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## Wordsworth's Images of Language: Voice and Letter in *The Prelude*

WHILE THE question of language in Wordsworth's poetry once tended to focus on poetic diction and the relation of poetry to prose, the emphasis today seems to be less on Wordsworth's repudiation of any "essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition" (*Prose* 1: 135) than on the description of an essential "difference" within all language. The issue is no longer simply a stylistic distinction between two forms of written discourse, or even a hypothetical ordering of standard and deviant languages, but an understanding of the difference within and between spoken and written discourses, a difference that divides voice from itself even as it sets the written word against the word. Wordsworth's poetry exhibits a double consciousness of its status as language in its images of voice and letter, which, far from being discrete or hierarchical, tend to enjoy an "interchangeable supremacy" (*Prelude* 14.84), both being inhabited by the same linguistic difference.<sup>1</sup>

### I

These two main forms of language, speech and writing—or their condensed and metonymic images of voice and letter—exist in Wordsworth's poetry with alternating priority. Wordsworth is often, and perhaps chiefly, associated with oral poetry. At one point he defines the poet as "a man speaking to men" (*Prose* 1: 138), and it is natural for a reader to follow this oratorical metaphor at first and to think of the poet as rhetor, as a speaker or performer, even as one who speaks in the language "really used by men" (*Prose* 1: 123). This apparent privileging of voice carries over into Wordsworth's habits of oral composition—as we see, for example, in the fourth book of *The Prelude* (100–30), in his note to "Tintern Abbey" (1: 954), and elsewhere (e.g., Rawnsley's descriptions of Wordsworth's oral comings [17–18]). There is considerable evidence for Wordsworth's status as a predominantly phonocentric poet.

But the definition of the poet as "a man speaking to men" contains a participle whose position on

a continuum between literality and figurality is shifting. *Speaking* implies voice, audience, and hence the idea of a rhetor. Yet there is also, if I may adapt Jacques Lacan, an "insistence of the letter" in Wordsworth's poetry, on the engraved or inscribed or imprinted word. Nature impresses or imprints on all forms, Wordsworth says, "the characters / Of danger or desire" (*Prelude* 1.471–72). The poet in "To Joanna" (1: 445–47) engraves the "rude characters" of a name into solid rock (82). The boy in the first "spot of time" sees a murderer's name carved in the turf. Even today, at Hawkshead Grammar School, tourists can see Wordsworth's name carved in his desk; and they can visit the Rock of Names outside the Grasmere Museum, where they can read his initials. But Wordsworth's poetry displays larger concerns with the written word than these incidental acts of writing would suggest. While *The Prelude* may be regarded as an epic conversation poem—the poem addressed to Coleridge—the oral emphasis is in part balanced by an entire book devoted, nominally, to "Books," to as literal and "sensuous" an "incarnation" (the metaphors are the poet's [*Prose* 3: 65]) as Wordsworth might have conceived for the imagination. J. Hillis Miller, in speaking of Wordsworth's inscriptions and epitaphs, rightly points out that Wordsworth, "far from always believing that poetry exists primarily as spoken language, sometimes felt that a poem only comes into existence in a satisfactory form when it has not only been written down but inscribed permanently on the perdurable substance of a rock" ("Stone and Shell" 129). Wordsworth's poetry does in fact exhibit an insistence on the letter, on writing or, as he says, on "the word, that shall not pass away" ("On the Power of Sound" 224; 2: 671).

The relation of speech to writing is a central question in some of the major developments in twentieth-century linguistics, whether viewed from a Saussurian or a Chomskyan perspective. Saussure, we know, has formulated a theory of language that favors the spoken word over the written. As a linguist, Saussure is interested in the features of a language as it is spoken; writing exists, he says, "for

the sole purpose of representing" the spoken form (23). But Saussure at points doubts the stability of such a hierarchy and acknowledges a "tyranny of writing" (31): "the spoken word is so intimately bound to its written image that the latter manages to usurp the main role" (24). Now, metaphors of usurpation and tyranny figure prominently in *The Prelude*, not only in book 12, where Wordsworth describes the tyrannical or "despotic" power of the bodily eye over the imaginative eye (129), but also in book 6, where, having recounted his crossing of the Alps, Wordsworth is confronted by a "strength / Of usurpation" (599–600) that he calls "Imagination" (592). It would be worthwhile to see whether this usurpation, which Wordsworth describes phenomenologically as the ascendance of an "invisible world" (6.602) over the visible "light of sense" (6.600), can be illuminated by the Saussurian usurpation of writing over speech. In the final form of *The Prelude* the apocalyptic passage on "Imagination" directly follows, and arguably results from, Wordsworth's encounter with a speaking peasant; and yet the passage has been frequently read—at least since 1929, when Fraser first suggested the interpretation—as Wordsworth's response not to a voice but to his own act of composition, to the moment of his writing some fourteen years after hearing and translating a voice that revealed the invisible world. Also of assistance here is Chomsky's distinction between linguistic "competence" (the underlying system of generative syntactical processes) and linguistic "performance" (the concrete use of language)—a distinction roughly analogous, but not exactly similar, to Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*.<sup>2</sup> Wordsworth, "through sad incompetence of human speech" (6.593), gives the name *Imagination* to the "awful Power" that rises "from the mind's abyss" (6.594). That he cites "incompetence of speech," rather than simply the inept performance of the poet, aligns his affected modesty with Chomsky's theory: the naming of the power lies beyond the ability of language itself; it exceeds what Wordsworth calls "the reach of words" (3.187), even as that reach must exceed the eloquent grasp of its author.

