

The Rhetoric of Imagination in "The Prelude"

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I

IN HIS NOTE TO "The Thorn" (1798) Wordsworth shows his awareness of the double difficulty involved in the (literary) use of language:

Now every man must know that an attempt is rarely made to communicate impassioned feelings without something of an accompanying consciousness of the inadequateness of our own powers, or the deficiencies of language.¹

These two factors, the "deficiencies" of language and the "inadequateness" of the language user, are related to the interpretive problem, expressed by Jacques Derrida, of that "certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses"² — though Wordsworth's interest here seems to be more on what he does *not* command than on what he does. The limitations of poetry and of poets, however, are not, for Wordsworth, a sudden discovery, full of frustration or despair; one should remember that the inability of an author to communicate immaculately his "impassioned feelings" is also strategic and conventional, appearing in such guises as the Shakespearean "tonguetied" muse, the Miltonic "forc'd fingers rude," and the Wordsworthian consciousness of the difference between his grasp and "the reach of words."³

A central question addressed in this essay involves the way in which the "deficiencies" of language for Wordsworth function as

part of an "allegory of reading"⁴ — by which I mean, to adapt Paul de Man's phrase, the linguistic structure in which the literal or narrative level of a text simultaneously repeats its rhetorical substructure, so that what seems "literal" or thematic is already "allegorical" of its own figurality. The question of what a text is "about," in these terms, correspondingly shifts from a concern with historical or referential meaning to a concern with rhetorical or semiological foregrounding; and such a shift is especially apparent in a poem like *The Prelude*, which offers itself as the autobiography of a poet's imagination, but which is forced repeatedly to meditate on the "deficiencies" of its translation of a self into language. Where these rhetorical difficulties are often clearly seen is in what Wordsworth calls an act of "usurpation" (VI, 600), which for him characteristically involves (to use his own trope) an act of "unfathering" — that is, the putting in question of a figural "father," source, light of sense or point of reference in order to liberate the power of the Imagination. But for the purposes of rhetorical analysis, "usurpation" may be described in other terms, such as those which Saussure uses in the introduction to his *Course in General Linguistics*, where, as Derrida at length has shown, the hierarchical placement of authentic speech over derivative writing is put in doubt by the deconstructive power of writing to usurp speech.⁵ To what extent are the thematic (i.e., autobiographical, optical, phenomenological, etc.) usurpations or unfatherings in *The Prelude* repetitions of a linguistic usurpation of writing over speech? Moreover, how is the *topos* of linguistic deficiency used by Wordsworth as part of his overall rhetorical strategy? By focusing on two significant moments in Books VI and XII we can show to what point, and how, these questions of theme and allegory are aspects of the more fundamental Wordsworthian question of language.

II

If, as Cynthia Chase has said, Book V of *The Prelude* is the "book of accidents,"⁶ then Book VI is the book of Error. It concerns both the wanderings of Wordsworth and the ways in which by indirections he finds directions out. "Juvenile errors are my

theme," he says in Book XI (54). But if, in *The Prelude's* allegory of reading, what happens on the thematic level is a repetition of a prior occurrence on the linguistic level, then the theme of error, wandering, deviation from a path may be read as playing out the more fundamental deviations of figural language itself.

The central passage in which both sense and reference are put in question comes from Book VI:

Imagination — here the Power so called
 Through sad incompetence of human speech,
 That awful Power rose from the mind's abyss
 Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps,
 At once, some lonely traveller. I was lost;
 Halted without an effort to break through;
 But to my conscious soul I now can say —
 'I recognize thy glory': in such strength
 Of usurpation, when the light of sense
 Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed
 The invisible world, doth greatness make abode,
 There harbours, whether we be young or old.

(VI, 592-603)

What are the errors of language in the Simplon passage? The most conspicuous, of course, is the word "Imagination," which is "so called / Through sad incompetence of human speech." There is the suggestion of a doubling of error here: "incompetence" chooses a name, and "Imagination" becomes a "so-called" power. Given its questionable accuracy as a name, "Imagination" is hardly a metaphor for the power; it is not identified with the power, but is a name put for the power: it is a meta-name, or metonym. The metonymic status of so-called "Imagination" makes clear the disjunction between word and thing, and conveys the tentativeness of the whole meta-naming process. But why is it the "incompetence" of speech which designates "Imagination" thus?

