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TIME AND HISTORY IN WORDSWORTH

PAUL DE MAN

Up till now, the double-barrelled topic of these lectures¹ has rather prevented us from reading our romantic authors with the kind of receptivity, the self-forgetting concentration, that we have been describing (in the case of Rousseau) as the proper state of mind for critical insights. The need to keep one eye on the text and another eye on the critical commentator has forced us into the rather tiresome grimace well known to anyone who has ever played in an orchestra—where one has to keep track simultaneously of the score and of the conductor. The grimace becomes even more painful when the directives of the score and those of the interpreter are pulling in different directions, as we found to be the case, to some extent, in the three preceding examples. The result often is that because of the unavoidable simplifications involved in a polemical discussion, one fails to do justice to both the writer and the critic. I probably had to overstate the degree of my disagreement with Girard and Starobinski, critics for whom I have a great deal of sympathy and admiration—and I was clearly not being critical enough, to your taste, with Heidegger, when I suggested that there might be perhaps something of merit in an imaginary figure, one that never existed in the flesh, who would have approached literature with some of the insights that appear in *Sein und Zeit*.² More distressing are the one-sided readings given to some of the texts, in order to use them as a rebuttal of methodological assertions. Such over-analytical approaches are certainly not attuned to catch the subtle nuances of temporality and intent that a valid commentary should bring out.

Fortunately, my topic today will allow for a more relaxed kind of presentation, in which the voice of the poet might come through in a less garbled manner. Geoffrey Hartman's study of Wordsworth awakens in me no trace of methodological disagreement.³ I read whole parts of it with the profound satisfaction of full agreement, only marred by the slight feeling of jealousy that I did not write them myself. The much hoped-for synthesis between the best qualities of American and Continental criticism certainly begins to come true in a book like this. It is based on a wide knowledge of the tradition in which the poet is writing, in this case true familiarity with Wordsworth's antecedents

¹This essay is transcribed by Tom Keenan from a photocopy of the manuscript. It is the fourth in a series of six lectures on Contemporary Criticism and the Problem of Romanticism that de Man delivered as the Christian Gauss Seminar in Criticism at Princeton University in April and May 1967. The manuscript has been transcribed with almost no editing other than the addition of bibliographical information and all footnotes, minor grammatical changes, and the correction of quoted texts and titles. A few of de Man's more interesting deletions have been restored in the footnotes. All emphases and (parentheses) are de Man's; [square brackets] mark added material. The passages from the "second layer" of de Man's text quoted in footnotes 4, 9, 13, 14, and 16 were transcribed by Andrzej Warminski. A critical edition of the essay will be published along with the other Gauss lectures and other unpublished texts in a volume forthcoming from The University of Minnesota Press.

²De Man refers here to the previous lectures in his Gauss series.

³References to Hartman's text throughout this essay follow the pagination of Wordsworth's Poetry 1787–1814 (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1964).

in Milton and in eighteenth-century poetry, combined with an ear that is finely attuned to the slightest nuances of Wordsworth's language. Moreover, by interpreting Wordsworth from the inside, from the phenomenological point of view of his own consciousness, Hartman can trace a coherent itinerary of Wordsworth's poetic development. His achievement will make it possible for us to limit ourselves to some indications derived from the reading of a few very short but characteristic texts, thus tracing, in turn, an itinerary through Wordsworth by means of some of those larger themes that Hartman has pursued. These themes, in the case of Wordsworth and Wordsworth scholarship, are quite obvious, and Hartman does not depart from a well-established custom when he makes the relationship between nature and the imagination into Wordsworth's central problem. The Arnoldian tradition of reading Wordsworth as a moralist has, for quite a while now, been superseded by a concern for the implicit poetics that are present in his writing, and that have to be understood prior to the interpretation of a moral statement that seems conventional. This leads inevitably to such abstractions as nature, the imagination, self-knowledge, and poetry as a means to self-knowledge, all of which figure prominently in recent Wordsworth studies, not only because Wordsworth himself talks at times openly about them, but because his poetry, even at its most trivial, always seems to be supported by and to relate back to them.

