Guilt and the Sublime in Wordsworth's Spots of Time

by

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For my dad.

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Abstract

Wordsworth revised his great autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, throughout his life. The poem bears traces of the various emotional imperatives under which he wrote and revised at different periods in his life, including guilt. The persistence of Wordsworth's guilt, illustrated particularly clearly in revisions made between the *Two-Part Prelude* of 1799 and the *Five-Book Prelude* of 1804, seems profitably read through an examination of various passages in the text known as the spots of time. I have chosen to work most carefully with two of the spots of time (referred to as the theft episodes), in the course of this thesis because they seem best to highlight the unresolved relationship between the imagination and Nature that I believe is at the heart of Wordsworth's guilt and that helps to produce the sublime experiences described in the theft episodes.

In this thesis, I will give a brief overview of the composition of the Wordsworthian sublime and the particular dynamics of the spots of time before moving on to a chapter that will explore the negative sublime and the original differentiation of the boy in the narrative of the spots of time from Nature. The resulting imbalance, I believe, persists in Wordsworth's poetic task of writing and revising those boyhood episodes. An awareness of that persistence, as well an understanding of the dynamics of the original imbalance, allows a new and useful reading of Wordsworth's compositional guilt and its relation to the egotistical sublime, which I will discuss in Chapter Two by examining the relationship between the *Two-Book Prelude* and its revision into five parts. I conclude that guilt, rather than being destructive, actually results in a richer, more carefully explored reading of the interactions between the boy of the spots of time and Nature, and between the poet and the recollections of childhood he uses as a key for his inquiry.

CONTENTS

"Was it for this?"

In Goslar, Germany, 1799, during what Wordsworth and Coleridge "understood to be the coldest winter of the century," Wordsworth began composing *The Prelude* in a fit of frustration. He was unable to write *The Recluse*, the great philosophical poem Coleridge urged as their task, and was trapped in a town he described as having been "the residence of Emperors, and...now the residence of Grocers and Linen-drapers who are, I say it with a feeling of sorrow, a wretched race; the flesh, blood and bone in their minds being nothing but knavery and low falsehood."[1] Cold and defeated, Wordsworth began the imaginative task for which he is best known, reaching back into his past in hopes of finding something there restorative, "food for future years."[2]

Geoffrey Hartman describes that psychic task of reaching back as the thematic concern of *The Prelude* as a whole: "The soul has dwelt with nature in the past, and nature gave the soul what it required; then if it dwell with nature again, can nature give it once again what it requires?".[3] The very first line of the *Two-Part Prelude*, which queries "*was it for this*?" of a series of pastoral sounds and images and the poet's recollection of his infant delight in them, seems to suggest that that question is indeed at

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[1] Duncan Wu, Introduction to *The Five-Book Prelude*, ed. Duncan Wu, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1997), 3. Hereafter cited in the text as "Wu."

[2]William Wordsworth. "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, 13 July 1798." *Romanticism*. Ed. Duncan Wu. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1994), 265. l. 66. Hereafter cited in the text as "T.A."

[3]Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1964), 218. Hereafter cited in the text as "W.P."

the heart of the poet's anxiety and subsequent inquiry as he began to write in Goslar.[4] So, too, does it seem to have been five years later, when he reworked the poem into five books.

Just as any frustrated person might begin a journal entry by storming straight into the heart of the problem, Wordsworth began *The Prelude* by presenting episodes that establish his problem: a deceptively simple economy between Nature and the imagination that actually complicates the work on many levels. Wordsworth's task in *The Prelude* is not merely to get back to Nature and to receive from it restorative power; it is also to discover how his own imaginative and poetic interventions have complicated his rights of access to that restorative power. Most readings of *The Prelude* conclude that the advance of the imagination is not prohibitive of that restoration, that, in fact, the poem shows "an increasing awareness of the 'ennobling interchange' between mind and Nature and a late yielding of primacy to the activity of the mind or the idealizing power of Imagination."[5] This ennobling interchange, presumably, comes to have the restorative properties Wordsworth hoped Nature herself would have. Whether or not this conciliation takes place (in passages of dejection he seems rather to accept it as a consolation prize), it is plain from the start of *The Prelude* that Wordsworth is deeply anxious – guilty even – about the gradual yielding of power from Nature to the imagination.

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[4]William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850,* ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill, (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), *Two-Part Prelude*, I, l 1. Hereafter cited in the text as "1899."

[5] Geoffrey Hartman, "The Poet's Progress: Wordsworth and the *Via Naturaliter Negativa*," "Recent Critical Essays," included in *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850.* Ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill, (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), 598. Hereafter cited in the text as "P.P."

This guilt seems to have at least two original parts, evidenced by the autobiographical narrative of the first spots of time episodes themselves, and the generally accepted chronology of Wordsworth's life, some of which I will draw upon in this thesis. During the times depicted in the spots of time passages, moments in his boyhood when he was first beginning to differentiate between himself and Nature, the boy's developing consciousness of a divide between himself, as a conscious subject, and Nature, as the object of his consciousness, sparked guilt.

A secondary guilt, occurring much later on, seems to have manifested itself with the act of representation required of the poet when he converted memory into poetry. This guilt seems sparked by the remembering and necessary (mis)representation and objectification of scenes from the poet's past which were once, we are given reason to believe as readers, concretely lived experiences from childhood.

Those lived experiences of Wordsworth's "simple childhood" and the open relationship with Nature he enjoyed then sit, for him, "upon a throne."[6] His guilt as a poet over dethroning childhood experiences and disrupting the preeminent role of Nature in his life is a haunting subtext of the childhood recollections in *The Prelude*. This is especially apparent in the first spots of time, the "theft-episodes," that open the 1799 *Prelude*, wherein many types of theft and guilt, both literal and metaphorical, become manifest.

As Duncan Wu points out in his introduction to a unique edition of the poem in the five-book format revised by the poet in 1804, Wordsworth's framing of the expanded

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[6] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850,* ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill, (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), from *The Prelude in Thirteen Books,* Book V, l 532. Hereafter cited in the text as "1805."

poem by the "spots of time" episodes that are placed at the front of the *Two-Part Prelude* create a structure that emphasizes "deliverance through the restorative and enduring power of Nature as represented by the spots of time" (Wu 6). But the placement of those spots of time and the plaintive question, "was it for this?" in places of such prominence in these first two versions of the poem (at the start of the two-part *Prelude*, and at the beginning and the end of the five-book *Prelude)* do more than point us in the direction of the thematic concerns of the work on Wordsworth's life: their prominence demarcates them as sites of the poet's highest anxiety. He "looks repeatedly for evidence that the natural education provided by the spots of time was not in vain - that it would prepare him for the task of composing *The Recluse*" (Wu 6). Instead, Wordsworth encounters in the spots of time sites of unresolved guilt made all the sharper by the imperatives of his new poetic task and the fresh trespass it will imprint upon those scenes. The fantastic triumph of *The Prelude* is that the sites of his greatest transgression are often also the sites of his greatest triumph: it is guilt that allows Wordsworth to experience the sublime.

In what follows, I will give a brief overview of the composition of the Wordsworthian sublime and the particular dynamics of the spots of time before moving on to a chapter that will explore the negative sublime and the original differentiation of the boy in the spots from Nature. The resulting imbalance, I believe, persists in Wordsworth's poetic task of writing and revising those boyhood episodes. An awareness of that persistence, as well an understanding of the dynamics of the original imbalance, allows a new and useful reading of Wordsworth's compositional guilt and its relation to the egotistical sublime, which I will discuss in Chapter Two by examining the relationship between the *Two-Book Prelude* and its revision into five parts. I will pay

special attention to the way the theft episodes of the spots of time are presented between the two versions. In doing so, I will challenge critics who focus on problems of memory, representation, and Wordsworth's relationship with Nature without looking to the reason for their persistence or the utility of their presentation in the spots of time. I conclude that the sublime experience, motivated by Wordsworth's guilt that he has not represented Nature fairly, remedies that guilt by instilling her with new eminence. Paradoxically, the sublime also produces a new guilt sparked by the poet's acknowledgment of the psychic and poetic efficacy of guilt and the sublime.

Possible Sublimity

> 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.[7]

Some of the most celebrated moments in Wordsworth's poetry are those that present unparalleled instances of connectivity between the mind, nature, and humanity, in which they seem to coalesce into the same great plastic power. There is indeed no shortage of these truly splendid moments in *The Prelude*. However, the sublime moment, whose origin is in division, not unity, is the sort of epiphany to which Wordsworth was more persistently susceptible. The continual imbalance of his sense of the relationship between his imagination and external forces of energy, not always teased into an "ennobling interchange," made him open to the sort of subreption made possible through the sublime.[8] Such inversions would allow those external forces of energy, be they of Nature or a childhood relationship with Nature untrammeled by the reworkings of the mind, the ability to counteract advances in his imaginative and poetic faculties. Such counter advances, in fact, may have been in large part self-motivated responses to the guilt initialized, ironically, by his imaginative advances.

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[7] William Wordsworth, *The Five-Book Prelude*, ed. Duncan Wu, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1997), Book II, ll. 331-8. Hereafter cited in the text as 1804.

[8] "Subreption" is a term I take from Thomas Weiskel's explication of Kant's ideas on the sublime in the *Critique of Judgment*. Its connotations are slightly more negative than I would like, implying as it does "fallacious representation" in the Oxford English Dictionary, but it does present a possible dynamic that is important for understanding sublime, perhaps especially with regard to guilt.

The sublime experience through which such a subreption takes place and is related to a transcendent order is one bound up with emotional need, psychological limits, and a peculiar and complicated sense of guilt over the condition of dissatisfaction that prompts the sublime.

