The Confessional Imagination

McConnell, Frank D.

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Hence in a season of calm weather
   Though inland far we be,
Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea
   Which brought us hither,
Can in a moment travel thither,
And see the Children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.

Wordsworth, *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*

We hear the name, and we all confess that we desire the things; for we are not delighted with the mere sound. For when a Greek hears it in Latin, he is not delighted, not knowing what is spoken; but we Latins are delighted, as would he too, if he heard it in Greek; because the thing itself is neither Greek nor Latin, which Greeks and Latins, and men of all other tongues, long for so earnestly. . . . And this could not be, unless the thing itself whereof it is the name were retained in their memory.

Augustine, *Confessions*
We have been tracing the history of Wordsworth's imagination as he reconstitutes that history in *The Prelude*. In the last chapter we discussed the basic plot of the poet's growth as his progressive enslavement to, and liberation from, an obsessively visual, allegorical, daemonic relationship to Nature—and therefore, of course, to his own experiences. This plot of liberation, furthermore, provided the liberated Wordsworth, the teller of his own tale, with a central, generative structure (fixation—blank desertion—release into vision) for confronting the worlds without and within him. Any confession tends to become a literal re-creation both of the confessant's self and of the world he inhabits. And Wordsworth's confession, with profound intuition of its own basic form, becomes a re-creation very like that of Genesis 1, where the temporal order of God's constitution of the universe is also the rational order of the hierarchy of created things.

As we have seen, the point of transcendence in *The Prelude* is the Mount Snowdon episode in book 14. It is at this point that the two processes of liberation we have been tracing—historical and structural—unite in a final moment of exemplary vision, a final attainment of the language of poetic maturity. Wordsworth himself, very clearly, intends the episode to have just such summarizing power. Introducing it, in the conclusion to book 13, he reflects upon Coleridge's praise of his first poetic efforts (a passage we have discussed in the first chapter):

Call we this
A partial judgment—and yet why? for then
We were as strangers; and I may not speak
Thus wrongfully of verse, however rude,
Which on thy young imagination, trained
In the great City, broke like light from far.
Moreover, each man's Mind is to herself
Witness and judge; and I remember well
That in life's every-day appearances
I seemed about this time to gain clear sight
Of a new world—a world, too, that was fit
To be transmitted, and to other eyes
Made visible; as ruled by those fixed laws
Whence spiritual dignity originates,
Which do both give it being and maintain
A balance, an ennobling interchange
Of action from without and from within;
The excellence, pure function, and best power
Both of the objects seen, and eye that sees.

(13. 360–378)

All of the elements of mediation and unification we have been
discussing are present in this passage and present in a climactic
articulation and interrelationship which is surely intended to set
the stage for the great proof which is Snowdon. The mediating
presence of Coleridge as auditor, at the beginning of the passage,
prevents Wordsworth from false humility about the first fruits of
his imagination. And this mediated confrontation with his own
power leads him to the sense of his Mind as “witness and judge”
(confessant) of his relationship to the new world of his imaginatively
transfigured sight. That world is described as the source of “spiritual
dignity”—what we have called imaginative maturity—and as a
world whose “balance” and “ennobling interchange” of inner and
outer being is a dismissal of the fragmentary and daemonic for the
continuous and unitary. This new world, furthermore, is still re­
garded by the poet under its aspect of confessional speech to
Coleridge: the prime value of the world is not its private radiance
to Wordsworth but the fact that it is “fit to be transmitted, and to
other eyes made visible.”

And most importantly, the vision of the mature Wordsworth
is articulated specifically in terms of the disciplining and liberation
of the eye:

The excellence, pure function, and best power
Both of the objects seen, and eye that sees.

But here Wordsworth is not simply describing his clear sight of
a new world, as he is midway through the passage, but in fact
realizing that world in the language of the poem itself. For the last
line, devoid of imagery and hardly distinguishable in its rhythm
from prose, nevertheless imitates in its syntax precisely the ennobling
interchange of inner and outer upon which Wordsworth’s faith is
based. For "objects" and "eye"—not symbols but the substance of "nature" and "consciousness"—are made equivalent as genitives appertaining to the unifying word "power"; and even more subtly, they are forced into grammatical interchange with each other in their common modification by a form of the word "see." For, as the passage has been talking about unification at some length, "seen" and "sees" become a concrete, syntactic example of that unity of object and subject: what might be called an ideological rhyme, unifying under the infinitive act "to see" both the passive and active voice-markers -\(n\) and -\(s\).

This passage, I am suggesting, is an almost symphonic reprise of the great themes of *The Prelude*, preparing for the final movement which is the vision of Snowdon. The vision itself, however, begins almost anecdotally, with a deliberate reduction of the prophetic energy of its overture:

In one of these excursions (may they ne'er
Fade from remembrance!) through the Northern tracts
Of Cambria ranging with a youthful friend,
I left Bethgelert's huts at couching-time
And westward took my way, to see the sun
Rise, from the top of Snowdon. To the door
Of a rude cottage at the mountain's base
We came, and roused the shepherd who attends
The adventurous stranger's steps, a trusty guide;
Then, cheered by short refreshment, sallied forth.

(14. 1-10)

"To see the sun rise, from the top of Snowdon"—the phrase might come from a collection of travel memoirs, as indeed might the whole paragraph. We have seen frequently before how Wordsworth channels the sublime into the quotidian and, correspondingly, how the central drive of confession is to articulate, through the most circumstantial narrative, the indwelling spark of the divine. Here, before the climactic spot of time of *The Prelude*, the poet very carefully prepares the ground of his vision with the most circumstantial of introductions.

Circumstantial, that is, in its detail. In its placement within *The Prelude*, however, the episode has already begun to function like the spots of time we discussed at the conclusion of the last
chapter: as an incident, that is, whose shape remains constant and sempiternal throughout history, while its meaning varies and grows according to what, at a specific time, the narrator needs to receive from it. The episode has been introduced, at the end of book 13, as belonging to the time of Wordsworth's recovery from despair, his "clear sight of a new world." In point of fact, the poet and his friend Robert Jones had made their visit to the top of Snowdon in the summer of 1791, nearer the height than the end of his disillusionment. And, of course, as the episode develops, it becomes not simply a memory of discovery but the triumphant and present-tense, earned vision of the whole poem ("may they ne'er / Fade from remembrance!"), a message of hope to Coleridge and a presage of Wordsworth's own greater work to come. The vision of Snowdon, in other words, exists—through the confessant's language—at all times of the confessant's life, attending him with visionary power since he has once, albeit unwittingly, been strong.

For the young Wordsworth of 1791, though, the ascent of Mount Snowdon was another of those failures of the will or of the appetitive intellect which—like crossing the Alps or stealing the boat—yields up its meaning only after the search for meaning has been abandoned. Wordsworth and his friend seek a vision of the natural sublime from the mountaintop. And the force of will which leads them to set out at night also separates them—daemonically, I insist—from the event of rebirth and renewal, of continuity, which they are attempting to fixate as aesthetic experience. As Wordsworth describes their ascent, the travelers themselves soon become possessed by a correspondingly daemonic separation from each other, an imprisonment within private reflections which, ironically, blocks out the view of the very mountain they are ascending:

The mist soon girt us round,
And, after ordinary travellers' talk
With our conductor, pensively we sank
Each into commerce with his private thoughts:
Thus did we breast the ascent, and by myself
Was nothing either seen or heard that checked
Those musings or diverted, save that once
The shepherd's lurcher, who, among the crags,
Had to his joy unearthed a hedgehog, teased
His coiled-up prey with barkings turbulent.
This small adventure, for even such it seemed
In that wild place and at the dead of night,
Being over and forgotten, on we wound
In silence as before. . . .

(14. 15–28)

The incident of the shepherd’s dog, like the encounter of the travelers with the peasant in the Simplon section or like George Fox’s turning aside to the spring on his descent from Pendle Hill—like any of the confrontations of the sublime and the quotidian we have seen—emphasizes the vacuity and abstraction of a will which admits only the drive toward the sublime, only the daemonic, Promethean urge to grasp immediately the divine or nature.

So far, in the preparation for the episode, we have seen the poet move from an introductory rhapsody—an overture—on the unitary imagination (13. 360–378), into a matter-of-fact recounting of the circumstances of the ascent (14. 1–10), into this narration of the ascent itself, in which the fragmenting, isolating will to fix the sight and daemon-ize the imagination takes on increasingly grim overtones. It is a development of tone and mood as careful, as architectonic, as any in Wordsworth’s poetry. And the next lines, in which the vision begins to be made manifest, are surely among the poet’s most breathtaking narrative performances:

With forehead bent
Earthward, as if in opposition set
Against an enemy, I panted up
With eager pace, and no less eager thoughts.
Thus might we wear a midnight hour away,
Ascending at loose distance each from each,
And I, as chanced, the foremost of the band;
When at my feet the ground appeared to brighten,
And with a step or two seemed brighter still;
Nor was time given to ask or learn the cause,
For instantly a light upon the turf
Fell like a flash. . . .