As will be clear to all of you, the path I'll try to trace by this direct commentary overlaps with that proposed by Hartman in more places than I will have time to mention. It diverges from it in at least one point of some importance, and I will comment on this disagreement later, as a way to summarize a tentative view of Wordsworth's poetry.⁴

Let me start out with a very well-known poem to which Hartman devotes a chapter, the text that Wordsworth placed at the head of the section of his *Collected Poems* entitled "Poems of the Imagination." He later incorporated it into *The Prelude* and seems to have, in general, attached a special importance to it. It was written in Goslar, during his stay in Germany, together with several other of the childhood memories that went into the two first books of *The Prelude*. "The Winander Boy" is divided into two sections separated by a blank space, and all readers of the poem have been struck by the abruptness of the transition that leads from the first to the second part. Problems of interpretation tend to

⁴The opening paragraphs seem to have been left out when de Man gave this lecture again (around 1971 or 1972). The new lecture began with some more informal remarks about what it means to read based on a version of the following notes:

reading

not declaim it—pure dramatic, vocal presence
not analyze it structurally—as in Ruwet
semantic, thematic element remains present in
Jakobson/Riffaterre
but read, which means that the thematic element remains
taken into consideration

we look for the delicate area where the thematic, semantic field and the rhetorical structures begin to interfere with each other, begin to engage each other

they are not necessarily congruent, and it may be (it is, as a matter of fact, it is the case) that the thematic and the rhetorical structures are in conflict and that, in apparent complicity, they hide each other from sight

in truth, there are no poems that are not, at the limit, about this paradoxical and deceptive interplay between theme and figure; the thematization is always the thematization of an act of rhetorical deceit by which what seems to be a theme, a statement, a truth-referent, has substituted itself for a figure

I can't begin to prove this, but want to hint at what I mean by reading two Wordsworth poems

Wordsworth, because he is the anti-rhetorical, natural poet (i.e. thematic) par excellence, not only because he explicitly attacked the use of figure as ornatus, but also because the thematic seduction is particularly powerful, in its transparency and clarity—one gets very far very quickly by meditative participation

no one has reached the point where this question of Wordsworth's rhetoricity can begin to be asked, except Hartman. —

focus on the relationship between the two parts. (I would add that these problems were solved in a definitive but somewhat peremptory fashion in a fine recent anthology of English literature, in which the second part has simply been suppressed.)

- There was a Boy, ye knew him well, ye Cliffs
And Islands of Winander! many a time
At evening, when the stars had just begun
To move along the edges of the hills,
5 Rising or setting, would he stand alone
Beneath the trees, or by the glimmering Lake,
And there, with fingers interwoven, both hands
Press'd closely, palm to palm, and to his mouth
Uplifted, he, as through an instrument,
10 Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls
That they might answer him.— And they would shout
Across the watery Vale, and shout again,
Responsive to his call, with quivering peals,
And long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud
15 Redoubled and redoubled; concourse wild
Of mirth and jocund din! And when it chanced
That pauses of deep silence mock'd his skill,
Then, sometimes, in that silence, while he hung
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise
20 Has carried far into his heart the voice
Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene
Would enter unawares into his mind
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
Its woods, and that uncertain Heaven, receiv'd
25 Into the bosom of the steady Lake.*

- This Boy was taken from his Mates, and died
In childhood, ere he was full ten years old.
—Fair are the woods, and beauteous is the spot,
The Vale where he was born; the Churchyard hangs
30 Upon a Slope above the Village School,
And, there, along the bank, when I have pass'd
At evening, I believe that oftentimes
A full half-hour together I have stood
Mute—looking at the Grave in which he lies.⁵*

The first part of the poem introduces us into a world that is, in the words of the text, both “responsive” and, as in the gesture of the hands, “interwoven.” Voice and nature echo each other in an exchange of which the exuberance expresses a stability, a firm hold on a universe that has the vastness of rising and setting stars, but nevertheless allows for an intimate and sympathetic contact between human and natural elements. Not the “vaste et profonde unité” of Baudelaire’s *Correspondances* should come to mind, but a more innocent, more playful, pleasure at finding responses, satisfying possibilities of relationship even for someone who, like the boy, “stands alone.” The “watery Vale” that might separate him from an alien natural presence is easily bridged by the cry of the owls; it is, by itself, an eerie noise enough on a dark night, but little of this eeriness is allowed to enter the poem. If we mimic it well enough to engage the response of its originators, the gulf between ourselves and nature need not be unbridgeable. “The poet . . . considers man and nature

⁵Wordsworth. *Poetry and Prose, selected by W. M. Merchant* (Cambridge: Harvard UP [The Reynard Library], 1955) 352–53. 1805 *Prelude*, V, 389 ff. Merchant prints only the 1805 edition of *The Prelude*. All quotations from Wordsworth and page references, unless otherwise noted, are from this edition (which de Man used) and will be included in the text.

as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting qualities of nature"—this statement from the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* would be a good commentary on the opening scene of the poem.⁶ Much Wordsworth criticism, still today, considers this frequently as the fundamental statement, not just of Wordsworth, but of romantic naturalism as a whole, and refuses to go beyond it. Yet, even in this first section of the poem, one finds some strain at keeping up a belief in such an "interwoven" world. "Mimic hootings" is not the highest characterization imaginable for the human voice, and we have somehow to be told explicitly that this is "concourse wild / Of mirth and jocund din . . ." to convince us of the persistent cheer of the scene.