It appears ironic, then, that the sublime phenomenon through which Wordsworth seems most impressively to invoke the majesty of Nature's power is a mental process driven by emotional needs. Indeed, Wordsworth seems emotionally compelled to express in as detailed a manner as possible the specifics of his natural experience. Wordsworth's "obsession with specific place" may be traced to his need to credit Nature adequately, to respect her. Respect, Kant formulates in his theory of the sublime, is "the feeling of our incapacity to attain to an idea *that is a law for us.*"[9] Wordsworth resisted a purely subjective view of Nature, believing that Nature was a law apart, and *for*, him. As Hartman points out, "the very moment the spirit tries to seize autonomy...Nature humbles it by an evidence of subtle supremacy, or Wordsworth humbles himself by shrinking from visionary subjects" (P.P. 603). One way in which Wordsworth is able to humble himself is by humbling the extent of his powers of imagination by being ready to admit his "inability to attain" wholly his subjects, and being similarly quick to divine the supremacy of those wavering visionary subjects. In Kant's view, that act of respect or self truncation produces "a 'pleasure' predicated upon the 'displeasure' the imagination feels in its own defeat" (Weiskel 105). Such a humbling act (in some way a violence

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[9] Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence,* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) 41. My source for Kant has been, primarily, Weiskel's explication of his work in this text.

toward the self out of respect for the object), is a way of reconciling the guilt Wordsworth might feel about the advance of the imagination over Nature.

Willingly or subconsciously Wordsworth, or any subject experiencing the sublime, sustains in his imaginative or reasonable faculties a "collapse of comprehension" regarding the object or scene to which he is subjected. The collapse is typically prompted by an overabundance either of signifiers or signified from the observed environment (Weiskel 26) which the mind is not able to apprehend. Such a sense of excess can be triggered in many ways. An overabundance of signifiers might occur aurally with the repetition of a measure of music a number of times far beyond expectation, or visually upon ascending a mountain-top and being unable to see a bound to the horizon in any direction. Conversely, an overabundance of signified might occur when a single object or word seems for at least an instant to generate innumerable meanings. In every case, the mind is confronted with infinitude, whether it be of boundless significance or endless inconsequence. The reasonable faculties are then forced to acknowledge their own limitation, and an oceanic stretch of vacant space exceeding the limits of the mind's cognitive faculties becomes apparent (thus the perception of external infinitude is converted into a sense of internal infinitude within the space of the mind) . Conscious recognition of that space provokes the sublime, expressed by Wordsworth as a gleam like "the flashing of a shield" of "high objects," and "enduring things" (1805, I, 436), through which the experience of vacancy in the mind becomes substantive, if allusive, and meaningful.

The process by which these changes might take place is thoroughly explicated by Thomas Weiskel in his book, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and*

Psychology of Transcendence. Weiskel persuasively reformulates Kant's sublime under a three stage model that is particularly applicable to the Wordsworthian sublime. I will quote his formulation at length for further use in this thesis:

> In the first phase, the mind is in a determinate relation to the object, and this relation is habitual, more or less unconscious (preconscious in the Freudian sense), and harmonious. This is the state of normal perception or comprehension...No discrepancy or dissonance interrupts representation, the smooth correspondence of inner and outer...In the second phase, the habitual relation of mind and object suddenly breaks down. Surprise or astonishment is the affective correlative, and there is an immediate intuition of a disconcerting disproportion between inner and outer. Either mind or object is suddenly in excess, and then both are, since their relation has become radically indeterminate... Any excess on the part of the object cancels the representational efficacy of the mind which can only turn, for its new object, to itself. But self-consciousness, too, can be prior and can force the rupture when the object (or memory) represented is too insignificant (fails to signify). We think of prominent examples in Wordsworth, for whom the object (often a memory) is always in danger of precipitant attenuation. In the third, or reactive, phase of the sublime moment, the mind recovers the balance of outer and inner by constituting a fresh relation between itself and the object such that the very indeterminacy which erupted in phase two is taken as symbolizing the mind's relation to a transcendent order. (24)

Weiskel goes on to distinguish two different sublime experiences, negative and positive. As I conceive it, the negative sublime is an original experience of infinitude, like that of the boy in the spots of time. The positive, or egotistical sublime, is the experience Wordsworth as a poet might experience in displacing an experience of the negative sublime into poetry. He thus transfers the sense of infinitude prompted by recognition of the vacant space beyond the imagination back to the faculties of the sense - this time, to his poetic imagination.

Since the sublime is an essentially a metaphorical phenomenon, the presence or power created through it has the potential to fill many spaces in *The Prelude* that would otherwise lack significance. Nature, in her metaphorized form, is welcomed to fill the gaps left by absent divinity, rhetoric, and the psyche, taking on the rich, transcendent role Wordsworth desired to give her as just repayment for her ministrations to him in childhood. The exchange is complex, and its permutations will occupy the rest of this thesis.

Spots of Time

Other readings of the spots of time have examined their complexity as representations of memories and have explicated the sublime moments that occur within them. My emphasis is on the persistence of guilt within and between versions of the spots of time, especially in the way it bears the traces of an unresolved relationship between the imagination and Nature.

> There are in our existence spots of time
> Which with distinct preeminence retain
> A fructifying virtue, whence, depressed
> By trivial occupations and the round
> Of ordinary intercourse, our minds-
> Especially the imaginative power-
> Are nourished and invisibly repaired. (1799, I, 288-94)

Though the 'fructifying' act described in this passage is that of remembering, that word is not, in fact, used in this passage defining the "spots of time." The spots seem instead continually available, in wait of the needful time at which they may be fitted to the mind's current anxieties and somehow provide means not only of comfort, but of restoration and liveliness. Thus the spots of time, though they structure *The Prelude* formally and anchor it to Wordsworth's life, are internally loaded sites of stress and repair. They are in some way devotional, rhetorical, and psychic conversation pieces. If the purpose of the poem as a whole is for the poet to develop some conclusion (love of nature leads to love of mankind, for example), the purpose of the spots of time seems not to arrive at any conclusion at all, but to leave those sites open for ongoing, unresolved work.

It is little wonder, then, that Wordsworth found *The Prelude* easier to write than *The Recluse*. It enabled him to address those mysterious spots both of comfort and irresolution in a way that the more synthetic task of writing *The Recluse* could not. As irrepressible sites of creative release, then, the spots of time prove themselves particularly significant if only because they put a poetic task of such import as *The Recluse* on hold, substituting instead the poem on his life that would take as its anchor the spots of time and their own, internal conflicts. Perhaps apart from the task of *The Prelude* as a whole, the spots of time reveal a conflict between the imagination and Nature that is as important for Wordsworth the poet in 1799, beginning his writing by expunging these spots onto paper, as it may have been for the boy of the episodes he narrates. That early boyhood conflict and the concomitant guilt created by it (which I believe is most apparent in a reading of the *Two-Part Prelude*), have a different shape than the more mature guilt of revised versions of *The Prelude*. The shape of the conflict for the boy in the narration of the spots, and for the poet first beginning to represent it by writing and revising the *Prelude,* is different in each temporal setting, but each instance in which the conflict is refreshed seems to center around an "unresolved antagonism" between the imagination and Nature that some critics, like Hartman and Harold Bloom, believe prevents the *Prelude* from becoming a sustained epic poem.[10]

In both these temporal spaces (that of the boy in the theft episodes and that of the poet writing) There is a parallel potential for the imagination to play a more dominant role than Nature. For the boy in the spots, his mind's burgeoning sense of the conflict seems to cause a release of his imaginative faculties that is not a welcome one.

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[10]Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A reading of English Romantic Poetry,* (Cornell University Press, 1961), 145.

Nevertheless, he is compelled to test this conflict and to make it, not Nature, the feature of his life at that time.

Similarly, in the course of writing those scenes, Wordsworth's adult imagination and the poetic task it holds must take precedence over the original event about which he writes. In both instances, the imagination is split between the enjoyment and empowerment of its own faculties and a guilt over displacing the matters at hand: a deified Nature or the integrity of cherished childhood events. Weiskel usefully describes the conflict of the mind in the act of remembering as "unwittingly, involuntarily divided against itself. It not only serves the reproductive function of memory but 'is at the same time an instrument of reason and its ideas' ... we appreciate that Wordsworth did not will the usurpation; writing at his desk and remembering, he did not want the light of retrospective sense to go out"(43). The theft episodes of the spots of time seem to concentrate on the dynamics of that potentially necessary usurpation, imagined both in the narrative thefts and in the act of representation.

Though Wordsworth's oscillation between precise local and historical details and a more temporally subjective act of rememoration produces some of his greatest verse, it is not because the issues contained within those spots of oscillation or between instances of remembrance and writing are resolved. Rather, the issues themselves persist despite Wordsworth's attempts to work them out in the spots and it is this persistence that keeps them glued together. Although many readings of *The Prelude* seem to emphasize the development of certain issues (the way Nature gradually becomes nature through the poet's revisioning, for example), they seem not to give enough regard to the persistent, unresolved components of the rememoration process, one of which seems to be guilt.

The guilt of the boy in the spots of time episodes, the guilt of the poet who (mis)remembers it, and the guilt of the poet who writes those memories are all, importantly, rooted within the spots of time. Those spots are whirlpools of memory and imagination in a poem that, in its effort to describe the evolution of the poet's mind, must move along without their resolution. They contain their own unstable internal economies which are, amazingly, elastic enough to contain the poet's anxieties over a lifetime, making his lifelong project of revision comprehensible.