The two figures of voice and letter that alternate within Wordsworth's poetry reflect the similar linguistic doubleness the poet perceives in nature: the *liber naturae*, or book of nature, and the *vox naturae*, or voice of nature. The concept, traditional in Wordsworthian criticism, of the reciprocity of mind and nature has, it would appear, its linguistic version: Wordsworth transfers these two forms

of human language to nature and then receives them again, as though nature were linguistically prior, as though to understand Wordsworth's rhetoric one must first understand the rhetoric of nature.

What are the tropes of nature? The question is perhaps naive, suggesting as it does a mystified belief in some Adamic language in which the words of human beings are also the things of nature. Enlightened minds no longer think that nature speaks or writes its own language, though they can conceive of a grammar of nature, and one that is not always written in mathematical and geometrical terms, as Galileo thought it was (Curtius 324). Having bestowed the powers of speech and writing on nature, the poet is free to receive that language again, to hear nature's voice and to read its written texts. The growth of a poet's mind is thus also the development of a hermeneutic, an ability to interpret the mind's linguistic projections as a continuous allegory—specifically, an allegory in which the poet keeps discovering his own figurations as language keeps doubling back on itself. The allegory of *The Prelude* is thus related to what Paul de Man has called "a scene of reading" (*Allegories* 162),<sup>3</sup> or perhaps to a scene of listening—that is, an account of the literal and figural limits to nature's "calling forth and strengthening the Imagination" ("Influence of Natural Objects" 1: 364) or the boy's learning "to stand and read . . . read and disobey" the text of nature (*Home at Grasmere* 712–13; 1: 716). Let us first consider speech, the more pervasive of these two figures, and then turn our attention to writing. By cataloging a few significant "images of voice," as Wordsworth calls them in his poem "On the Power of Sound" (34; 2: 665), we may establish the peculiarly Wordsworthian quality of voice and then modestly consider one or two scenes of writing in book 7.

## II

In *The Prelude* we often hear that "Nature" speaks, but we rarely hear what she says. Only once, in book 6, does Wordsworth give the reader an account of what he heard Nature utter, and even then it is a tentative account. Here is the singular passage in book 6:

—"Stay, stay your sacrilegious hands!"—The voice  
Was Nature's, uttered from her Alpine throne;  
I heard it then, and seem to hear it now—

"Your impious work forbear: perish what may,  
Let this one temple last, be this one spot  
Of earth devoted to eternity!"  
She ceased to speak. . . . (430–36)

What are the tropes of Nature in this Alpine passage? Significantly, her speech is a combination of apostrophe and imperative—a "vain injunction," as Wordsworth described it in a canceled passage in ms. A (de Selincourt 198). Nature speaks in a series of imperative verbs: "Stay, stay"; "forbear"; "Let . . . last"; "[Let] . . . be." The injunctive mood of address links Nature's rhetoric with such epitaphic commands as "Pause, Traveller!"; "Nay, Traveller, rest"; and "Stop here, or gently pass!"<sup>4</sup> Nature sounds curiously like an epitaph, apostrophizing the viewer-listener through an admonishing rhetoric; of all her moods, the imperative seems her favorite. A number of commentators, including Ernest Bernhardt-Kabisch, Geoffrey Hartman, Paul Fry, and Frances Ferguson, have noted epitaphic qualities in Wordsworth's poetry,<sup>5</sup> but I am more immediately concerned with the place of voice in this interpenetration of landscape and text. The rhetorical overlap between the voice of Nature and the "monumental writing" of epitaphs (1805 *Prelude* 11.295) suggests connections at thematic levels: Nature personified apostrophizes and commands; the epitaph, Wordsworth points out in his first essay on the subject, frequently employs the "tender fiction" in which the deceased person "admonishes with the voice of one experienced in the vanity of those affections which are confined to earthly objects" (*Prose* 2: 60). The bridge that connects the voice of Nature to the voice of epitaphs is what Paul de Man has identified as "the fiction of the voice-from-beyond-the-grave" (*Rhetoric* 77); or what Wordsworth himself calls a "shadowy interposition" (*Prose* 2: 60), in which an inscription is troped as voice and the deceased becomes "a man speaking to men." The voice of Nature is not quite the voice of the dead, but there are thematic and rhetorical connections between the two; hence the predominantly elegiac tone of the Alpine injunction "Perish what may, / Let this . . . last!"

This unique speech illustrates the identification of Nature's voice with an epitaphic voice. *The Prelude* reverberates with similar figures of speaking from the very outset: in the "glad preamble" of book 1, the poet longs for the soothing "murmur" (1.13) of a "clear stream" (1.12) to allay his perturbations; later in the same book, in the problematic

"Was it for this" passage, he speaks of the River Derwent, who "loved / To blend his murmurs with my nurse's song" (1.270–71), sending "a voice / That flowed along my dreams" (1.273–74). A giant vocal chiasmus blends the beginning and the ending of *The Prelude*: early in the poem a mature river makes "ceaseless music" (1.277) to "a babe in arms" (1.276), and at the close a mature poet listens "faintly" (14.195) to the "natal murmur" (14.196) of his own "stream" of imagination (14.194). In book 1 the "nurse's song" appears to have a linguistic and temporal priority over the river's murmurs; the poet says that the river's song blends with the nurse's, and not hers with his. It is a strange blending, however, radically metonymic and substitutive; the chain of associations runs from "murmurs" through "song," "voice," "music," "softness," "calm," and "breathes." We begin with a river's murmurs that first blend with and then usurp the human voice, and we end with "the calm / That Nature breathes." The crucial passage concludes:

For this, didst thou,  
O Derwent! winding among grassy holms  
Where I was looking on, a babe in arms,  
Make ceaseless music that composed my thoughts  
To more than infant softness, giving me  
Amid the fretful dwellings of mankind  
A foretaste, a dim earnest, of the calm  
That Nature breathes among the hills and groves.  
(1.274–81)

The nurse and her song have been completely elided. They are, like the Wanderer in *The Excursion*, "o'erpowered / By Nature" (1.282–83; 2: 48). Whereas initially it is the nurse's lullaby that is meant to soothe the babe, the River Derwent usurps the voice of the nurse and, through metonymic displacement, gives the infant "a foretaste, a dim earnest" of its strength of usurpation as well as the calm that it can breathe. The babe, by "looking on" the river, hears music that flows along his dreams—an experience to which we may compare "Tintern Abbey": "For I have learned / To look on nature, not as in the hour / Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes / The still, sad music of humanity" (88–91; 1: 360). The chiasmus of seeing-hearing, common in Wordsworth, involves here yet another sense: "a foretaste."

Figures involving voices in nature are more frequent in the earlier books of *The Prelude*, where the poet describes his childhood and youth. As the poem proceeds, the vocal tropes tend to disappear,

rarely occurring in books 9 to 11, but they increase correspondingly with the return to childhood episodes in books 12 to 14.<sup>6</sup> This statistical pattern suggests a close relation to the role of the eye: as the “visionary gleam” (“Intimations” 56; 1: 525) that Wordsworth experiences in childhood fades, so does his auditory capability, though he claims that neither eye nor ear entirely loses its imaginative power. “Though inland far we be,” he writes in the Intimations Ode, the soul can still “see the Children sport upon the shore, / And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore” (163, 167–68). The voice of nature, like the music of the spheres, may once have been heard with the bodily ear but can now best be apprehended through the imagination—that is, by listening through the ear and not with it. Describing how as a youth he “did converse” with all forms and creatures of nature (2.393), Wordsworth elaborates the paradox:

One song they sang, and it was audible,  
Most audible, then, when the fleshly ear,  
O’ercome by humblest prelude of that strain,  
Forgot her functions, and slept undisturbed.  
(2.415–18)

Again there is a kind of usurpation: the “fleshly ear” is “o’ercome” by the song of nature; the sound of sense goes out, but with a softness that reveals an almost inaudible world.<sup>7</sup>

The most vocal forms of nature are the streams, waterfalls, rivers, and lakes. In “Tintern Abbey” we hear the “sounding cataract” (76; 1: 359). In *The Prelude* Wordsworth compares his habit of composing aloud to “a river murmuring / And talking to itself” (4.119–20). Book 8 has the “wild brooks prattling from invisible haunts” (67) and later the contrast with the more powerful “Atlantic’s voice” (217). In the climactic Snowdon episode, we hear “the roar of waters, torrents, streams / Innumerable, roaring with one voice!” (14.59–60). Water almost inevitably is figured as voice; conversely, when Wordsworth begins with the vocal element in a descriptive passage, he often insinuates a natural trope of water, turning his verse into “vocal streams” (14.146). On Snowdon again he perceives “the emblem of a mind” that is “intent to hear / Its voices issuing forth to silent light / In one continuous stream” (14.70, 72–74). The Leech-gatherer’s voice is “like a stream / Scarce heard” (107–08). These tropes of voice and water amount to a way of reading Wordsworth’s poetry that

deserves explicit formulation; and if we revise Geoffrey Hartman’s phenomenological equation on Wordsworth, transposing it into its rhetorical aspect, we shall glimpse a theory of voice in Wordsworth. Hartman correctly writes, “*In the imagination of Wordsworth everything tends to the image and sound of universal waters*” (*Unmediated* 43). But we must alter this theorem thus: *In the language of Wordsworth the sound of waters tends to the image of voice.*

Examples of Wordsworth’s tropes of speech in portraying nature—“this mighty sum / Of things for ever speaking” (“Tables Turned” 25–26; 1: 356); “the speaking face of earth and heaven” (5.13); “the earth / And common face of Nature spake to me / Rememberable things” (1.585–86)—could be multiplied considerably; not only water but wind, trees, birds, even flowers are what Wordsworth calls “speaking monuments” (8.172). “The Pansy at my feet / Doth the same tale repeat,” he says (“Intimations” 54–55; 1: 525). The notion of a monument, a “speaking monument,” implies a past event—a history, as it were, of departed things: “But there’s a Tree, of many, one; / A single field which I have looked upon; / Both of them speak of something that is gone” (“Intimations” 51–53; 1: 525). The voice of nature is like an epitaphic voice; nature itself is like one giant epitaph, one complex memorial text to be conned by human beings. But how do all these voices in nature—all these whisperings, murmurings, utterings, prattlings, breathings, and echoings—affect Wordsworth? What is their rhetorical function?