As soon as the silence of the owls allows for the noise to subside, what becomes audible is poetically much more suggestive than what went before. The deepening of the imaginative level is not announced with any fanfare or pointed dramatic gesture. The "surprises" that Wordsworth's language gives are indeed such "gentle shocks of mild surprise" that the transition from stability to suspense can be accomplished almost without our being aware of it. Yet certainly, by the time we come to "uncertain Heaven," we must realize that we have entered a precarious world in which the relationship between noun and epithet can be quite surprising. Coleridge singled out the line for comment, as being most unmistakably Wordsworth's: "Had I met these lines running wild in the deserts of Arabia, I should instantly have screamed out, 'Wordsworth.'" ⁷ The line is indeed bound to engender wonder and meditation. The movements of the stars, in the opening lines, had seemed "certain" enough, and their reflection in the lake was hardly needed to steady the majesty of their imperceptible motion. But the precariousness that is here being introduced had been announced before, as when, a little earlier, in lines 18 and 19, it was said that when "pauses of deep silence mock'd his skill, / Then, sometimes, in that silence, while he (the boy) *hung* / Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise. . . ." We would have expected "stood Listening" instead of the unusual "hung / Listening." This word, "hung," plays an important part in the poem. It reappears in the second part, when it is said that the graveyard in which the boy is buried "*hangs* / Upon a Slope above the Village School." It establishes the thematic link between the two parts and names a central Wordsworthian experience. At the moment when the analogical correspondence with nature no longer asserts itself, we discover that the earth under our feet is not the stable base in which we can believe ourselves to be anchored. It is as if the solidity of earth were suddenly pulled away from under our feet and that we were left "hanging" from the sky instead of standing on the ground. The fundamental spatial perspective is reversed; instead of being centered on the earth, we are suddenly related to a sky that has its own movements, alien to those of earth and its creatures. The experience hits as a sudden feeling of dizziness, a falling or a threat of falling, a *vertige* of which there are many examples in Wordsworth. The nest-robbing scene from Book I of *The Prelude* comes to mind, where the experience is a literal moment of absolute dizziness which disjoins the familiar perspective of the spatial relationship between heaven and earth, in which the heavens are seen as a safe dome that confirms at all times the earth's and our own centrality, the steadfastness of our orientation towards the center which makes us creatures of earth. But here, suddenly, the sky no longer relates to the earth.

*Oh! at that time,
While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,
With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
Blow through my ears! the sky seem'd not a sky
Of earth, and with what motion moved the clouds!*

[1805 *Prelude*, I, 335–39; 291]

⁶"Preface [1800]," in *Wordsworth and Coleridge, Lyrical Ballads 1798*, ed. W. J. B. Owen (London: Oxford UP, 1967), 150–79 at 167. De Man quotes from a section Wordsworth added for the 1802 addition.

⁷Quoted in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, gen. ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: Norton, 1962), 2:152n5.

and was referring to Wordsworth himself as a boy. The text went: "When it chanced / That pauses of deep silence mocked *my* skill. . . ." The poem is, in a curious sense, autobiographical, but it is the autobiography of someone who no longer lives written by someone who is speaking, in a sense, from beyond the grave. It would be banal and inadequate to say that Wordsworth is praising and mourning, in the poem, his own youth, the boy he used to be. The movement is more radical, more complex. The structure of the poem, although it seems retrospective, is in fact proleptic. In the second part, Wordsworth is reflecting on his own death which lies, of course, in the future, and can only be anticipated. But to be able to imagine, to convey the experience, the consciousness of mortality, he can only represent death as something that happened to another person, in the past. Dead men,⁸ as we all know, tell no tales, but they have an assertive way of reminding us of mortality, of bringing us eventually face to face with our own finitude. Wordsworth is thus anticipating a future event as if it existed in the past. Seeming to be remembering, to be moving to a past, he is in fact anticipating a future. The objectification of the past self, as that of a consciousness that unwittingly experiences an anticipation of its own death, allows him to reflect on an event that is, in fact, unimaginable. For this is the real terror of death, that it lies truly beyond the reach of reflection. Yet the poem names the moment of death in a reflective mood, and it is this reflective mood that makes it possible to transform what would otherwise be an experience of terror into the relative appeasement of the lines