Though the sublime experience is an intellectual one, it requires that the mind bump up against something outside itself, even if that something else is merely a sense of its own limitations. The spots of time episodes seem to posit nature both as metaphor for that cognitive limitation, and as actual possessor of the authority to limit the boy who shoulders the "naked crag" in one of the episodes. The spots of time provide the grounds not only for the lifelong nourishment of imaginative power, but for examination and redefinition of the division between imaginative power and the possibility of a higher power (perhaps residing in Nature) as recognized in the sublime. The nature of the divide, like the nature of the sublime, shifts in the spots: once these shift are recognized, it is possible to think more carefully about the way guilt might motivate the work of the spots of time. In the second part of this thesis, I will use the *Two-Part Prelude* to unpack the imbalance at the heart of the relationship between the mind and Nature.

Chapter One: The Two-Part Prelude and the Negative Sublime

How equisitely the individual Mind
(And the progressive powers perhaps no less
Of the whole species) to the external World
Is fitted: - and how equisitely, too -
Theme this but little heard of among men -
The external World is fitted to the Mind... [11]
--- *The Excursion*

The hour that man leaves the path of mere natural being marks the difference between him, a self-conscious agent, and the natural world. The spiritual is distinguished from the natural...in that it does not continue a mere stream of tendency, but sunders itself to self-realization.[12]
--- Hegel

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[11] William Wordsworth, from Preface to the *Excursion*, as quoted in Weiskel, 47.
[12] Georg Wilhelm Hegel, *The Logic of Hegel,* tr. from the *Encyclopedia of the Sciences* by W. Wallace (2nd ed., Oxford, 1904), pp.54-7, as cited by Geoffrey Hartman, "Romanticism and 'Anti Self-Consciousness,'" in *Romanticism and Consciousness,* ed. Harold Bloom (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1970), 49.

The Lake District

It seems appropriate at this time, as I describe the structure of the inner life that made Wordsworth incline toward the sublime experience, to describe the structure of the external life - the landscape of the Lake District - that also seems to have led Wordsworth toward the sublime. Owing mostly to its scale and its wide range of natural features, the Lake District seems to embody particularly well the fit between mind and Nature in which Wordsworth dearly believed. Wordsworth himself emphasizes those features of the Lake District in his *Guide through the District of the Lakes in the North of England*, published in 1810. In the guide, he describes the way the vales of the district lie within easy walking distance of one another, using the example of a shepherd who, "would not require more than an hour to descend into any one of eight of the principal vales."[13] The lakes are apprehensible to the eye in their full outline from most vantages, and the mountains are only just high enough "to have the surface towards the summit softened by distance" (62). The full effect is of a country fit for the ramblings of a man. Like the miniature model of the Lake of the four Cantons, which Wordsworth begins his chapter "Description of the Scenery of the Lakes," describing, the Lakes themselves, with all their "hidden treasure, and their bearings and relations to each other," are yet "comprehended and understood at once (54) ... I do not indeed know any tract of country in which, within so narrow a compass, may be found an equal variety in the influences of

[13]William Wordsworth, *A Guide Through the District of the Lakes*, (Soho Square London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1951), 62.

light and shadow upon the sublime or beautiful features of the landscape" (59).[14]

Wordsworth's devotion to the uniqueness of the Lake District manifests itself as what Geoffrey Hartman has called an "obsession with specific place" (W.P. 166). Throughout *The Prelude*, particularly in the spots of time, Wordsworth makes specific, detailed reference to the region. This peculiarity has interesting, sometimes detrimental, effects upon his ability to "cast roots, in many places," in a "more generous conception of nature," (W.P. 166) and his ability to universalize his claims and envision a "commonly available world."[15] Nevertheless, the dynamism of the Lakes, as a humanly accessible landscape that also undergoes radical changes in light, climate, and precipitation, lent itself to the experience of the sublime for the boy of the spots of time. In their navigability and relative domesticity, the Lakes allowed him to know and make himself familiar with them - to become with ease a child of Nature.

Wordsworth's praise of Nature in *The Prelude* is thus about much more than giving her due credit for her objective goodness. His celebration of Nature at its most glad and pacific, rather, is an attempt to celebrate the original relationship of co-existence he had with her. He makes a particular effort to emphasize the "vulgar joy" of his early relationship with her, which "like a tempest works along the blood / And is forgotten" after childhood (1799, I, ll. 415-7). So, too, does he fondly name Nature a nurse and teacher. He desires and describes a human experience that is greatly indebted to scenes

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[14] It is interesting that Wordsworth should mention light and shadow as instances of the sublime in light of the fact that depth (our sense of which is created in large part by light and shadow) creates a sense of the sublime while height, which the mountains of the Lake District do not display very impressively, is associated with the feeling experienced in the third stage of the sublime, once the vacant sense of the second stage is replaced by the sensation of transcendence (Weiskel 25).

[15] David Simpson, *Wordsworth and the Figurings of the Real*, (Hong Kong: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1982), 61.

of Nature "so beauteous and majestic in themselves," that they have come to hold sway over his existence with the investment of time, fear, affection, and association (1799, I, ll. 438).

Because these investments necessarily shape the way Wordsworth conceives Nature and the dynamics of his childhood relationship with her, the persistence of his deep attachment to the concrete details of place and time within his memories is understandable. Though there is certainly a constant oscillation in the spots of time between the particulars of experience and the mind's refashioning of them, Wordsworth tends toward a representation of the past that is as true and particular as possible. As Hartman points out, "his greatest verse takes its origin in the memory of given experiences to which he is often pedantically faithful" (P.P. 603). This minute faithfulness, which might be dismissed for verging on an affected colloquialism, actually seems to point toward the poet's sincere affection and reverence for the details he provides in a way that is profoundly important.[16] John Beer marked their spatial and temporal specificity as exemplifying Wordsworth's tendency to "think in terms of visitations in time, rather than of a single central working in the consciousness itself."[17]

But it is in the Lakes' ability to enthrall, to *invite* the boy to develop mastery over its places and flag them with specific visitations in time - yet to revoke that familiarity with surprising liveliness - that the landscape itself seems to contain an instability that substantiates sublime moments. If Wordsworth could proclaim full majesty over his

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[16] On this point I disagree with Herbert Lindenberger's characterization of the poet's attention to detail as one that makes him seem "too reticent to release emotions directly, as though the distancing in time and the casualness of tone could make a deeply personal experience less overtly and embarrassingly personal," in *On Wordsworth's Prelude*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963), 148.

[17] John Beer, *Wordsworth in Time*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 77.

homeland, she would be unable to provide him with the sublime - flashes of brilliance whose ability to convey transcendence is in some way dependent upon the conditions of a specific place at a specific time.

The Separation of Self from Nature

The poet's telling of the spots of time is "fructifying" not simply as the transcription of a pleasant memory, but as confession of violation. In Timothy Bahti's words, the theft episodes of the spots of time "steal from nature in acts that metaphorize natural objects but also, ultimately, the self that would have a literal story of its 'natural' and proper coexistence with nature."[18] Indeed, the theft scenes seem to be the site of an originary gesture towards the making of metaphor as a "generalized structure, not only as a rhetorical device" (W.P. 81). In making that gesture, the boy of the narrative draws distinctions between himself and a newly discovered, objectified natural world that is other than himself. It is the beginning of that process, during which the boy differentiates himself from Nature, that is described in the theft episodes.

But just what is being interrupted? What might a "natural" coexistence with Nature be? In the *Two-Part Prelude* examples occupy the opening of the poem. They are of Wordsworth as a "four years' child," experiencing the river Derwent as a sort of second nursemaid, whose voice "flowed along [his] dreams," and "composed [his] thoughts / To more than infant softness," giving him,

Among the fretful dwellings of mankind

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[18] Timothy Bahti, "Wordsworth's Rhetorical Theft," in *Romanticism and Language*, ed. Arden Reed, (Cornell University Press, 1984), 98.

A knowledge, a dim earnest, of the calm
Which Nature breathes among the fields and groves. (1799, I, ll. 5-15)

It is that knowledge, of the calm of nature, with which Wordsworth begins to sustain himself in the winter of 1798 in Goslar, Germany when he began writing *The Prelude*:

Was it for this
That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved
To blend his murmurs with my nurse's song
...For this didst thou,
O Derwent, traveling over the green plains
Near my 'sweet birthplace', didst thou, beauteous stream,
Make ceaseless music through the night and day,
Which with its steady cadence tempering
Our human waywardness, composed my thoughts
To more than infant softness... (1799, I, ll. 1-15)

This set of childhood impressions and Wordsworth's act of remembering them seems somewhat less complicated than the memories presented shortly after it in the theft scenes. Wordsworth was once educated by the river Derwent, he explains, and he hopes to be so once again through recollection of that education, as if the "rememoration" of "visible scenes of childhood...constituted a kind of knowledge," in itself (Weiskel 168). The spots of time, famously, have distinct preeminence in this arena, relied upon to nourish and invisibly repair the imaginative power. But the rememorations of the narrator of the time when he was "a four years' child" have a slightly different value than that invested in the spots of time. These simple memories, of bathing on a summer's day and standing naked in a thunderstorm, are "predialectical."[19] There is no distinction between the elements nature provides and the experience the boy has with them, and

[19] Weiskel states, "Wordsworth...is not willingly a dialectical poet: he...would like to celebrate the predialectical moment before perception's power yields to knowledge and what is created is differentiated from what is given" (51).

there is therefore no attempt to unify oppositional parts. The river Derwent inhabits the child's dreams, blends his voice with the nurse's song, composes the child's thoughts, and issues itself as silent pools and rain in which the child can play in much the same sort of acquiescent symbiosis Wordsworth later describes between an "infant babe" and the world. The babe has a mind "eager to combine / In one appearance all the elements / And parts of the same object, else detached / And loth to coalesce." His mind works "but in alliance with the works / Which it beholds" (1805, II, 247-50, 273-5).

