

## Authority and Deconstruction In Book V of *The Prelude*

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In recent years Book V of *The Prelude*, the pivotal book entitled “Books,” has assumed special prominence not only in Wordsworth studies, but in literary studies generally. To those who believe that Wordsworth’s poem is essentially faithful to its announced expectations, this avowedly difficult section—a *mélange* of invective, reverie, memory and allusion—has proven especially vexing. Even Geoffrey Hartman, who regards *The Prelude* as a massive exercise in bad faith, is sufficiently perplexed by Book V to make it two books: one that approximates the apocalyptic humanism of the succeeding book (“Cambridge and the Alps”) and another which seeks to “bind” the human imagination to Nature in what Hartman calls “akedah.” In struggling “valiantly,” then, “to shift its emphasis from apocalypse to akedah,” Book V not only avoids “poetic schizophrenia”; it avoids, Hartman shows, the thing it also privileges—specifically, the primacy of Imagination, or the book of Man, over Nature, “the book of God.”<sup>1</sup>

Hartman’s is an extreme position to be sure, yet not so extreme when one considers the lengths other critics have gone to to recuperate Book V. These have ranged from simple paraphrase, to psychoanalysis, to the employment of religious symbolism, to the elision, finally, of any part of “Books,” such as the Drowned Man episode, that might otherwise complicate what one critic terms its “structure and meaning.”<sup>2</sup> Thus it is hardly surprising that for J. Hillis Miller, a deconstructive critic, *The Prelude*’s book on books is less an exegetical problem than a fortuitous accident. According to Miller, Book V illustrates why “meaning,” particularly poetic meaning, is essentially impossible.<sup>3</sup> This, he contends, is the subject of the book’s initial episode—the well-known Arab dream—in which a book of poetry is reconstituted as a shell. This is done to

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show that poetry, far from being a spontaneous utterance, is an inscription, or radical displacement, which must therefore be interpreted. At the same time, such “demand” for interpretation—with reference, again, to the dream in which the Arab, a displacement of Don Quixote, wishes to bury a displaced book (the shell) to save it from destruction—only reinforces the “conferring, divesting or transforming energy [of] language.” In other words, the Arab dream “puts in question the possibility of literal naming and suggest[s] that all names are metaphors moved aside from any direct correspondence to the thing named by their reference to other names which precede and follow them in an endless chain.”<sup>4</sup>

Unlike Hartman’s, Miller’s argument is interesting less for its conviction than for the ease with which it is accomplished. Yet all this ease confirms is that Miller has simply transformed Book V to suit his purpose, doing away with the remainder of the book as with *The Prelude* of which Book V is a part. Nor is Miller’s way with “Books” endemic to a revisionist or, in his case, a deconstructive posture. Most readings of *The Prelude*’s fifth book, as opposed to those of its other books, *are* restrictive, not only in their focus within “Books” itself, but in their reluctance to extend that focus to the larger poem. Since “Books” is by all appearance a digression, so most criticism of the section is similarly digressive, adopting an uncharacteristically hermetic stance ill-suited to the remainder of the poem.<sup>5</sup>

There is, however, another way to approach Book V, but it demands a conception of referentiality with which Romanticists are generally uncomfortable. In such a conception, particulars or signifiers are not self-referential any more than they refer immediately to universals. Removed from their literalness to begin with, signifiers in this view *literally* resist symbolic transformation or their co-optation by what we might term a Romantic imagination. Instead these signifiers refer to other particulars, in this case to the larger book of which they are in a sense still parts. This conception, of course, we normally call allegory, but it is germane to our discussion of Book V not because allegory as such is the dominant figurative mode of *The Prelude* or that it is a condition properly of all representation. Allegory is at issue here because for Wordsworth it is another kind of representation whose orientation is neither natural, nor supernatural, nor natural-supernatural. It is because allegory places Wordsworth at distance from himself in *The Prelude* or from the “Poet” we recognize to be Wordsworth: the figure whose preoccupations with the ordinary barely mask their “self-

congratul[ory]" (I.121) drift.<sup>6</sup> Whether it is allegory that accomplishes this removal on its own, or whether it is the poet who situates himself at critical remove through allegory, is immaterial. The critical point is that the "self" that authorizes allegory in Book V is the same self, for better or worse, that is authorized by it and empowered, consequently, to contest its own "representation."

In Book V there is in the end no difference between the poet and the "Poet," between the writing Wordsworth and the represented counterpart; the referent, by gradual turns, becomes the referee. I do not mean to suggest that allegory is always this reflexive or, following the judgments of de Man and Derrida, this subversive. I would argue rather that Wordsworth's use of allegory in Book V checks the expansiveness of the idealized subject by depending on that same subject to restrain itself. If the various signifiers in "Books" are not strictly self-referential neither are they "self"-congratulatory except that, like symbols, they do not always say what they mean. Meaning, as elsewhere in Wordsworth, inevitably lies in what is not said here or in what is communicated indirectly. This communication privileges something, or someone, but at the expense inevitably of something and someone else—in this instance of both *The Prelude* and its idealized poetical self. Nor is this the last time that this happens in *The Prelude*, that one representation will be purchased at the cost of what it re-presents. In fact, it is only the first time, the first juncture in the poem that as *poet* Wordsworth has been able to take stock of the very enterprise to which as "Poet" he is still committed. Composed before *The Prelude*, the initial two books in which the poem's scheme was set forth have given the idealizing Wordsworth a headstart that the writer himself never wholly overcomes, save in the manner just described. Yet for this same reason, by the very scheme that resists subversion as it provokes dissent, Wordsworth has recourse in Book V—as he will in other parts of *The Prelude*—to fight representation with representation.