*that uncertain Heaven, receiv'd
Into the bosom of the steady Lake.*

Another way of putting it is that what Wordsworth strives to conquer, on the relentless fall into death, is the time, the surmise that would allow one to reflect upon the event that, of all events, is most worth reflecting upon but hardest to face. This time is conquered at the end of the poem, in the curiously exact full half-hour that becomes available to him, a purely meditative time proportionate to the time it takes us to understand meditatively Wordsworth's own poem. But the strategy that allows for this conquest is temporally complex: it demands the description of a future experience by means of the fiction of a past experience which is itself anticipatory or prefigurative. Since it is a fiction, it can only exist in the form of a language, since it is by means of language that the fiction can be objectified and made to act as a living person. The reflection is not separable from the language that describes it, and the half-hour of the end also clocks the time during which Wordsworth, or ourselves, are in real contact with the poem. Hartman is quite right in saying that the poem "becomes an . . . extended epitaph" [20], though one might want to add that it is the epitaph written by the poet for himself, from a perspective that stems, so to speak, from beyond the grave. This temporal perspective is characteristic for all Wordsworth's poetry—even if it obliges us to imagine a tombstone large enough to hold the entire *Prelude*.⁹

⁸*De Man's manuscript reads "Death men." Restoring portions crossed out in the manuscript, the sentence fragment reads: "Death men, as we all know from Western movies, tell no tales, but the same is not true of Western romantic poetry, which knows that the only interesting tale is to be told by a man who."*

⁹*In the second version of the lecture, the final sentences of this paragraph seem to have been replaced by the following passage:*

It is always possible to anticipate one's own epitaph, even to give it the size of the entire Prelude, but never possible to be both the one who wrote it and the one who reads it in the proper setting, that is, confronting one's grave as an event of the past. The proleptic vision is based, as we saw in the poem, on a metaphorical substitution of a first person subject by a third person subject, "the boy" for "I." In fact, this substitution is, of all substitutions, the one that is, thematically speaking, a radical impossibility: between the living and the dead self, no analogical resemblance or memory allows for any substitution whatever. The movement is only made possible by a linguistic sleight-of-hand in which the order of time is reversed, rotated around a pole called self (the grammatical subject [first and third persons] of the poem). The posterior events that are to occur to the first person,

Wordsworth himself gives us sufficient evidence to defend this kind of understanding. The first of the *Essays upon Epitaphs* describes, in prose, insights that are very close to what we have found in "The Winander Boy." What seems to start out as a simply pious statement about the consolatory power of a belief in the immortality of the soul turns very swiftly into a meditation on the temporality that characterizes the consciousness of beings capable of reflecting on their own death. The first characteristic of such a consciousness is its power to anticipate: "The Dog or Horse perishes in the field, or in the stall, by the side of his Companions, and is incapable of *anticipating* the sorrow with which his surrounding Associates shall bemoan his death, or pine for his loss; he cannot *pre-conceive* this regret, he can form no thought of it; and therefore cannot possibly have a desire to leave such regret or remembrance behind him" [605]. And Wordsworth characterizes a human being that, not unlike the Winander boy at the beginning of the poem, would have chosen to remain in a state of nature by an "inability arising from the imperfect state of his faculties to come, in any point of his being, into contact with a notion of death; or to an *unreflecting* acquiescence in what had been instilled in him" [606]. Very soon in the same essay, however, it becomes clear that the power to anticipate is so closely connected with the power to remember that it is almost impossible to distinguish them from each other. They seem like opposites, and are indeed at opposite poles if we think of time as a continual movement from birth to death. In this perspective, the source is at a maximal remove from the final point of destination, and it would be impossible to reach the one by way of the other. In a more reflective, more conscious concept of temporality, however, the two poles will, in Wordsworth's phrasing, "have another and finer connection than that of contrast" [608]. "Origin and tendency are notions inseparably co-relative" [606], he writes, and the essay develops this notion in an extended voyage image: "As, in sailing upon the orb of this Planet, a voyage, towards the regions where the sun sets, conducts gradually to the quarter where we have been accustomed to behold it come forth at its rising; and, in like manner, a voyage towards the east, the birth-place in our imagination of the morning, leads finally to the quarter where the Sun is last seen when he departs from our eyes; so, the contemplative Soul, travelling in the direction of mortality, advances to the Country of everlasting Life; and, in like manner, may she continue to explore those cheerful tracts, till she is brought back, for her advantage and benefit, to the land of transitory things—of sorrow and of tears" [608]. Stripped of whatever remnants of piety still cling to this language,¹⁰ the passage summarizes the temporality of the "Winander Boy" poem. In this poem, the reflection on death takes on the form, at first sight contradictory, of a remembrance of childhood. Similarly, in Wordsworth, evocations of natural, childlike, or