The scenes that follow this idyllic verse, the theft episodes, begin to catalogue the boy's gradual differentiation of his own sensibility from Nature. What is lost in that transfer, a unified existence with the natural world, begins to be compensated for by an expansion of the imaginative faculties. Paradoxically, the biggest payoff may come with the subsequent revocation of those imaginative faculties to make room in the mind for the recognition of a transcendent order that Nature comes to represent through the negative sublime. It is only once the boy has sensed or created a division between himself and nature that he can experience the sublime, and the power that is invested in Nature as a result. As an infant the boy could never advance to the second stage of the sublime in which an outside object proves itself beyond the conscious comprehension of the newly created subject. As the boy gains a consciousness separate from Nature, he also gains access to the sublime and, through that experience, a way of filling the gap created by the rent in his natural coexistence with Nature.

The trap robbery is the first of the theft episodes. In it, the narrator imagines himself chased by some human figure after stealing woodcocks from another trapper's springs. The desire to thieve and the ensuing fear the boy experiences as he escapes the

scene are similar to those in the two scenes which with this thesis is principally concerned (the nest robbery and the stolen-boat episode). The episode offers a dynamic presentation of the guilt, fear, and imaginative fantasy that makes the scenes compelling, but it seems to lack a sublime experience, perhaps because the "low breathing" and silent footsteps that the boy imagines following him are, like the experiences of the four-years' child, pre-dialectical. The idea the boy formulates of a man in pursuit of him is a rather self-sufficient one; it does not rely upon an interchange between natural objects and the boy's physical sense and mental extrapolation of that sense for its formulation. It is, rather, a sort of primordial imaginative exercise sparked by his fear of being found out for plundering another trapper's prey. As Leslie Brisman notes, the low breathings figure a "ghostly presence in nature, haunting the mind like a bad conscience - or, more precisely, haunting the mind like a reproving figure of authority not yet internalized, not yet made the self-hauntings of conscience."[20] The theft in this episode is a simple one, not yet predicated by a dynamic relationship between the boy as an agent and subject in a natural, object world that he is in some way responsible to and for.

A rich body of critical scholarship exists that attempts to trace the relationship between subject and object in *The Prelude*. It draws upon an equally rich and varied collection of representations with the poem. Each of the poet's formulations of the subject/object relationship presents a variation on every other one, and even within

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[20]Leslie Brisman, *Romantic Origins*, (Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press, 1978), 101.

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representations there exist discrepancies.[21] Though such inquiry can be done on a purely rhetorical level, it seems important to remember that *The Prelude*, as autobiography, is vitally connected with its narrative strain. The episodes of the poem, based upon episodes of Wordsworth's life, work on many different formal, metaphorical, narrative, and autobiographical levels that work simultaneously and cannot be separated. It seems worthwhile, then, not only to study the rhetorical devices Wordsworth puts to work in crafting the work on his life, but also to emphasize the importance of the original experiences with the object world that made up that life. These are elements of great value in Wordsworth's development, so it seems odd to use them merely as a screen on which to project his intellectual and rhetorical development, especially since Wordsworth himself seems to have considered them as being a more organic part of his experience. Though it is impossible to know the development of the poet's conception of himself as a subject and poet in contrast to the object world and Nature, it is possible to re-emphasize the narrative details Wordsworth presents in an attempt to consider Nature in some way that precedes her representational forms. This seems to be one of the poet's own great tasks, through which a more complete understanding of the significance of the conflict

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[21]I cannot do justice to the range of critical voices in this arena, including David Simpson's *Wordsworth and the Figurings of the Real* (which has influenced me most in this area), in which he states that "*The Prelude* presents a whole range of formulations of the mind-world relation, varying from active mind (and passive nature) to active nature (and passive mind), with consequent variations in the attribution of the 'real'...it must be stressed that Wordsworth's version of the balance is actually an *interchange* through time" (65-6). He goes on to say that Wordsworth privileges no one figuring of the real. It is my contention in this thesis, however, that Wordsworth feels that he *ought* to privilege one such figuring (in which Nature is more active than the mind), and that his decision not to do so consistently is a guilty one. My attempt to give some small part of an explanation for Wordsworth's inconsistency is not meant to point out some "confusion in Wordsworth's epistemology," as Simpson notes many claim, but to do the opposite.

between himself and his original experience with the world might be obtained. The conflict has a reality great enough to impose restriction upon Wordsworth's celebration of the powers of the mind, throughout his poetry. The value he places upon the natural world and authentic experience always rises up in response to advances of the imagination.

It seems likely that Wordsworth chose the theft episodes as the site of his first work on that conflict because they are the site of his first work in conceptualizing and testing it as a boy. In the spots of time he is significantly older than the infant along the river Derwent, a school-boy, and the simplicity of his mind's relationship with the object world becomes much more complex than it was in the "Was it for this?" passage. The boy begins to participate in a differentiation of himself from the environment by 'stealing' from Nature both literally and symbolically by problematizing the symbiotic, or proper, relationship previously described along the river Derwent and in other passages throughout the text. In Timothy Bahti's words, the spots of time are a "series of mutually determining interactions," in which "both nature and the self become dispossessed of their properties and of their possible representation as being proper to themselves, as they are rendered improper, or figural, in writing that calls into question the very condition of - or the possibility of knowing and naming - 'corporeal existence'" (99).

Though Bahti emphasizes the way writing originates the impropriety, or disjunction, of the boy and nature, the disjunction seems to occur not only on a representational level with the act of writing (which I will discuss in Chapter Two of this thesis), but also on a narrative, or literal, one. While it is true that the writing of the scene by the poet requires an imaginative process that must attempt to know and characterize

corporeal existence, it is also true that the imaginative process of the boy that features in the narrative must struggle with the same dilemma. The boy in the spots of time must attempt to distinguish himself and his imaginative processes from the object world and his relationship to it.

The Nest Robbery

It is in the scene that follows the trap-robbing episode in the Two-Book *Prelude* that the boy Wordsworth first seems to recognize himself as a force outside Nature. The ideological and physical situation he is in place him squarely in opposition to Nature. "Though mean/ And though inglorious were my views," the episode begins, "the end / Was not ignoble." The boy believes he is justified, ethically, in taking the raven eggs because ravens kill lambs. It is for the good of the lambs and the farmers that keep them that he is encouraged to take the eggs. The ravens, unlike the lambs, are outside and inimical to the human social order, and in pillaging their nests, the boy Wordsworth seems to place himself against the ravens, against whatever is outside himself and society – against Nature. His justification of that opposition is highlighted by the care he takes to make a distinction between views and ends. Though the result of his task, taking the eggs, may not be ignoble within the social order, it does align him against Nature. The special mention that his views were also mean and inglorious, and thus also against Nature, reveals a not-so-hidden malignancy well within the bounds of his own agency, and is the reason the episode takes on such significance. Views, intentions, and agency for Wordsworth are all important indicators of a consciousness separate from and responsible for, or to, Nature regardless of ends or effects.

Even the image of the boy stealing the eggs that Wordsworth creates is, literally, an image of the boy aligned against and defined by the antagonism between the natural environment and himself as he hangs,

> Above the raven's nest, by knots of grass
> Or half-inch fissures in the slipp'ry rock
> But ill sustained, and almost as it seemed,
> Suspended by the blast which blew amain,
> Shouldering the naked crag... (1799. I. ll. 58-62)

Thus the conflict between the boy and Nature in this passage is a real, physical one, and paradoxically, one that literally sustains him. It is that presentation that seems to give the episode its drama and real danger. The possibility of physical pain, the fear it places in the boy, and the excitement that comes with the fear are all conducive to the sublime experience, as they are to the guilt Wordsworth felt over the contempt he must have held for the natural forces that put his body in danger at that moment. The physicality of the language used in the passage, the contraction of "splipp'ry," the sliding "s" sounds in quick collision with the hard sounds of " slipp'ry rock...sustained...almost," and "blast," as well as the arrangement of lines, with "Or" and "But" creating a skip and a lurch into theirs, and the opposite forces of suspension and support compelling theirs, ground the experience in the material conflict of boy and crag.

Nevertheless, of course, there can be no real contest between the boy and the crag. It is an act of imagination that allows the boy to imagine himself both suspended by the wind and supporting the crag. It is the strange equation of the physical and imaginative power of the boy with natural forces that becomes tied to the exhilarating fear of physical pain and transforms the experience into a sublime one. "Oh, at that time," Wordsworth writes,

> While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,
> With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
> Blow through my ears; the sky seemed not a sky
> Of earth, and with what motion moved the clouds! (1799. I. ll. 63-6)

In the last two lines of this section, the boy is pulled back from the scene in which he hangs. The equation of his power with that of nature is reversed once again, back in Nature's favor; the apparently indescribable motion in which the clouds move takes the situation out of his control as the sky is removed from the very earth, seeming to withdraw itself from any imagined contest with the boy.

The ambiguity of the boy's original offense in this passage (the robbing of the nests), combined with the uncertainty of the physical danger of the scene and the uncertain balance of power between the boy and Nature combine to form an unbalanced equation in this formulation of this spot of time. In the imagined balance between boy and Nature, the boy both supported by and supporting it, there is an attempt to solve the disjunction between the subject and the object world. But as the scene widens and the sky leaves the earth, that equation is nullified. The experience conforms with Kant's theory of the negative sublime:

> Delight in the sublime in nature is only *negative* … that is to say it is a feeling of imagination by its own act depriving itself of its freedom by receiving a final determination in accordance with a law other than that of its empirical employment. (Weiskel 100)

The sense that the boy deprives himself of imagination in the last two lines of the nest-robbing passage comes not only from the remove at which Nature is suddenly flung from the boy, but also from a lack of metaphor. Although the "loud dry wind" is

anthropomorphized as possessing a "strange utterance," that utterance seems not to speak anything identifiably meaningful to the boy. It is instead a strange but powerful voice that blows *through* his ears without comprehension (literally, in one ear and out the other).