We might advert to the Chomskyan distinction between linguistic competence and linguistic performance,⁷ for Wordsworth seems to a surprising degree consistent with Chomsky's theory when he says that it is the "incompetence" of language, and not the inept performance of the poet, that gives to the power the

so-called label of "Imagination." In other words, the naming of the power lies beyond the ability of language itself, not just beyond the particular eloquence of one person: it actually lies beyond "the reach of words" (III, 187). Had Wordsworth said that the name was the result of the sad performance of the poet, he would have reiterated the convention of affected modesty; he makes himself worthy of his Romantic stature, however, by shifting the question of language to the questionableness of language, to the limits of language's competence. Wordsworth reformulates the problem in the 1815 *Essay Supplementary*. In response to our question — "Why is it the 'incompetence' of speech which designates 'Imagination' thus?" — Wordsworth flatly replies: "Poverty of language is the primary cause of the use which we make of the word, Imagination."⁸

It is thus debatable whether the "Imagination" passage should hold the privileged position which it generally does in Wordsworth commentary. In one sense, the passage is not all that special; structurally, the experience of some obstacle rising up to block the poet should be familiar. In Book IV Wordsworth speaks of those moments of poetic composition when "some lovely Image in the song rose up / Full-formed, like Venus rising from the sea" (IV, 113-14); later in the same book he says, "the memory of one particular hour / Doth here rise up against me" (IV, 308-09). In the book of London, Wordsworth commands the city: "Rise up, thou monstrous ant-hill!" (VII, 149); the Maiden of Buttermere's image later rises twice to meet and block the poet (VII, 295-320). In the second of the "spots of time" Wordsworth writes that "there rose a crag" (XII, 292) at the intersection of two highways. The metaphor "rose" is not innocent, though so familiar as almost to be neglected. It animates the crag in the same way that the crag in the boat-stealing episode in Book I is animated, "as if with voluntary power instinct," as Wordsworth says (I, 379). We could multiply examples of risings, but consider these three only: the drowned man, who rises up out of the lake; the "fair trains of imagery" which rise before the poet in the *Prospectus* (3); and the dream of the Arab, in which, Wordsworth says, certain "thoughts / Beset me, and to height unusual rose" (V, 61-62). What results from this last

rising up is a moment when the poet's light of sense likewise goes out, and he passes into a dream.

Blocking images are always coming athwart Wordsworth.⁹ But the Simplon Pass episode should be familiar in other ways — not least, in the context of an act of usurpation. The abyss-experience of the Simplon, with its “strength / Of usurpation,” has a precedent only a hundred lines earlier, in the episode of the Chartreuse. There Wordsworth speaks of a

conquest over sense, hourly achieved
Through faith and meditative reason, resting
Upon the word of heaven-imparted truth,
Calmly triumphant; and for humbler claim
Of that imaginative impulse sent
From these majestic floods, yon shining cliffs,
The untransmuted shapes of many worlds,
Cerulean ether's pure inhabitants,
These forests unapproachable by death,
That shall endure as long as man endures,
To think, to hope, to worship and to feel,
To struggle, to be lost within himself
In trepidation, from the blank abyss
To look with bodily eyes and be consoled.'

(VI, 458-71)

Even so strong an exegete as R. D. Havens is forced to describe these lines as “obscure,”¹⁰ but they nevertheless do bear some relation to the “Imagination” passage. There is the theme, religious but expressed in terms which are not explicitly so, of a “conquest over sense,” which rests upon an imparted word; and the matter of achieving a complementary consolation through the will and the senses. The “forests unapproachable by death” give man an intimation of his own immortality, and though these natural symbols of immutability have a “humbler claim” on the mind than “faith and meditative reason” do, they nevertheless contain an “imaginative impulse” analogous to “the word of heaven-imparted truth.” The consolation which is proposed in the final lines depends on a return to the senses (“bodily eyes”) from within the abyss of the conquest over sense.

