Miall, David S., ***Wordsworth and "The Prelude": The Problematics of Feeling*** ,
Studies in Romanticism, 31:2 (1992:Summer) p.233

DAVID S. MIALL

Wordsworth and *The Prelude*: the Problematics of Feeling

When Wordsworth looks back at the earliest experience of the child in Book II of *The Prelude* he deploys several metaphors. In the 1805 version the Babe "Claims manifest kindred" (II.242),[1] and "Doth gather passion from his Mother's eye" (243); in the 1850 version, which omits these phrases, the Babe instead "Drinks in the feelings of his Mother's eye" (*1850*, II.237). In summing up the interchange between child and mother at the end of this section, Wordsworth refers to the "mute dialogues" held with his "Mother's heart" (II.284). In the present post-structuralist perspective such metaphors lend themselves to the (now commonplace) view that the fundamental concern of *The Prelude* is with language. The first metaphor, for example, is seen as "an active verbal deed" by Paul de Man, a part of the "totalizing power of language" which makes possible perception itself.[2] The poem might seem to warrant this approach: Wordsworth often describes his commerce with nature in linguistic terms. In Book I he says "the earth / And common face of Nature spake to me / Rememberable things" (I.614–16); and in Book V: "my mind hath looked / Upon the speaking face of earth and heaven / As her prime teacher" (V.11–13). It seems as if Nature is a type of speech or writing. As Douglas Kneale puts it, Nature is an "epitaphic voice . . . one complex memorial text to be conned by human beings."[3]

These readings in effect take the metaphors literally, and in so doing enable us to view a different text, one that is reflexive, preoccupied with its own coming into being and mode of existence. Yet there are diffi-

---

[1] All parenthetical references are to the 1805 edition unless otherwise indicated, and are taken from the Norton Critical Edition of *The Prelude*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979).

[2] Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984) 91.

[3] J. Douglas Kneale, "Wordsworth's Images of Language: Voice and Letter in *The Prelude*," *PMLA* 101 (1986): 354.

SiR, 31 (Summer 1992)

culties at the foundations of such readings. There is the difficulty, specific to Book II, which de Man elides, that Wordsworth is thinking of the pre-linguistic experience of the child (hence the child's "claim" cannot in any literal sense be a verbal one). More generally, by literalizing the metaphors such readings attribute to language qualities that Wordsworth elsewhere attributes to feeling. The texture of *The Prelude,* recursive and episodic, with all the losses, puzzlements, and satisfactions that it traces, is primarily the texture of the feelings. The uncertainties, displacements, and elisions are those of a mind attempting to locate and delineate its feelings. Metaphor, given the paucity of the lexicon in names for feelings, must provide one of the instruments for this endeavor; but the texture itself, the folds and pattern of the text, is also put to work to indicate the variance in feelings, their development and relationship one to another. The fact that feeling is cognitively elusive, a presence that the linguistic sign can connote only figuratively, suggests that for this text, at least, it would be productive to see the inherent *différance* of language as a perspective that *The Prelude* opens onto the problematics of feeling.

In *The Prelude,* then, we are perhaps faced not with a primacy of language but with a primacy of feeling. But this is a far from simple matter: the status of feeling is frequently ambivalent. Feeling at various times seems to belong either to the poet or to some aspect of nature; the feeling that is taking place is now active and willed, or now passive and imposed, now a presence, now an otherness. Wordsworth's long struggle with the poem, from its first notations in 1798 as a third-person narrative about the Pedlar to its posthumous appearance in 1850, surely reflects his difficulty with an intractable and paradoxical subject. To trace its complexities would, as Wordsworth's own line puts it, require "The chamois's sinews, and the eagle's wing" (II.290). Within the bounds of one article I will confine the discussion to rereading the problematic lines of Book II mentioned above; in this way I will outline a view of language and feeling that will cast some light on other much debated sections of the poem.

The Infant Babe

The Infant Babe passage, first drafted towards the end of 1799 while the Wordsworths were staying at Sockburn, presents the reader with a number of difficulties. Indeed, as comparisons of the various extant versions of the passage will show, Wordsworth's daring attempt to reconstruct our earliest conscious development bears the traces of his own difficulties—difficulties which underlay the enterprise of *The Prelude* as a whole. Thus, while this section may be "nobody's favourite sequence of *The Prelude*," as Jonathan Wordsworth has remarked, it is nevertheless one of the most important.[4]

The first remarkable feature of the passage is its context, which it retains through all its different versions. Wordsworth, decisively rejecting the Hartleyan account of the mind which would trace "the history and birth" of each sensation, states that thought "Hath no beginning" (II.237). The Infant Babe sequence, then, whatever else it may be, is not an account of the origin of thought or feeling.[5] To affirm this Wordsworth is careful to say, in his opening parenthesis, "I would trace / The *progress* of our being" (my emphasis). In some way the being of the infant is already in motion: it is not a *tabula rasa*. At the same time, the account is not notably Platonic either, since it is not primarily concerned with the origins of understanding. The activity of the growing mind is "Tenacious of the forms which it receives" (II.254), but these are not Platonic forms; in any case, this activity is preceded by a more fundamental one: the primary motion of the mind consists in feeling. Wordsworth had already alluded to this in Book I in speaking of "those first born affinities that fit / Our new existence to existing things" (I.582–83). But now he states it more directly. In his first draft for this passage the infant who

> Claims manifest kindred with an earthly soul
> Doth gather passion from his Mother's eye.
> This passion is the awakening breeze of life
> Thus stirred in the first trial of its powers[6]

Wordsworth offers no speculations on a pre-natal state, as he was to do in the "Immortality" ode. At the same time, these lines seem to imply that the process taking place with the mother is a type of induction, dependent on a pre-existent faculty within the child capable of being

---

[4] Jonathan Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: The Borders of Vision* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982) 73.