(14. 28–39)

No exegesis can hope to do justice to this magnificent passage; but the confessional terms for *The Prelude* which we have been
developing help, at any rate, to catch the sources of its power. The first lines, in the manner of the Stolen Boat episode, identify the experiences of daemonic will and intense muscular effort: Wordsworth is literally spurning the earth as he pantingly ascends the mountain. Most brilliantly, however, the image which describes his willful separation from quotidian nature—"in opposition set against an enemy"—is qualified by the phrase "as if," which denies the willfulness of the experience in the very act of affirming it. For the image itself of man set in opposition against the earth is daemonic in the extreme; and yet its presentation under the reflective, ruminative marker "as if" affirms the daemonic as part of the language of continuity. The actual experience of opposition to the Earth is, of course, that of the Wordsworth of 1791; but the silent, intense thoughts of that Wordsworth as he climbs Snowdon do not allow for words this self-conscious or self-critical. The words themselves are those of the present poet, narrating his last great anecdote of continuity and community; and they are words whose daemonic imagery, superimposed upon a past daemonic experience, dramatize the unity of the present narrator and his 1791 self. With the phrase "as if," Wordsworth conveys his belief in his past warfare with the Earth only as a delusion he has overcome and can now command with words. The "as if" clause, in fact, belongs to what I have called "confessional time": neither wholly to the past nor wholly to the memorial present but to that mysterious, narrative field where present and past are related, not sequentially or causally, but by mutual penetration and fructification.

As the climbers continue their ascent, they become—although there are only three of them—a "band": a word suggesting purposive and usually illegal action. And Wordsworth is "foremost" among them, both in muscular advance up the mountain and in daemonic single-mindedness. And although Wordsworth most probably did not have The Borderers in mind while writing the passage, it is difficult not to see a continuity and a triumph in this image of the leader of a daemonic band, advancing toward a vision which resolves the problems of will, causality, and action of the earlier drama.

The last five lines describe the beginning of the vision itself. Wordsworth had ascended the mountain to seek the light of the rising sun; what he is given—by nature and through memory—is a light which cannot be localized, dispersed as it is throughout all
things, and a light which cannot be sought purposively or causally, since it is itself a moment of process rather than, like sunrise, an artificial fixation of process. Two lines describe the brightening of the ground before the poet. But the brightening is at first so subtle, so gradual, that he remembers it as imperceptible intimation rather than "fact": "appeared to brighten" and "seemed brighter still." The brightening is, of course, due to a chance collocation of the moon, mist, and clouds. And the full revelation of the moon occurs, as Wordsworth says, without "time given to ask or learn the cause"—a line which brilliantly indicates that, while the rational, disjunctive cause is there, the time of the revelation makes such questioning irrelevant.

What it is Wordsworth saw is impossible of paraphrase. It is a vision of things at their vanishing point, returning to the primal state of indeterminacy in which all shapes and transformations are possible—yet at the same time, things revealing, in their very malleability, their eternal presence and the everlasting mystery of their substance:

For instantly a light upon the turf
Fell like a flash, and lo! as I looked up,
The Moon hung naked in a firmament
Of azure without cloud, and at my feet
Rested a silent sea of hoary mist.
A hundred hills their dusky backs upheaved
All over this still ocean; and beyond,
Far, far beyond, the solid vapours stretched,
In headlands, tongues, and promontory shapes,
Into the main Atlantic, that appeared
To dwindle, and give up his majesty,
Usurped upon far as the sight could reach.
Not so the ethereal vault; encroachment none
Was there, nor loss; only the inferior stars
Had disappeared, or shed a fainter light
In the clear presence of the full-orbed Moon,
Who, from her sovereign elevation, gazed
Upon the billowy ocean, as it lay
All meek and silent, save that through a rift—
Not distant from the shore whereon we stood,
A fixed, abysmal, gloomy, breathing-place—
Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams
Innumerable, roaring with one voice!
Heard over earth and sea, and, in that hour,
For so it seemed, felt by the starry heavens.

(14. 38–62)

Rereading this passage, one is continually surprised at how little, actually, is given to the eye. Even the Moon, the bright center of the vision, exists in a clarity which is austere rather than dazzling; the firmament of azure in which she hangs naked bears more than a nominal resemblance to *l'azur*, denuded and inhuman, which was later so to obsess Mallarmé. The roar of waters which concludes the passage is of course the apocalyptic might of a new deluge which we have already seen operating in Wordsworth's deepest perceptions. And it, too, like the pure and unprismatic light of the moon, is an image of primal sensation, almost without what Lockean epistemology would call “secondary qualities,” specific modulations determining its identity as this sound or this light. The remarkable—and characteristically Wordsworthian—thing about the passage, though, is that it does retain the pressure of reality, in spite of its minimal differentiation. Wordsworth's reflections on the scene are among the most powerful of his passages and are carefully kept disjunctive from the scene itself, so as not to impinge upon that scene's own mute authority.

When into air had partially dissolved
That vision, given to spirits of the night
And three chance human wanderers, in calm thought
Reflected, it appeared to me the type
Of a majestic intellect, its acts
And its possessions, what it has and craves,
What in itself it is, and would become.
There I beheld the emblem of a mind
That feeds upon infinity, that broods
Over the dark abyss, intent to hear
Its voices issuing forth to silent light
In one continuous stream. . . .

(14. 63–74)

That the vision should partially dissolve into air, as Wordsworth says, is a further touch of realization, since the vision itself
had been of the most airy, the most transient and fortuitous collocation of mist and landscape. Its further dissolution into air, its final passage across the borderline between the minimal and the insubstantial is a retrospective affirmation of the reality of the vision itself.

But a more important aspect of this passage is the ambiguous and seemingly clumsy phrase “in calm thought / Reflected,” which appears to have no real referent in the sentence. In 1805 the construction had been avoided by a straightforward meditative transition, much in the manner of a seventeenth-century metaphysical evidence:

A meditation rose in me that night
Upon the lonely Mountain when the scene
Had pass’d away, and it appear’d to me
The perfect image of a mighty Mind,
Of one that feeds upon infinity . . .

(1805, 13. 67–71)

But in fact the 1850 construction is both more accurate in its implications and closer to the sort of perception Wordsworth is concerned with in The Prelude. Its very vagueness and the imprecision of its time sense (not “that night” but at, or in, some time between “then” and the narrative “now”) suggest again the confessional merging of event and afterthought: what has been called the “suspension of the will to relational knowledge.” Furthermore, while 1805 calls the vision explicitly an “image” of the mind feeding upon infinity, 1850 refers to it as a “type” or an “emblem.” And whether or not Wordsworth was wholly aware of, or wished to use, the traditional implications of those words, they certainly imply a more complex and tenuous inherence of meaning in object than does the straightforward “image.”

The key word in the whole passage is “Reflected,” for while its most obvious meaning is “reflection” in the sense of meditation or ratiocination, it is impossible to construe the phrase grammatically with this meaning. If we wish to read the sentence grammatically,

with “Reflected” referring to “it,” the meaning toward which “Reflected” tends is reflection in its purely optical, non-intellectual sense, like reflections in a pool of water. Such an implicit meaning for the word gives the whole construction “in calm thought / Reflected” a complexity which is almost a direct reversal of 1805’s more simple-minded “A meditation rose in me that night.”

This sort of reflection, a paradox in the psychology of Wordsworth’s own day, is the source of much of the imaginative power of The Prelude and the key to Wordsworth’s radically original imagery. Its sense is elaborated, furthermore, in an earlier passage from The Prelude, one of Wordsworth’s most famous images for the introspective, confessional technique of his great poem. In book 4, the book which originally was to have been the last of The Prelude, he is speaking to Coleridge of the progress of his poem up to the point of his first self-dedication to the powers of poetry during a summer vacation from Cambridge:

As one who hangs down-bending from the side
Of a slow-moving boat, upon the breast
Of a still water, solacing himself
With such discoveries as his eye can make
Beneath him in the bottom of the deep,
Sees many beauteous sights—weeds, fishes, flowers,
Grotts, pebbles, roots of trees, and fancies more,
Yet often is perplexed and cannot part
The shadow from the substance, rocks and sky,
Mountains and clouds, reflected in the depth
Of the clear flood, from things which there abide
In their true dwelling; now is crossed by gleam
Of his own image, by a sun-beam now,
And wavering motions sent he knows not whence,
Impediments that make his task more sweet;
Such pleasant office have we long pursued
Incumbent o’er the surface of past time
With like success. . . .

(4. 256–273)

On the simplest level, of course, this is a gracious conceit for the rambling, ruminative nature of The Prelude as autobiography. But examined more closely, from the viewpoint of the narrator—
the man in the boat—as confessional narrator, it is an inversion of usual ideas about the nature of the “real” and the operation of the intellect. For the “real” things in this image are not the trees, sky, and clouds of the boatman’s world—the present world of the confessor—but rather the submerged flowers and roots of time past. And the narrator’s present understanding of those images, “the gleam of his own image,” occurs not as a result of any directed act of the will but rather as an unwilled gift to the introspective intellect, literally “in calm thought / Reflected” through the medium of time past. Here again, as in the Snowdon passage, Wordsworth has intuitively touched very near the nerve of much contemporary psychology. It is the problem Wordsworth elsewhere describes as that of the retrospective duality of consciousness:

... often do I seem
Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself
And of some other Being.