Before illustrating what I mean in a more specific way, I want to examine two recent treatments of Book V. These readings are useful for several reasons: first, because they are comprehensive in their view of "Books"; second, because they succeed in linking "Books" both to *The Prelude* and to the "high Romantic argument" on which *The Prelude* is predicated; and finally, because they make clear the importance of their inquiry—the question of poetic authority—to literary studies today. At issue is not simply the relevance of this question either to the study of *The Prelude* or even to the "Romantic reassessment" of the last thirty years; instead what

those readings emphasize together is the relevance of authority *per se*, its sustained promotion, to the function of criticism in the present time. The first of these studies, Michael Jaye's "The Artifice of Disjunction: Book V of *The Prelude*,"<sup>7</sup> is clearly within the "humanistic" tradition of Romantic studies, beginning in the 1950s with Northrop Frye and continuing in the work of Harold Bloom, M. H. Abrams and others, in which the creative self is authorized a supreme artificer.<sup>8</sup> In Jaye's argument, Wordsworth admits in Book V to the fundamental confusion of his poetic enterprise and, admitting this, legitimizes his poem whose disjunction we are bound to accept. The fault lies not with Wordsworth who confronts "inharmonious complexities," incidents like the Winander Boy episode where tension and conflict are unrelieved amid efforts to the contrary; the fault is with modern criticism's failure to "accept ambivalence, inconsistency or contradiction as conditions of poetic utterance." Among those who admire *The Prelude*, then, Jaye goes furthest in acknowledging Book V's peculiar difficulties. These, he observes, are at base insoluble. Just as the dreamer fails in his vision (failing in this instance to bring it to conclusion), so the Arab also fails in that his mission "alienates him from those in the comfortable, safe world" who are paradoxically free from such "sacred knowledge and obligation." Moreover, as a figure with whom Wordsworth identifies, the Arab is a scapegoat, dramatizing as part of that failed dream the creative mind's inability to "overcome the ultimate forces of waste and loss." Finally, in his most startling observation, Jaye maintains that the new endings to the Winander Boy and Drowned Man segments—added when these episodes were incorporated into *The Prelude* in 1804—serve to create a disjunction in the reader's experience as we pass from the actuality of death to "artificial conceptual resolution," specifically to "compensatory experiences gained through reading."<sup>9</sup>

And yet, for all his attention to artifice, Jaye never questions the integrity of *The Prelude*, or the arbitrary structure it imposes on the poet's life, even though "Books," as he admits, is a transitional section in the poem. Nor are the reasons for his reluctance to continue the argument all that unclear. By reconfirming Wordsworth's role as artificer, even if now the artifice is disjunct, Jaye invests Wordsworth with the right to undo what he has done and will proceed eventually to redo. There is something despotic about Wordsworth here, despite the fact that his despotism, for reasons of sincerity, is enlightened. Central, then, is an unwavering belief in

poetic authority which the critic remains reluctant either to deconstruct or to relocate. Authority is with the poet, who must be privileged despite his own inclination to be under-privileged, or to abdicate—as he does initially—in favor of a friend and, following that friend, in deference to the Arab.

Such sentiments are not shared by the second of the readings, Cynthia Chase's deconstruction of Book V, "The Accidents of Disfiguration: Limits to Literal and Rhetorical Reading in Book V of *The Prelude*,"<sup>10</sup> which limits Wordsworth as a shaper of language and, more than Miller's reading, poses a significant challenge to the accepted view of both the poem and Romanticism of which Jaye's is an offshoot. Although I will not rehearse every aspect of this argument, Chase's overall thesis of poetry as self-corrupting (and here we must take "self" in two different ways) is her most central and for purposes of critical discourse her most challenging. Chase argues that the "recurrence, disfigured, of figures," beginning with the drowned world and climaxing in the drowned man, as well as the "dissolution of images" in Book V in "accidents of repetition" (the accidental, therefore necessary, character of this dissolution is very important), provide a powerful critique of logocentricity and a reevaluation of Romantic textuality. The ghastly emergence of the drowned man toward the end of Book V characteristically "breaks the . . . mirror of mimetic or metaphoric reflection," disrupting "the specular structure of figuration." In other words, "there emerges in the text something that disrupts our conception of literal language in contradistinction to figure. For the literal," the drowned man, "is revealed as effaced figure, rather than a primary, integral, proper condition of language." Language, according to Chase (with assists from Derrida and others), is "the production of decayed or abused figures," and while "language ordinarily covers up the effects of effaced figuration," here in Book V "the cover is cancelled and the erased effacement reinscribed, in an act of disfiguration."<sup>11</sup> Language which feeds on death—dead or defaced figures—is necessarily also death-dealing, killing to ensure its survival. This explains, in turn, the association between the drowned man's emergence and the fairy tales that apparently empowered the young Wordsworth to divest that experience of its literalness and fear.