[5] As Jonathan Arac also affirms: "For each initiatory attempt of the 'blest . . . infant Babe' an answering 'already' is there before him" ("Bounding Lines: *The Prelude* and Critical Revision," in *Post-Structuralist Readings of English Poetry*, ed. Richard Machin and Christopher Norris [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987] 235–36). See also David Simpson, *Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1979) 42 and Frances Ferguson, *Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1977) 6. In Book VI it is this absence of origins to which Wordsworth seems to refer in his obscure phrase for the imagination, "an unfathered vapour" (VI.527). For a recent discussion of this phrase see Mary Jabobus, *Romanticism, Writing, and Sexual Difference* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) 7–11, 29–31.

[6] *The Prelude, 1798–1799*, ed. Stephen Parrish (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977) 186–89.

"stirred." In this sense feeling is innate to the child. But a marginal correction in the manuscript, incorporated in the 1805 version, alters the second pair of lines to:

> Such feelings pass into his torpid life
> Like an awakening breeze
>
> (II.245–46)

The inherent faculty that the first draft implies seems to have given Wordsworth trouble: feelings are now bestowed on an otherwise "torpid" infant by the mother. Wordsworth's difficulties continue across the next two lines. The infant's mind, in the first draft, is hence "prompt and eager to combine," the eagerness representing a type of anticipatory power involved in feeling.[7] But in his marginal correction this is altered to "prompt and active," "active" is then deleted in favor of "wakeful," and finally altered again to "watchful" (by 1850 these troublesome lines are omitted altogether).

Wordsworth's ambivalence, as recorded in the drafts, seems to reflect an alternately active and passive view of the infant's feelings. At the same time it raises the question: Does the Babe feel innately and hence with anticipation, or only by projection from the mother? The difficulty is further compounded in the lines that follow:

> 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.
> Emphatically such a Being lives,
> An inmate of this *active* universe.
> From Nature largely he receives, nor so
> Is satisfied, but largely gives again;
> For feeling has to him imparted strength
>
> (II.261–69)

The "infant veins" are another allusion to feelings, yet the force of gravitation is, by any normal interpretation, exerted on passive objects. Since the infant lives within an "active" universe, however, should we consider him an active being in his own right? From nature he "largely" receives (the passive view again), yet "largely" is not "wholly"—it leaves scope for some innate activity of the child, which would augment the giving and strengthening that follows.

---

[7] Another reference to anticipation occurs a few lines later: "that most apprehensive habitude" (II.256). Cf. "That twilight when we first begin to see / This dawning earth, to recognise, expect" (V.537–38).

If Wordsworth is uncertain, it must be counted in favor of this interpretation that is just these more paradoxical sections of the Infant Babe sequence that Wordsworth eliminated or revised for the 1850 version. Wordsworth at first seems to want to say both things at once: that the formative feelings are active, hence innate to the infant, *and* that they are bestowed by the mother on an infant who is initially passive and who requires "awakening." The slide from metaphor to simile in the first revision exhibits the heart of the problem: the passion "is the awakening breeze" or it is "Like an awakening breeze"; either it is intrinsic, or it leaves open the question whether it might not be at first extrinsic. If it is the latter, as the revisions up to 1805 leave it, then the passivity of the child (his prior torpidity) sorts poorly with Wordsworth's claim to portray a history of the infant which "Hath no beginning."

The difficulty of extracting a consistent view from these lines (or "philosophy," as F. R. Leavis put it[8]) is by no means confined to the question of the status and origin of the feelings. Yet the uncertainty over feelings is perhaps the root problem: it touches an uncertainty which surfaces frequently elsewhere in *The Prelude,* and which has to do with an obduracy inherent in the subject matter itself—the nature of feeling and our relation to it. If feeling creates the baby's perceptions then it also underlies the baby's understanding of the world in general and the subsequent workings of memory: thus the problems intrinsic to feeling are inherent to the cognitive developments that Wordsworth describes elsewhere in the poem.

Among recent critics of the poem has been a school of thought which attributes these problems to another source: the problematics of language. This is why a quite different view of the Infant Babe passage emerges from the account of Paul de Man. But de Man's argument, I will suggest, is based on a misreading of the situation that Wordsworth is handling: de Man's reading, to use his own term, is an error,[9] not a mistake, a blindness to the relationship of language to feeling which his system of critical insights has generated. At the same time, de Man's account underscores the difficulty, noticed by other commentators, of establishing exactly what the crucial opening lines of the passage mean.

In his first mental activity, the infant,

---

[8] He cites this passage as an instance of the impossibility of establishing Wordsworth's philosophical argument in *Revaluation* (London: Penguin, 1964) 146–52.

[9] In de Man's own terminology: see Stanley Corngold, "Error in Paul de Man," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1982): 498–507.

> when his soul
> Claims manifest kindred with an earthly soul,
> Doth gather passion from his mother's eye.
> Such feelings pass into his torpid life
> Like an awakening breeze, and hence his mind
> Even in the first trial of its powers,
> Is prompt and watchful, eager to combine
> In one appearance all the elements
> And parts of the same object, else detached
> And loth to coalesce.
>
> (II.245–50)

The first issue here is the nature of the infant's mental activity. His primary knowledge, according to Wordsworth, is based on feeling, a type of emotional knowing. This enables the infant to discriminate form, or, as we would now put it, to separate figure from ground (the first gestalt, fundamental to any act of perception). The description bears traces of the Hartleyan model: Hartley noted that we would have no idea of a horse, for example, unless the "particular ideas of the head, neck, body, legs, and tail, peculiar to this animal, stuck to each other in the fancy, from frequent joint impression."[10] But in his emphasis on a controlling cohesive power, Wordsworth is going beyond "the technical vocabulary of associationist psychology," as de Man puts it, in order to establish a different principle. Having just ended the previous verse paragraph by stating that "each most obvious and particular thought . . . Hath no beginning" (II.236–37), it would be surprising to find him doing otherwise. For him the whole, "one appearance," governs the "coalescence" of the parts. The logic of the passage suggests that this organizing principle is feeling.[11] It is a principle that appears at important moments elsewhere in *The Prelude,* as I will point out.