(2. 31–33)

This duality, as is implied by the word “seem” in the passage, is primarily an illusion of the voluntary intellect; and the two passages of reflection indicate the terms of its imaginative, if not discursive, resolution. In terms of Wordsworth’s own image for the problem from book 4, the situation is the same as that of looking out a window at a landscape; anyone who has ever ridden a bus through a nighttime countryside will have a strong impression of what the image means. Looking out the window of the bus, the passenger sees alternatively both the passing countryside and the reflected interior of the bus—including his own image—independently of any willed concentration of his eyes. In fact, it takes a concerted effort to see only one or the other. One of the discoveries of modern psychology, furthermore, has been the extent to which our natural, relaxed perception of such a visual field is a function not of analytic powers but rather of the general, gestalt organization of our whole sensory environment. Maurice Merleau-Ponty discusses this problem in a passage which suggests but in no way surpasses in insight or imaginative power the Wordsworthian locution:

Movement and repose distribute themselves for us in our surroundings, not according to the hypotheses our intellect happens
to construct, but according to the manner in which we fix ourselves within the world and according to the situation our body assumes therein.  

We can now see more clearly what importance it has for *The Prelude* that the vision of Snowdon takes its meaning “in calm thought / Reflected.” The passage is a precise parallel to the situation of the observer and the window. Wordsworth, the present-tense confessor, regards his past experience on Snowdon. Does the meaning of that experience, the “type” and “emblem” of a mighty cosmic mind, arise from the experience in the past or from the present-time meditations of the narrator? Exactly; it arises from either and neither. The crucial phrase, “in calm thought / Reflected,” with its implication of the past phenomenon superimposed upon the present and involuntary intellect of the narrator, is a deliberate way of placing the experience within neither time but rather above and around their confluence. What Merleau-Ponty calls “the manner in which we fix ourselves within the world” is, for Wordsworth here, the manner of fixation of the confessor, which allows the reflective confluence of past and present time into not two distinct consciousnesses but one temporal and yet liberated consciousness. This consciousness can draw meaning from the visible world without either the daemonic fixation of the visual into allegory or its evaporation in intellectualized evidences.

And that is the point of the rupture of time which the whole Snowdon passage represents. For not only is the experience of 1791 transported as an imaginative coda into the last book of *The Prelude*; but the substitution of the deliberately vague time sense of “Reflected” for the line “A meditation rose in me that night” has the effect of widening the distance between vision and meditation, translating the time of meditation into the universal confessional time of the redeemed narrator.

The meditation part of the vision is one of Wordsworth’s most explicit and most triumphant statements of human power and human unity. But before proceeding to a discussion of that meditation, I shall discuss further some of the confessional problems in

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the history of thought and in Wordsworth's own career which find their definitive articulation in the Snowdon episode. The ambiguity of the word "reflected" and its centrality to the process of Wordsworth's narration raise particularly the problems of "double vision" and "duality of consciousness" which are so crucial to the history of the form.

In discussing duality of consciousness in confession, we come close to the central linguistic energies of the form. For, quite simply, confession for the confessant is language: consciousness is the syntax of that language, and salvation is its semantics. The confessant is in the business of saying "I"—the oddest word in language, since its meaning demands to be filled by the total experience of its speaker, to the extent that it even, normally, loses its identity as a word. For the confessant, however, the word "I" tends to become recognizably a word again, and this is the chief source of disruption and unease in confession. For if I, filled with the consciousness of my renovation and blessing, try to tell the steps of my life leading up to my conversion and rebirth, it is inevitable that I should be overwhelmingly aware of the gap between the I who previously lived life on a lower plane of experience and the new I telling the story. Conversion, while it bases itself upon the providentially insured continuity of the self, nevertheless, in its very violence and psychic depth, tends to break down that continuity.

The most conventional method of overcoming this duality is to assert that the spirit of God, in some way, was present even in one's earliest youth and most abysmal excesses. But this assertion itself, in the subtest of the confessants, carries a stronger assertion about language—the perennial power of the Word—as the agency of that presence of God. It is speech which one remembers: the speech of a preacher, or the silent speech of God himself, but speech which allows the present narrator to see into the grace

which was at work even in his daemonic past. As the early Quaker Elizabeth Webb writes in her letter to Anthony William Boehme:

I was convinced that the Quakers held the principles of truth, and that their ministry was the true ministry: but I dwelt then far from any of them, only thus it had happened:—When I was about twelve years old, I was at a meeting or two of theirs, and the doctrine of one man that preached there, proved to me . . . like bread cast upon the waters, for it was found after many days: the sound of his voice seemed to be in my mind when I was alone, and some of his words came fresh into my remembrance; and the voice and the words suited with the exercise of the mind.\(^5\)

The type and emblem of a mighty mind which Wordsworth finds not at the time of Snowdon but “in calm thought / Reflected,” has unmistakable linguistic and structural similarities to this sort of experience.

The connection of language, memory, and continuity is even more explicit, of course, in Augustine’s use of “The Preacher” Ambrose, as we have already seen in the opening of the *Confessions*. As a Manichaean, Augustine delighted in the rhetorical skill of the Christian Ambrose. But looking back on his former aesthetic taste for the Preacher’s words, he finds that they were even then elements of the truth living within him: “Together with the words which I would choose, came also into my mind the things which I would refuse; for I could not separate them” (5. 24).

The situation may be described almost graphically. For conversion, in its soul-shattering excitement, tends to sunder the present I of redeemed experience and the past I of benighted, daemonic experiences. And confession, whose aim is to render permanent and unassailable the experience of conversion, heals that daemonic split of I’s by asserting past language to have been the unfolding manifestation of the divine Word one is now prepared to recognize and speak. The narrative is a mirror reflection of the life, and as such it completes and eternalizes the unity toward which the life strives. In this connection, I shall examine a number of confessional

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passages which deal with the relationship of language and unitary memory, including two of Wordsworth's most profound and characteristic memorial passages.

The first passage predates the development of confession as a form; and, though describing a conversion-experience, it fails to resolve the pronomial ambiguity of past and present I we have been discussing. It is from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians:

I have to boast. There is nothing to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations given me by the Lord. I know of a man fourteen years ago—whether in the body or out of it, I do not know; God knows—being actually caught up to the third heaven. And I know that this man—I do not know whether it was in the body or out of it, God knows—was caught up into Paradise, and heard things that must not be told, which no human being can repeat. On this man's account I am ready to boast, but about myself I will boast only of my weaknesses.

(2 Corinthians 12:1-5)

The "man," of course, is Paul. But the disjunction between his conversion experience and his conscious life after that experience is so strong that he finds it impossible to make the narrative act of connecting them by a single I. He will boast of his weaknesses in the first person, since that is the I dependent upon the grace of God, which is his present self; but by a fine grammatical construction, he can only identify his past ecstatic self with the present I in the form of a first person accusative—not the conscious, narrative "I" but the passive and acted-upon "me" whose life was absolutely transformed by a gift of supernal vision.

Augustine describes a far subtler experience of pronomial ambiguity when, in the Confessions, he narrates his divided consciousness at the moment of his conversion:

Myself when I was deliberating upon serving the Lord my God now, as I had long purposed, it was I who willed, I who nilled, I, I myself. I neither willed entirely, nor nilled entirely. Therefore was I at strife with myself, and rent asunder by myself. And this rent befell me against my will, and yet indicated, not the presence of another mind, but the punishment of my own.

(8.21)
It is obvious that in this displacement of self-awareness into two conflicting I's not only the ideal of narrative continuity but implicitly the operation of the rule of memory itself is at stake. And equally, the very gravitation of I into opposed forces indicates the strength and continued presence of the confessor's memory. It is a potential breach which in its violent possibilities testifies to the strength of the memorial fabric. For it is the memory of election, of choice by a higher power, which makes it possible to avoid confrontation with the Doppelgänger of one's past self.

Theodor Reik, in *The Compulsion to Confess*, narrates a remarkable conversation with his eight-year-old son Arthur which illumines the problem of memory and the twin self. Arthur is questioning his father about the inner voice of conscience which causes his problems with washing his hands before dinner, masturbating, and crossing the street without looking both ways:

[Reik, Sr.] “Is that really a voice?”
“No, there isn’t anybody there. It is memory that tells me that.”
“Why memory?”