The boy, faced with the suddenly withdrawn sky and unidentifiable wind is unable to apprehend their negative plenitude or the physical precariousness of his position. He is in Weiskel's second phase of the sublime, in which "there is an immediate intuition of a disconcerting disproportion between inner and outer" (100). In this case, the result is fear rather than astonishment, and as Weiskel speculates, "perhaps only fear can compel the mind to relinquish perception in favor of metaphor" (100). This moment upon the crag is the first in the *Two-Part Prelude* in which the boy is made to make the move from perception to metaphor: the negative sublime. The unwieldy experience of power that the boy feels as his perceptual vantage moves into the sky and the clouds is outside the limits of his imaginative power and recognition of that cognitive failure becomes itself a metaphor for some higher power embodied by nature.

That original struggle parallels the one in which the poetic mind composing the scene must differentiate itself from the memory of that experience. Thus, there are three experiences of disjunction in the theft scenes, three struggles in which the advance of the imagination requires the differentiation of subject and object. The first concerns the real theft of snared birds, eggs, or boats, all of which belong not to the boy but to the object world. The second, the negative sublime, involves the boy's flexing of his imaginative capabilities, which he uses to construct an original concept of the difference between himself and Nature by constructing Nature as an other against which he acts, using his

imagination to enact that drama of perpetration. Finally, in the egotistical sublime, there is a disjunction between the poet's imagination in composition and the content of the memory he transcribes.

Although the poetic imagination necessarily mediates all of these interactions in *The Prelude*, it is not itself free from the guilt of representing and thus modifying either the real experience described, or the real imaginative conflicts of the boy that Wordsworth recalls. As Weiskel points out, Wordsworth refuses to propound "the fictive character of the real," thus ensuring that the idea of the reality of the object world and his memories of interaction with it will always hold sway in his formulation of Nature, and perhaps even accounts for his "regressive attachment" to Nature (54, 102). The solid existence of the object world for Wordsworth thus prevents it from becoming merely the "guarantor of the dialogue," between the poet and higher powers or presences as their stand-in or screen, as Weiskel later claims (172). Although nature does indeed seem to serve this function, it does so only insofar as Wordsworth's variable poetic imagination conceives it. The authority of Nature that Wordsworth is reluctant to perpetrate against imaginatively comes not only from the powers that it might represent, but from its persistence as a vibrant corporeal presence in Wordsworth's life. The significance of that presence, as well as the significance of memory and the consecration of places and events, must be acknowledged when examining *The Prelude*.

One of the *Two-Part Prelude*'s concluding verses is this one, blessing the poet's boyhood interaction with Nature:

> From Nature and her overflowing soul
> I had received so much that all my thoughts
> Were steeped in feeling. I was only then

> Contented when with bliss ineffable
> I felt the sentiment of being spread
> O'er all that moves, and all that seemeth still,
> O'er all that, lost beyond the reach of thought
> And human knowledge, to the human eye
> Invisible, yet liveth to the heart...the gift is yours
> Ye mountains, thine O Nature. Thou hast fed
> My lofty speculations, and in thee
> For this uneasy heart of ours I find
> A never-failing principle of joy
> And purest passion. (1899. II. ll.446-545, 491-5)

The passage blesses the poet's boyhood consciousness in lines of wondering gladness and also celebrates the sublime moment for the separate but powerfully constructive force Nature has become through his experience of it. In language distinctly indicative of the sublime moment, the poet thanks Nature for the "bliss ineffable" she has made him feel "beyond the reach of thought," and gives her full credit for the feeling's extraordinary effects. The passage has a ringing tone, both poetically and rhetorically, that announces wholeness and conclusion with triumph and seeming satisfaction. However, the poet's decision to revise the poem reveals his own dissatisfaction. In the next section of this thesis, I will explore the persistence of Wordsworth's guilt and the way it motivates new forms of the sublime experience through writing.

Chapter Two: The *Five-Book Prelude* and the Egotistical Sublime

> [Poetry] takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.[22]
> --- *Preface to Lyrical Ballads 1800*

> ...this position of severed life has in its turn to be overcome, and the spirit must, by its own act, achieve concord once more. ...The principle of restoration is found in thought, and thought only: the hand that inflicts the wound is also the hand that heals it.[23]
> --- Hegel

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[22]William Wordsworth, from Preface to *Lyrical Ballads,* in *Romanticism,* ed. Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1994), 361.

[23] *The Logic of Hegel,* tr. from the *Encyclopedia of the Sciences* by W. Wallace (2nd ed., Oxford, 1904), pp.54-7. As cited by Geoffrey Hartman, "Romanticism and 'Anti Self-Consciousness,'" in *Romanticism and Consciousness*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1970), 49.

On Writing and Revision

The statement above by Wordsworth on composition was published two years after *Tintern Abbey* and one year after the original, *Two-Part Prelude*. The overarching effect of all of those texts is one of remarkable inclusiveness, incorporating spirit, Nature, and the imagination. In *Tintern Abbey* "beauteous forms" travel by sensation from the blood to the heart, and even into the "purer mind," and in the *Two-Part Prelude*, too, spots of time with their own mysterious, beauteous forms fructify the mind and the imagination. Thus mind, imagination, sensation, and emotion are all involved in the experience of transcendence. That experience, nonetheless, is a troubled one, fraught with an element of guilt or anxiety over the instability of these parts without which the sublime experience could not occur. Analogous imbalances are struck throughout the writing process itself that result, perhaps, in a kindred experience of the sublime - an egotistical one sparked by the author's writing.

In the introduction to his edition of *The Five-Book Prelude*, Duncan Wu notes that the 1804 version of the poem is marked by the stresses of Wordsworth's life at the time in which it was written, similar to the way the burden of writing *The Recluse* and the cold and solitude of living in Goslar, Germany, sparked his writing of the original 1799 version. But the 1804 version is "distinctive," he notes, "for it articulates a number of concerns for the moment. More so than in any other version, its tone is self-justificatory .... Guilt and self-doubt pervade the verse and its argument" (10). Wu cites Coleridge's declining health and spirits, as well as the poet's own waning poetic vision as the cause of his 1804 anxieties. As was the case with the writing of the 1799 *Prelude*, the writing of

the 1804 revision seems to be a response to particular stresses that might stir-up the long-lived stress of guilt I have been discussing in this thesis. Marked as it is by self-doubt, the acts of writing and revising seem to have sparked a sharper awareness in Wordsworth of the sublimity of poetic prowess itself that mirrors and complicates the sensations of original guilt and sublimity described in the spots of time. Writing and revision, particularly in autobiography, are ways of repeating experience, and as Geoffrey Hartman notes, poets, similar to Romantic wanderers

> resubmit themselves to temporality and are compelled to repeat their experience in the purgatorial form of words. Yeats, deeply affected by the theme of the Wandering Jew, records a marvelous comment of Mme. Blavatsky's. "I write, write, write," said Mme. Blavatsky, "as the Wandering Jew walks, walks, walks.[24]

Mme. Blavatsy's remarks seem particularly relevant to Wordsworth's compositional and revisionary impulses. While composing, he walked, his steps following a circular path, just as revision on the poem of his own life was continuous, circling back again and again to the spots of time.[25] In the presence of the natural surroundings he knew so well, he spoke aloud into the open air. Perhaps because Nature was both the subject of much of his poetry, as well as the setting of its composition, many of Wordsworth's anxieties seem readable through his changing relationship with Nature and his various modes of reflecting upon those changes. Wordsworth's guilt over creating a self separate from

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[24]Geoffrey Hartman "Romanticism and 'Anti Self-Consciousness,'" in *Romanticism and Consciousness,* ed. Harold Bloom (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1970), 33.

[25]Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1980), 63.

Nature as a boy and over creating a poetic voice that would relate and change the very dynamics of that separation is bound up with the particulars of his physical relationship to the object world. That physical impetus seems to result in Wordsworth's provision of rudimentary details as to the time and setting of the spots of time so as to cast Nature as a real, legitimate counterpart in his maturation (as discussed in the first chapter of this thesis). He seems to attempt a similar mode of making concrete the dynamics of his compositional conflicts by tying them to his relationship with Coleridge, whom he addresses at several points in the poem:

> Nor will it seem to thee, my friend, so prompt
> In sympathy, that I have lengthened out
> With fond and feeble tongue a tedious tale.
> Meanwhile my hope has been that I might fetch
> Invigorating thoughts from former years,
> Might fix the wavering balance of my mind,
> And haply meet reproaches too, whose power
> May spur me on, in manhood now mature,
> To honorable toil...(1805, I, ll. 646-53)

Even as Wordsworth neatly expresses and perhaps diminishes the magnitude of some of his compositional concerns by placing them within the context of his friendship with Coleridge in this passage, he is drawn back to the power of spots of time past and it is from that power that he expects, hopes even, to receive reproach. Nature and the spots of time during which his relationship was teased out with her, as much as Coleridge or the relationship he had with him, remain powerful counterparts throughout the poem.

The deep frustrations of *The Prelude* with which this thesis is principally concerned extend beyond the original ones between the boy of the narrative and the outside world to the one between lived experience and the writing of the autobiographical narrative. Although the relationship between these differences in *The Prelude* is never

fixed, there are particular sections of the text, like the spots of time, in which they are put under the greatest strain, sometimes with epiphanic results. Bahti cites those moments as important 'conversions' through which "the persona whose life is being narrated becomes transformed into the author with the authority to read and understand the significance of that life and thus to write the life in the first place" (86).