Now in the Simplon passage a number of these details are reiterated. The “conquest over sense” becomes a “usurpation,

when the light of sense / Goes out"; "the word of heaven-imparted truth" becomes the words of a human-imparted answer by a peasant; "the forests unapproachable by death" are transformed into "woods decaying, never to be decayed"; the work that man has to do "to think, to hope, to worship and to feel, / To struggle" becomes the "hope that can never die, / Effort, and expectation, and desire"; and the experience of man's being "lost within himself" is changed into a direct statement: "I was lost." The "blank abyss" — which surely owes something to Milton's "universal blanc" (*Paradise Lost*, III, 48) which similarly is recompensed by "things invisible" (*Paradise Lost*, III, 55) — is altered to the "mind's abyss"; both involve things seen (with "bodily eyes") and unseen ("the invisible world"). The final correspondence concerns the metonym of "Imagination": at the Chartreuse Wordsworth feels an "imaginative impulse sent / From these majestic floods" — that is, from Nature; in the Simplon Pass, "Imagination" comes from the mind.

Structurally, then, these two episodes are strikingly similar. Perhaps the Chartreuse, instead of the Ravine of Gondo, should be regarded as what M. H. Abrams calls Wordsworth's "complementary revelation";¹¹ it prepares the reader for its analogous version in the poet's encounter with the peasant. Under the question of language, let us see to what extent the "Imagination" passage depends upon an imparted word corresponding to "the word of heaven-imparted truth."

Jonathan Wordsworth has observed that in MS WW the crossing of the Alps and the passage on "Imagination" are separated by the simile of the cave from Book VIII ("As when a traveller hath from open day . . ." [1805: VIII, 711]), which Wordsworth wrote, perhaps, "in an attempt to define [his] sense of anticlimax at having unknowingly crossed the Alps."¹² That intervening passage, in which the poet describes the interior of an underground cave where chiaroscuro effects dominate, ends in a curious trope: "the scene before him stands in perfect view / Exposed, and lifeless as a written book!" (VIII, 575-76). This simile of the "dead letter," which Wordsworth uses earlier in Book VIII (297), stands in marked contrast to the rhetoric of presence of the peasant whose voice corrects the travellers. The

writing simile was relocated, and Wordsworth's response to the peasant's response became a lament for the incompetence of human speech.

Is there a usurpation here? Speech seems to outlast writing in the growth of this passage. The meeting with the peasant emphasizes the oral / aural aspects of the encounter; strangely, Wordsworth gives us no matter-of-fact description of the peasant's appearance. "A peasant met us," he says, "from whose mouth we learned / That . . . we must descend" (VI, 579-80, 581); the travellers "grieved to hear" (VI, 586) what the peasant had to say:

We questioned him again and yet again;
But every word that from the peasant's lips
Came in reply, translated by our feelings,
Ended in this, — *that we had crossed the Alps.*

(VI, 588-91)

Mouth, hearing, words, lips, questioning, reply, translation — the diction clearly stresses the vocal nature of the transaction. It also raises some questions as to what the peasant actually said, or what the poet actually understood. The participial phrase "translated by our feelings" introduces a profound mediating element: if the peasant's words are the text, then Wordsworth becomes the interpreter (that is, both as a reader of texts and as a translator), and his interpretation/translation a periphrasis for the text; hence the indirect speech — "*that we had crossed the Alps.*" Like the voice of Nature, the peasant's speech is partially hidden from the reader; the poet is also a mediator, and the poem the text of a text.

The episode with the peasant is thus an instance of interpretation, when the linguistic performance of one person in one language is translated through the sad incompetence of another person in another language. In a relatively late poem, "After Leaving Italy, Continued," Wordsworth gives a surprising parallel in his account of his departure from Italy on his tour of 1837. To demonstrate his rapture over the Italian landscape, he offers proof of his reluctance to leave the country:

witness that unwelcome shock
 That followed the first sound of German speech,
 Caught the far-winding barrier Alps among.
 In that announcement, greeting seemed to mock
 Parting; the casual word had power to reach
 My heart, and filled that heart with conflict strong.