Arthur pointed vividly to his head, “Well, cleverness, the brain. When, for instance, you say on the day before, ‘If the child runs and falls,’ and I run the next day, then the thought tells me, ‘Don’t run!’ . . . But now I know what the inner voice is! *It is a feeling of one’s self and the language of somebody else!*”

“The feeling of one’s self and the language of somebody else,” regardless of its applications to Reik's theory of superego and id antagonism, is a nearly perfect description of the difficulty of the religious confessor in using the same I to describe his present and past selves. The other I, either the accusing voice of a bad conscience or the unawakened self of the preconversion past, is a full-fledged double, and the confessional confrontation with this double is fraught with all the psychic perils associated with such an experience—perils avoided only by the same forces that generate them, language and memory. Augustine describes such a powerful self-confrontation in the story of his listening to the tale of the convert Pontitianus:

Such was the story of Pontitianus; but Thou, O Lord, while he was speaking, didst turn me round toward myself, taking me from

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behind my back where I had placed me, unwilling to observe myself; and setting me before my face, that I might see how foul I was, how crooked and defiled, bespotted and ulcerous. And I beheld and stood aghast; and whither to flee from myself I found not. (8. 15)

Here, literally, as in John Nelson’s experience with the preacher discussed in chapter 1, the “language of somebody else” effects a radical transformation in the “feeling of one’s self”; and we may read if we wish the whole immense verbal web of the Confessions as a memorial attempt to find the appropriate language for both halves, pre- and post-conversion, of the Saint’s self.

Georges Gusdorf, in a fine article, “Conditions et limites de l’autobiographie,” provides what will be for the moment our final word on the general dimensions of this problem. Writing of formal autobiography and its tendency toward an artificial superimposition of present conditions on the past, he says:

The original sin of autobiography is... that of logical coherence and rationalization. The telling is a conscious act, and as the consciousness of the narrator organizes the telling, so it inevitably appears to him that he has organized his life. Put another way, the constitutive reflection of self-consciousness is transformed, by a kind of inevitable optical illusion, to the level of the event itself. ... Autobiography is condemned to substitute perpetually the perfected [le tout fait] for the durational [au se faisant].

Confession, on the other hand, which we have continually distinguished from conventional autobiography, is concerned precisely because of its reverence for the radical, crucially overturning moment of conversion with maintaining a narrative transaction between the present tout fait and the past se faisant. Thence its strong linguistic awareness of pronomial ambiguity and all that it implies and its particularly “Wordsworthian” character. Both the religious confessions and The Prelude demonstrate the same grammar of memory.

The most famous instance of pronomial displacement in *The Prelude*, of course, is the Boy of Winander passage from book 5. It is one of the earliest fragments to find its way into *The Prelude*, and it has the honor of standing first among the poet's grouping of his "Poems of Imagination." And it is a transferral, with Pauline violence, of the past self into another I:

There was a Boy: ye knew him well, ye cliffs
And islands of Winander!—many a time
At evening, when the earliest stars began
To move along the edges of the hills,
Rising or setting, would he stand alone
Beneath the trees or by the glimmering lake,
And there, with fingers interwoven, both hands
Pressed closely palm to palm, and to his mouth
Uplifted, he, as through an instrument,
Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls,
That they might answer him; and they would shout
Across the watery vale, and shout again,
Responsive to his call, with quivering peals,
And long halloos and screams, and echoes loud,
Redoubled and redoubled, concourse wild
Of jocund din; and, when a lengthened pause
Of silence came and baffled his best skill,
Then sometimes, in that silence while he hung
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise
Has carried far into his heart the voice
Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene
Would enter unawares into his mind,
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
Its woods, and that uncertain heaven, received
Into the bosom of the steady lake.

This Boy was taken from his mates, and died
In childhood, ere he was full twelve years old.
Fair is the spot, most beautiful the vale
Where he was born; the grassy churchyard hangs
Upon a slope above the village school,
And through that churchyard when my way has led
On summer evenings, I believe that there
A long half hour together I have stood
Mute, looking at the grave in which he lies!

(5. 364-397)
This superb passage has undergone a weight of critical analysis which must seem to approach the point of textual exhaustion, and it is not my intention to retrace the brilliance of its images of confrontation. A fascinating aspect of the passage, however, is its very curious texture of verb tenses—a texture we can easily understand as a further mutation of pronomial ambiguity, if we wish to see Wordsworth as the Boy. “There was a Boy”—the section begins in what is obviously intended as a perfect tense (le tout fait). But of course it is one of the inherent ambiguities of English that the verb to be can serve as perfect or imperfect. So that the “perfect” of “There was a Boy,” implying his present nonexistence, easily glides into the “imperfect” durational tense implied in “would he stand alone” and “Blew mimic hootings” (le se faisant). Neither one of these implied tenses, of course, necessarily hints at the boy’s continued existence as another I, the I of the narrator. But the next permutation of tense definitely does. The phrase “a gentle shock of mild surprise / Has carried far into his heart . . .” cannot be read in normal English as meaning anything else than that the boy still exists at the time of the writing. One could not now say, for example, that Milton has opposed the restoration of the Stuart line, in spite of the fact that generations of schoolboys have been taught to translate the Latin perfect tense by a “have. . .” construction. It would be a mistake, though, to read the verb “Has carried” as a slip from an earlier manuscript version or as a simple syntactical error. For it is precisely, again, the confessional narrative tense, which asserts a connection between past and present selves and which subsumes and transforms conventional narrative in a memorial resurrection of the Doppelgänger which one’s youth always is.

The most problematic example of pronomial ambiguity in Wordsworth’s poetry, however, is not to be found in The Prelude itself but rather in “Home at Grasmere,” the monumental wreckage which is as far as Wordsworth ever got with The Recluse. Written in 1800, “Home at Grasmere” is later than the Boy of Winander passage of The Prelude but predates the great bulk of it in composition. And the transition between the two poems is itself a measure of Wordsworth’s increased understanding of the essentially confessional nature of his genius. “Home at Grasmere” begins with a reminiscent vision resembling the opening of “Tintern Abbey”:
Once to the verge of yon steep barrier came
A roving school-boy; what the adventurer's age
Hath now escaped his memory—but the hour,
One of a golden summer holiday,
He well remembers, though the year be gone—
Alone and devious from afar he came;
And, with a sudden influx overpowered
At sight of this seclusion, he forgot
His haste. . . .

The first three lines are a triumphantly simple projection, in dia­grammatic form, of the celebrated two consciousnesses of Prelude 2. 25ff. The past experience and the present repenetration of it are tenuously related—memorially as well as gramatically—to the “steep barrier” which is ambivalently both the most striking fact of the present-tense observer and the least important aspect of his observa­tion. The steep barrier itself avoids being emblematic by a richness of suggestion too strong for a simple emblem to support. It is the barrier against the apocalyptic sense, the obsessive spot which, like a true omphalos, is a concentration of antinatural powers and there­fore a herald of the death of the purely natural imagination. The power of the passage—and it is a power almost impossible to grasp through any sort of rhetorical analysis, though the rhetoric is compelling—is that it transforms the apocalyptic associations of the spot into an antiapocalyptic binding of the imagination to nature. But the most remarkable thing is the way in which that binding is actually achieved. For here, at the outset of Wordsworth’s most confident and joyous poem, it is articulated in explicitly confessional terms:

Since that day forth the Place to him—to me
(For I who live to register the truth
Was that same young and happy Being) became
As beautiful to thought, as it had been
When present, to the bodily sense; a haunt of pure affections. . . .

(46–50)

The italicized to me is, in spite of its emphasis, a perfectly smooth and inevitable rounding-off of what should be recognizable by
now as a unique version of experience. The identification of the poet and the schoolboy unifies the past, other time of the boy’s story with the unfolding present of the narration and transvalues the verb *became* into the confessional tense, which can regard natural experience as a continuum and redeem the spot’s apocalyptic intimations. The second and third lines of the passage—“For I who live to register the truth / Was that same young and happy Being”—is a parenthesis as brilliant and profound in its implied weight of narrative power as any single passage from *The Prelude*.