I, (usually death) are made into anterior events that have occurred to a third person, the boy. A pseudo-metaphorical and thematically inconceivable substitution of persons leads to a temporal reversal in which anteriority and posterity are inverted. The structural mechanics of metaphor (for, I repeat, the substitution of the dead he for the living I is thematically, literally, "unimaginable" and the metaphor is not a metaphor since it has no proper meaning, no sens propre, but only a metaphorical structure within the sign and devoid of meaning)—the structural mechanics of metaphor lead to the metonymic reversal of past and present that rhetoricians call metalepsis. The prolepsis of the Winander boy, a thematic concept—for we all know that we can proleptically anticipate empirical events, but not our death which is not for us an empirical event—is in fact metalepsis, a leap outside thematic reality into the rhetorical fiction of the sign. This leap cannot be represented, nor can it be reflected upon from within the inwardness of a subject. The reassurance expressed in the poem when the "uncertain" heaven is received in the lake or when the meditative surmise seems to promise the reflective time of the meditation is based on the rhetorical and not on thematic resources of language. It has no value as truth, only as figure. The poem does not reflect on death but on the rhetorical power of language that can make it seem as if we could anticipate the unimaginable.

This would also be the point at which we are beginning to "read" the poem, or to "read" Wordsworth according to the definition I gave at the start, namely to reach the point where the thematic turns rhetorical and the rhetorical turns thematic, while revealing that their apparent complicity is in fact hiding rather than revealing meaning.

¹⁰A crossed-out clause here reads: "and with the understanding that what is here called immortality stands in fact for the anticipated experience of death."

apocalyptic states of unity with nature often acquire¹¹ the curiously barren, dead-obsessed emptiness of non-being.¹² The poetic imagination, what is here called the contemplative soul, realizes this and thus encompasses source and death, origin and end within the space of its language, by means of complex temporal structurizations of which we found an example in "The Winander Boy."¹³

Another brief poem of Wordsworth's will allow us to take one further step in an understanding of his temporality; it may also make the concept less abstract by linking it to its more empirical mode of manifestation, namely history. The poem belongs to the later sonnet cycle entitled *The River Duddon* that appeared in 1820.

*Not hurled precipitous from steep to steep;
Lingering no more mid flower-enamelled lands
And blooming thickets; nor by rocky bands
Held;—but in radiant progress tow'rd the Deep
5 Where mightiest rivers into powerless sleep
Sink, and forget their nature; now expands
Majestic Duddon, over smooth flat sands,
Gliding in silence with unfettered sweep!
Beneath an ampler sky a region wide
10 Is opened round him;—hamlets, towers, and towns,
And blue-topped hills, behold him from afar;
In stately mien to sovereign Thames allied,
Spreading his bosom under Kentish downs,
With Commerce freighted or triumphant War.*

[699]

The *Essay upon Epitaphs* had already suggested the image of a river as the proper emblem for a consciousness that is able to contain origin and end into a single awareness. "Origin and tendency are notions inseparably co-relative. Never did a Child stand by the side of a running Stream, pondering within himself what power was the feeder of the perpetual current, from what never-wearied sources the body of water was supplied, but he must have been inevitably propelled to follow this question by another: 'Towards what abyss is it in progress? what receptacle can contain the mighty influx?' . . ." [606]. In this poem, we have what seems at first sight like a progression, a continuous movement that flows "in radiant progress" towards the triumphant ending:

*In stately mien to sovereign Thames allied,
Spreading his bosom under Kentish downs,
With Commerce freighted or triumphant War.*

Equally convincing seems to be the movement that leads, in the poem, from the idyllic setting of "flower-enamelled lands / And blooming thickets . . ." to the political, historically

¹¹Reading uncertain.

¹²A sentence crossed out here reads: "Being the father of man, the child stands closer to death than we do."

¹³In the second version, the final sentences of this paragraph (from "Stripped of whatever remnants . . .") seem to have been replaced by the following transitional passage:

The metaphor of the voyage, with its vast stellar and heliotropic movements of rising and setting suns and stars, here makes the link between life and death, origin and end and carries the burden of the promise. But this is precisely the metaphor that was "deconstructed" in the Winander boy, in which this kind of analogism is lost from the start and never recovered; as is often, but not always, the case, a poetic text like the Boy of Winander takes us closer to an actual "reading" of the poet than discursive statements of philosophical convictions and opinions, especially when these statements are themselves heavily dependent on metaphor.