Because it is comprehensive in its view, both of "Books" and of books, what Chase says about Book V carries considerable weight. After all, if it is a condition of language to claim victims, one of these would be the "self," which must resign its part as an unmediated

presence in the poem. Yet on this score there are problems with Chase's argument; for what is not in *The Prelude* is the "nothing" (to borrow from Stevens) "that is"—the intelligence of which is, Chase implies, strictly the business of criticism. At the same time, there is "something," as she calls it, *in* the poem that doesn't love a poem, that wants it down—or better still, wants it "drowned." The question of authority, then, is less the ontological question Chase would prefer than a question of priorities, of *who* is to be privileged. Chase, of course, is not a polemicist any more than is Jaye. However, like Jaye, she is hardly timid about authority in Book V, which she observes descend on the poem as if by fate. It is not Wordsworth, according to Jaye, who intends Book V to take the shape it does; rather it is his prerogative to let it happen, just as it is the prerogative of language now to disrupt its subjugation in representation by representing that disruption.

In contrast to these readings, my reading of "Books" is in a strange sense consistent with both in that it is not the critic, in my view, the apostle of "something," who witnesses authority in *The Prelude* any more than it is the poet who ultimately exercises it. Rather it is Wordsworth who relinquishes his authority in Book V, delegating it in part to the reader and partly to some other Wordsworth by essentially reconstituting their hermeneutical relationship, by forcing us to derive meaning through allegory rather than through what is customarily assumed (even by Chase and Jaye) to be naive, unmediated, expression.<sup>12</sup> It is important too that this reconstitution is not complete, that in giving the lie allegorically to *The Prelude*, particularly to its overall scheme, Wordsworth gradually allows the "will," as Schoepenhauer describes it, to hold sway over "representation."<sup>13</sup> Beginning in Book V, he dissociates the Poet—the character of himself—from himself (or the man writing) in order then to reunite them. That is, Wordsworth demystifies himself, the character of the poet who may thus far be confused with the poet, in deference to a less idealized or antithetical self, which in turn opposes the mythopoeic scheme employed to domesticate that self and, so subjugating it, to celebrate it. Paradigmatic among such schemes, particularly in the Romantic period, is of course *The Prelude*: a conflation, as Abrams describes it, of the *Bildungsroman*, the *Künstlerroman*, the epic, and, more generally, the Judeo-Christian Bible with its circular myth of paradise lost and paradise regained.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, by disclosing *The Prelude*'s failure to accomplish its designated aim, or to correspond to an intentional or designated

scheme, Wordsworth not only contests the organic and transcendent Romanticism attributed to him by Abrams (and in that manner so promoted); he rejects in large part the specifically subversive, if still formative, conditions of "Romantic irony."<sup>15</sup> What he leaves is more static, more deliberate, more thoroughly deconstructed: his assurance that especially by conventional means the very prospect of a way out or a way back is an utter mystification.

It should be observed that Wordsworth differs from other Romantics, notably Shelley, in the accessibility of his counter-position. This is a poet, after all, capable at one extreme of writing against the authority of poetic idealization in the manner Chase perceives, yet a poet who, like Jaye's version of him, virtually found himself writing *The Prelude*—writing from a sufficiently defensive position at the turn of the eighteenth century—to sustain the self-contestation of what we call deconstruction and yet remain, both in part and for the purpose of such contestation, logocentric. That this logocentricity struggles in and against the allegorical mode in Book V illustrates the tentative, merely functional, accord between idealization and desire, between the naive and the sentimental. Moreover, it explains Wordsworth's reluctance to reconstitute this dualism either dialectically or in the case, again, of Romantic irony, as a kind of existential magnetic field. Both the center of *The Prelude* and its authority are in Book V *outside* the poem, making its subversion—the coming to terms with the status of one's discourse and oneself—not only easy, but virtually inevitable.

A further word too must be said about Wordsworthian allegory at this point, since according to Paul de Man, allegory, though a condition properly of Romantic writing (indeed of all writing), is nevertheless unintentional. The "rhetoric of temporality," as de Man describes allegory, remains a competing rhetoric in the Romantic period, subverting through figural displacement the "intentional structures" normally associated with the Romantics, chiefly the symbolic structures that presume a stable or otherwise "organic coherence."<sup>16</sup> In part polemical, de Man's position is not always defensible. Indeed, as Theresa Kelley has observed recently, symbol and allegory are in the Romantic period especially "competing yet cooperative modes."<sup>17</sup> My position is perhaps in between: that in so far as allegory is intended in Book V, it is *meant* to compete with the symbolic or, more immediately, with the expressive mode in which the poet's self is properly a poetical self. That is, without wholly differentiating between symbol and allegory (or contriving,

as Kelley observes, to reach a concord between them), Wordsworth employs allegory to refute a still greater “rhetoric of temporality”—*The Prelude*—in which his development as a man is contained by a symbolic structure. In this way, allegory is not a rhetoric of temporality in Book V; it is a rhetoric of perpetuity or what de Man, to distinguish it from other rhetoric, calls “irony.”<sup>18</sup> It reflects a consciousness independent of its representation, the moveable present or reality *in time* of the writer who, as he remarks in Book VI, was “four years and thirty . . . this very week” (VI.61).