Another difficulty in these lines lies in Wordsworth's use of the term "object," as the focus of the infant's act of perception. What is the infant looking at? According to de Man[12] it is the mother's face:

> what is being described is the possibility of inscribing the eye, which is nothing by itself, into a larger, total entity, the "same object"

---

[10] David Hartley, *Observations on Man: His Frame, His Duty, And His Expectations* (London, 1749), Chap. I, Sect. II, Prop ii, page 71.

[11] As the Norton editors suggest, 78, n. 4.

[12] And one other commentator: see Jack Stillinger, ed., *Selected Poems and Prefaces by William Wordsworth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965) 545.

> which, in the internal logic of the text, can only be the face, the face as the combination of parts. (*Rhetoric* 91)

Language, continues de Man, "originates with the ability of the eye to establish the contour, the borderline, the surface" of things. Thus it follows that "'Face' . . . in this passage" ('face' is *not* in this passage!), "designates the dependence of any perception or 'eye' on the totalizing power of language. . . . The possibility of any contact between mind and nature depends on this spirit manifested by and in language."

De Man's own, elliptical, logic in these comments is hard to follow. Having already introduced the notion of language into Wordsworth's lines by arguing that "Claims manifest kindred" is a "verbal deed," de Man introduces it again through the metaphor of "inscribing" the eye into the "face." Thus perception is seen as a type of writing, in which words begin with the contours and borderlines of things. In this view, to paraphrase de Man, objects are known through being located within the "totalizing" system of language, hence the relationship between mind and nature is necessarily mediated through language. Such a conclusion is, of course, consistent with de Man's views elsewhere, but it depends on a number of assumptions which seem inconsistent with the argument of the Infant Babe passage and Wordsworth's diction elsewhere in *The Prelude*.

If the passage is taken as a whole, it is apparent firstly that Wordsworth is interested in both perception and other forms of knowing. He speaks of the infant coming to know "All objects through all intercourse of sense" (II.260) and in summing up the drift of the section as a whole he refers to the "intercourse of touch" by which "I held mute dialogues with my mother's heart" (282–83). The type of knowing that de Man outlines, by contrast, can refer only to perception, since it originates in "inscribing" the eye into the face. Wordsworth's view is broader than this: in particular—and this point cuts most directly across de Man's account—the "virtue" which makes "All objects" known is the feeling which derives from the "beloved presence" of the mother; more precisely, it is "the discipline of love" to which his "organs and recipient faculties" are subjected. The power with which the baby is imbued thus owes its nature and mode of operation to feeling, not to language.[13]

---

[13] Cf. Ferguson 137. It is worth noting that Coleridge, in a letter of 1801, attributed the growth of the senses and consciousness to one sense, probably touch (*Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs [Oxford: Oxford UP, 1956–71] Vol II: 706–8. Jerome Christensen's account of this issue is helpful in *Coleridge's Blessed Machine of Language* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 78–80. An important, recent discussion of de Man's

Wordsworth is delineating a general power to endow the world with meaning: the combining of the "parts of the same object" stands as paradigmatic for the power of the infant's mind that now "spreads / Tenacious of the forms which it receives / In one beloved presence" (254–56). Thus, although the "object" that is otherwise "loth to coalesce" may be the face of the mother, this interpretation is not required. In any case, it seems unlikely that Wordsworth, who describes the mother (twice) as a "presence" would at the same time refer to her face as an "object."

The infant's process of coming to know the world is due not to language (which the infant clearly lacks at the stage Wordsworth describes him) but to feeling. In this respect we might believe that Wordsworth was interpreting with some accuracy what he had observed, perhaps helped by Coleridge, whose family scene was available to Wordsworth in Nether Stowey the year before he wrote the Infant Babe passage.[14] One notable power possessed by the pre-linguistic infant lies in its ability to follow its mother's gaze. As early as two months of age, a baby adjusts its line of sight in response to a shift in the mother's direction of attention. This gives the mother's gaze a communicative function:

> What initially attracts the mother's attention and leads her to turn is also likely, in the natural environment, to capture the attention of the infant. The ecological mechanism enables a 'meeting of minds' in the selfsame object.[15]

In addition, the infant is also sensitive to the emotional quality of the adult's gaze. The infant's feelings about an object will be governed by the feelings it senses in the adult. This phenomenon, known as "social referencing," has been shown in infants of twelve months old.[16] It seems probable that Wordsworth and Coleridge, who were careful observers of children, surmised a process of this kind, and that in Wordsworth's view, his "best conjecture," such a process laid the foundations of the infant's knowledge, his sense of place in the world. If so, this would

---

misreading of Wordsworth is provided by Don H. Bialostosky, *Wordsworth, Dialogics, and the Practice of Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992). See especially 190–91, where Wordsworth's understanding of the baby's pre-verbal experience is contrasted with de Man's insistence on the role of language.

[14] Jonathan Wordsworth also calls in evidence Coleridge's letter of April 1799 about the death of his infant son Berkeley (74).

