The Confessional Imagination

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

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The fixation of the eye, the sacramental betrayal of the living spirit of God, the warfare between Book as "text" and Book as "Word," all of these elements have their most self-conscious and most carefully literary manifestation in a confession which Wordsworth could not have known at the time of writing *The Prelude*. William Cowper's *Memoir* (1816), though, can be read almost as a critical commentary on that poem's central method—so much so that Cowper seems closer to Wordsworth as a confessor than he does as a poet of the pre-Romantic sublime. It is a confession in which concerns of spiritual salvation and imaginative health mingle and are equated under Cowper's major and tragic flaw, his predisposition toward melancholy and insanity. Early in the short narrative, Cowper tells of his despair at having to stand a public examination for the position of Keeper of the Journals of the House of Commons, a position that was originally to have been a comfortable and retired sinecure for him. One day, trying to escape from his panic at the prospect, he went with some friends into the country around Southampton and was immensely refreshed at the natural view he witnessed there:

Here it was that on a sudden, as if another sun had been kindled that instant in the heavens on purpose to dispel sorrow and vexation of spirit, I felt the weight of all my misery taken off; my heart became light and joyful in a moment; I could have wept with transport had I been alone. I must needs believe that nothing less
than the Almighty fiat could have filled me with such inexpressible delight, not by a gradual dawning of peace, but, as it were, with a flash of his life-giving countenance. . . . But Satan and my own wicked heart quickly persuaded me that I was indebted for my deliverance to nothing but a change of scene and the amusing varieties of the place. By this means he turned the blessing into a poison. . . .¹

We recognize in this passage a distinctly Wesleyan flavor in the concern with instantaneous conversion and in the comparative flatness of the language; the Wesleyan narratives tend to be written in less excited, and therefore to some modern ears more compelling, prose than those of the Quakers. But what is really exciting and has almost the air of an original aesthetic discovery here is Cowper's instinctive merging of a central problem of earlier religious confessors with a central, if submerged, problem of pre-Romantic poetry: what might be described in general terms by the phrase "the one life within us and abroad." Cowper came to regard this episode in his life as the "unpardonable sin," his one disastrous failure to trust to the divinity within nature—or as we would put it in more Wordsworthian terms, to transcend sight for vision:

No favourable construction of my conduct in that instance, no argument of my brother's who was now with me, nothing he could suggest in extenuation of my offences could gain a moment's admission. Satan furnished me so readily with weapons against myself that neither scripture nor reason could undeceive me.²

This despair, coupled with its secular analogue, Cowper's fear of his public examination, eventually led him on the morning of the proposed examination to attempt suicide no less than three separate times, to withdraw from the candidacy for the post, and to enter the asylum (how appropriate that word is for this pathologically shy man!) of Dr. Nathaniel Cotton at St. Alban's, whence he dates the beginning of his full conversion to Christ and Calvinist evangelicalism. The story of this and Cowper's later fits of melancholy is,

2. Ibid., p. 376.
of course, well known from such biographical studies as Lord David Cecil's *The Stricken Deer*; but the Cowper of the *Memoir* finally establishes himself as a much more perspicuous, tough-minded individual than the "outer" Cowper of Cecil's overdone book. One tends to forget too readily that a man writing about his insanity, far from being a study in psychic aberrancy, can often be the most viable exemplar of the sane available to us.

In Cowper's case, his precise narrative control of the confession is, besides a heartening picture of a man making peace (however temporary) with his private desert places, a valuable commentary on the structuring powers of Protestantism as an imaginative fact. The central symbol of Cowper's confession, the madhouse from which he was to come forth in a new birth of faith, is rather like a final exaggeration or aggravation of elements at work in a whole line of earlier religious confessions, and it helps us bring into focus the problems of the visual world and the daemonic. His penetration to the roots of the experience is extraordinary. Here is Cowper, for example, discussing his difficulties in actually studying for his examination (he was given about a year to peruse the journals and acquaint himself with the duties of the post):

I expected no assistance from anybody there, all the inferior clerks being under the influence of my opponent, and accordingly I received none. The journal books were indeed thrown open to me—a thing which could not be refused, and from which perhaps a man in health and with a head turned to business might have gained all the information he wanted—but it was not so with me.

The inner split in Cowper's personality readily projects an analogous division into the world around him, and he sees the offices of the journals transformed by the same daemonic fears that have begun to possess him. It is a cruel but appropriate irony that the cynosure of his despair should be, again, the journal—books rather like a malign reduction of his visual field corresponding to his earlier "unpardonable sin" in being unable to transcend the visual field at the other end of the scale, the natural prospect at Southampton.

We see, in fact, the daemonic-visual syndrome of Cowper's madness beginning to transform the world of "experience" into a negative sacrament, a downward viaticum into a universe of absolutely hostile things. And it is here, at the level of sacramental theology, that the connections between Wordsworthian Romanticism and the radical tradition in Protestantism appear in their most inevitable aspects. For the mistrust of sacrament, absolute in the Quakers and a constant, if restrained, element in Wesleyan Methodism, is the most obvious element not only of radical ritual but of radical confessional narrative.