It often seems to be the case, however, that conversion moments in *The Prelude* have the opposite effect, undermining rather than supporting authorial power. As previously discussed, the poem vacillates between moments in which Wordsworth claims such power, and moments in which he subordinates his own powers of imagination to powers of Nature. There is a sense in which he seems to conceive the advance of his imagination and poetic endeavor as a violence against what he most celebrates: the primacy of lived experience and the instructive and healing properties of Nature. As Brisman notes, "it is fundamental to Wordsworth's myth of romantic origins that the relation of past incident or past self to the present self is that of a powerful, parental predecessor to the weak singer of the present time" (280). To shape the presentation of those predecessors and to make concrete their existence in a necessarily limiting way through the imaginative act of writing poetry is in some way to violate them, making the very act of composition, though in some ways therapeutic, a guilty one for Wordsworth.[26]

It is in the five book *Prelude* that Wordsworth seems most anxious about the way he has positioned Nature in the poem, and in the two part *Prelude* that he seems best to approximate the original, negative, sublime experienced by the boy in the narrated

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[26] Heaney makes note of the physical signs of that sensation in Dorothy's journals, in which she noted that the nervous strain of composing long poems was capable of making the poet "sick and exhausted," 71.

episodes. The 1799 writing approaches the same pitch of excitement that the narrator describes experiencing as a boy, and in that version of the poem, at least, Wordsworth the narrator seems truly to enjoy the memory of the sublime moment as well as a swell of poetic, or egotistical, sublime through composition that lifts him out of the mood that compelled him to ask, "was it for this?" and answers that question with confidence. The egotistical sublime is also markedly present in the five book version, though the poem is overall less compositionally exuberant, perhaps because of Wordsworth's growing awareness of the self generative quality of the egotistical sublime. I would argue, in fact, that Wordsworth's poetic anxiety drove him to revise the poem so many times because he was desirous of converting his compositional guilt into experiences of the poetic sublime, especially once he became aware of the degree to which he could produce it. This theory fits well with Weiskel's formulation of the egotistical sublime, in which "the two Kantian poles of sensible nature and eschatological destination collapse inward and become 'habitual' attributes of what was to be called Imagination – a totalizing consciousness whose medium is sense but whose power is transcendent. Apocalypse becomes immanent; the sublime, a daily habit" (50).

Though Wordsworth may have sought the egotistical sublime, he never grew comfortable summoning it. In 1810 in *Essays Upon Epitaphs* Wordsworth voiced his real concern, misguided or not, that the act of making metaphor (necessary to the sublime) is itself a potentially blasphemous one:

> Words are too awful an instrument for good and evil to be trifled with; they hold above all other external powers a dominion over thoughts. If words be not...an incarnation of the thought but only a clothing for it, then

> surely they will prove an ill gift; such a one as those poisoned vestments, read of in the stories of superstitious times, which had power to consume and to alienate from his right mind the victim who put them on. [27] (De Man 79).

The passage, independent of any logical inconsistency,[28] illustrates Wordsworth's basic anxiety that he did not have the authority to substitute for the powers he felt in Nature his own poetic verse. Such anxieties are most apparent in the verses between the nest-robbing and the boat stealing episodes in which the powers behind those experiences are explicated. Though in the 1804 version the poet more openly examines the nature of his poetic intervention in the relationship he has to those powers, he seems to attempt compensation by more pointedly naming and crediting Nature or some one universally powerful spirit as the possessor of a superior power. The "beings of the hills" invoked in the 1799 *Prelude* "walk the woods and open heaths / By moon or star-light," and "love to intertwine / The passions that build up our human soul," in a more companionable, human fashion than those in the 1804 *Prelude* (1799, I, ll.131-4). In that version of the poem, Wordsworth seems to draw away from the companionable aspect of "beings" that "walk the woods," and instead references a larger, more obviously powerful entity that is also less specific:

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[27]Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (Columbia University Press, 1984), 79.
[28] De Man points out the inconsistency of Wordsworth's expressed belief that evil language is to thought as "the garb is to the body," while good language is to thought as "the body is to the soul," since the two types of language described as having an opposite relationship to thought actually have the same relationship. He goes on to explain the disastrous ramifications of such a negative formulation for language and understanding.

Wisdom and spirit of the universe!
Thou soul that art the eternity of thought,
That giv'st to forms and images a breath
And everlasting motion, not in vain,
By day or star-light thus from my first dawn
Of childhood didst thou intertwine for me
The passions that build up our human soul...(1804. 1. 426-32)

The "Wisdom and spirit of the universe," besides being put at a further remove from the boy and Nature than in the 1799 version, also intertwines *for* the boy "passions" without being said to love doing so.

Similarly, 1894 revisions to the verse following the nest robbing episode emphasize severer interventions in the poet's life by Nature than in the 1799 version. Slight changes (which I have italicized) indicate that general difference in climate:

...I believe
That there are spirits which, when they would form
A favored being, from his very dawn
Of infancy do open out the clouds
As at the touch of lightning, seeking him
With gentle visitation – *quiet powers,*
Retired, and seldom recognized, yet kind,
And to the very meanest not unknown –
With me, though rarely, in my boyish days
They communed. Others too there are, who *use,*
Yet haply aiming at the self-same end,
Severer interventions, ministry
More palpable – *and of their school was I.*
(1799, I, ll. 66-80)

...I believe
That Nature, oftentimes, when she should frame
A favored being, from his very dawn
Of infancy do open out the clouds
As at the touch of lightning, seeking him
With gentle visitation; not the less,
Though haply aiming at the self-same end,
Doth it delight her sometimes to *employ*
Severer interventions, ministry
More palpable – *and so she dealt with me.*
(1804, I, ll. 360-9)

Again, the ministrations of Nature are a bit harsher and more impersonal (more specifically named yet more generally endowed with power and force) in the 1804 verse. Nature in that version employs severer interventions and "deals" with the boy rather than including him in her school. But, as in the verses following the boat stealing episode, the end is much the same, and the boy receives the same education in both, allowing him to

read his own heart, its pains and fears, through Nature. The passions she intertwined in his soul were

> Not with the mean and vulgar works of man,
> But with high objects, with eternal things,
> With life and Nature, purifying thus
> The elements of feeling and of thought,
> And sanctifying by such discipline
> Both pain and fear, until we recognize
> A grandeur in the beatings of the heart. (1804, I, ll. 433-9)

As I have shown, the passage between the egg-stealing episode and the stolen boat episode differs significantly in the two-part and five-book *Preludes*. Although the spots of time themselves are not markedly different, both that transition stanza and the stanzas that follow the stolen boat episode are very different, indicating a difference in the way Wordsworth read the episodes himself and perhaps a difference in the degree to which he felt authorized to present changes that might alter the sanctity of the remembered experience. That change in attitude is not really germane to how the boy may have experienced the negative sublime in each episode, but relates rather to the poet's growing faith in his own poetic license. Though the experience of the egotistical sublime, resulting in a conversion experience of the kind described above, further distinctions develop between Wordsworth's relationship to Nature and to the primacy of lived experience versus the imagination in his writing.

Nature as Reader

In the 1804 *Prelude* the poet's confidence in his ability to present and arrange material with his imaginative powers, perhaps in spite of mysterious outside ones, is at

the fore. It is those imaginative advances that revisions which empower outside forces, as in the verses above, seem written to address in an attempt to stabilize the uncertain balance between authorial and outside power in the text. Paradoxically, Wordsworth's increasing celebration of his own imaginative and poetic faculties does not result in a reduction of the power he attributes to Nature. If anything, passages like the ones above illustrate that Nature's powers become both more mysterious and more forceful with revision - a "dark / Invisible workmanship that reconciles / Discordant elements, and makes them move / In one society" (1804, I, ll. 350-3).

Nature, or the spirits for which it stands, gains prominence in the 1804 revision as a force that answers Wordsworth's guilt over his waning attachment to her. Once again, Wordsworth allows Nature to become an authority - once again a force that is a law for him as it was for the boy described in the spots of time, who experienced the negative sublime. This time, in experiencing the sublime through writing rather than through direct contact with the outside world, Nature takes the role of reader. Wordsworth, so fond of casting Nature in every supporting role in his life - nurse, guide, guardian, soul - finds a new place for her in the writing of his autobiography. Far more than to Coleridge, it is to Nature and his own boyhood experiences that Wordsworth writes in *The Prelude*.

As such, Paul de Man's exploration of autobiography and the problems of authority involved in its writing takes on new dimensions. De Man delineates the specular structure of autobiography by identifying the "autobiographical moment" as:

> an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution. The

> structure implies differentiation as well as similarity, since both depend on a substitutive exchange that constitutes the subject ... The specular moment that is part of all understanding reveals the tropological structure that underlies all cognitions, including knowledge of self. The interest of autobiography, then, is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge - it does not - but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textural systems made up of tropological substitutions. (71)

If Nature or lived experience (say, a specific spot of time) is positioned as the second subject in the autobiographical pair, it is possible to see Wordsworth's writing of *The Prelude* as a process of reaching some sort of tropological arrangement between himself and Nature that could ease his guilt over changing his relationship with her in the first place. Significantly, the sublime experience seems to perform a similar function. Such an understanding helps elucidate why the conversion moment described by Bahti, in which the author of an autobiography gives himself the authority needed to understand and write his life, never seems wholly to happen for Wordsworth. Conversion moments instead move in a different direction, in which an outside authority who responds to the poet's writing must be harnessed through that writing in an experience of the egotistical sublime. In this way, the poet becomes aware of his ability to spread the awesome excess of the sublime moment through an act of composition. As such, the act that produces the guilt, writing, also appeases it by investing the act with new valor. Importantly for Wordsworth, Nature facilitates the conversion by providing the awesome excess with

which the poet molds meaning in the creative act. Because the spots of time themselves "demonstrate in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization," they are particularly apt places in the text for Wordsworth to return for revision and the restoration of poetic power through the egotistical sublime (de Man 71).