Thus, as its title suggests, Book V is a commentary on the poetical scheme based on the assumption that the man speaking in *The Prelude* is, as he announces in the initial book, “free” and “enfranchised” (I.9). As *represented*, however—that is, from the standpoint of temporality—this freedom is a deferred condition whose origins and eventual achievement Wordsworth must recount. Accordingly, the validity of the assumptions grounding the Prelusive scheme (and reciprocally sustained by it) is immediately called into question in Book V, in general terms first, then gradually in more germane fashion. Initially the terms are so general that they appear irrelevant; but this may be attributed in part to the “competitive,” necessarily random, character of the allegory. Beginning with a lament for the transitory nature of human life and its endeavors, Book V proceeds to a brief vision of apocalypse (“earth by inward throes . . . wrenched throughout” [V.29]) in which books, “the consecrated works of bard and sage” (V.41), are destroyed. The pertinence of this initial gesture is not yet clear nor will it be so for some time. Still, in looking ahead, two things must be borne in mind: that the “inward throes” are thus the basis of apocalyptic vision, and that it is “books,” the “holds” of “Sovereign Intellect,” whose destruction the speaker deplures.<sup>19</sup> The importance of the latter is more obvious, for it is Wordsworth’s own sovereignty, the “sovereign intellect” in “which [he] participate[s]” (V.14-16), that his poem of thirteen “books,” must by form authenticate. The significance of the first, the emphasis on apocalyptic origins, is more complicated. There is no way at this juncture to take “inward throes” figuratively, no way that the end of the world bears a substantive relationship either to *The Prelude*’s integrity as a poem, to the poem’s integrity as myth, or, most important, to the alleged sovereignty of the Poet’s mind. But all of this changes with the following episode, involving a “friend’s” dream about an Arab who has had a similar vision.



Critics have usually questioned Wordsworth's motive in assigning the Arab dream to a friend when he so obviously identifies with the dream's protagonist. Yet it is precisely their identity, the extent to which it exposes certain facts of which the poet, simultaneously a resisting writer, is only gradually aware, that makes a mediation necessary. Apocalyptic vision, the dream illustrates, is a function of memory, hence a repetition of the past (the Flood) at variance with the progressive sense of history on which sovereignty (Wordsworth's anticipated freedom) and the conditions of heroism in *The Prelude* both depend. (In fact, memory as counter-spirit, as opposed to an epiphanic or progressive consciousness, is already an issue, most recently in Book IV in the encounter with the Discharged Soldier.)<sup>20</sup> Like Wordsworth, the Arab fears imminent destruction and, like him, fears it for the fate of books which he hopes to preserve by burying them—in this case, by burying a shell signifying poetry and a stone representing Euclid's *Elements*. But unlike Wordsworth thus far, the represented "Poet," the Arab is a failed hero or "semi-Quixote" (V.142) whose blindness to the futility of his enterprise preconditions his heroic stance to life. Most immediately, the Arab ignores the fact that the earth's "drowning" (V.136) as he has prophesied will negate his effort to preserve monuments of intellect from destruction. It is not that books themselves will vanish; their transformation into stones and shells virtually ensures otherwise. It is that the human culture which arbitrarily "consecrate[s]" them or, more pointedly, stones and shells, will disappear. In a less concrete way, however, both the Arab's "backwar[d]" look (V.128) and the fact that the flood he fears actually "chace[s] . . . him" (V.137) indicate that he is tilting at windmills of his own device, or at memory. "Quixote," that is, the fact of a Quixote, attests less to human inadequacy than to the inadequacy of the heroism at which Quixote fails: to the myth of "sovereign intellect" and of that myth's failure to accommodate our predisposition to looking backwards, particularly in matters of eschatology. What fails is not man but represented man, not memory or personality but the mythologized intellect vulnerable to both memory and desire. Correspondingly, the myth and the progressive conception of history with which it is aligned make one vulnerable to Quixotehood, to the heroism doomed to failure.

Through the Arab dream, Wordsworth—the resisting writer—depicts himself, "the Poet," for what he is: a crazed, deluded wanderer implicated in a mythic or representational structure that is

uncompletable. The poet's past, his remembered past, gives the lie to *The Prelude's* past, which is also its future (the "long journey home" Abrams calls it),<sup>21</sup> making the poem uncompletable even as an anti-heroic account. Memory, it is shown, destroys autonomy as surely as will the flood chasing the Arab. In other words, the conflation here of selfhood and autonomy, the conception, as Karl Kroeber describes it, of a "personal epic,"<sup>22</sup> remains either a negation or, in the present illustration, a parody.

There are, to be sure, other instances in the poem which call into question the very nature of *The Prelude's* progress and, by implication, its completability. Paul Sheats, for example, has identified what he calls "retrogrades" in the poem, movements both temporal and formal in which *The Prelude's* progress, or the assumption more properly that Wordsworth has progressed successfully at the present, is decidedly opposed.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, to call these moments "retrogrades" is already to co-opt them, for not all such movements in *The Prelude* are mere counter-movements. Some—notably the Arab dream—maintain a less congenial, less dialectical, relationship to the poem's scheme. To be "regained" or redeemed in the way that Wordsworth has prescribed at the outset, "paradise" must at some point have been "lost," making "loss" or "debasement," as Sheats describes them, not a retrogression but a prolepsis, or means by which to measure gain.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, what makes the Arab dream so crucial is not just that it discounts, with assistance from the Flood, the representation of paradise regained; it is that the dream indentifies as *equally* representational the notion of paradise lost. Thus, in discussing Book V, we must differentiate the "will," again, that opposes "representation" from the will or intentionality that *is* representation, or from the retrogression, in this case, that opposes the "will" by incorporating it—by making memory, however dark and debilitating, a counterweight to its recuperation.