Another brief poem by Wordsworth may make the movement we are trying to describe less abstract

oriented language at the end. The progression from nature to history, from a rural to an urban world seems to be without conflict. We move from a relationship between the personified river Duddon and its pastoral banks, to a relationship that involves human creations such as “hamlets, towers, and towns,” or human historical enterprises such as “commerce and war.” And this gliding passage, similar to what is called in *The Prelude* “love of nature leading to love of man” [title of 1850 Book VIII, cf. 395], appears as a liberation, an expansion that involves a gain in freedom. The river is no longer restricted “by rocky bands” and now flows “with unfettered sweep.” The order of nature seems to open up naturally into the order of history, thus allowing the same natural symbol, the river, to evoke the connection between both. The poem seems to summarize the “growth of a mind” as espousing this movement, and to prove, by the success of its own satisfying completeness, that language can espouse poetically this very movement.

Some aspects of the language, however, prevent the full identification of the movement with natural process and put into question an interpretation of the River, which a subsequent poem in the same series addresses as “my partner and my guide” [“Conclusion,” 1, 699], as a truly natural entity. The beginning of the poem, for instance, casts a curious spell over the subsequent progression. It describes what the river no longer is in such forceful and suggestive language that we are certainly not allowed to forget what the river *has been* by the time we encounter it in its expanded form. The opening line, for example, cannot cease to haunt us, and no matter how strongly the italicized *now* (in “*now* expands”) takes us to the present, so much has been told us so effectively about what came before that we can only seize upon this present in the perspective of its past and its future. The past is described as successive motions of falling and lingering. The dizziness of the Winander Boy poem and of the childhood scenes of *The Prelude* is certainly present in the image of the river “hurled precipitous from steep to steep,” which introduces, from the start, a powerful motion that dominates the entire poem, and that the various counterforces, including the initial *not*, are unable to stem. For the idyllic stage that follows, among flowers and blooming thickets, is a mere lingering, a temporary respite in a process that is one of steady descent and dissolution. The implications of this movement become clearer still when the radiant progress is said to be “. . . tow’rd the Deep / Where mightiest rivers into powerless sleep / Sink, and forget their nature.” This description of the sea is certainly far removed from the image of a pantheistic unity with nature that one might have expected. It is presented instead as a loss of self, the loss of the *name* that designates the river and allows it to take on the dignity of an autonomous subject. The diction of the passage, with the antithetical balance of “mightiest” and “powerless” is all the stronger since the apparent strategy of the poem does not seem to demand this kind of emphasis. It makes the forgetting of one’s nature that is here mentioned into a movement that runs counter to the original progression; this progression, which first seemed to lead from nature to history while remaining under the dominant sway of nature, now becomes a movement away from nature towards pure nothingness. One is reminded of a similar loss of name in the Lucy Gray poems where death makes her into an anonymous entity

*Roll’d round in earth’s diurnal course
With rocks and stones and trees!*

[“A slumber did my spirit seal,” 7–8, 165]

Similarly, the river Duddon is first lost into a larger entity, the Thames, which in turn will lose itself in still larger anonymity. There is no cycle here by means of which we are brought back to the source and reunited with it by natural means. No prospect of natural rebirth is held out, and the historical achievement at the end seems caught in the same general movement of decay.

Nevertheless, the poem can overcome the feeling of dejection that this irrevocable fall might suggest; it ends on a statement of assertion that is not ironic. Not altogether unlike the uncertain heaven in “The Winander Boy” that was steadied in reflection, the fall here is not prevented, but made tolerable this time by the assertion of historical achievement. There seems to be an assertion of permanence, of a duration in what seems

to be an irrevocable waste, a falling away into sheer nothingness. It is based on a certain form of hope, on the affirmation of a possible future, all of which made it possible for man to pursue an enterprise that seems doomed from the start, to have a history in spite of a death which Wordsworth never allows us to forget.