Having achieved and articulated, in his vision from the top of Snowdon, the unification of the dual consciousness, Wordsworth proceeds to describe the gift this unity brings:

```plaintext
There I beheld the emblem of a mind
That feeds upon infinity, that broods
Over the dark abyss, intent to hear
Its voices issuing forth to silent light
In one continuous stream; a mind sustained
By recognition of transcendent power,
In sense conducting to ideal form,
In soul of more than mortal privilege.
One function, above all, of such a mind
Had Nature shadowed there, by putting forth,
'Mid circumstances awful and sublime,
That mutual domination which she loves
To exert upon the face of outward things,
So moulded, joined, abstracted, so endowed
With interchangeable supremacy,
That men, least sensitive, see, hear, perceive,
And cannot choose but feel. The power, which all
Acknowledge when thus moved, which Nature thus
To bodily sense exhibits, is the express
Resemblance of that glorious faculty
That higher minds bear with them as their own.
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(14. 70–90)
The gift is language—a language whose rolling periodic rhythms both mask and reveal the daring simplicity at the heart of its complications. For here present and past, self and other, unitary and daemonic, are not simply asserted to be one continuum but are acted out in the resplendence of their continuity. "There I beheld" is neither the time of the 1791 ascent nor the time of the present writing of the words. It is "in calm thought / Reflected," precisely the confluence of those two times mirrored in a mind that feeds upon infinity. For the emblem which the poet beholds in confessional time is at once an image of a power and a mind beyond nature and man, generating both; and at the same time it is an image of his own mind exercising its fullest and most visionary power of unification. The whole magnificent passage, in fact, is an extended confrontation with the other I of transcendent vision in terms which make that transcendence immanent within the syntax itself. The line "... intent to hear / Its voices ..." may refer either to the mind or to the poet beholding the emblem of that mind. But this double reference is not "ambiguity," as the new critics have established that term. It is, rather, the entirely unambiguous assertion that both referents are substantially one, differentiated only in their mode of manifestation. For while the reflections of the narrator are kept carefully in the past-confessional tense, the operations of the mind are described in a perennial present—"feeds" and "broods." But even as this apparent disjunction of times is affirmed, the first half of the passage abounds with present and past participles—"issuing," "sustained," "conducting"—which enforce a sense of common and indeterminately continuous duration between the reflecting mind of the narrator and the universal mind that he perceives.

Midway through the passage, as the perceiving and perceived minds continue to approach each other, the primal experience itself—historical, daemonic fact—recedes even further back. For the pluperfect "Had Nature shadowed there" is immediately overwhelmed by the complex, heavily participial sentence, which describes the mutual domination—of nature and nature, nature and man, the poet's timeless vision and the poet's mortal consciousness. And in the last sentence of the passage, the poet yokes the eternal and the time-bound with a verb. The power he has been reflecting upon, he now says,
... is the express
Resemblance of that glorious faculty
That higher minds bear with them as their own.

All the verbs are present-tense indicative: the activity of the universal mind and that of the reflecting narrator have become one, and the confessional past has developed inevitably into the prophetic present tense. And the "higher minds" which now displace the universal mind, in remaining human, substantial, and plural, incarnate the poet's vision in an ideal of community and history.

The total effect of the passage, in fact, is to evolve a language in which the visionary power of the imagination is indistinguishable from the syntax in which that imagination manifests itself: a language "In sense conducting to ideal form," until ideal form and sense become absolutely appropriate signs of each other. Jung, among other moderns, has written of the peculiar nature of this sort of language, as a permanent possibility of the psyche:

The deeper "layers" of the psyche lose their individual uniqueness as they retreat further and further into darkness. . . . Hence "at bottom" the psyche is simply "world." In this sense . . . in the symbol the world itself is speaking.8

Word and world, in such a language, are at their minimum point of divergence, if divergent at all. But for Wordsworth, the language is not gained by going deeper and deeper into the psyche as much as it is earned by confronting and refurbishing one of the most permanent myths of language, that of Eden.

The sort of language I am talking about here is what I call in the title of this chapter "Edenic words," that is, language which attempts to attain to a prelapsarian condition of naming. Adam's only recorded act in the Garden of Eden is, of course, his naming of the beasts, plants, stones, etc., in a language which fits perfectly together the structures of word and thing. This is the Edenic situation of language, and in fact this act of quasi-divine naming is the only possible or appropriate act of Edenic man. For the perfect balance of appetites, objects, and understanding which is Eden

cannot issue in any action less symmetrical than the spontaneous generation of the word which absolutely reflects an absolute condition. And the fall of man from this situation necessarily entails the parallel fall of language: the myth of the Serpent is doubled in the myth of the Tower of Babel. Such, in fact, was the tacit assumption of European linguistics until the late seventeenth century. The greatest efforts of such philologists as Athanasius Kircher, J. C. Becanus, and John Webb were directed toward locating the Edenic language by a process of extrapolation from its known "dialects." 9

The breakdown of this language myth has been recounted often enough. Beginning most explicitly with Bacon's *Novum Organum*, the idea has grown throughout the last three centuries that an Edenic correlation of word and thing is not simply a lost power of speech but one which never could have been, and never could be, possible. The consequent severing of word from reality, thought from the objects of thought, is the most crucial linguistic event of the modern age, and it is nowhere more tellingly articulated than in Hobbes's epigram: "For *true* and *false* are attributes of speech, not of things." 10 The general effects of this split in Romantic poetry have been traced by Paul de Man, who speaks of the nostalgia of Romantic language for the object which it seeks to become, and which it never can become, precisely because it is language. 11 And in our own age, a thinker as seminal as Ludwig Wittgenstein, who was engaged in his own private and lifelong agony over the chances of a meaningful language, invoked the Edenic myth with mingled disdain and—in a Romantic sense—nostalgia:

> For we are most strongly tempted to imagine that giving a name consists in correlating in a peculiar and rather mysterious way a sound (or other sign) with something. How we make use of this peculiar correlation then seems to be almost a secondary matter. (One could almost imagine that naming was done by a peculiar sacramental act, and that this produced some magic relation between the name and the thing.) 12

A magic relation between word and thing—this is what language, particularly visionary language, must seek in spite of itself, even if it is only the broken magic of Man exiled from the Garden. And the Wordsworth who, as we have seen, becomes the emblem of power he beholds and becomes it through the agency of his own words—this poet occupies a central place in the history of the word. Not, indeed, for his solution to the problem, as much as for the desperate precision with which he sees the terms and the need for a solution. He writes in his most exuberant passage on language, the "Prospectus" to \textit{The Excursion}:

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

(47–61, italics mine)

These lines, written before the bulk of \textit{The Prelude}, are a brilliant commentary on the imaginative activity we have been witnessing in the Snowdon passage. Another Wordsworth text, however, post-dating the 1805 \textit{Prelude}, casts an even clearer light on the poet's complex attitude toward language. I am speaking of his series of essays upon epitaphs. These essays may be taken partially as a critical commentary on the linguistic insight the poet gained in writing the original \textit{Prelude}. And they indicate the visionary power with which Wordsworth, during his great decade, expanded the criterion of "language ordinarily used by men" of the \textit{Preface to Lyrical Ballads}—that most famous and, probably, most misunderstood Wordsworthian pronouncement.
The essays upon epitaphs should, I think, come to be recognized as essential to the study of Wordsworth. Only the first and comparatively least interesting one was published (in *The Friend*, February 22, 1810), as “Upon Epitaphs”; the other two, “The Country Church-Yard” and “Critical Epitaphs Considered,” were edited by Grosart from manuscripts. Together they form an extended examination of what Wordsworth considers the appropriate language of the deepest sort of human truth.

The first essay, from *The Friend*, eloquently develops the relationship between the true language of poetry and the common speech of rural epitaphs. In what may be his closest approach to an expression of the Quaker inner light, Wordsworth writes of the charity necessary in reading an epitaph.

We are not anxious unerringly to understand the constitution of the minds of those who have soothed, who have cheered, who have supported us: with whom we have been long and daily pleased or delighted. The affections are their own justification. The light of love in our hearts is a satisfactory evidence that there is a body of worth in the minds of our friends or kindred, whence that light has proceeded.\(^{13}\)

Much like the “conversational sublime” we have described in the first chapter, the epitaph, as a unit of continuity between the generations, assumes an extraliterary, human mediatiorship—“it is truth hallowed by love—the joint offspring of the worth of the dead and the affections of the living.”\(^{14}\) This mediatiorship, furthermore, is linked explicitly to memory: it functions as a point of contact with the earlier imaginative power of the individual’s youth. The overtones of the great theme of the Immortality Ode are unmistakable:

If we look back upon the days of childhood, we shall find that the time is not in remembrance when, with respect to our own individual Being, the mind was without this assurance [of immortality]; whereas, the wish to be remembered by our friends or kindred after death,


\(^{14}\) Ibid., p. 36.
or even in absence, is, as we shall discover, a sensation that does not form itself till the social feelings have been developed, and the Reason has connected itself with a wide range of objects.\textsuperscript{15}

The sense of immortality, of autonomous imaginative power, ages naturally into the social compulsion to communicate, to convert, to be remembered, and thus it necessitates the mediatorship we have seen operating in Wordsworth's own confessional language in \textit{The Prelude}.