(*Poems*, II, 864)

The note to Isabella Fenwick makes the parallel to *The Prelude* clearer: "It was only by the accidental sound of a few German words I was aware that we had quitted Italy" (*Poems*, II, 1067). "That we had crossed the Alps," we hear. It is only by the accidental words of the peasant that the travellers in Book VI discover where they are; despite their errors in language, through interpretation they realize their mistaken direction. A similar voice/shock effect is felt: the poet is presented with a vocal text, he translates, and "Imagination" rises. The same error of 1790 is repeated in 1837. The German words are "unwelcome"; Wordsworth is "loth to believe what [he] so grieved to hear" (VI, 586). The greeting of the Germans seems to "mock" the parting from Italy; the completion of one tour marks the beginning of another.

The journey across the Alps seems guided by error and disappointment. Wordsworth grieves when he sees Mont Blanc (VI, 523-28), but he then proceeds to relate a "far different dejection . . . a deep and genuine sadness" (1805: VI, 491, 492) resulting from what he calls his "underthirst / Of vigour" (VI, 558-59):

And from that source how different a sadness
 Would issue, let one incident make known.

(VI, 560-61)

What follows is the Simplon Pass episode, and what "issues" from an undersource is not sadness but a "sad incompetence of human speech" which both celebrates and deplors the so-called errors of "Imagination."

My suggestion earlier that the word "Imagination" is but a metonym for an "awful Power" (VI, 594) in the mind has a certain phenomenological appeal, however fallacious such an hypothesis might be according to faculty psychology. But I want

to reformulate my approach now in terms of the Saussurian usurpation as mentioned at the start. There we saw that writing usurps speech: what is the analogous usurpation here? We might be tempted to say that Imagination usurps sense, but from our reading of the rhetorical structure of the whole passage, we know that it is actually a voice, a vocal text, which usurps upon the poet. *Language* usurps sense in this passage; and if "Imagination" is put for the power which usurps, we may safely say that here "Imagination" is but a trope for language. The naming of the power is the naming of language; language *is* power; and for language thus to talk about itself is to enter an abyss of linguistic reflexiveness unequalled in *The Prelude*. The text comes face to face with its awful power of language, and calls that power "Imagination."

III

In its earliest form, the structural pattern of *The Prelude* (1799) bears some resemblances to the Biblical unit of narrative called the pericope. As Northrop Frye has recently said, the pericope is used in the New Testament as the structuring principle in the biography of Jesus; it involves "a certain context or situation that leads up to a crucial act . . . or to a crucial saying." A pericope structure is thus "a sequence of discontinuous epiphanies."¹³ The concept is relevant to the discontinuous sequence of the "spots of time" in the 1799 *Prelude*, and to its later version in Book XII of 1850. The second half of Book XII presents two narrative episodes, separated chronologically by several years, and structurally by a frame narrative which begins "There are in our existence spots of time" (XII, 208), and recurs after the first "spot" with the "Oh! mystery of man" passage (XII, 272). Both episodes contain crucial acts, in the sense of moments which figure importantly in the poet's account of his life, and in the sense of *loci* which involve figural crossings or intersectings of various kinds: human with divine, mature poet with young child, eternity and infinity with mutability and transience, dreariness with vision. The recurrent "epiphanies" in the "spots of time" reveal those things which are bred whenever man looks into his own mind: "fear and awe" (Prospectus, 38) are the characteristic elements

of these scenes. But let us pursue the semiological concerns of the "spots of time."

What the child encounters in the first episode is a text, the engraven characters of a name in the turf. But that is not what he originally found; the 1799 version has a significantly different experience:

Mouldered was the gibbet-mast;
The bones were gone, the iron and the wood;
Only a long green ridge of turf remained
Whose shape was like a grave.

(1799: I, 310-13)

The uncertainty of the boy is beautifully expressed in the tentativeness of the simile of the grave. But it is possible to trace the development of the "ridge of turf" into language. The 1850 poem reads:

but on the turf,
Hard by, soon after that fell deed was wrought,
Some unknown hand had carved the murderer's name.
The monumental letters were inscribed
In times long past; but still, from year to year,
By superstition of the neighbourhood,
The grass is cleared away, and to that hour
The characters were fresh and visible. . . .