It might suffice to show that they “haunt” Wordsworth. The voice of the “sounding cataract” in “Tintern Abbey,” he says, “haunted me like a passion” (76–77; 1: 359). In “The Tuft of Primroses” he remarks, “Those voices! . . . these sighs / These whispers that pursue or meet me . . .” (521–24; 1: 813). But I wish to go one step further and suggest that the haunting voice of nature is also sometimes a usurping voice: in the episode of the nurse’s song, in the overlap of voice and epitaph, in the baffling of the Boy of Winander when his “mimic hootings” are unreturned (5.373), in the moment in youth when the physical ear is “o’ercome” by the song of nature, in the uncanny extravagance of the mountain echoes in book 1 that take up the voices of the skaters and return them frighteningly, there is always the sense of a recurrent “alien sound,” as Wordsworth calls it (1.443), unable or unwilling to harmonize perfectly with the

human voice. Yet Wordsworth, strangely, is haunted and usurped by a voice that is also a letter. "Ye Presences of Nature!" (1.464), he writes,

Haunting me thus among my boyish sports,  
On caves and trees, upon the woods and hills,  
Impressed upon all forms the characters  
Of danger or desire. . . . (1.469–72)

These "Presences" are indicated not by a voice but by writing, by the memorial "characters" inscribed on "the surface of the universal earth" (1.473). In phenomenological terms this usurpation of a human or even a natural voice by "monumental letters" in nature (12.241) may signify the ascendance of a self-consciousness over an unselfconsciousness, or the Wordsworthian split into "two consciousnesses" (2.32)—"myself / And . . . some other Being" (2.32–33). In rhetorical terms, the usurpation marks the "interchangeable supremacy" (14.84) of voice and letter in Wordsworth's poetry, with speech and writing competing for presence in the midst of difference. In such strength of usurpation, when voice becomes writing, Wordsworth's text acknowledges the passing from living voice to dead letter but seeks to outlive this death through the epitaphic permanence of writing that aspires to the phonocentric immediacy of speech. The voice of Wordsworth's poetry is always the voice to be accomplished in writing.

### III

To turn now from figures of voice to those of writing, let us consider book 7 of *The Prelude*, which I shall call the book of signs, the book that deals with what David Simpson describes as the "semiotic inferno" of London. There, Simpson writes, "the linguistic metaphor [is] used to suggest exhaustion and overdetermination, the absence of meaning through the very oversupply of possible meanings" (64). Hence the "inferno" is a semiotic, rather than a semantic, structure, declaring a variety of discourses whose meanings are withheld or deferred. The opening of the book is a return to the success of the "glad preamble," which recalls both the triumph of spontaneous overflow and the self-presence of speech. The vocal tropes at the beginning—"I sang / Aloud" (4–5), "I in whispers said" (28), and "ye and I . . . / Will chant together" (29, 31)—and the emphasis on oral composition make

the fall into writing in the greater part of book 7 all the more disturbing; the "man speaking to men" enters a world in which written signs, letters, characters, and symbols seem to prevail. The three parallel, juxtaposed passages on the uses and abuses of oratory that punctuate this book of signs (7.486–572) are conspicuous exceptions to the overwhelming graphological images, and Wordsworth satirizes them to varying degrees, treating them as perversions of the true voice of feeling.

Very early in book 7 we encounter scenes of reading. The *topos* of the human face as a book lies behind the conjuring passage in which the "monstrous ant-hill" (149) of London rises up at Wordsworth's rhetorical command, and the poet sees

The comers and the goers face to face,  
Face after face; the string of dazzling wares,  
Shop after shop, with symbols, blazoned names;  
And all the tradesman's honours overhead:  
Here, fronts of houses, like a title-page  
With letters huge inscribed from top to toe. . . . (156–61)

Perhaps we are reminded of Blake's "London":

I wander through each chartered street,  
Near where the chartered Thames does flow,  
And mark in every face I meet  
Marks of weakness, marks of woe. (26)

"I glance but at a few conspicuous marks," Wordsworth writes, "reading them with quick and curious eye" (7.573, 587). The marks, to Wordsworth, are legible—that is, he finds a semiotic quality in them, though their semantic content is not always disclosed. The fronts of the houses, similarly, are "like a title-page": they are one book Wordsworth can judge by its cover: a joint volume, encyclopedic, author anonymous. But note how the power of rhetoric works noiselessly here to give a human figuration to objects: the title page is inscribed, Wordsworth says, "from top to toe." Now, "from top to toe" is so familiar a metaphorical expression that it is easy to overlook, but when placed alongside the other prosopopoeic tropes (e.g., "overhead"; "fronts of houses"—where "fronts" retains the suggestion of a forehead or face), it is significant for the way in which it turns this passage back to the human form of the opening lines ("face to face, / Face after face"). It is as though Wordsworth wants

to make this book speak, to undo the usurpation of the living voice by the dead letter and rediscover a "speaking face of earth and heaven" (5.13). The metaleptic shift from houses to a title page and finally to a human form personifies the city in a way reminiscent of Wordsworth's sonnet "Upon Westminster Bridge" (where "the very houses are asleep" [1: 575]). The poet attempts, not wholly successfully, to humanize the city, to make it meaningful and accessible to him; and he does so, in part, by giving it a human shape but also, in part, by turning it into a text, into writing, into the one distinctively human quality of articulate language.