[15] G. Butterworth and L. Grover, "The Origins of Referential Communication in Human Infancy," in *Thought without Language*, ed. L. Weiskrantz (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988) 14.

[16] Paul L. Harris, *Children and Emotion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) 21.

help to explain why Wordsworth's lines speak, not of the infant looking at his mother, but of feelings authorized by her presence, which endow the infant with strength and power.

It is this emotional knowing, then, that forms "the first / Poetic spirit of our human life" (a statement justly compared by Jonathan Wordsworth to Coleridge's formative principle, the Primary Imagination [83]). This is consistent with Wordsworth's other well-known statements about the role of feeling in the generation of poetry. Yet, as I pointed out earlier, Wordsworth's lines are ambiguous both on the origin of feeling in the infant—whether it is original to the infant or derived from the mother—and on whether it is active or passive. These uncertainties, with others deriving from them, are written into the texture of *The Prelude* as a whole.

The Indeterminacy of Feeling

I have analyzed the Infant Babe passage and de Man's comments on it in some detail in order to indicate the scope of the issues that it raises.[17] De Man's article does identify a significant problem in Wordsworth's argument. Quoting Wordsworth's remark in Book v that "my mind hath looked / Upon the speaking face of earth and heaven / As her prime teacher" (v.11–13), de Man notes that with "face" such lines "assume the recognition of an entity or agency that bridges the distinction between mind and world by allowing them to exist in the proximity, in the dialogue of this distinction" (*Rhetoric* 89). In the pastoral convention (of which *The Prelude* is a major offshoot), de Man remarks elsewhere, there is "eternal separation between the mind that distinguishes, negates, legislates, and the originary simplicity of the natural."[18] Locating this separation in the consciousness of language in *The Prelude,* however, is to preclude insight into a more profound and troubling division in the mental landscape that Wordsworth develops, a division inherent in feeling itself. Tracing other instances in which Wordsworth uses the term "face" will help to sketch the internal problematics of feeling that *The Prelude* develops at large.

The implication of "face" cannot be taken to mean, as de Man maintains, that Wordsworth is committed to mediating his relationship with nature through perception, "a mute scene of looking" dependent on the "eye" (*Rhetoric* 90). This would be, once again, to literalize what should be taken metaphorically. As Wordsworth makes clear in Book XI, there was a phase in which "the eye was master of the heart," making the act of looking "The most despotic of our senses," and one which "rejoiced / To lay the inner faculties asleep" (XI.171, 173, 193–94). Literal dependency on the eye is thus both partial and dangerous. Ignoring this, de Man falls into another error, seeing a conflict between two processes that for Wordsworth are clearly complementary: the emotional knowing that identifies wholes (the gestalt that the Infant Babe passage describes), and the knowing that distinguishes and discriminates.[19] In Book III Wordsworth, now speaking of a time when he was seventeen or eighteen, states:

---

[17] A fuller analysis of de Man's discussion would also have to take issue with his comments on Wordsworth's theory of metaphor (88–89), which erroneously refers to it as analogical.

[18] Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight,* 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1983) 239.

> I had an eye
> Which in my strongest workings evermore
> Was looking for the shades of difference
> As they lie hid in all exterior forms,
> Near or remote, minute or vast—an eye
> Which from a stone, a tree, a withered leaf,
> To the broad ocean and the azure heavens
> Spangled with kindred multitudes of stars,
> Could find no surface where its power might sleep,
> Which spake perpetual logic to my soul,
> And by an unrelenting agency
> Did bind my feelings even as in a chain.
> (III.156–67)

For de Man this is another example of the "face-making" power, yet it is a power which "can find no surface": the face "is the power to surface from the sea of infinite distinctions." Thus, he asks, "How are we to reconcile the *meaning* of face, with its promise of sense and of filial preservation, with its *function* as the relentless undoer of its own claims?" (*Rhetoric* 92). This question, of course, is based on the wrong premises. Having established that "face-making" signifies the "totalizing power of language," he is led to read the predicament, the *différance,* of language, into the unresting absence of "surface." There is a problem in this passage, but it is not one of "surfacing" from a sea.

At one level Wordsworth is simply establishing another type of knowing, a responsiveness to the hidden differences in everything. That he is not concerned only with perception, that this is not the despotic eye, is confirmed by the last three lines, where the meaning of the differences is registered in the feelings. Unlike domination by the eye, his inner faculties are not "asleep." Thirty lines earlier another aspect of the same process is offered, referring to the face of Nature, and deploying a metaphor analogous to that of "sleep":

---

[19] J. Wordsworth, on the other hand, suspects Wordsworth of mistaking one for the other (80).

> whatso'er of Terror or of Love
> Or Beauty, Nature's daily face put on
> From transitory passion, unto this
> I was as wakeful, even, as waters are
> To the sky's motion: in a kindred sense
> Of passion, was obedient as a lute
> That waits upon the touches of the wind.
> (III.132–38)

In this account it appears to be the moods of nature as a whole to which Wordsworth is "wakeful": he responds to its meaning in the way a lake takes on the color of the sky. Whether discriminating differences or seeing the whole, however, the feelings in either case are induced and shaped passively (the aeolian harp figure is quite explicit). Yet between these two passages Wordsworth seems to claim just the opposite: "I had a world about me—'twas my own, / I made it" (142–43). Tracing backwards or forwards from this section the same paradox can be found, the paradox also noted in the Infant Babe passage. Feeling is either active—to every natural form he gave "a moral life—I saw them feel, / Or linked them to some feeling" (126–27); or passive—"From Nature and her overflowing soul / I had received so much that all my thoughts / Were steeped in feeling" (II.416–18). This passive/active paradox[20] beginning (temporally speaking) with the earliest feelings of infancy, runs throughout *The Prelude*. The relationship of mind and nature, which is mediated by the feelings, is thus seen at one time strictly as the genesis of mind by nature, at another time as the creation of nature by the mind.