It is in the second and third essays upon epitaphs, however, that the full implications of these sentiments find expression. The second essay is largely concerned with what Wordsworth's generation would have regarded as the criterion of sincerity; Wordsworth insists, as he had done in \textit{The Friend}, that a primary condition for approaching epitaph verse is an act of critical charity and good faith:

\begin{quote}
Literature is here [i.e., in epitaph verse] so far identified with morals, the quality of the act so far determined by our notion of the aim and purpose of the agent, that nothing can please us, however well executed in its kind, if we are persuaded that the primary virtues of sincerity, earnestness and a moral interest in the main object are wanting.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

It seems obvious that what Wordsworth is doing here is denying the tension between language and referent, between word and significance—in modern terms, between “tenor” and “vehicle”—which is so basic to earlier versions of metaphor.

The criterion of absolute appropriateness is a rich vein in Wordsworth's poetry and implies a number of things. “Words which speak of nothing more than what we are,” words which in their absolute purity of reference both recover the past and avoid its allegorical transformation into an ideational, dehumanizing schematism, are, as it were, the verbal incarnation of memory. And therefore, like memory itself, they become an element of the poetry beyond rational analysis: they are not agents of mediation; they are mediation.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 28.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 54.
This is a crucial point. Hartman's *The Unmediated Vision*, although certainly taking a good deal of its theoretical impetus from the energies of Wordsworth's poetry, tends to understate this aspect:

Whereas the older poet, even when as extreme as Meister Eckhart, knew and acknowledged mediation, the modern either does not acknowledge or does not know a mediator for his orphic journey. He passes through experience by means of the unmediated vision. Nature, the body, the human consciousness—that is the only text.17

But it is not, of course, the only text. There is also the book itself, what we normally call the text, and Hartman damages his argument by attempting to expand the substantive meaning of text to human experience, while at the same time ignoring the substantiality of text in its conventional connotation. Most such phenomenological approaches, indeed, fail to take into account the physical existence of the book. For the apocalyptic vision which Wordsworth tries so to avoid and which later poets, in their various ways, embrace—vision beyond mediating nature—is still necessarily vision within text. And thus the poet's attitude toward that text becomes immensely important, since it determines whether or not he chooses to use language itself as the necessary mediation between apocalypse and the world or whether language itself becomes for him a self-annihilating moment of prophecy:

I warn everyone who hears the message of prophecy in this book read, that if anyone adds anything to it, God will inflict upon him the plagues that are described in this book; and if anyone removes from this book any of the prophetic messages it contains, God will remove from him his share in the tree of life and the holy city which are described in this book.

(Revelation 22:18–19)

John's obsessive repetition of "this book" is a strong indication of the importance of the verbal text in apocalyptic poetry, both as amelioration and reinforcement of the apocalyptic message.

We have already discussed, in this connection, the nature of

Wordsworth's answer to the central exegetical question, "where is the text?" With Luther, and with the great confessors of radical Protestantism, Wordsworth's answer is one which emphasizes the social, humanizing, and mediatory function of the potentially world-annihilating Word.

Returning to the essays on epitaphs, we see how this verbal criterion works itself out in Wordsworth's attitude toward the poetry of the Augustans. Examining Pope's epitaph on Mrs. Corbet, a highly antithetical and structured verse, he remarks:

The Author forgets that it is a living creature that must interest us and not an intellectual existence, which a mere character is. Insensible to this distinction the brain of the Writer is set at work to report as flatteringly as he may of the mind of his subjects; the good qualities are separately abstracted (can it be otherwise than coldly and unfeelingly?) and put together again as coldly and unfeelingly.¹⁸

Pope's verses on Mrs. Corbet (who died of breast cancer) are not his finest but are a fairly polished and witty example of the verbal energies Wordsworth is repudiating:

Here rests a Woman, good without pretence,
Blest with plain Reason and with sober Sense;
No Conquests she, but o'er herself desir'd,
No Arts essay'd, but not to be admir'd.
Passion and pride were to her soul unknown,
Convinc'd, that Virtue only is our own.
So unaffected, so compos'd a mind,
So firm yet soft, so strong yet so refin'd,
Heav'n, as its purest Gold, by Tortues try'd;
The Saint sustain'd it, but the Woman dy'd.

The slight sense of bathos a modern reader may experience reading this is probably due not so much to the poem's intrinsic nature as to the unfortunate resemblance of lines like the eighth—"so firm yet soft, so strong yet so refin'd"—to the advertising slogan of a brand of cigarette. But it is a remarkable substantiation of

Wordsworth's point about language. The words are daemonic here: they become the autonomous organizing terms of Mrs. Corbet's personality and, finally, the terms of her dehumanization. The final line, "The Saint sustain'd it, but the Woman dy'd," from the standpoint of what we have already seen of Wordsworth's concern for the wholeness and continuity of the human experience, is bound to call forth a shuddering denial, for it exhibits a daemonism (albeit a eudaemonic one) of the most severe order and, furthermore, one which Pope's use of language in this little epitaph makes inevitable.

Wordsworth was not blind to the greatness of Pope. But he did realize the antithetical nature of the Augustan poetic to his own deepest concerns. The third essay on epitaphs, while acknowledging the power of couplet rhetoric, makes a brilliant point about its opposition to the Wordsworthian ideal—and incidentally comes as close as any of Wordsworth's prose to an explicit repudiation of the daemonic:

If a man has once said . . . "Evil, be thou my good!" and has acted accordingly, however strenuous may have been his adherence to this principle, it will be well known by those who have had an opportunity of observing him narrowly that there have been perpetual obliquities in his course; evil passions thwarting each other in various ways. . . . It is reasonable then that . . . Dryden and Pope, when they are describing characters like Buckingham, Shaftesbury, and the Duchess of Marlborough, should represent qualities and actions at war with each other and with themselves; and that the page should be suitably crowded with antithetical expressions.\textsuperscript{19}

We need only remind ourselves of the really unforgettable passages in the poetry of Pope, with their frighteningly concentrated and barely restrained hatred—such as the "Sporus" portrait in the \textit{Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot}, which was apparently a favorite of Byron's—to realize the daemonic quality of his language. Whether that daemonism, of course, is simply a result of the satirist's mask, or whether it is a necessary corollary of the assumptions of eighteenth-century poetic diction, is open to much question; but for Wordsworth, all these considerations are inextricably interrelated, and they are all deadly for his own imagination. It is

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 60.
especially significant in this connection that Wordsworth’s most Popean use of words in *The Prelude* occurs at the end of book 1, as he is remembering the winter evening card games of his boyhood:

... some, plebeian cards
Which Fate, beyond the promise of their birth,
Had dignified, and called to represent
The persons of departed potentates,
Oh, with what echoes on the board they fell!
Ironic diamonds—clubs, hearts, diamonds, spades,
A congregation piteously akin!
Cheap matter offered they to boyish wit,
Those sooty knaves, precipitated down
With scoffs and taunts, like Vulcan out of heaven....

(1. 522–531)

This is undoubtedly a reprise of the game of Ombre in *The Rape of the Lock*, canto 3; but it is also a remarkable inversion and dismissal of Popean wit and language. For if *The Rape of the Lock* is the language’s most glorious use of the daemonic and the diminutive for satire, the card game in *The Prelude* represents an intentional diminution of those verbal resources themselves. We remember the giant forms of daemonic heroism which had haunted Wordsworth’s epic hopes at the beginning of this book and his gradual memorial triumph, in incidents like the Skating and Stolen Boat episodes, over a daemonic ideal of nature in favor of a rhetoric of human continuity. Now, at his great moment of renewal and rededication at the end of book 1, he again examines the daemonic and, in a curiously involuted compliment to one of the masterpieces of the language, finds that view of human existence and experience “cheap matter offered... to boyish wit.” It is to be the characteristic Wordsworthian attitude throughout *The Prelude* and all the major poetry toward any myth or metaphor which distorts the language of “the produce of the common day.”

Before proceeding in this discussion of Wordsworth’s language in *The Prelude*, then, it is advisable to examine one of his few exercises in the kind of verbalization he disliked in Pope. It is not from *The Prelude* but was composed in 1804 during the intense period of writing which produced the larger poem. I quote it in full:
She was a Phantom of delight
When first she gleamed upon my sight;
A lovely Apparition, sent
To be a moment’s ornament;
Her eyes as stars of Twilight fair;
Like Twilight’s, too, her dusky hair;
But all things else about her drawn
From May-time and the cheerful Dawn;
A dancing Shape, an Image gay,
To haunt, to startle, and way-lay.

I saw her upon nearer view,
A Spirit, yet a Woman too!
Her household motions light and free,
And steps of virgin-liberty;
A countenance in which did meet
Sweet records, promises as sweet;
A Creature not too bright or good
For human nature’s daily food;
For transient sorrows, simple wiles,
Praise, blame, love, kisses, tears, and smiles.

And now I see with eye serene
The very pulse of the machine;
A Being breathing thoughtful breath,
A Traveller between life and death;
The reason firm, the temperate will,
Endurance, foresight, strength, and skill;
A perfect Woman, nobly planned,
To warn, to comfort, and command;
And yet a Spirit still, and bright
With something of angelic light.

The poem is about marriage and, more importantly, about the problem of knowing another person in and through the body. And the subtlety with which it approaches the problem is at least as great as any of the contemporary existential or phenomenological treatments of this crucial and intricate theme. Like Pope’s epitaph on Mrs. Corbet, it is a description of a woman; like the epitaph, it is written in heavily end-stopped couplets; and like the epitaph, it abounds in general terms—‘Endurance, foresight, strength, and
skill." But as a way of knowing, as a verbal structure, it is polar to
the Pope verse.

Each of the three ten-line stanzas of the poem can be described
as a recognition of the subject and can be analyzed into the three
characteristic forms through which, in fact, we may be said to
recognize any person. To the internal question "Who is this?" we
usually say to ourselves either "This is William Wordsworth" (or