Wordsworth's reference to the "files of ballads [which] dangle from dead walls" (7.193) in the streets of London recalls his description in book 1 of nature's habit of impressing or imprinting letters and characters on the landscape—"the characters / Of danger or desire" (471–72). Such scenes of writing can be linked to a pastoral tradition, dating back to Callimachus, of "scratching erotic sentiments into the bark of a tree" (Rosenmeyer 202)—the very thing that Orlando attempts in *As You Like It* by tacking his poems to the trees in the Forest of Arden and by carving names in their trunks. This convention is actually a breach of the pastoral contract between humanity and nature (Rosenmeyer 202–03), a sacrilege of what Karl Kroeber has called the "ecological holiness" of a *locus amoenus* like Grasmere. "I pray you, mar no more trees with writing love songs in their barks," Jaques says to Orlando (3.2.248). But the ballads in the streets of London parody this convention; instead of representing an attempt (admittedly ecologically perverse) by human beings, through the metonymy of language, to get inside living nature and be at one with it, these poems invert that end: they are, Wordsworth says, "dead letter[s]" (8.297) hanging from "dead walls" (7.193). Is there not something epitaphic about all this dead language? Could not these anonymous bits of verse in the streets of London be, to borrow a phrase from J. Hillis Miller, epitaphs for a dead city ("The Still Heart" 308)? Surely they reflect more than the linguistic "exhaustion" of which Simpson speaks; the poet everywhere sees signs and written characters, but the alphabet is without its transliteration; the signs remain dead to him.

Sometimes the image of writing, by foregrounding the conventionality or arbitrariness of language ("O, wondrous power of words, by simple faith / Licensed to take the meaning that we love!" [7.119–20]), throws into relief other conventions—in

one case, the conventions of the theater. Describing a play that requires the lead character to become invisible, Wordsworth writes, "Delusion bold! and how can it be wrought? / The garb he wears is black as death, the word / '*Invisible*' flames forth upon his chest" (7.285–87). Writing, in the form of the bare sign, assists in creating the dramatic illusion; written characters collaborate with stage characters. The "delusion bold" that language creates through its arbitrary connection of signifier and signified is here a source of humor for Wordsworth, a "delight" (7.274) that reveals how willingly human beings accept illusions, especially the delusion that the linguistic sign has the power to do, and not just to signify—that it has the "illocutionary force" to make something invisible, and not just to signify the idea of invisibility (Austin 100).

But the one scene of writing in book 7 that powerfully focuses our concerns with voice and letter is Wordsworth's encounter with a solitary figure. Classified as a "spot of time" by many critics (e.g., Havens 141, 172; Bishop; Ogden 293), the moment involves a complex set of echoes of "Resolution and Independence." Wordsworth introduces the episode with a dramatic simile of the multitudinousness of the city:

As the black storm upon the mountain top  
Sets off the sunbeam in the valley, so  
That huge fermenting mass of humankind  
Serves as a solemn background, or relief,  
To single forms and objects. . . . (619–23)

The pictorial trope freezes the city as a "spectacle" (7.643), something to be observed, like a painting, relief sculpture, or even a stage performance. The naturalistic opening simile and the diction of "forms and objects" sound like the language of nature again, though the usurping agent here is a text, both human and inscriptive. Here is the short but powerful passage:

And once, far-travelled in such mood, beyond  
The reach of common indication, lost  
Amid the moving pageant, I was smitten  
Abruptly, with the view (a sight not rare)  
Of a blind Beggar, who, with upright face,  
Stood, propped against a wall, upon his chest  
Wearing a written paper, to explain  
His story, whence he came, and who he was.  
Caught by the spectacle my mind turned round  
As with the might of waters; an apt type  
This label seemed of the utmost we can know,

Both of ourselves and of the universe;  
 And, on the shape of that unmoving man,  
 His steadfast face and sightless eyes, I gazed,  
 As if admonished from another world. (635–49)

“Beyond / The reach of common indication”: beyond “the reach of words” (3.187)? The double text in the passage, man and paper, is a “label” with a double semantic content, “of ourselves and of the universe”—though this content is not made known to the reader. The content is not important, however, for it is the semiotic, not the semantic, structure of the experience that makes Wordsworth “smitten” and “caught.” Both the Beggar and his paper are signs: the man’s “unmoving” shape and “steadfast face and sightless eyes” admonish the poet in a language that seems “from another world”; the paper itself, which is intended to explain “his story,” gives the reader in the streets of London only a “minimally informative text” (Hertz 83). The image of a man wearing a text on his chest—like the actor earlier in the book on whose chest “the word / ‘Invisible’ flames forth”—suggests a sentimental desire to have language become one with the objects it intends, to make words invoke real things. The placing of a system of signifiers on a paper, and then on the man’s chest, reveals the wish for an identity of words and things, not just of signifiers and signifieds, but of signs and objects, or of words and referents. By “wearing a written paper,” the man attempts to clothe himself in language: he is the trope of a self seeking pure semiological status. But the Beggar’s attempt literally to ornament himself with language, figurally to present himself as a text and not as a referential object, only half succeeds; the text that he wears is an ill-fitting garment. If words are not incarnations but merely garb, ornamentation, or clothing, Wordsworth argues in his third essay on epitaphs, then they will be like “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” (*Prose* 2: 84–85). The Beggar is in part victimized by his own rhetoric: by merely “wearing” language and not being fully incarnated in it, he repeats the error within all logocentric discourse.

Yet Wordsworth’s image of the man wearing the paper does not seem entirely naive. The clothing metaphor, which Wordsworth elsewhere rejects in favor of incarnationist tropes (*Prose* 2: 84–85), suggests an awareness of the distance between words and things, an abyss that cannot be bridged by mere

appareling, any more than by carving poems in trees (or by writing them on paper, an attenuated form of the same act). Wordsworth uses epistemological terms to couch this visual disjunction between the intentionality of language and the physical objects that language attempts to present: the “label” is a “type” or “emblem,” as he says in the 1805 *Prelude*, “of the utmost we can know” (7.618). The original version of these lines in ms. X explicitly formulates the episode as a scene of reading (see J. Wordsworth et al. 260n7):

I thought  
 That even the very most of what we know,  
 Both of ourselves and of the universe,  
 The whole of what is written to our view,  
 Is but a label on a blind man’s chest.