One step beyond this lies the formulation that allows for both processes. As an "agent of the one great mind" the infant "Creates, creator and receiver both" (II.272–73). This reciprocal relationship of mind with nature is a founding principle of romantic faith, elaborated here and in other major poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge. To approach it in this way, however (and recalling the question placed over it by de Man), serves to indicate that the principle is dependent on prior assumptions about the role and status of the feelings.[21] Apart from the "one great mind," which here, as elsewhere in *The Prelude,* is little more than a gestural component of the statement,[22] the primal assumption appears to be this: that at the most elementary level our feelings are a part of nature.[23] Wordsworth comes close to saying this in that cancelled metaphor in his first draft for the Infant Babe passage: the passion "is the awakening breeze of life" (Parrish 188–89). But other early drafts also suggest it. Praising Nature, or the eternal spirit (at times the terms seem interchangeable), he says:

---

[20] Wordsworth restates it without resolving it in the "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface" of 1815: see *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth,* ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974) Vol. III: 81. As a general property of emotion it has been classed as one of the basic "antinomies" of emotion by Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987) 2.

> Oh bounteous power
> In childhood, in rememberable days
> How often did thy love renew for me
> Those naked feelings which when thou wouldst form
> A living thing thou sendest like a breeze
> Into its infant being.
> (Parrish 94–95)

Another passage, showing Wordsworth looking at the sea and gathering "New pleasure, like a bee among the flowers" (I.608), in its earlier draft stated that he linked the scene with "No body of associated forms," suggesting that the feelings are native and unlearned. He continued:

> Nor unsubservient even to noblest ends
> Are these primordial feelings how serene
> How calm those seem amid the swell
> Of human passion even yet I feel
> Their tranquillizing power
> (Parrish 99)

These "naked" or "primordial" feelings, as the breeze metaphor implies, appear to be Nature's emanation in the infant mind. As such they form the basis of Wordsworth's account of his growth.[24] Retreating from this pantheistic identity of nature-spirit-mind, he eliminated the overt statements of our oneness with nature through the feelings. But *The Prelude* is a type of palimpsest: their implications, disturbing the surface of the poem, continue to exist only half concealed.[25]

---

[21] Geoffrey Hartman passes over this question perhaps too easily: "It does not matter whether the inspiring impulse is from within or without: from now on Wordsworth considers them interchangeable and uses whether/or formulations. The 'I' must never seize the initiative too strongly, and must be willing to be born in the moment and precariously from moment to moment" (*Wordsworth's Poetry 1787–1844* [New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1977] 174).

[22] It is developed most fully in the Snowdon episode (XIII.69–73), but here too Wordsworth retreats from it rather quickly to the psychological process through which contact with the "mind" emerges.

[23] This issue is renewed in the current controversy over emotion: whether it is culturally determined or primarily pandemic. For a recent partisan statement of the controversy see Rom Harré's opening chapter in *The Social Construction of Emotions,* ed. Rom Harré (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

Geoffrey Hartman has pointed to the "unresolved opposition between Imagination and Nature" which prevented Wordsworth from "becoming a visionary poet." Hartman sees it as paradoxical that Wordsworth

> should scrupulously record nature's workmanship, which prepares the soul for its independence from sense-experience, yet refrain to use that independence out of respect of nature. His greatest verse *still takes its origin* in the memory of given experience to which he is often pedantically faithful. (39)

However, the opposition that Hartman describes dissolves at the level of feelings, if feelings are nature within us, since feelings, in the discarded passages above, constitute both Being and Imagination. The "naked feelings" form "A living thing"; and the "primordial feelings" provide a primitive perspective by which to assess "human passion." While Wordsworth retreats from this foundational view, creating the paradox that Hartman identifies, yet many of the greatest passages of *The Prelude* seem haunted by this sense of the autonomous power of the feelings, feelings that authenticate nature within him while they judge what is human or cultural (including language). Even so, the role of the feelings, especially their organizing power within memory, remains subtle and elusive:

> the hiding-places of my power
> Seem open, I approach, and then they close;
> I see by glimpses now, when age comes on
> May scarcely see at all; and I would give

---

[24] Cf. also the later reference to this first stage of imagination: "a mute influence of the soul, / An element of the nature's inner self" (XIII.513–14). Which nature is this? Note also that *1850* deletes the second line. The statement at the opening of Book XII, "From Nature doth emotion come," holds a similar ambiguity, since emotion is both "Nature's gift" and her "influence" (XII.1–7). If by gift he means an endowment, then emotion is the endowment of Nature in us, ie., it is innate; but this is hard to reconcile with a power that is an "influence." See also XII.185–88.

[25] I am concerned here with Wordsworth's distinctive account of feeling in generating the pantheist metaphysic; the question of Wordsworth's pantheism raises wider issues than those I deal with here: see Melvin Rader, *Wordsworth: A Philosophical Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967) 58–66, 198–201.

> While yet we may, as far as words can give,
> A substance and a life to what I feel
> (XI.335–40)

But it is surely this indeterminacy in what the feelings mean (their origin, role, and status), which has given the high points of *The Prelude* their power over successive generations of readers. In that repeated struggle of Wordsworth with his glimpses and occlusions, he enacts a discourse of the mind in which discourse itself is discovered to be an inadequate vehicle for the meaning that feelings seem to hold out to us.