Wordsworth, his resistance wavering, seems to realize as much, admitting after the dream to having been "hurried forward by a stream" and unable to "stop" (V.183-84), "untouched by these remembrances" (182). The nature of "these remembrances" is not defined beyond the usual attempt to locate them in periods of infancy and childhood. And this reticence is not surprising. Unlike the "stream," Wordsworth's "personal epic," the "drift" of "Books" is "scarcely . . . obvious" (V.290-91); it is both certain yet, in contrast to the "stream's" movement, perceptible as through a glass darkly. In their opposition, therefore, to poetic progress (an opposition

inconceivable in Book I) the “remembrances” are indices of doubt, about *The Prelude* and about Wordsworth’s growth as a man. Furthermore, they are only the first in a series of such registers which, although various and discontinuous, are allegorical and systematic. Coincident with more idealized remembrances, with the claim, for instance, to being “reared / Safe from an evil . . . laid / Upon the children of the land” (V.226-28), these signifiers are competitive in character; they show that while the poet “should” (by his own admission) “honour” his fellow poets in a book so entitled, he is disposed at this juncture to take up “transitory,” less determinate, “themes” (V.217-24).

That the expressive is therefore leagued with the idealized in Book V or, to use Wordsworth’s own term, with the “obvious,” cannot be emphasized enough. For it signals what is otherwise “scarcely obvious,” that the primary representational mode of the poem, that of sincerity and authenticity, is in competition now with the allegorical mode. Thus, like the Arab, who is an allegorical scapegoat, the primary speaker of the poem—the replacement of that displacement—comes under similar attack in Book V and turns out not surprisingly to be his own worst enemy. His recourse to childhood, for example, though by no means uncommon to the poem, is in the present context problematic because it contests, without meaning to, *The Prelude*’s overarching scheme in which childhood is a mere prelude to both the future and the present. In other words, by privileging childhood in the way he does—in subjective, spontaneous, fashion—the speaker exposes a contradiction between the representational scheme here, grounded in interiority, and the poet’s mind itself, which this same scheme simultaneously validates. Where *The Prelude* mystifies the poet’s present self, projecting it upon the future or toward a goal that has already in fact been achieved, this same self refutes that achievement by idealizing its past. The past, in other words, that previously foreshadowed the present, that was a base allegedly on which to ground a future, is now base and superstructure both, displacing the very present—or, again, the very future—to which it has always been subordinate. It is not, then, that Wordsworth was wrong where he is now correct or that he was correct where he is now wrong.<sup>25</sup> It is that so long as he is committed to idealizing a self, Wordsworth remains committed to endorsing those idealizations that are in turn self-born. Thus, in contrast to the “obvious,” what at this juncture is arguably all too obvious, Wordsworth has recourse as a writer to the “scarcely

obvious" in order to contest the various contradictions that as "Poet" he is obliged to promote.

The figurative register that follows, then, the passage about the "infant prodigy" (V.294-369), actually vacillates between the expressive and the allegorical. An attack ostensibly on modern education, and a foil plainly to the "Winander Boy" who follows, the satire ultimately cuts both ways. "Fenced in" by restraints of progress, by "telescopes, and crucibles, and maps" (V.330), this "dwarf man" (V.295) who "fear . . . touches . . . not" (V.315-18) is as much an opposing self on the surface as the Winander Boy remains in many ways a surrogate self. Yet beneath the surface, or in a less obvious way, the prodigy, like the Winander Boy, is also a representation of the "Poet." In this case, he is a positivistic version of the figure so recently impeded in his progress by remembrance or whose "remembrances" as such are at variance with his "book's" progress. That is, he is the sorry, literally freakish, result of an attempt to situate childhood within a conception of human development both progressive *and* deterministic—a conception that by rejecting memory, or by idealizing the past, is able then to circumvent "fear." While the "semi-Quixote," as we have seen, results from the alignment of myth with memory, the Prodigy issues from their Prelusive separation, inaugurating the equally figurative rejections—in the Winander Boy next and, following him, the Drowned Man—of the ensuing stages in the poem's projected and progressive scheme.

Thus, while it is customary to observe that the Winander Boy and the Drowned Man are, like the Prodigy before them, part of the larger, expressive argument here against modern education, it is not often remembered that these two figures were at some point versions of Wordsworth, either by sympathetic identification (the Drowned Man in the two-part *Prelude* of 1799) or by self-representation the referent of which was only later changed. Nor are the reasons for forgetting these, especially the latter, difficult to understand. After all, what the previous affinity of the Winander Boy points to in retrospect is his present displacement: a disaffection with *The Prelude* that his example now—its enlistment in the argument against education—curiously confirms. Dissociated at this point from Wordsworth, the Boy is in consequence associated with no one, save the exemplary figure whose representation he represents. Positioned, in fact, just after the Infant Prodigy, and the attack on books his example provokes, the Boy is less a counter-example to the Prodigy than a prodigy in his own right. Unusual like the Infant, he

is, like the Prodigy, a commentary on *The Prelude*: both upon its scheme and, in his reiteration of the schematic use of Nature as a humanizing influence, upon the apparent uselessness of what once were useful fictions:

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 wat'ry 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 mirth and jocund din.