In the Five-Book *Prelude,* the river Derwent passage that opens the Two-Book version is preceded by a passage that confronts head-on the poet's recent compositional troubles. This complicated passage establishes the poet's task and provides context for the question, "Was it for this?" with a preface often referred to as the 'glad preamble'.

Bahti identifies the problematics of that preface as a lack of either an "ontologically stable speaker or an unvexed scene of its own creation" (91). Indeed, neither nature, which gifts the narrator with a breeze that he hopes will help him to "shaken off...mountings of the mind" but never quite seems to do so, nor the speaker, baffled by "a mind that every hour / Turns recreant to her task" of composing a "philosophic song / Of truth," is comfortably seated in a position of gift or receipt, though that is the ostensive topic of the 'glad preamble' (1804, I, ll. 20, 257-8, 228-9). Given this disjunction and the narrator's frustration with it, the relative simplicity of the river Derwent passage is a cathartic gesture that takes the place of the narrator's vain wish "never to have heard the name / Of zeal and just ambition," and instead to

...stray about
Voluptuously through fields and rural walks
And ask no record of the hours given up
To vacant musing... (1804, I, 250-4)

The wish for such complacency is met by the memory of the "ceaseless music" of the river, but the theft scenes, now more than ever with the insertion of the Glad Preamble as

an introduction, seem to mark the true beginning of the narrative trajectory and a way of addressing the problems presented obliquely in the preface.

The Stolen Boat Episode

In the 1799 *Prelude,* the stolen boat episode, like the nest-robbing episode, does indeed seem to be written in a state of "emotion recollected in tranquility," and the imaginative license taken by the boy in both episodes is transferred into the writing that describes them. It is as if the uncertain lessons of those episodes, as well as an uncertain sense of guilt, are still unresolved at the time of their writing, but can be glossed over with an optimism similar to that the boy is described as having. In the 1804 version, however, Wordsworth seems more concerned about the role Nature plays in the stolen boat episode and the cost of casting her in such a dark light. The imaginative reprimand the boy may have felt during that experience seems more strictly to moderate the writing of the 1804 version. While in the 1799 *Prelude* the boy is led into the Stolen Boat episode by fanciful "spirits," in the 1804 *Prelude*, he is guided through the definite intervention of Nature; "surely I was led by her," the narrator notes, before launching into the second theft episode (1804, I, 370).[29] In this episode, there is perhaps even greater emphasis on the fact that the boy is alone than in the nest robbing episode, and the development of his offense is more detailed. The stealing of the Shepherd's boat, unlike the stealing of the raven's eggs, sets the boy apart both from Nature and from a social order. He is a transgressor of social boundaries, then, from the start, and the clean,

[29] All of the quotations I use in the body of my text in this reading of the boat stealing episode, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the 1804 version, Book I, ll. 370-425.

moonlit night and "shining clear" lake, like a fresh sheet of paper, seem to offer themselves as a free playing field for further transgression. In fact, the image of the shining clear lake seems to point toward a line later in the poem in which the poet ruminates upon the "awful...might of souls, / And what they do within themselves while yet / The yoke of earth is new to them, the world / Nothing but a wild field where they were sown" (1804, III, 177-80). In a similar spirit, the boy in the episode seems poised to use the vacant landscape of the lake as a measure of his own might. The state of vacancy in the landscape is also, importantly, an apt state for the experience of the sublime.

The force that the boy exerts on his environment is deliberate; the cadence both of the oars described and of the verse is strong and regular:

> I pushed, and struck the oars, and struck again
> In cadence, and my little boat moved on
> Just like a man who walks with stately step
> Though bent on speed. (1804, I, ll. 383-6)

The boat and the boy combine power to become "just like a man," and as the boy begins to build that power, he begins to aggrandize himself by deliberately channeling his new-found agency into an impressive, machine-like regularity, mirroring his mind's concomitant attempt to order or systemize the experience. He rows with his best skill, dipping his oars a specified "twenty times" into the lake, keeping his gaze fixed upon a craggy ridge that marks the "bound of the horizon."

But despite the boy's physical purposiveness and the deliberate bounds of the task he has set for himself, the scene is yet an awkward one, an "act of stealth / And troubled pleasure." The boat moves through the water, not without the "voice of mountain echoes," and the trail of his oars in the water becomes a live, snake-like "track of

sparkling light"[30] eerily analogous to a text, as if the boy and the water converge with the aim of writing upon the Lake's surface.[31] The landscape proves more active, more in tune to the boy's task, than the opening lines suggest and the peculiar intimacy of the boy's writing not just upon, but with the water is an interesting contrast with the disruption that follows.

The images of natural unrest build as the passage moves ahead, seeming to gain an edge on the boy and his imagined power. The boy's concept of his task begins to seem even shabbier in the vibrant light of the moon and voice of mountain echoes. The movement of his boat, after all, is not a man's, it is "just like a man," and the boy fixes as his goal the rocky crag not because he has a particular interest in that crag, but because behind it there is "nothing but the stars and the grey sky." At this point in the passage, the boy's imaginings become less powerful, slightly less erotic, and begin to suggest once more childishness. The boat becomes "an elfin pinnace," and even as the boy reaches the height of power in his stroke, the effect is strangely inadequate: the boat is described as "heaving through the water like a swan." The irregular struggle implied by the action of "heaving," is at odds with the movement of a swan, and their coupling seems to indicate the boy's growing sense of inadequacy in the face of Nature.

As in the nest-robbing episode, this passage undergoes a final, radical shift in power as the huge cliff that marks the "bound of the horizon" suddenly, "as if with voluntary power instinct," uprears its head, asserting itself as the dominant force at play.

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[30] This track of light is reminiscent of a line from Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancyent Marinere*, first published in 1798: "Beyond the shadow of the ship / I watched the water snakes; / They moved in tracks of shining white, / And when they reared, the elfish light / Fell off in hoary flakes." Wu, *Romanticism*. p. 199.

[31] The idea of the track of light as a text is from a conversation with Professor Marjorie Levinson in December, 2002.

The effect is both a physical one (as the boy rows, the cliff really does seem to grow), and an imaginative one. It takes an act of the imagination to perceive itself as reprimanded, bounded, by the natural world which it used earlier as a playing field for self aggrandizement. It is the cliff whose movements become "measured," and the boy's movements that seem desperate, striking once and again, hands trembling as he flees.

It is difficult to say whether the moment the boy experiences as he flees is of the negative sublime. Certainly, the experience has a more definite imaginative structure than the one in the nest-robbing scene. Here, the astonishment or fear of the boy is localized around the single cliff that uprears its head, making the cliff a symbol for the power of Nature. But in Kant's negative sublime, at least, the metaphor made by the mind that confronts its imaginative limit is between the vacancy discovered behind the limit, and the conversion of that vacancy into proof of some*thing* else. And in fact, the cliff in this episode rises up between the boy and the stars in that indefinite space of grey sky upon which the boy was earlier unable to gaze fixedly. The cliff can be seen as replacing that indefiniteness with a definite sense of power, a conversion that is indeed an experience of the negative sublime.

That is, in fact, the experience upon which the boy seems to reflect and that the narrator attempts to describe:

> ...after I had seen
> That spectacle, for many days my brain
> Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
> Of unknown modes of being. In my thoughts
> There was a darkness-call it solitude,
> Or blank desertion-no familiar shapes
> Of hourly objects, images of trees,
> Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields,
> But huge and mighty forms that do not live
> Like living men moved slowly thorough my mind

By day, and were the trouble of my dreams. (1804, I, ll. 415-425)

The familiar shapes of Nature are removed from the boy, replaced instead by an obscure sense of "solitude" or "desertion," that is in turn replaced by "huge and mighty forms" that come to embody the boy's confrontation with power. It is a power, perhaps, of Nature, but it is also a power for which Nature, the black crag, may be a metaphor. In any event, Nature in this episode is not purely benevolent. Nature, or the vacant piece of the boy's mind that it represents and that represents it, is not recognizable. She is posited not so much as guide but as guardian, not so much as nurse but as threat, and instead of anchoring the boy's "purest thoughts" (as she is said to do in *Tintern Abbey*) she seems to set them deeply off-kilter.

Beer marks the strange forms that move through the boy's mind as the "first hint...of a state of mind which seems to have oppressed Wordsworth from time to time - a melancholy...terrifying by absence of *all* colouring and tone - a nightmare in which relationship with the world was removed, so that the external world was simply seen to exist, and no more" (73). I believe, however, that within this "terrifying absence" is a sense of nagging, terrifying guilt - embodied by those dark forms - that some power, the power that causes the forms to continue to move through the mind of the boy, is still at work. The boy's melancholy seems attributable not to a despondency over an absence of power, but over his inability to comprehend the power he has violated and the nature of his violations. The powers the boy has sensed move so mysteriously that they are beyond his apprehension. Such an effect is, of course, like that of the sublime. That this passage is drawn out through the boy's thoughts and dreams, rather than occurring in a flash, seems to indicate a sublime experience through which guilt has taken up permanent

residency in the boy's mind, the persistence of which is illustrated in the adult poet's reluctance to codify those dark forms in a more particularized or symbolic fashion.