Scripting the Self

It is the mother's "presence" that, by a type of induction, arouses the feelings of the infant—a presence communicated by touch as well as sight. Her presence validates the infant's feelings, endowing them with strength and power "in all sentiments of grief, / Of exultation, fear and joy" (II.270–71). This term for the mother, "presence," is also employed to account for the effect of nature: the "presences of Nature, in the sky / Or on the earth" (I.490) that imbue natural scenes with feeling; "the one presence . . . the life / Of the great whole" (III.130–31). It is in a similar vein that Wordsworth speaks figuratively of the "face" of nature: "the earth / And common face of Nature spake to me / Rememberable things" (I.614–16); "my mind hath looked / Upon the speaking face of earth and heaven / As her prime teacher" (V.11–13). Again, it is the "face" that authorizes the feelings that Wordsworth develops. In this presence or from this "face" the truths of nature's "speech" (i.e., Wordsworth's correspondent feelings) are guaranteed, rather as in ordinary discourse we can be certain of the meaning of a person's speech only when we are also able to assess facial expression, tone of voice, and body language (thus eliminating as far as possible the inherent free play of language). On the other hand, both memory and language (actual language, in contrast to the figurative speech of nature) threaten to place Wordsworth at a remove from the meaning of his feelings. Wordsworth's metaphysic of presence is thus founded on a sense of psychological realities, in which a disjunction of language and feeling always looms.[26]

---

[26] Wordsworth's critique of 18th century poetic diction in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* takes its stand on this issue; compare also his note to "The Thorn": "Poetry is passion: it is the history or science of feelings; now every man must know that an attempt is rarely made to communicate impassioned feelings without something of an accompanying consciousness of the inadequateness of our own powers, or the deficiencies of language"

It is these authenticated feelings that form the self. When the first Presence is removed—Wordsworth's reference may be to the death of his mother—"the building stood, as if sustained / By its own spirit" (II.295–96). His continued contact with nature "left a register / Of permanent relations else unknown" (II.311–12), a process of self-formation that took place at times without the participation of the conscious mind: "I made no vows, but vows / Were then made for me: bond unknown to me / Was given" (IV.341–43). Other feelings are invalidated by this internal standard, shown up as trivial or vain (e.g., III.332, IV.304–6), but in the larger structure of *The Prelude,* this authentic self is present, albeit in glimpses, as the implicit standard for judging memory and language. The question then arises as to how the registry of the self is to be elaborated, when memory provides only a partial and perhaps faulty record, and when language itself is continually on the point of betraying Wordsworth's purpose.

The work of compiling *The Prelude* out of the first fragments of 1798–99, then the move from the two-book to the thirteen-book version of 1805, show Wordsworth's experiments to be motivated by just this problem. His method depends only episodically on a linear, temporally ordered narrative, in the manner of a conventional autobiography (as Wordsworth acknowledges in the opening of Book IX): the larger structure he devises for the poem depends rather on the sequencing of the various episodes, so that their affective implications in forming the self that he has become are allowed to emerge. He is guided in this by the nature of the feelings he is attempting to portray. Certainly, constructing a context for the initial *Prelude* fragments was a textual problem for Wordsworth, as Paul Magnuson emphasizes,[27] but in this case the textual issue is governed by the fundamental psychological problem, that of providing a context in which the prospective role of feeling can find a correspondence in the movement of the poetry. The prototypical technique is the long backward look. At the opening of the poem, having declared the need for a theme, Wordsworth then breaks off to begin again, "Was it for this . . ." Similarly, the Infant Babe passage in Book II, and the relocation of the spots of time episodes from Part II in 1799

(*Prose,* Vol. II: 513). Cf. XII.268–74, where Wordsworth points to the feelings as a type of languageless thought. For a judicious account of Wordsworth's views on the relationship of language and thought see Jonathan Wordsworth, "As with the Silence of the Thought," in *High Romantic Argument: Essays for M. H. Abrams,* ed. Lawrence Lipking (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981).

[27] *Coleridge and Wordsworth: A Lyrical Dialogue* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988) 199, 227.

to Book XI in 1805, constitute a type of anticipation by retrospection. Another strategy is to place in sequence scenes showing qualitatively different feelings to indicate their moral relativity in forming the self. The various effects of these strategies cannot be traced in detail here, but by looking briefly at two sections of *The Prelude,* I will sketch out their implications for Wordsworth's understanding of the feelings.

The Blind Beggar scene in Book VII is one of several scenes in *The Prelude* where language itself is foregrounded and appears as if setting a limit to what we can know. The beggar is "his own living epitaph," as Douglas Kneale puts it, in a discussion informed by deconstructive principles: "The Beggar and his text are almost explicitly epitaphic . . . his state presents an 'apt type' of what Wordsworth's poetry is forever moving toward: the epitaph, the 'memorial' . . . the frail shrine of language." The Beggar provides a significant instance, says Kneale, of what *The Prelude* has been enacting: "a figural foregrounding that repeats language's own self-encounter," the "narcissistic" moment of language. Thus *The Prelude,* concludes Kneale (perhaps predictably), "attempts to narrate the life of an actual person but finds itself instead narrating the semiological problems of that narration" (358–60).