(V.395-404)

Here, the weight of implication lies as much in the boy's exceptionalness—"purchased," not surprisingly, "at the cost of" representativeness—as in the fact that he is dead, "taken from his mates" before his tenth birthday (V.414-15), and thus a counter-prodigy, one of the elect, for failure of becoming something worse. Both infant and boy, then, contest in different ways *The Prelude*'s progressive notion of growth, each by showing the extent to which progress in the poem, to avoid contradiction, is more accurately arrested development. As for childhood itself, it is in a peculiar sense irrelevant, whether to the idealized present, from which it no longer differs, or to what for purposes of representation is the future now, yet a future that by rights is no different from the past. In this respect the boy's death not only represents the death of childhood; it also signifies the death of adulthood, or of the represented life that represents in turn an idealized past. This makes the boy's death the pivot, in effect, on which the triad of infant, boy, and man now turns. For while the Winander Boy illustrates a self-contained past that, like *The Prelude* itself, is sundered from the writing present, the Drowned Man "bolt upright" (V.471) in absurdly heroic fashion is an effigy from this same vantage of the "Poet" himself, of the Wordsworth who claims enfranchisement yet only by dying may achieve it.

Hence, while a relationship exists between the speaker and the Drowned Man, their affinity is less pronounced than in 1799, when the Drowned Man was part of the then "two-part" *Prelude*.

Although the account of the incident has not changed dramatically, there is an effort in 1804 to keep the man and his death at some remove.<sup>26</sup> The principal vehicle for this, and a revealing one, is the “plain tale” told by the swimmer’s “unclaimed garments” (V.467). Like Wordsworth’s own “obvious” tale, this story interposes itself between Wordsworth and his “representation,” making the man’s emergence (the emergence of his corpse) almost plausible, and the distance between past and present virtually negligible. All of which leads to some speculation on the speaker’s part, speculation that no matter how expressive or obvious, is at this stage inescapably ironic: that the distance or the quietism of the man’s appearance had to do with books, especially fairy tales, whose mediation domesticated Wordsworth, ennobling his “inner eye:”

And yet no vulgar fear  
 Young as I was, a child not nine years old,  
 Possessed me, for my inner eye had seen  
 Such sights before among the shining streams  
 Of fairyland, the forests of romance—  
 Thence came a spirit hallowing what I saw  
 With decoration and ideal grace.

(V.473-79)

At a point where books, including Wordsworth’s, have been targets, where even their burial, though ludicrous at first, seems oddly supportable, this makes for strange testimony indeed, strained and gratuitously deductive. Still, if we keep in mind that memory is simultaneously allegory, exposing as it were the “romance” of Romanticism, such “see[ing]” in the represented present is no less a seeing in the writing present. At issue is the *distance* between subject and object, between the poet writing (in this case revising) and the character of the Poet projected in the Drowned Man. Furthermore, it is the same distance that has just separated Wordsworth from the Winander Boy from whose vantage in effect (“a child not nine years old”) the Drowned Man is subsequently witnessed. Writing against *The Prelude*’s circular design en route to self-discovery, Wordsworth neither needs nor wishes to align himself with any prototype at this point: neither “the man to come,” nor “him who had been” (XI.59-60) nor their synthesis—the “dwarf man”—whose death(s) either by water or outside intervention allow, if only figuratively, for the demystification of progress and for freedom from representation.

Consequently, it is not surprising that the conclusion of Book V,

following the drowning, is in contrast to its preceding parts both less “obvious” and at the same time less “scarcely obvious.” With the demystification of the “Poet,” Wordsworth is able suddenly to grant authority to himself, exposing in that way a paradox central to Book V: that the allegorical, not the representational, mode has been the more genuinely representational and the more authentic. Moreover, Wordsworth is able to clarify at this juncture what may not have been clear up until now: that the referent, the character of Wordsworth, has on the basis of that referentiality remained proximate to his referee throughout—to the poet, the allegorist, who has placed them at remove for the purpose now of reuniting them. Thus, an immediate result of their union, of the represented self’s recovery, is a sudden opacity in the poem in which one is never sure what Wordsworth’s argument is, the direction he is taking, or how any of it relates to what has gone before. When, for example, Wordsworth speaks of having read books in his “father’s house” (V.501), the significance of that recollection is not clear until thirty lines later when, having observed our need of books in later life, Wordsworth remarks that “our childhood,” in contrast, “sits upon a throne” (V.531-32). Mindful, again, that the “obvious” in this final section of “Books” is not altogether obvious, that the expressive is, in relation to before, mediated and displaced, it can be said that Wordsworth has exposed at last the vital link between idealization and patriarchy. He has conceded, in fine, that the story of his life, its representation, is essentially a tale of two kingdoms in which the idealized “child” is quite literally “father” of the “man to come.” Moreover it is the reader—or more properly the culture—according to Wordsworth, who authorizes this patriarchy, who reads books so as “to live / In reconciliation with our stunted powers” (V.540-41) and, in contrast to their fictions, “to endure this state of meagre vassalage” (V.542). At this point Wordsworth’s use of the first person is especially telling, for what he has ultimately done in “Books” has been to situate his poem among other books. Placing himself, the character of Wordsworth, at continuous remove, the poet has not only read himself in Book V; he has been made aware in his reading that the inscribed self, Wordsworth the Poet, would have been impossible had not he, Wordsworth the Poet, conceded his own vassalage as a prelude to self-inscription. Serving the teller, then, not his tale—the writing (and reading) Wordsworth, who, in troubling the “stream,” subverts self-representation and its intentional structure—*The Prelude*’s book on “books” is neither an artifice of disjunction nor a