The guilt featured prominently in the composition of this scene is also a feature of *Nutting,* a passage that was never included in *The Prelude*, but which seems to have been composed in Goslar directly after this one.[32] In *Nutting* Wordsworth spends more than forty lines describing the beauty and peacefulness of a woodland scene on " One of those heavenly days that cannot die," during his boyhood when, "Tricked out in proud disguise of cast-off weeds," he strove through brambles and thickets in search of nuts. It seems a perfectly pleasurable recollection of boyhood until the middle of line forty-three, when suddenly it turns violent:

> ...up I rose,
> And dragged to earth both branch and bough, with crash
> And merciless ravage: and the shady nook
> Of hazels, and the green and mossy bower,
> Deformed and sullied, patiently gave up
> Their quiet being: and, unless I now
> Confound my present feelings with the past;
> Ere from the mutilated bower I turned
> Exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings,
> I felt a sense of pain when I beheld
> The silent trees, and saw the intruding sky.[33]

Upon reflection, it's not difficult to see why *Nutting* was never included in *The Prelude*. The contrast between the unresponsive pastoral setting and the violent actions of the boy in retaliation are markedly different from the dialectical interchange between boy and nature presented in the other spots of time. As Beer points out, the oddity of *Nutting*

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[32] Beers notes that "Nutting" was the "third and last passage transmitted to Coleridge in Dorothy's letter," a letter that contained early drafts of the theft episodes, 76.
[33] William Wordsworth, "Nutting" (03 March 2003), http://www.bartleby.com/145/ww145.html, ll. 43-53.

might be attributed to Wordsworth's attempt to use it to posit Nature as a teacher of morality. As such, the guilt described in *Nutting* would be a moral guilt different from the psychic and compositional guilt examined in this thesis. Nevertheless, the passage's explicit treatment of guilt, as well as the problem of an unresponsive external world, supports my claim that the theft episodes are largely about guilt and the extent to which Nature causes that guilt and is activated and actualized by it.

What separates "Nutting" from those episodes, however, is the lack of a conversion moment in which the experience becomes a sublime one. This seems true both of the experience depicted, in which the boy leaves the scene of his crime dissatisfied and dejected, and of the poem itself, which is, in contrast to the theft episodes, comparatively flat. As the boy leaves the forest, his sense of pain is caused not by a reprimand (no giant cliffs uprear their heads, no silent figures move about furtively in his brain), but arises from a sense of disappointment. His exultation over the destruction that made him feel "rich beyond the wealth of kings" is met with indifference rather than reproach. The trees are silent and the sky "intruding," a far cry from the blast of wind he felt upon the cliff in the nest-robbing episode or the swirling skies he then beheld. Rather than expanding to rebuke the boy's sense of empowerment, Nature in this episode shrinks: the silence of the trees is the same pacific silence noted of the trees before he began his rampage, and the sky, in its intrusion, gives the scene a smaller, rather than an infinitely expanding, scope. In "Nutting," the poet's attempt to claim a "spirit in the woods" fails because a genuine dialectic seems not to have developed. Nothing occurs in the episode beyond the boy's comprehension or the poet's representation that might necessitate the intervention of a third party (a presence other

than the boy and the object world) that could make sense of things. In other words, there is no call for the sublime, and no persistent sense of guilt that might create it and drive Wordsworth to include the episode in the poem on his life.

Conclusion

It is apparent, then, that guilt can be a powerfully constructive emotion - that it is in fact the very emotion on which the dynamic interchange between man and nature, and between life and poetry, is founded. And it is precisely this dynamism for which Wordsworth is so celebrated. The sublime moment springs up as the cure and, perhaps, the continued cause for the guilt of division and imbalance experienced by the boy of *The Prelude* who develops a consciousness separate from Nature, and the poet writing *The Prelude* who confronts a fresh disjunction between his writing and the episodes about which he writes. Wordsworth articulates that transformation beautifully in Book Two of the Five Book *Prelude*:

> Hence life, and change, and beauty, solitude
> More active even than 'best society',
> Society made sweet as solitude
> By silent unobtrusive sympathies,
> and gentle agitations of the mind
> From manifold distinctions (difference
> Perceived in things where to the common eye
> No difference is) - and hence, from the same source,
> Sublimer joy. (1904, II, 310-18)

The "best society" of solitude is the one praised by Adam, still a member of Eden, in *Paradise Lost*, making Wordsworth's reference a poignant comment on his own ability, even once expelled from the Eden of perfect co-existence with Nature that he enjoyed during his youngest years, to appreciate with "[s]ublimer joy" the dialectic of difference, not of complete estrangement, he has evolved with her.[34] The perhaps perpetual

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[34] The reference to *Paradise Lost*, ix. 249, is one pointed out by Wu in a footnote in the *Five-Book Prelude*.

imbalance that might inhere in such a dialectic is precisely what motivates the sublime, whether it be negative or egotistical. In a psychological as well as a poetic formulation of the sublime, the experience is about difference and absence, theft and substitution. It is a way of transcending difference without annihilating it through reconciliation, of highlighting and celebrating the complex relationship between subject and object and making their disjunction the site of poetry that is itself predicated upon a rift between representation and what is represented.

Because the sublime persists in representing some incommunicable presence, the guilt of incomplete understanding persists, and motivates Wordsworth's continual writing and revision. Thus it seems in *The Prelude*, or at least in the theft scenes of the spots of time, that tranquility is not the aim. Tranquillity, de Man says,

> exists for the poet who can hear its voice, not because he is endowed with supernatural wisdom, or because he can dwell beyond the boundaries of space or of life, but because he possesses the kind of double vision that allows him to see landscapes as objects, as well as entrance gates to a world lying beyond visible nature. "Tranquillity," it seems, is the right balance between the literal and the symbolic vision, a balance reflected in a harmonious proportion between mimetic and symbolic language in the diction of the poem (132).

It is precisely because the "right balance between the literal and the symbolic vision" does not exist in the sublime moment that Wordsworth can indeed "dwell beyond the boundaries of space or of life" in the spots of time.

While it is true that many moments in Wordsworth's poetry obtain a harmonious way of proportioning external forms with a spiritual presence and remembered experience with subtle imaginative interventions, those moments of balance are distinctly not sublime ones. It is excess and imbalance that produce the sublime - a pitch of excitement and even fear without which the processes of growing and learning would be inauthentic, and without which the spots of time could not hold the mysterious allure generated by their minute specificity and sudden departures to more abstract, impressive realms. It is that irresolvability that kept Wordsworth writing and rewriting the spots of time passages and that he praises in "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," on which he was working during the same period in which he wrote the Five Book *Prelude.* After reflecting upon a childhood whose unproblematic relationship to the external world is represented more caustically than in *The Prelude*, he proclaims in the *Ode*:

> Not for these I raise
> The song of thanks and praise;
> But for those obstinate questionings
> Of sense and outward things,
> Fallings from us, vanishings;
> Blank misgivings of a Creature
> Moving about in worlds not realised,
> High instincts before which our mortal Nature
> Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised... (ll.142-150)

Given the extent to which Wordsworth regarded his childhood and his early intercourse with Nature as a knowledge in itself, (as well as his belief in the mind's fitness to Nature and Nature's fitness to the mind, as I have stressed in the course of this thesis), Wordsworth's praise in the *Ode* for the *limits* of those two domains (the mind and Nature) must signify a hard earned concession, indicating a knowing appreciation of the emotional utility of guilt and the transcendent effects of the sublime. However, such self

awareness does not seem to resolve itself into complete independence from Nature or a relinquishment of the ineffable, as the last three lines of the above passage clearly demonstrate.

Instead, a constructive, if not tranquil (in the sense that de Man uses the word) relationship with Nature is struck:

> ...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 heaven
> Spangled with kindred multitude 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. (1804, II, ll.155-66)

Wordsworth's eye in this passage seems akin to that of the Romantic invoked at the beginning of this passage, the wanderer who walks and walks as he is compelled to write and write. The prompts of such restless roving in this passage are the "shades of difference" in "all exterior forms" that do not provide the poet's eye with any "surface where its power might sleep," instead urging it to spread its powers actively in the creation of new meaning and the apprehension of a new chain of being founded in shades of difference: such is the logic of the sublime.

In the theft episodes of the spots of time, the boy struggles to begin balancing the dialectic between imagination and Nature that evolves throughout the *Prelude*. The spots of time in which the thefts occur, in fact, first set the scales off balance. In the Two-Part *Prelude*, the exhilarating sense of imaginative power that the boy gains through his rift with Nature is emphasized. Wordsworth in 1799, as he first wrote those scenes,

seems to have experienced the same ecstasy in the transcription of that experience that he might have had as a boy experiencing it, consistent with his theory that an emotion "kindred" to the original is produced through the writing of poetry.

But in the Five Book *Prelude,* he seems to hang back from commitment to a dialectical process through writing, motivated perhaps by a more acute sense of the poetic interventions his writing and revisioning has performed. The guilt prompted by such an awareness, rather than being destructive, actually results in a richer, more carefully explored reading of the interactions between the boy of the spots of time and Nature, between the poet and the recollections of childhood he uses as a key for his inquiry. Wordsworth is able to praise "those first affections, / Those shadowy recollections, / Which, be they what they may, / Are yet the fountain-light of all our day, / Are yet a master-light of all our seeing," despite the thefts he has performed in prising his consciousness from those original affections. In doing so he is able to derive the sense sublime of something "far more deeply interfused."[35]

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[35] William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" ll. 153-5 and "Tintern Abbey" l. 97., from *Romanticism,* editted by Duncan Wu. (Oxford: Blackwell Publisher Ltd. 1994), 378, 268.

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