(XII, 238-45)

From a grave into writing: the "monumental letters" are the epitaph for an effaced tomb. They are the metonymy of an absence, words put for something which the text cancels.

Cynthia Chase, in her reading of the semiotics of this landscape, has said that the boy encounters "a code without a message, a spot where the medium is the message: letters." In other words, what he sees is simply a proper name, "the murderer's name" (XII, 240). Chase also reads the spot "as a scene of effacement," that is, we may say, as a spot or stain partially expunged, but leaving a residue of writing.¹⁴ Compare another later poem of Wordsworth's, where a surprising parallel is given. In his poem "In the Sound of Mull" Wordsworth speaks of the records of tradition,

stamped by the ancient tongue
 On rock and ruin darkening as we go, —
 Spots where a word, ghost-like, survives to show
 What crimes from hate, or desperate love, have sprung. . . .

(*Poems*, II, 715)

In this first episode in Book XII, the child comes upon a spot exactly where a word — a name — survives to show the trace of a crime. But the carving, if it recalls a past deed, also signifies a present object, writing or language itself, which survives. The endurance of language is emphasized by the repeated references to the past, to the moment when the name was supposed to have been written: “in former times”; “soon after that fell deed”; “in times long past.” A man dies, his body, even his grave disappears; but Wordsworth is smitten by a word, “that shall not pass away” (*Poems*, II, 671).

The effect of the boy’s meeting with this undecaying text is reminiscent of Stephen Dedalus’s sight of the word “Foetus” carved in the desk of the anatomy theatre:

On the desk he read the word *Foetus* cut several times in the dark stained wood. The sudden legend startled his blood: he seemed to feel the absent students of the college about him and to shrink from their company. A vision of their life, which his father’s words had been powerless to evoke, sprang up before him out of the wood in the desk.¹⁵

Another rising up out of a stain: writing triumphs over speech; the handcarved “legend” succeeds where the father’s voice fails. Like Stephen, Wordsworth is “startled”: he flees, “faltering and faint” (XII, 247) from the site of the hanging and the sight of the name.

When the boy reaches the top of the hill, he experiences another instance of the sad incompetence of human language. The lines hardly need quoting:

It was, in truth,
 An ordinary sight; but I should need
 Colours and words that are unknown to man,
 To paint the visionary dreariness. . . .

(XII, 253-56)

Wordsworth says "in truth" that the landscape was ordinary, yet his language is unable to communicate that "truth." Here, as in Book VI, the inability to convey it lies in language, and not in the poet. It is not simply that Wordsworth cannot think of the words to describe it; there *are* no words to describe it: they are "unknown to man." The thoughts and feelings which lie too deep for tears also lie too deep for language. We are faced again with the incompetence of language crippling the performance of the poet. The "colours" that he needs "to paint" the visionary landscape are necessary to express the colouring of Imagination which is thrown over the whole scene. But even the combined force of "colours and words," as two distinct systems of signs, falls short here of a descriptive adequacy. Wordsworth, as the little boy on the hill, stands on that verge where words abandon him.¹⁶

But of course that is not all that abandons him. The boy, we should recall, has been "unfathered" by his guide. In our allegory of figure, the abandonment of the child by the guide may be read as the thematized version of the abandonment of the poet by language. This latter desertion is really the prior occurrence, the "deeper" linguistic experience which becomes raised to the level of image and theme. The poet is unfathered in the Simplon Pass; he loses his way as language loses its way, becoming error or figure, but he regains it through a translated voice. The boy here in this first "spot" is also lost through language; he eventually finds a word, a name, but one which is inaccessible to him and which strains the limits of signification. How is the boy in the second "spot of time" deserted, and how is his unfathering related to language?