As far as language is concerned, this is well put. But it is not the main meaning of the scene if taken in its context. The Beggar scene is located between passages in which Wordsworth considers two differing types of understanding: one largely determined by external objects in which the mind is controlled or adrift upon its perceptions; in the other the mind is informed by awareness of the inner meaning of sights and sounds, and absorbs them to its own existing structures. Thus the Beggar occurs as a check to Wordsworth's drifting mind, a state in which nothing has been making adequate sense:

> the shapes before my eyes became
> A second-sight procession, such as glides
> Over still mountains, or appears in dreams,
> And all the ballast of familiar life—
> The present, and the past, hope, fear, all stays,
> All laws of acting, thinking, speaking man—
> Went from me, neither knowing me, nor known.
> (VII.601–7)

The sight of the Beggar breaks in upon this state: it is a sudden anchor to Wordsworth's drifting perception. As such it is placed within an ironic framework. The label on the Beggar's chest appears an emblem "of the utmost that we know / Both of ourselves and of the universe" (619–20). That this is not Wordsworth's last word on self-knowledge is clear from the continuation, which pointing back by the referent "These" explicitly categorizes experiences such as the Beggar scene as of lesser importance, a type of mental fabrication:

> Though reared upon the base of outward things,
> These chiefly are such structures as the mind
> Builds for itself. Scenes different there are—
> Full-formed—which take, with small internal help,
> Possession of the faculties . . .
>
> (624–28)

The context serves to reinforce the point Wordsworth is making here about language, highlighted by Kneale, but serves more particularly to underline the limitations of knowledge confined to a "written paper" or "label." The stance of the Beggar, his immobility, upright with blind eyes, is an apt emblem for the deficiencies of language *qua* language. The Beggar presents a scene of stasis, in which feeling is absent or suspended.[28] The "scenes different" of the ensuing passage provide more reliable knowledge, based on feelings of solemnity, calm, or beauty.[29] While Wordsworth does not dwell on them, he emphasizes that they are "falsely catalogued" (643): in other words, we normally underrate or neglect them for more superficial and striking scenes (he goes on to describe Bartholomew's Fair).

If we take the Beggar scene out of context, then, and make it too exclusively a point about language, the important sequencing of feelings that Wordsworth provides is overlooked. This sequence provides a type of affective script:[30] moving from oppression and reverie as the self becomes adrift, to a sharp turn of astonishment as the Beggar is encountered, to a reconfirmation of the feelings at the foundation of the self's knowledge of itself. In various forms the elements of this script can be found elsewhere in *The Prelude,* registered shifts or changes in feeling. The self being formed in the poem can be seen as a compound of such scripts. Memory in the poem is able to capture certain key scenes that show the scripts being formed or recapitulated, but memory itself is structured by its affective scripts and is more apt to provide a sense of their significance than their substance:

---

[28] Cf. Frances Ferguson's account of the essential "supplementarity" of language in Ferguson 32–33.

[29] J. Wordsworth relates the Beggar to the reductive state of the leech gatherer (10) and the discharged soldier (14–16). By lacking feeling such figures are at the opposite pole to Wordsworth himself. "Feeling in this sense is for Wordsworth nothing less than the power of imaginative re-entry into past experience . . ." and the basis of the creative process (16).

[30] I borrow this useful term from Don Kuiken, "Dreams and Self-Knowledge," in *Sleep and Dreams: A Sourcebook*, ed. Jayne Gackenbach (New York and London: Garland, 1986) 229; the term is a descendent of the coinage of R. Schank and R. P. Abelson in artificial intelligence from where it was taken over by cognitive psychology. Kuiken employs it to identify a property of feeling largely overlooked by contemporary psychologists.

> the soul—
> Remembering how she felt, but what she felt
> Remembering not—retains an obscure sense
> Of possible sublimity, to which
> With growing faculties she doth aspire,
> With faculties still growing, feeling still
> That whatsoever point they gain, they still
> Have something to pursue.
>
> (II.334–41)

Feeling itself, as it is experienced, but more especially in Wordsworth's memories of feeling, exhibits another fundamental paradox which is a notable property of the Wordsworthian affective script. Feeling is both temporal—it has an anticipatory dimension, the sense of something "about to be" (VI.542)—and eternal, through a sense of its co-presence with the one mind.[31] In this respect the self that is founded on feeling is both in time and transcends time. Wordsworth's most characteristic attempts to resolve this paradox redefine it as a type of cultural critique: what is located in time, contingent on human history, opposed to the process of becoming in which the self participates in the eternal. Thus the Beggar, with his label, "The story of the man," emblematic of the self in history, is contrasted to the a-historical truths of nature that follow.

As a scene in which actual writing is given special significance, the Beggar may also be compared with the second passage I will discuss, the first of the "spots of time" episodes in Book XI. Here the young Wordsworth flees from the "characters" of the murderer's name engraved on the grass (XI.300–301). This scene is immediately followed by a contrast: the pool on the hillside and the girl striving against the wind. Again, differing types of understanding seem to be proposed by the opposition between these two moments, first on the valley bottom and then on the hillside. The moment of history that is preserved, frozen in the murderer's name, stands in contrast to that most mysterious and archetypal encounter, the girl who seems to exist forever outside time, making her way against the wind. Wordsworth's somewhat laborious insistence on the writing in the turf, added when revising this passage for 1805,[32] seems designed to make the contrast more explicit than it had been in the original version of 1799.

---

[31] Interestingly, adjacent entries in Coleridge's notebooks record both views: see Vol. 3, notes 4056 and 4057 in *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge,* ed. Kathleen Coburn (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957–73).

The primary contrast is that between stasis and process (a contrast which appears in many forms in much romantic poetry). The scene of writing here doubly violates natural process: first it recalls a murder, and second, the overgrowing of grass that would have erased the characters has been prevented. This striking and fearful image of the stoppage of natural process is succeeded by its opposite: the pool and the girl signify process, change, and striving.[33] If this is not immediately evident, it should be noted that these lines contain two symbols important to Wordsworth and invariably associated with epiphanic accounts of knowing: water and wind.