In this poem, the possibility of restoration is linked to the manner in which the two temporalities are structurally interrelated within the text. If taken by itself, the progression towards history would be pure delusion, a misleading myth based on the wrong kind of forgetting, an evasion of the knowledge of mortality. The countertheme of loss of self into death that appears in the first and second quatrain introduces a temporality that is more originary, more authentic than the other, in that it reaches further into the past and sees wider into the future. It envelops the other, but without reducing it to mere error. Rather, it creates a point of view which has gone beyond the historical world of which we catch a glimpse at the end of the poem, but which can look back upon this world and see it within its own, relative greatness, as a world that does not escape from mutability but asserts itself within the knowledge of its own transience. We have a temporal structure that is not too different from what we found in "The Winander Boy." Instead of looking back upon childhood, upon an earlier stage of consciousness that anticipates its future undoing, we here look back on a historical consciousness that existed prior to the truly temporal consciousness represented by the river. This historical stage is named at the end of the poem, but this end is superseded by the authentic endpoint named in line 5. We see it therefore, with the poet, as destined to this same end. Like the boy experiencing the foreknowledge of his death, history awakens in us a true sense of our temporality, by allowing for the interplay between achievement and dissolution, self-assertion and self-loss, on which the poem is built. History, like childhood, is what allows recollection to originate in a truly temporal perspective, not as a memory of a unity that never existed, but as the awareness, the remembrance of a precarious condition of falling that has never ceased to prevail.¹⁴

Hence, in the concluding sonnet of the same cycle, the emphasis on the italicized word *backward* in

*For, backward, Duddon! as I cast my eyes,
I see what was, and is, and will abide.*

["Conclusion," 3–4, 699]

¹⁴In the second version, the final sentences of this paragraph (beginning with "We see it therefore . . .") seem to have been replaced by the following passage:

Middle and end have been reversed by means of another metonymic figure in which history, contained within a larger dimension of time, becomes, in the poem, the container of a temporal movement that it claims to envelop, since it is present at the end of the text. But, again, as in the Boy of Winander, this metonymy of a content becoming a container, of an "enveloppé" becoming an "enveloppant," is a rhetorical device that does not correspond to a thematic, literal reality. When Wordsworth chooses to name mutability for what it is, in one of his most suggestive poems, the Mutability sonnet from the Ecclesiastical Sonnets, no historical triumphs are mentioned but only decay. It would take us a great deal more time and effort than we have available tonight to reveal the de-constructive rhetoricity of the Mutability poem; though it could be done. It would take us closer to an actual reading of Wordsworth, for which these remarks are only introductory exercises.

My entire exposition could be seen as a gloss on a sentence in Hartman's admirable book on Wordsworth in which he speaks of the need, for Wordsworth, "to respect the natural (which includes the temporal) order" if his poetry is to continue "as narrative." The narrative (which is itself metonymic) depends indeed on making the natural, thematic order appear as the container, the enveloppant, of time rather than as its content; the narrative is metonymic not because it is narrative but because it depends on metonymic substitution from the start. I can therefore totally subscribe to Hartman's reading of Wordsworth's strategy. The only thing I might

[Note that in this interpolated passage de Man seems to be re-reading his own metaphor of "enveloping" above (the more authentic temporality "envelops the other" in the fourth sentence of the paragraph), that is, is reading his own text rhetorically. Ed.]

As a mere assertion of the permanence of nature, the poem would be simply pious and in bad faith, for we know that as soon as we think of the river as analogous to a self, as a consciousness worthy of engaging our own, that it only reveals a constant loss of self. Considered as a partner and a guide, it has indeed “past away” [line 2] and never ceases to do so. This is the Function it fulfills in the line

The Form remains, the Function never dies

[line 6]

in which the Form corresponding to this function is the trajectory of a persistent fall. The entire poignancy of the two sonnets is founded on the common bond between the I of the poem and its emblematic counterpart in the Duddon, which makes the river into something more than mere nature. Instead of merely letting ourselves be carried by it, we are able to move backwards, against the current of the movement.¹⁵ This backward motion does not exist in nature but is the privilege of the faculty of mind that Wordsworth calls the imagination; asserting the possibility of reflection in the face of the most radical dissolution, personal or historical. The imagination engenders hope and future, not in the form of historical progress, nor in the form of an immortal life after death that would make human history unimportant, but as the persistent, future possibility of a retrospective reflection on its own decay. The 1850 version of *The Prelude* makes this clearest when it defines the imagination as being, at the same time, a sense of irreparable loss linked with the assertion of a persistent consciousness:

*I was lost
Halted without an effort to break through;
But to my conscious soul I now can say—
“I recognise thy glory.”*

[1850 *Prelude*, VI, 596–99]

The restoring power, in Wordsworth, does not reside in nature, or in history, or in a continuous progression from one to the other, but in the persistent power of mind and language after nature and history have failed. One wonders what category of being can sustain the mind in this knowledge and give it the future that makes imagination dwell, in the later version of *The Prelude*, with “something evermore about to be” [VI, 608].