more generally, "This is a man") or "This is the person with these
recognizable characteristics" (this longish nose, weak chin, thought-
ful expression, etc.) or "This is the author of The Prelude" (or
"This is a poet," "This is the Distributor of Stamps," etc). Each
stanza, that is, is a movement of perception from name to ap-
pearance to function.

Now, observing the permutations of these three terms for
forms of knowing within the poem, we can see that each stanza
generates a set of prime coordinates:

1. **Name**: "She was a Phantom of delight."
   **Appearance**: "a moment's ornament."
   **Function**: "A dancing Shape."

2. **Name**: "A Spirit, yet a Woman too!"
   **Appearance**: "A countenance."
   **Function**: "human nature's daily food."

3. **Name**: "The very pulse of the machine."
   **Appearance**: "A Being breathing thoughtful breath."
   **Function**: "A perfect Woman . . . yet a Spirit still."

This breakdown is itself, of course, daemonic in the extreme and
tends to obscure the single, unified movement of the poem through
all three sets of coordinates. But it is useful in trying to see how that
movement develops. The first stanza, which by itself could almost be
confused with a courtly compliment by a chaste Lovelace or a
leisurely Pope, is by far the most conventional in its description; it
is also the most daemonic in its use of words. Not only do the key
phrases "Phantom," "Apparition," "Shape," and "Image" carry an
implication of a disembodied, sublimated sensuality, but the terms
of visualization are explicitly ornamental, disjunctive, and obsessive.
The lady's eyes and hair are visualized in conventional imagistic
terms, but more importantly, they are visualized singly, that is, not
in terms of an integrated, human perception. The language perfectly
reflects the overcoming of the eye by the very power of the visual; and the dance which is the function-term of this stanza is not the dance of Yeats's cosmic figure in "Among School Children" but a momentary, faery dance which precisely startles and waylays the observer.

In stanza 2 the perception becomes humanized. Familiarity reveals the Woman within the apparition, the human body which articulates the spirit. And this revelation is in terms of a perception which is primarily unitary. The ornamental features of the woman's face are organized into "a countenance, in which did meet / Sweet records, promises as sweet." And an important part of that countenance-recognition is the transformation of movement as function into movement as appearance: the startling dance of the first stanza, which had been the ornamental apparition's definitive activity, is now refined into "Her household motions light and free," which is the woman's characteristically human feature. But if stanza 1 represented the overcoming of subject by the brilliance of its object, this stanza in its incipient humanization represents the inversion of that relationship. First she had gleamed upon the poet's sight; now he sees her with a more active eye, and this is to some extent an intellectual dominance of the object; her function, then, is as food for experience, as a relatively passive performer of the transient and surface human activities.

The love which is assigned to the woman as function in the second stanza, though, literally grows to transform the language and perception of the third. The poet now sees "with eye serene"—or as he had said in the great passage from "Tintern Abbey":

... with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

(47-49)

And it is important to understand that it is into the life of things that the poet does see. The name term here, "The very pulse of the machine," has struck a number of intelligent readers as a rather uncomplimentary one for the lady. Actually, it is by far the most intensely intimate name in the poem. For it is the final name perception, the perception that is neither beyond nor of the humanity
of the body but which is a vision of humanity through and within the body. Nor should the phrase “pulse of the machine” suggest any deference to a Cartesian or Pauline soul-body dichotomy, such as that implied in Gilbert Ryle’s phrase “the ghost in the machine.” For “pulse” is itself a powerfully embodied articulation of life force; and “machine,” in fact, must refer not only to the woman’s body but to the whole complex process of the poet’s perception of that body. Perception itself becomes here literally conception, as the woman’s appearance is transformed beyond even the humanity of “countenance” into the powerful and inexplicably rich phrase, “A Being breathing thoughtful breath.” Remarkably, this stanza, while incarnating the height of humanized perception, contains the greatest percentage of generalized terms. Unlike the example of the Pope epitaph, however, the general terms here are not categories for the delimiting of the woman’s character but are rather qualities spontaneously generated from the contemplation of her physical and psychic individuality. They are, in fact, not generalizations in the normal sense at all but terms which in their very bareness and nearly prosaic quality bring home the “creaturality” of the perception. And the woman’s function terms in this last stanza, “To warn, to comfort, and command,” are appropriately terms implying in the fullest sense a community with the poet, a mutuality in which each creature is reciprocally subject and object to the other, in which each is most definitively a person. The last two lines, in their graceful rounding back to the spirit images of the first two stanzas, are one of those characteristic Wordsworthian assertions of grace which convince because they seem earned. There are few poems which describe so well the way in which one human being comes to know another and perhaps none which articulate that process in such a complex yet basically unitary language.

For it would be an error to assume that any of the perception terms we have been tracing is lost in the last stanza. Each of the coordinates retains its organic importance in the development of the final intuition, as each of the stages in the history of the eye we described in the last chapter retains its memorial autonomy, and each phase of Wordsworth’s confessional relationship with his auditor is essential for every other phase in The Prelude. “She was a Phantom” has its very great usefulness for a study of The Prelude because it demonstrates, writ small, the complex balance between the past and present selves as both continuous and discontinuous,
which is our theme here. And that very discontinuity-within-continuity, as “She was a Phantom” makes almost graphically clear, is a function of the operation of the rule of memory in the language game which is the poem.

In the first two sections of the Snowdon episode, we have seen the poet move from a confessional unification of past and present into a new, Edenic language which acts out as well as asserts the power and blessedness he has earned through memory. Continuing our examination of the passage as a moment of transcendence, we now observe the third and final movement. Much has been said in this study about Wordsworth’s avoidance of the metaphorical and allegorical; that urge has been described as similar to the Protestant confessant’s horror of the sacramental and liturgical. But in the final movement of the Snowdon episode, one should not be surprised to see Wordsworth employing his most self-consciously religious, hieratic language. Having introduced the higher minds who represent a human incarnation of the universal mind of the middle section, he now proceeds to describe these minds’ activity:

They from their native selves can send abroad
Kindred mutations; for themselves create
A like existence; and, whene’er it dawns
Created for them, catch it, or are caught
By its inevitable mastery,
Like angels stopped upon the wing by sound
Of harmony from Heaven’s remotest spheres.
Them the enduring and the transient both
Serve to exalt; they build up greatest things
From least suggestions; ever on the watch;
Willing to work and to be wrought upon,
They need not extraordinary calls
To rouse them; in a world of life they live
By sensible impressions not enthralled,
But by their quickening impulse made more prompt
To hold fit converse with the spiritual world,
And with generations of mankind
Spread over time, past, present, and to come,
Age after age, till Time shall be no more.
Such minds are truly from the Deity,
For they are Powers; and hence the highest bliss
That flesh can know is theirs—the consciousness
Of Whom they are, habitually infused
Through every image and through every thought,
And all affections by communion raised
From earth to heaven, from human to divine. . . .

Almost every line of this great passage contains a phrase or image from the vocabulary of religious conversion. It begins with the doubling of active and passive responses to Nature which we have seen operating throughout the vision. But here, the dual relationship which was “seen” / “sees” at the opening becomes the doubling of “create” / “created,” that is, no longer a matter simply of perception but of an activity like that of God himself. The godlike minds of the visionary are compared to those of angels and are shown in their characteristic activity of building up “greatest things from least suggestions”—definitively the activity of The Prelude’s narrator and most strikingly what happens in the Snowdon incident itself. And from the vantage of this newly asserted power and divinity, Wordsworth can expand the sense of his own mediating and edified audience from the person of Coleridge and the “happy few” like himself to include the generations of men even down to the moment of final apocalypse. And as if even the simile of angels were to be taken literally, Wordsworth in the conclusion to the passage puns on the higher visionary minds as

. . . truly from the Deity,
For they are Powers. . . .

Powers, that is, as one of the traditional choirs of angels. And Powers, also, as real incarnations of the supernal power “which all acknowledge when thus moved” and which has been the subject of his confessional reflection.

The reader who has followed The Prelude to this point cannot himself but acknowledge, thus moved, the mastery and sweep of Wordsworth’s language here. For, true to his own fundamental linguistic principles, the poet is not using metaphor or allusion in this passage, for all its liturgical and hieratic vocabulary. He is, rather, celebrating the abolition of the Fall of man. For if, as we have said, the modern fissure of word and meaning involves, in its
origin, a denial of the Fall and of the original, "Edenic" state of consciousness, then Wordsworth's way of healing that fissure is to assert not simply the original and lost power of Edenic words but their real possibility in the here-and-now. His treatment of the image of angels is an index of his seriousness; for, refusing to allow the image to stand as image, he translates it into the word "Powers," whose meaning and range have been guaranteed through the language of the passage itself. As point of transcendence, in fact, the Snowdon episode here transcends even the terms of this study. For at this moment, the growth of poetic imagination is not simply like Protestant versions of the indwelling of God in the soul; that growth has, rather, become the indwelling of the only God Wordsworth—or the modern era—can imagine, allowing him to use the language of Christian theology not as image or allusion but as absolutely appropriate to his own sense of his poetic gift.