The unfathering in the second episode is a literal one — Wordsworth's father dies — but this primal usurpation is partially and silently reversed by a linguistic return to the father through the act of "repairing."¹⁷ Yet the repairing occurs in two ways — etymologically, as Geoffrey Hartman has argued, as the "repatriation" in the father; and phenomenally, as a return to Nature, from which the boy "thence would drink, / As at a fountain" (XII, 325-26). The troping of Nature as a "fountain" from which the poet drinks recalls similar primal images from the earlier books of *The Prelude*. In Book II Wordsworth blesses

the “infant Babe” (II, 232) who “with his soul / Drinks in the feelings of his Mother’s eye!” (II, 236-37). What the literal reformulation of this beautiful, multiple metonymic displacement suggests, of course (with additional references at II, 235, 236), is that the babe drinks in the “innocent milk” (V, 272) of his mother’s breast. Wordsworth describes this experience as “the first / Poetic spirit of our human life” (II, 260-61). Why “poetic”? What specifically is poetic about it? We must recognize that the experience of breast-feeding itself is not poetic, *but the troping of it is*: the first poetic spirit of our life is metonymy, displacement or substitution, making something out to be that which it is not, associating ideas in a state of excitement. The metonymic displacing of the mouth-milk-breast chain by the soul-feelings-eye chain in this verse is but a rehearsal for the larger substitution of a greater mother in Nature. The poet, we may say, projects this first maternal love on to Nature (perhaps in response to his actual mother’s death), and thus is able to say, less than a hundred lines after the blessed babe passage, that from Nature — specifically from the troped “ghostly language of the ancient earth” (II, 309) — “thence did I drink the visionary power” (II, 311). From drinking in feelings from the mother to drinking in power from Nature: the progression is more than phenomenologically analogical; it is rhetorically identical, for the same trope of metonymy is at work in both cases. From feelings to power: the growth has a thematic sanction from the poet, “for feeling has to him imparted power” (II, 255).

So when the poet in this second “spot of time” says that he “would drink” from the “kindred spectacles and sounds” (XII, 324) of Nature, even as in Book I he is described as “drinking in a pure / Organic pleasure” (I, 563-64) from the landscape, the imagistic and rhetorical continuity with the earlier books is asserted. The unfathering is overcome partly by an intratextual echoing in which the boy’s repairing is at once a returning to both mother and father.

Viewed in terms of its rhetoric, the second “spot” complements the first through its connection with the epitaph. Whereas in the first episode “monumental letters” are “inscribed” where a grave

originally was, in the second episode the poet creates a memorial which enshrines a spirit:

 enshrining,
Such is my hope, the spirit of the Past
For future restoration. — Yet another
Of these memorials. . . .

(XII, 284-87)

The image of enshrining a spirit takes us back to Book V, to the "shrines so frail" (V, 49) in which the mind must enclose "her spirit" (V, 49). What Wordsworth is troping, of course, is the act of writing, of embodying or giving "substance and life" (XII, 284) to mind or spirit in language in the same way that man's soul is incarnated in a body. This instance of *The Prelude's* self-declared awareness of its own rhetoricity, of its status as a piece of language, does not come as a surprise if we understand that the "spots of time" are more concerned with the problems of language — with composition especially — than with the meaning of particular experiences in a referential or historical sense. Thus the second "spot" can be read as one entire epitaph for Wordsworth's dead father, not merely the sudden encounter with a pre-existing memorial text, as in the first "spot," but the actual creation of monumental letters which enshrine the "efficacious spirit" (XII, 219) of the past. The restoration which the poet anticipates is also a semiological one, referring to a future scene of reading in which language re-presents the experience, rather than to any hoped-for resurrection of the father. The rhetorical similarity between the end of Book XII and the opening of the poem, by foregrounding their shared allusiveness, further suggests the text's preoccupation with language as such, and not its subordination to the referentiality of experience.

The rhetorical structure of the "spots of time" gives us a clue as to what Wordsworth means when he says that the experiences in Book XII demonstrate the power of the mind over Nature. That power, I would suggest, is a linguistic one: the troping of childhood memories as a text, especially one which is able to be repeated and revised, creates an allegory which shows to what point, and how, language holds an awful dominion over

thoughts.¹⁸ The function of allusion, drawing the reader's attention to the status of echo as echo — that is, as trope rather than referent — is to present, in a manner similar to the other repetitions of the text, a turning or revisioning, so to speak, which is illustrative of the mind.