These lines thus contrast both the temporal and the eternal aspects of the feelings. They also embody one other important psychological aspect of feeling, to which Wordsworth is frequently sensitive—the slow development of significance in feeling. Frances Ferguson, in a different context (Wordsworth's account of epitaphs), terms this "the time lag within the feelings which makes them more capable of fidelity to absent than to present subjects" (32). In describing the pool, beacon, and girl, Wordsworth repeats his description three times, each time adding emotional weight to the account.[34] The "beacon" becomes "The beacon on the lonely eminence," then "the melancholy beacon"; the girl, seen first merely forcing her way, becomes "The woman and her garments vexed and tossed / By the strong wind." The emerging significance of the experience correlates with a narrative strategy describing the moment first in time, then progressively out of time as a phenomenon of memory. Thus the manner in which Wordsworth recaptures the remembered moment, the spot of time, ends by seeming to purge it of the temporal.

---

[32] The lines are objected to by Jonathan Wordsworth who sees them as a distracting addition (56–57).

[33] The girl is an "admirable" figure, as J. Wordsworth suggests (59); David Pirie notes that the boy, faltering and lonely, "is confronted by an image of resolution and independence" (*William Wordsworth: The Poetry of Grandeur and of Tenderness* [London, Methuen, 1982] 263). Thus these are not three images of stasis, as in the accounts of Hartman (216) or Jonathan Bishop, "Wordsworth and the 'spots of Time,'" in *Wordsworth, The Prelude: A Casebook*, ed. W. J. Harvey and Richard Gravil (London: Macmillan, 1972) 145.

[34] Hugh Sykes Davies, noticing the repetition, saw it as emotional change rather than development, Wordsworth's way of indicating "the shaping action of the memory" (*Wordsworth and the Worth of Words* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986] 29–30). David Simpson also points to the revisionary role of emotion in the spots of time, but draws a different conclusion from it: see *Wordsworth and the Figurings of the Real* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities P, 1982) 65.

A similar emergence of emotional significance through repetition is even more apparent in the second spot of time, the "waiting for the horses" episode. And here the transcendence of the temporal appears to involve several factors: the thwarting of the boy Wordsworth's childish hope, his impatience to return home, the death and funeral of the father that takes place in time ("ten days" is given prominence), and the "trite reflections of morality" (XI.372) caused in him by the event, that place a limited and conventional significance on the experience.[35] Wordsworth transcends these temporally marked aspects to find (albeit obscurely) some transcendental significance in the feelings attaching to the single sheep and blasted hawthorn.

Both spots of time thus raise a central paradox of feeling, its simultaneous temporal and a-temporal character. As emotional significance emerges, however, the focus shifts from the cultural to the epiphanic component of the experience; and in both episodes a set of affective contours is traversed in which there is a sharp gradient as one type of feeling gives way to another. Both must be set down as foundational affective scripts in the formation of the Wordsworthian self, lying behind numerous other experiences related earlier in *The Prelude.*

The revisions and structural shifts that Wordsworth made between 1799 and 1805 seem intended in part to allow the relationship between his various emotional experiences to appear more clearly, to enable each episode to be illuminated by its neighbors and by its place in the cumulative scheme of the poem, and above all to enable the significance of the experiences as they evolve in memory to be enacted at the narrative level of the poem.[36] This evolutionary principle is suggested in Part I of the 1799 *Prelude,* just before the "spots of time" are introduced.

---

[35] What these reflections may have been is suggested by Wordsworth's earlier treatment of this episode in *The Vale of Esthwaite,* lines 437–49.

[36] Referring to the shift of the spots of time episodes to Book XI, James Averill notes that whereas the 1799 *Prelude* is concerned only with relating inner and outer, the revisions of 1805 enable Wordsworth to show "how the impaired imagination is restored as the poet finds in his childhood the 'hiding places' of his power" (*Wordsworth and the Poetry of Human Suffering* [Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980] 238). For a general defense of Wordsworth's revisionary practice see Jack Stillinger, "Textual Primitivism and the Editing of Wordsworth," *Studies in Romanticism* 28 (1989): 3–28.

Following his account of the drowned man of Esthwaite, he mentions that there were other such accidents and disasters, and that these

> impressed my mind
> With images to which in following years
> Far other feelings were attached—with forms
> That yet exist with independent life,
> And, like their archetypes, know no decay.
> (*1799,* I.283–87)

The first spot of time episode, as Wordsworth was to expand it in 1805, provides a perfect example of such changes in feeling across time: his later memories of rambles with Mary Hutchinson and Dorothy on Penrith Beacon, which cast a quite different light on the scene, are nevertheless endowed with "radiance more divine / From these remembrances" (XI.323–24).

If we take a larger perspective still (to suggest how the textual works to elaborate the psychological), the shift of the spots of time away from Book II to Book XI serves to endow much greater power on the negative pole of those episodes for coming after the increasingly negative experiences of Cambridge, London, France, and the dissolution of Godwinian reason in Wordsworth's crisis of despair. All of these disturbing experiences, in the retrospect implied by the spots of time, take their place as collocates of stasis and death. Yet, as Wordsworth states, introducing this part of the poem, the "spots of time" retain "A renovating virtue" (XI.259) which, by contrast to the world of mutability and death, enforces the sense that some eternal principle is implanted with the feelings from infancy onwards. This realization allows Wordsworth to celebrate such feelings with a conviction that in 1799 was not yet possible:

> Oh mystery of man, from what a depth
> Proceed thy honours! I am lost, but see
> In simple childhood something of the base
> On which they greatness stands . . .
> (XI.328–31)

Whatever the metaphysical presuppositions of Wordsworth's verse, the structure and sequencing of *The Prelude* of 1805 provide a remarkable psychological exploration of the indeterminacies and paradoxes of feeling as Wordsworth had experienced them across his thirty-five years of life.

University of Alberta, Canada