commentary on the disjunction of artifice. Rather, it is yet another prelude to *The Prelude*, signalling the presence this time of a "living," if less heroic, subject.<sup>27</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 225-33.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, W. G. Stobie, "A Reading of *The Prelude*, Book V," *MLQ* 24 (1963):365-73; J. Robert Barth, "The Poet, Death and Immortality: The Unity of *The Prelude*, Book V," *WC* 10 (1979):69-75; Evelyn Shakir, "Books, Death and Immortality: A Study of Book V of *The Prelude*," *SIR* 8 (1969):156-67; Joel Morkan, "Structure and Meaning in *The Prelude*, Book V," *PMLA* 87 (1972):246-54; and David Wiener, "Wordsworth, Books, and the Growth of a Poet's Mind," *JEGP* 74 (1975):209-20. While both Wiener and Morkan avoid the Drowned Man altogether, Michael Ragussis ("Language and Metamorphosis in Wordsworth's Arab Dream," *MLQ* 36 [1975]:148-65) is reluctant to view any aspect of the book in a strictly literal way except as a prelude to Wordsworth's getting beyond the literal through his highly symbolic or otherwise imaginative transfiguration of language.

<sup>3</sup>J. Hillis Miller, "The Stone and the Shell: The Problem of Poetic Form in Wordsworth's Dream of the Arab," *Mouvements Premiers: Études Offertes à Georges Poulet* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1972), pp. 125-47.

<sup>4</sup>Miller, pp. 137, 140.

<sup>5</sup>Other deconstructions of Book V which, like Miller's, are polemical in nature include Timothy Bahti, "Figures of Interpretation, the Interpretation of Figures: A Reading of Wordsworth's 'Dream of the Arab,'" *SIR* 18 (1979):601-27, which transforms Book V into an allegory of writing; and John Boly's critique of Auden's treatment of Book V ("Auden as Literary Evolutionist: Wordsworth's Dream of the Fate of Romanticism," *Diacritics* 12 [1982]:65-74) in which the Arab dream is enlisted to show how "romanticism is in effect born into critical awareness as it deconstructs its own functional components" (p. 66).

<sup>6</sup>References throughout are to the 1805 version of *The Prelude* in *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979), cited by book and line.

<sup>7</sup>Michael Jaye, "The Artifice of Disjunction: Book V of *The Prelude*," *PLL* 14 (1978):32-50.

<sup>8</sup>This humanistic, possibly even agnostic, conception of Romanticism began with Northrop Frye's *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1947) and has remained prevalent in the criticism of Bloom, Hartman, and Abrams. It is also prevalent in G. Wilson Knight's *The Starlit Dome* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941) as well as in the writings of Earl R. Wasserman, notably *The Subtler Language* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1959).

<sup>9</sup>Jaye, pp. 32-33, 43-44, 42, 46.



<sup>10</sup>Cynthia Chase, "The Accidents of Disfiguration: Limits to Literal and Rhetorical Reading in Book V of *The Prelude*," *SIR* 18 (1979):547-65. See also Paul de Man's essay, "Autobiography as De-facement," *MLN* 94 (1979):919-30, which resembles Chase's in observing how autobiographies in general are "eager to escape from the coercions of this [the autobiographical] system," in particular, from "their cognitive and tropological constitution" (p. 922). The way toward escape, then, is through defacement or through the disruption of figure, and it is no accident, de Man observes, that in *The Prelude*, for example, there is "textual evidence" that the "figures of deprivation, maimed men, drowned corpses, blind beggars, [and] children about to die . . . are figures of Wordsworth's own poetic self" (p. 924). A related argument, which appeared too late for me to take into consideration while preparing this essay, is Andrej Warminski's "Missed Crossing: Wordsworth's Apocalypses," *MLN* 99 (1985):983-1006. Like Chase and de Man before him, Warminski is concerned with the "passage" in Book V "from a mimetic, representational language faithful to sense experience to a figural language that takes advantage of, violates, the senses" (p. 995). Revising Hartman's distinction between the book of Nature and the book of Man, Warminski sees the tension as not between these, then, "but between the Book and Book" (p. 1003).

<sup>11</sup>Chase, pp. 555-56.

<sup>12</sup>David Simpson makes a similar argument in reference to Romantic poems other than *The Prelude*, most importantly to Keats's "Odes." (*Authority and Irony in Romantic Poetry* [London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979].) However, by allowing the reader to complete—as he describes it—the "hermeneutic circle," Simpson effectively divests indeterminacy of its contestational disposition. It is the poet, that is, who is self-consciously indeterminate for the purpose of creating his own audience, but who does not, as matter of course, either resign his authority as poet or seek, as does Wordsworth, to undermine the authority of his text.