The abyss structure of the Simplon Pass, buried deep within the massive rhetorical structure of *The Prelude* as a whole, stands as a critical event in Wordsworth's allegory of reading. The un-fathering which Wordsworth undergoes there on the narrative level reflects a de-centering on the linguistic level: the "light of sense" goes out, and language is forced to confront itself in an "invisible world" (VI, 602) beyond referentiality. With the centre, the father, the light of sense, and reference no longer there, figurality is no longer viewed as deviation but as difference, subordinating the pressure of the outside world to the power of rhetoricity. Yet as Roman Jakobson has pointed out, "the supremacy of poetic function over referential function does not obliterate the reference but makes it ambiguous."¹⁹ That ambiguity is most apparent in a poem which attempts to narrate the life of an actual person, but which finds itself instead narrating the semiological problems of that narration. Shifting between an imaginative history troped as fiction, usurpation, and drama, and a fiction which purports to be history, autobiography, and epitaph, the text feels obliged to descant on its own deformity.

As "discontinuous epiphanies,"²⁰ the two episodes in Book XII involve critical events which centre on a death. The inscription in the turf stands as the epitaph to an obliterated grave; the "spectacles and sounds" of wall and tree and sheep, which surround the death of the father, are described as "memorials" (XII, 287) which "enshrin[e]" (XII, 284) the past. As Wordsworth verges on the boundary of language, the narrative also confronts a bourne, the one from which no traveller returns. The poet would give, "as far as words *can* give" (XII, 283; emphasis added) a glimpse into that undiscovered country, but language cannot go beyond language, and these epitaphs and memorials remain frail shrines to a linguistic and thematic absence. In its allegory of reading the text repeats its own "deficiencies" of language.

NOTES

- 1 R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones, ed., *Lyrical Ballads: Wordsworth and Coleridge* (London: Methuen, 1963), p. 289.
- 2 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins, 1974), p. 158.
- 3 Shakespeare, Sonnet 85; Milton, "Lycidas," l. 4; William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979), p. 101. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be given in the text with book and line numbers. All references to Wordsworth's other poetry are to *The Poems*, 2 vols., ed. John O. Hayden (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), and will be included in the text.
- 4 The best illustration of de Man's idea of figural language is found in his *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale, 1979).
- 5 Derrida's deconstruction of Saussure's logocentrism — in many ways a model deconstruction — is found in *Grammatology*, pp. 27-73.
- 6 Cynthia Chase, "The Accidents of Disfiguration: Limits to Literal and Figural Reading in Book V of *The Prelude*," *SiR*, 18 (1979), 547.
- 7 Noam Chomsky makes the distinction between competence ("the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language") and performance ("the actual use of language in concrete situations") in his *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1965), p. 4.
- 8 William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1974), III, 81.
- 9 For another approach to imagistic blockage in Wordsworth, see Neil Hertz, "The Notion of Blockage in the Literature of the Sublime," in *Psychoanalysis and the Question of the Text*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins, 1978), pp. 62-85.
- 10 R. D. Havens, *The Mind of a Poet* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1941), p. 424.
- 11 M. H. Abrams, "The *Prelude* as a Portrait of the Artist," in *Bicentenary Wordsworth Studies in Memory of John Alban Finch*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (Ithaca and London: Cornell, 1970), p. 214.
- 12 *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, p. 304.
- 13 Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (Toronto: Academic Press Canada, 1981), p. 216.
- 14 See Chase, 553-54, where she says that in the "repeated effacements" of the text, "the residue is writing."
- 15 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p. 90.
- 16 I am adapting a sentence from Shelley's essay "On Life": "We are on that verge where words abandon us, and what wonder if we grow dizzy to look down the dark abyss of — how little we know." See *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 478.
- 17 Geoffrey Hartman has noted that the verb "to repair" comes both from *reparare*, to make ready again, and from *repatriare*, to return to one's

fatherland. The second etymology is particularly suggestive in the context of the "spots of time." See "The Poetics of Prophecy," in *High Romantic Argument: Essays for M. H. Abrams*, ed. Lawrence Lipking (Ithaca and London: Cornell, 1981), p. 26.

¹⁸ I am echoing Wordsworth's third "Essay Upon Epitaphs," in *Prose Works*, II, 84.

¹⁹ Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960), p. 371.

²⁰ Frye, p. 216.