It would perhaps be overstating Wordsworth’s response to this sight to say that it embodies a sudden consciousness that whatever is written on the paper cannot “refer” to the man wearing it. Wordsworth’s concern is closer to a moral one, to a wish for self-knowledge acquired through such encounters with humanity. But self-knowledge, this scene of reading suggests, cannot be contained by a particular text but can only be intimated through the silence or space between texts, between the Beggar as he is and the paper that tells “who he was.” This difference (though in the narrative past) implies a temporal as well as a referential disjunction: writing, as re-presentation, lags behind thought and at some distance from the objective referents that the thought intends. Perhaps this semiotic gap is “the utmost we can know,” the closest that words can draw to things without being engraved or tattooed on them. Yet, while we might be able to know the “story” of another person, the image of the “label on a blind man’s chest” suggests that self-knowledge is not so easily obtained: remember, the blind man cannot read his own history. Two implications: the self must be given its identity partly through the interpretive efforts of others; and all human knowledge—“the very most of what we know”—is but a macrosign (“a label”) that posits yet another, inscrutable signified.

Why does the blind Beggar not speak? Is the semiological caesura between body and paper meant in some way to be a function of his blindness, his inability to read imaged as a scene of reading? He better far were mute. The absence of a voice, and the substitution of writing for that voice, sets the



Beggar apart from most of Wordsworth's solitaries. Instead of the immediacy of speech, the distanced and deferred mode of writing serves as an epistemological limit, the utmost that language can show. The blindness, a type of muteness, suggests by extension that the Beggar would have to be deaf in order to speak.<sup>8</sup> His characterization recalls the earlier encounter between the poet and the discharged soldier in book 4: the Beggar is "propped against a wall"; the soldier is supported "from behind, [where] / A milestone propped him" (4.396–97). The Beggar's paper explains "his story"; the poet inquires of the soldier "his history" (4.417). The mode of discourse with the Beggar is writing; with the soldier, "a quiet uncomplaining voice" (4.419). If the blind Beggar's scene of reading exposes the semiological difference between writing and presence, the soldier's voice also leaves something devoutly to be wished:

in all he said  
There was a strange half-absence, as of one  
Knowing too well the importance of his theme,  
But feeling it no longer. (4.442–45)

Voice as "half-absence" is related to the "label" as half-presence, intending but never reaching its object. The soldier and the Beggar are linked imagistically to each other: they are both motionless and "propped" by a wall or stone. But what is more, their motionlessness and steadied support connect them with the image of Wordsworth's Leech-gatherer: "Himself he propped, limbs, body, and pale face, / Upon a long grey staff of shaven wood . . . Motionless as a cloud the old Man stood" (71–72, 75; 1: 553–54). The final lines of the Beggar episode—"I gazed, / As if admonished from another world"—echo "Resolution and Independence" in the description of the Leech-gatherer, who is "like a man from some far region sent, / To give me human strength, by apt admonishment" (111–12; 1: 555). The chastening and subduing effects of the Leech-gatherer and the Beggar associate the episodes with the "spots of time" and their frequent element of "chastisement" (12: 311)—with the poet's being figurally "smitten." But the imagistic resemblances between these two figures suggest deeper tropological associations. The Leech-gatherer, who appears "as if he had been reading in a book" (81; 1: 554), is pictured as "not all alive nor dead, / Nor all asleep," but as something halfway between "a huge stone" and a still "sea-beast" (57,

64–65, 62; 1: 553). Wordsworth's explication of this passage in the 1815 Preface at first seems to argue for a metalepsis of stone to sea beast to man, but in fact the rhetoric doubles back on itself in such a way that the man is imaged at the point where stone and beast "unite and coalesce in just comparison" (*Prose* 3: 33). The two similes collapsed into the figure of the man allow him to take on the qualities of both images, but it is clear that the figural transformation is a downward metamorphosis: he "is divested of so much of the indications of life and motion" (*Prose* 3: 33) that he appears less alive than a sea beast, though not as inanimate as a rock.

An analogous, if not exactly similar, process is at work in the Beggar's description. "The shape of that unmoving man," as Wordsworth calls it, allies him curiously to an inanimate object, one that has to be propped up. The man appears divested of the indications of life: no motion has he now, no force; he neither speaks nor sees. He is his own living epitaph. The "written paper" on his chest takes on lapidary qualities as this stationary figure assumes marmoreal significance. The Beggar and his text are almost explicitly epitaphic: his message is unearthly, "from another world," like the world beyond the grave, and its admonitory tone recalls the imperative and exhortatory mood of epitaphic Nature. The Beggar is not dead, nor all alive, but his state presents an "apt type" of what Wordsworth's poetry is forever moving toward: the epitaph, the "memorial" (12.287), the frail shrine of language. The Beggar is a written "speaking monument."