This negation of the Fall is, of course, a constant theme in the Protestant confessions themselves; we have already alluded to it as the theme of "Paradise Regained." The confessions of self-proclaimed "great sinners," such as John Newton or Silas Told, assert that, for the converted and redeemed, original sin and the effects of the Fall have been obliterated through the sacrifice of Christ, and the converted man has become innocent, like a preternatural child. The image of the child, in fact, in his pristine closeness to God, plays at least as important a role in these confessions as it does in Wordsworth's own poetry. And specifically as a mode of liberation from the Fall—of man and of his language—the image of the child displays profound connections with the Snowdon episode and the theme of Edenic words.

Who is the child? What are his links with the world, and why does he remain a lifelong agent of salvation in spite of the fact that man's own relationship to the world and the self changes radically during his career?

Emphatically such a Being lives,
Frail creature as he is, helpless as frail,
An inmate of this active universe.
For feeling had to him imparted power
That through the growing faculties of sense
Doth like an agent of the one great Mind

20. See appendix 3.
Create, creator and receiver both,  
Working but in alliance with the works  
Which it beholds.—Such, verily, is the first  
Poetic spirit of our human life,  
By uniform control of after years,  
In most, abated or suppressed; in some,  
Through every change of growth and of decay,  
Pre- eminent till death.

(2. 252–265)

The relationship of this very early passage from The Prelude to the climactic vision on Mount Snowdon is inescapable. And always, in Wordsworth’s awareness of the primordial energy of the child, is the sober awareness that the child must change. The child, that is, is an ornament against the voluntarist intellect, an archetype against the will. The child is what must grow, as in the primal linguistics of the soul “child” necessarily implies a later “man.” The child of the confessors is not, then, a myth of absolute primal innocence but rather a symbol, “smaller than small, bigger than big,”21 of all that the man will become, innocence and guilt, but yet in a uniquely blessed balance, a balance that in its very physical inevitability of growth and change insures the ultimate wholeness-in-time of the later man.

Augustine’s is the least rhapsodic intellect imaginable about the child’s absolute goodness, and yet book 1 of the Confessions concludes with a powerful memorial salutation of that infantile, other I:

Yet, Lord, to Thee, the Creator and Governor of the universe, most excellent and most good, thanks were due to Thee our God, even hadst Thou destined for me boyhood only. For even then I was, I lived, and felt; and had an implanted providence over my well-being—a trace of that mysterious Unity whence I was derived; I guarded by the inward sense the entireness of my senses, and in my thoughts on things minute, I learnt to delight in truth, I hated to be deceived, had a vigorous memory, was gifted with speech, was soothed by friendship, avoided pain, baseness, ignorance. In so small a creature, what was not wonderful, not admirable?

(1. 31)

21. The phrase is Jung’s, in Psyche and Symbol and other works, for the libido.
In the Latin, the “mysterious Unity whence I was derived” of this majestic passage is equally interpretable as referring either to prenatal unity in the godhead or to the unity of father and mother in the sexual act, wellspring of the individual’s physicality and hence of his psychic uniqueness. The passage, read with the latter bias, is a use of language and primal symbology matched in later confessional literature only by *The Prelude* itself:

Blest the infant Babe,
(For with my best conjecture I would trace
Our Being’s earthly progress,) blest the Babe,
Nursed in his Mother’s arms, who sinks to sleep
Rocked on his Mother’s breast; who with his soul
Drinks in the feelings of his Mother’s eye!
For him, in one dear Presence, there exists
A virtue which irradiates and exalts
Objects through widest intercourse of sense.
No outcast he, bewildered and depressed:
Along his infant veins are interfused
The gravitation and the filial bond
Of nature that connect him with the world.

(2. 232–244)

For the child is not only the central symbol of the confessional recovery of Edenic speech; it is also the prime form of confessional narration. From the standpoint of the present narrator, any past stage of the self is always archetypally the “child,” that which was to grow; and this attitude assures not only an avoidance of the daemonic, willful separation of temporal selves but also the truth to spiritual fact of confessional language and the transformation of past guilt into the necessary evidence of one’s glorification. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, which has already been cited, is involved with, among other things, the purity of evangelical speech (the Corinthians had taken to prophesying in ecstatic tongues) and the symbology of the child:

For our knowledge is imperfect and our preaching is imperfect. But when perfection comes, what is imperfect will pass away. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put aside my childish ways.
For now we are looking at a dim reflection in a mirror, but then we shall see face to face.

(1 Corinthians 13:9-12)

The "child" here is the earlier Paul (Saul) who had persecuted the Christians; and although he is put aside by the Apostle, the implication is strong that his imperfection is a necessary prelude to the later man's perfection. We cannot pass without remarking again the presence here of the ancient theme of mirror-reflection in the confrontation of present and past selves.

Wordsworth, in regarding the child of his past self at twenty-two, provides yet another example of this imaginative form:

... until not less
Then two-and-twenty summers had been told—
Was Man in my affections and regards
Subordinate to her [Nature], her visible forms
And viewless agencies: a passion, she,
A rapture often, and immediate love
Ever at hand; he, only a delight
Occasional, an accidental grace,
His hour being not yet come.

(8. 348-356)

The last line is of course deliberately christological, not in a theological but rather in a linguistic, imaginative context, implying as it does the inevitable growth-to-be of human sympathy in the twenty-two-year-old "child" and the hour to come, not only of Man as a wider ground of natural and imaginative sympathy, but also of the particular man narrating this process.

I have attempted to discuss the Snowdon passage, without scanting its own intrinsic brilliance, as a kind of visionary compendium both of The Prelude and of Wordsworth's imaginative life during the period of The Prelude's composition. In this way, I believe, it is possible to see this last vision of the poem as an access of power and confidence which, in fact, radiates over the entire web of the poem. From the vantage point of this passage, which has been the central vantage point of the present chapter, it is possible
to observe the distinctively confessional elements of *The Prelude* in their deepest relationships with one another and with the fabric of Wordsworth's vision.

The sense of the human community as mediatory is manifested in the poem's confessional address to Coleridge, a mode of address which implies the carefully humanized and antidaemonic sense of human growth in both the physical and psychic world. Both this mediation and this humanization, furthermore, necessitate Wordsworth's delicate reapportionment and balance of the senses—particularly the sense of sight—in a narrative structure which can at the same time give equal weight to the experiences of the past and to the present state of enlightenment which those experiences have created. And, finally, as the confluence and triumph of these confessional elements, the poem articulates the ideal of Edenic words—an ideal epitomized in the myth of the child who will, necessarily, grow to be a man. It is, for Wordsworth as for so many mythmakers in the history of thought, the fullest vision of recovery in this our only world of that oneness with the past which is the paradise of historical man.

It is an intuitive balance of subject, narration, and imagination which is astounding both in its achievement and in its felt influence on the history of Western thought and verbalization. It was not, of course, an achievement which Wordsworth was to keep faith with. The story of his first failings of power and then of his long decline into a poetic life-in-death are not our concern here. But it would not be possible to conclude without mentioning that a man has only one life, and therefore only one confession to write, and that Wordsworth's continued testimony to the imaginative election he found within himself, for some reason, never filled the great form projected by *The Prelude*, whose tragically ironic title we note here for the last time.

*The Excursion* is perhaps a great poem—whatever that sanction implies—but it demonstrates a falling-off of the power to speak Edenic words. This is quite explicit in the dialogue of the Wanderer and the Solitary, which throughout books 3, 4, and 5 centers in the meaning of our words for happiness and our myths of a pastoral Eden. The Wanderer's defense of daemonic superstition as at least marginally conducing to reverence for the world and his comparative insouciance toward the phenomenal reference of language in a headlong rush toward a quasi-Platonic doctrine of Forms are
betrayals of the poem’s own “Prospectus” and a new and ominous departure in the poet’s career. Likewise, in what is perhaps Wordsworth’s last major poem, *The White Doe of Rylstone*, human history has been transformed into something very different from *The Prelude*. Emily’s final attainment of exaltation above her melancholy history may represent, as many have said, a new mysticism in Wordsworth, of a more spiritual nature than the rule of memory in *The Prelude*. But it also represents a deep cleavage in what had been his central symbolic resource, what we have called the primal symbol. The Doe and the Banner that Emily weaves, the living creature and the artifact, carry on a subtle emblematic warfare throughout the poem. And the final immortal triumph of Emily’s spirit in the former after having been betrayed by the latter is an implicit defeat of the imagistic and symbolic power which had once belonged to the miraculous child of the major years.

But in spite of Wordsworth’s later failures and in spite even of the remarkable but minor successes of these poems of the decline, *The Prelude* stands not only as the single great work of the poet’s career but also as one of the very great revolutions in the human spirit. Few poems can claim to have made radically new avenues of experience available to the secular imagination, but *The Prelude* is certainly one of these few, generating a sense of the self in time, whose wonders and terrors we are still exploring at the moment these words are written. This sense takes its dim origin from the saints and madmen of English Christianity of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but it is Wordsworth’s indelible honor to have transformed it into a “prelude,” not only to his own century and poetic era, but to our own most deeply human triumphs and perils. The last line of Augustine’s *Confessions* is “it shall be opened,” heralding the opening on *this* earth of an epoch to which the first great confessor stands as patriarch. And the poetic confession we have been exploring here, heralding an epoch more resolutely secular and fiercely aspiring than any which had gone before, ends with another opening, characteristically the linguistically compact and complex opening of the comparative adverb, in the assurance that the unaided human spirit is, within the physical universe which is its home and its heritage,

In beauty exalted, as it is itself
Of quality and fabric more divine.