<sup>13</sup>For the relationship of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer (in *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The World as Will and Representation*) to the self-deconstructing tendency in British Romanticism, see Tilottama Rajan, *Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 27-57.

<sup>14</sup>M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: Norton, 1971), pp. 74-80.

<sup>15</sup>For a full discussion of "Romantic irony," the Schlegelian "way of thinking about the world that embraces change and process for their own sake," see Anne K. Mellor, *English Romantic Irony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980). Although, like Simpson, Mellor maintains that Romantic irony is essentially deconstructing, that the ironist "must acknowledge the inevitable limitations of his own finite consciousness and of all man-made structures or myths," she is far more direct in what she holds to be its ultimately formative orientation: that Romantic irony remains a way, as she describes it, to "affirm and celebrate the process of life by creating new images and ideas" (p. 5).

<sup>16</sup>Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality" in *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Charles S. Singleton (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), pp. 173-209. See also de Man's "Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image," *Romanticism and Consciousness*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: North, 1970), pp. 65-77. Allegory, in de Man's view, stands in contradistinction to the

arbitrarily synthetic analogical structuring of the world through symbol, and replaces that rhetorical correspondence with distance, with a rhetoric of temporal differentiation that serves ultimately to demystify. For a more critical view of allegory, one that situates it at the crossways of synchrony and diachrony, and perceives it as a mooring of sorts for post-structuralism, see Joel Fineman, "The Structure of Allegorical Desire" in *Allegory and Representation*, ed. Stephen J. Greenblatt (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 26-60.

<sup>17</sup>Theresa M. Kelley, "Proteus and Romantic Allegory," *ELH* 49 (1982):623-52. See also, with particular reference to Book V, Kelley's "Spirit and Geometric Form: The Stone and the Shell in Wordsworth's Arab Dream," *SEL* 22 (1982):563-82, in which her views about allegory are enlisted to show that the shell and the stone, far from signifying the implied opposition of science and poetry, are "emblems for the past and future products of the intellect" (p. 579).

<sup>18</sup>De Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," pp. 191-209.

<sup>19</sup>See, again, Kelley ("Spirit and Geometric Form"), who identifies the stone and shell as symbols of "intellect" all of which "make[s] way for a new set of oppositions and unexpected points of convergence" (p. 565).

<sup>20</sup>The account of the Discharged Soldier at the end of Book IV arguably marks the beginning of this allegorical countermovement in *The Prelude*. Like the Arab in Book V, the soldier is a "double" of the Poet, beginning from the "unseen" (IV.405) vantage from which he is first observed, and continuing in the fact that Wordsworth does "not," as he recalls, "prolon[g his] watch [without self-blame]" (lines 433-34). Moreover, like the Arab or the Drowned Man, the old soldier is a failed hero whose "discharge" casts the Poet's "enfranchisement" into dubious relief.

<sup>21</sup>Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, pp. 278-92.

<sup>22</sup>Karl Kroeber, *Romantic Narrative Art* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1960), pp. 78-114. *The Prelude* is a poem, according to Kroeber, "which, whether or not itself a kind of epic, has usurped the function of traditional epic . . . [in] its tendency to find the profoundest order, significance, and satisfaction in individual experience, in the fulfillments or defeats of the individual soul operating amidst the chaotic impersonalities of modern civilization" (p. 103).

<sup>23</sup>Paul D. Sheats, "Wordsworth's 'Retrogrades' and the Shaping of *The Prelude*," *JEGP* 71 (1972):473-90.

<sup>24</sup>Sheats, P. 481.

<sup>25</sup>It is arguable that the Prelusive scheme has always been in question, as evidenced by the well-known interrogative "Was it for this . . ." (lines 271 ff.) that interrupts Book I. Still, by 1805 the question had been relegated to the role of counterpoise in contrast, for example, to its inaugural function of 1799, all of which suggests that if Wordsworth was indeed questioning his "representation" he was also representing, or co-opting, the doubt inherent in that question.

<sup>26</sup>For the difference in the Drowned Man episode in the 1805 *versus* 1799 *Prelude*, see Peter J. Manning, "Reading Wordsworth's Revisions: Othello and the Drowned Man," *SIR* 22 (1983):3-28. In the 1805 version, according to Manning, "nothing rises from the depths to challenge the poet, who gazes only on past time" (p. 15). For a similar view, see Susan J. Wolfson, "The Illusion of Mastery: Wordsworth's Revisions of 'The Drowned Man of Esthwaite,' 1799, 1805, 1850," *PMLA* 99 (1984):917-35. Although Manning adopts a generally

quietistic view of Book V and its evolving shape, of the development of the poet, for example, “from the questing knight, the figure of disruption, to the poet of consolation” (p. 25), he is clearly aware that in so developing, Wordsworth “rewrote, or wrote against, his previous writing, rather than wholly erasing it” (p. 26). Wolfson, too, though she inevitably privileges Wordsworth’s “self-questioning” (p. 917) as an original presence, nevertheless perceives each revision of the Drowned Man episode as a challenge to Wordsworth’s poetic authority.

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