Yet a voice is wanting here. Usually Wordsworth's encounters with humanity involve a voice and a person. Think of the Solitary Reaper's song; the voice of the ladies of "Stepping Westward"; the peasant in the Simplon Pass, whose translated reply leads into the great paragraph on imagination; and the discharged soldier again, whose voice, like the voice of the Leech-gatherer, narrates a story that is not as impressive as the physical presence of its narrator. Yet a voice *is* present in the Beggar episode, if only obliquely. The Beggar's label is a written form of utterance that aspires to the innerness of voice. It is an utterance that is not uttered because it has already been "outered" through writing. The label spatializes the voice, making the Beggar no less a "speaking monument." And if, according to our theory of voice in Wordsworth, the sound of universal waters tends to the image of voice, shall the apocalyptic "might of waters" in this passage escape unnoticed and unheard? This "might of waters" contains a mighty voice that is silenced,

usurped by the writing of the Beggar. Hence that most intricate evasion of *as*: “my mind turned round / *As* with the might of waters” (emphasis added)—as if the mind were set spinning by a voice and not by a letter. Insofar as the Beggar is a living epitaph, moreover, we hear a voice in the etymology of *epitaphium*, originally a funeral oration. In his first essay on epitaphs, Wordsworth chooses the graphological sense of the word, though he subscribes to the theory of vocal origin. “It need scarcely be said,” the essay begins, “that an epitaph presupposes a Monument, upon which it is to be engraven.” Yet in the next paragraph Wordsworth quotes Weever’s discourse on *Ancient Funerall Monuments*, which claims that epitaphs were originally oral: “they were first sung at burials, after engraven upon the sepulchres” (*Prose* 2: 49, 50).

But Wordsworth’s personal definition of the epitaph is even more instructive. The epitaph, he says, is an “epitomized biography” (*Prose* 2: 89). Biography? What does this definition suggest about the relation between the Beggar and his label, and between the poet and his fourteen-book poem? Can we say that the Beggar is a biographer, an autobiographer, even as he is an epitaphist? The epitomized autobiography written on his paper tells “whence he came, and who he was.” Viewed in this way, Wordsworth’s meeting with the blind Beggar becomes the image of the poet’s encounter with his double, the meeting of autobiographer and autobiographer. Yet this encounter is anything but simple; the blindness, the silence, the impersonality all tend to put in question any attempt to read this scene as a moment of self-possession, as if Wordsworth suddenly acknowledged his double, or the text declared its awareness of this repetition within itself. As soon as the text offers such reflexive readings, based on an implicit model of self-presence, it seems to retract them. The Beggar cannot read his written self, and Wordsworth, for all his celebration of “the mighty world / Of eye, and ear” (“Tintern Abbey” 105–06; 1: 360), reveals the spots, silent and blind, that are integral to his rhetoric and that continually push the text from referential into reflexive narrative. “I cannot say what portion is in truth / The naked recollection of that time, / And what may rather have been called to Life / By after-meditation,” he says (3.613–16). The moment of retrospective silence, however, when one “cannot say,” is also the moment of rhetorical response, when the text does say, though reflexively, and with a certain blindness to what it has said. The poem, in its own words, finds a self-answerable style.

Wordsworth’s meeting with the Beggar, then, provides the imagistic and thematic correlative of what the language and structure of *The Prelude* have been enacting. The confrontation of the self with itself (or the double of itself) may produce a heightened self-consciousness—even, as Geoffrey Hartman has said, a “consciousness of self raised to apocalyptic pitch” (*Wordsworth’s Poetry* 17), but this state of mind is in turn, I think, a function of language, a product of a figural foregrounding that repeats language’s own self-encounter. Paul de Man, in an essay on Rousseau, once stated this situation in a hypothesis that has far-reaching implications for Wordsworth: “If all language is about language, then the paradigmatic linguistic model is that of an entity that confronts itself” (*Allegories* 153). This is the “narcissistic” moment of language, (*Allegories* 152),<sup>9</sup> the point where the poet-autobiographer is “smitten” with his mirror image, an emblem of all he is, the utmost he can know. The epitaphic qualities of the Beggar and his paper reflect on the poet’s own scene of writing; *The Prelude* itself appears but a label on a blind man’s chest: Wordsworth is composing his own epitaph too. The “single form” of the Beggar draws Wordsworth back to those points “within our souls / Where all stand single” (3.188–89). The poet and his double share a mute dialogue; both of them speak of something that is gone.

But the Beggar wears his text with a “difference.” Blind, mute, and nameless, he is the least egotistical of men, though sufficient to stand as Wordsworth’s “second self” (“Michael” 39; 1: 456). Still, questions remain. To what extent is Wordsworth’s encounter with his second self also an encounter with his former self—that is, with a precursor? Why is this other self a blind man, accessible only textually? Or perhaps, as Harold Bloom asks in a decidedly different context, “Need we question who this blind man is?” (73). John Milton was no beggar, and although he was accessible to Wordsworth only textually—indeed, epitaphically (“Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour” [*Poems* 1: 579])—the question of the point at which epitaph becomes allusion, naming or invoking an absence, requires separate discussion.

This striking episode in book 7 is perhaps the clearest and most suggestive example in *The Prelude* of the rhetorical turn known as an “abyss structure” (*mise en abyme*). As James Hulbert, one of Jacques Derrida’s translators, has pointed out, “the expression ‘*mise en abyme*,’ originally from heraldry, where it denotes a smaller escutcheon ap-

pearing in the center of a larger one, is [used] to refer to a structure in which the whole is represented in miniature in one of its parts" (147–48). The image of the poet writing his autobiographical poem is located in this *mise en abyme* with the Beggar and his label, which also becomes a kind of *mise-en-scène* for the "pageant" (7.637) or "spectacle" (7.643) of this reflexive drama. The characteristic effect of an abyss structure, either here or in the Simplon Pass, is one of vertigo, a "dizzying, unsettling" (Hulbert 148) experience not unlike Wordsworth's response to the blind man: "my mind turned round / As with the might of waters." The spinning action of the poet's mind suggests precisely this sort of dizziness at being cast into an abyss of epistemological reflexivity. I am reminded of 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" (478). Rhetorically the turning round, or "troping," signals an equally disturbing linguistic spin in which writing is thrown back from its referential validity to its self-declaration as language. Perhaps we should not be surprised by this; perhaps we should even expect it: is it not exquisitely fitting that a so-called egotistical poet should produce a "narcissistic" text?

I began this essay by suggesting that *The Prelude* contains its own allegory of reading. We are closer

now to seeing what that allegory is. It consists in the recurrent meetings of the poet with his own image, like the Magus Zoroaster in *Prometheus Unbound*, or in the recurrent foregroundings of the text as a piece of language. Yet these meetings and foregroundings by no means cancel the structure of difference within language, nor do they finally make the text more present to itself. The poem attempts to narrate the life of an actual person but finds itself instead narrating the semiological problems of that narration. Though Wordsworth's text never settles on a single term in the voice-letter alternation, it is accurate to say that voice is an ever-present but often veiled figure, and it bears repeating that in the language of Wordsworth natural phenomena tend to the image of voice. Grammatological images, by contrast, tend to be more situated. But I prefer to remain with the particular insights of the various readings given. The "naturalness" of "a man speaking to men" flows over into the text to create a so-called authentic voice in nature, but scenes of writing, being more "artificial," as it were, are also more instructive about the ways in which the poet translates the landscape, experience, and himself—into language.<sup>10</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Quotations from *The Prelude* follow the 1850 text in Maxwell's parallel edition, except for those attributed to the 1805 version. Citations of Wordsworth's other poems are identified by line numbers in the text followed by volume and page numbers in *Poems*. For the concept of linguistic "difference," see Saussure 114–20 and Derrida 27–73. For discussions of the speech-writing hierarchy, see Saussure 23–32 and Derrida 6–26, 30–44.

<sup>2</sup> Chomsky is careful to distinguish competence and performance from *langue* and *parole*. "It is necessary," he writes, "to reject [Saussure's] concept of *langue* as merely a systematic inventory of items and to return rather to the Humboldtian conception of underlying competence as a system of generative processes" (4).

<sup>3</sup> I use the phrase "scene of reading" in de Man's sense of the enactment of a text's allegory of reading.

<sup>4</sup> The three imperatives come, respectively, from the first essay in *Essays upon Epitaphs* (*Prose* 2: 54); "Lines (Left upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree)," line 1 (1: 254); and "The Solitary Reaper," line 4 (1: 659).

<sup>5</sup> While Bernhardt-Kabisch traces "the pervasive monumental element in the canon of Wordsworth's poetry" (511), Hartman is more concerned with defining a genre of "inscription"

and relating a number of Wordsworth's poems to this "normal, accepted, even archaic feature of the eighteenth-century literary scene" ("Wordsworth, Inscriptions" 207). Like Bernhardt-Kabisch, Ferguson explores the "virtual omnipresence" of an epitaphic style in Wordsworth's poetry (155–72), and Fry demonstrates "that a . . . widely diffused 'epitaphic moment' prevails in Wordsworth" (413). I differ with Fry's claim that the epitaph represents "the burial of voice" (433), since I attempt to show that the peculiarly Wordsworthian aspect of voice is its persistence beyond death and despite absence. What is baffling in Wordsworth's language is the interpenetration of a voice as enduring as epitaphic inscription with a writing as immediate as the breath of speech. Writing, for Wordsworth, is not the death of voice but the consummation: it is the accomplishment of voice. See Kneale for the place of voice and writing in the "spots of time" and the Simplon Pass.

<sup>6</sup> The "return" to childhood episodes—and hence to tropes of voice—is both structural and chronological. As a variation of the "return poem," *The Prelude* continually doubles back on itself to consider its "progress" (5.12)—not only in book 8 ("Retrospect") but at the openings of books 5, 7, and 12; the end of book 14; and, perhaps most explicitly, the beginning of book 9, where Wordsworth states that he has "turned and returned with intricate delay" (9.8). Book 12 signals a structural "retroting," or re-turning, to first considerations through its echoes

of the "glad preamble" (7.4) of book 1 (12.7–43), including an apostrophe to Nature that reintroduces vocal tropes: "Oh! that I had a music and a voice / Harmonious as your own . . ." (12.29–30). From a chronological perspective Wordsworth is also "returning" to childhood episodes in the sense of reworking earlier passages from the 1799 *Prelude*. For a thorough discussion of the chronology of the composition of *The Prelude*, see J. Wordsworth et al. 485–526.

<sup>7</sup> An essay needs to be written on "The Ear and the Object" to supplement Frederick A. Pottle's early study of "The Eye and the Object in the Poetry of Wordsworth" by showing how the "despotic" power of the bodily eye (12.129) is frequently challenged by the "strength of usurpation" of the bodily ear. Wordsworth's interest in "the mighty world / Of eye, and ear"

("Tintern Abbey" 105–06; 1: 360) helps to explain how his visual and aural concerns compete or, in other words, how an "image" often quietly becomes an "image of voice."

<sup>8</sup> The blindness-muteness association has connections with Milton's "blind mouths" in "Lycidas" (119) and with Wordsworth's "Eye among the blind, / That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep" ("Intimations" 112–13; 1: 527).

<sup>9</sup> See Northrop Frye, who states that the "dialectic of love"—which includes self-love—"treats whatever it encounters as another form of itself" (122).

<sup>10</sup> I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada during the writing of this essay.

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