This may be the moment at which a return to Hartman’s book is helpful. Like all attentive readers of Wordsworth, he reaches a point at which the nature of this restorative power has to be defined as the main assertive power in Wordsworth’s poetry. And the understanding he has of Wordsworth’s own mind allows him to give a very full and penetrating description of the complexities involved. He has noticed, more clearly than most other interpreters, that the imagination in Wordsworth is independent of nature and that it leads him to write a language, at his best moments, that is entirely unrelated to the exterior stimuli of the senses. He has also noticed that there is a kind of existential danger connected with this autonomy, and that when Wordsworth speaks about the *daring* of his imagery in the 1815 Preface, this risk involves more than mere experimentation with words. Hartman refers to this danger as an apocalyptic temptation, in his words, “a strong desire to cast out nature and to achieve an unmediated contact with the principle of things” [x]. Carried by the imagination, Wordsworth would at certain privileged moments come close to such visionary power, although he reaches it without supernatural intervention and always in a gradual and gentle way. Still, in the climactic passages of *The Prelude*, and in the main poems generally, the evidence of a moving beyond nature is unmistakable. What characterizes Wordsworth, according to Hartman, and sets him apart from Milton, for instance, and also from Blake, is that the apocalyptic moment is not sustained, that it is

¹⁵The remainder of the sentence, crossed out here, reads: “and thus to become aware of the persistence of the movement that can then be asserted as an eternal truth, almost regardless of its negative connotation.”

experienced as too damaging to the natural order of things to be tolerated. Out of reverence, not out of fear, Wordsworth feels the need to hide from sight the vision he has glimpsed for a moment; he has to do so, if his poetry is to continue its progression. And he finds the strength for this avoidance of apocalyptic abandon in nature itself—a nature that has been darkened and deepened by this very insight, and that has to some extent incorporated the power of imagination. But it has naturalized it, re-united it with a source that remains in the natural world. “The energy of imagination enters into a natural cycle though apart from it” [69], writes Hartman. The return to a natural image at the end of the famous passage on Imagination in Book VI of *The Prelude* “renews the connection between the waters above and the waters below, between heaven and earth. Towards this marriage of heaven and earth the poet proceeds despite apocalypse. He is the matchmaker, his song the spousal verse” [69]. The road apparently beyond and away from nature in fact never ceased to be a natural road, albeit nature in a negative form, the “via naturaliter negativa.”

We cannot follow him in speaking of an apocalyptic temptation in Wordsworth. The passages that Hartman singles out as apocalyptic never suggest a movement towards an unmediated contact with a divine principle. The imagination [in Book VI, 371–72] is said to be “like an unfather’d vapour” [527] and is, as such, entirely cut off from ultimate origins; it gives sight of “the invisible world” [536], but the invisibility refers to the mental, inward nature of this world as opposed to the world of the senses; it reveals to us that our home is “with infinity” [538–39], but within the language of the passage this infinity is clearly to be understood in a temporal sense as the futurity of “something evermore about to be” [542]. The heightening of pitch is not the result of “unmediated vision” but of another mediation, in which the consciousness does not relate itself any longer to nature but to a temporal entity. This entity could, with proper qualifications, be called history, and it is indeed in connection with historical events (the French Revolution) that the apostrophe to Imagination comes to be written. But if we call this history, then we must be careful to understand that it is the kind of history that appeared at the end of the Duddon sonnet, the retrospective recording of man’s failure to overcome the power of time. Morally, it is indeed a sentiment directed towards other men rather than towards nature, and, as such, imagination is at the root of Wordsworth’s theme of human love. But the bond between men is not one of common enterprise, or of a common belonging to nature: it is much rather the recognition of a common temporal predicament that finds its expression in the individual and historical destinies that strike the poet as exemplary. Examples abound, from “The Ruined Cottage” to “Resolution and Independence,” and in the various time-eroded figures that appear throughout *The Prelude*. The common denominator that they share is not nature but time, as it unfolds its power in these individual and collective histories.

Nor can we follow Hartman in his assertion of the ultimately regenerative power of nature. His argument returns to passages like the passage on Imagination in Book VI of *The Prelude* in which, according to him, after having shown the “conscious soul” as independent, Wordsworth has to return to a natural image. The soul is said to be

*Strong in herself and in beatitude
That hides her, like the mighty flood of Nile
Poured from her fount of Abyssinian clouds
To fertilize the whole Egyptian plain . . .*

[1850 *Prelude*, VI, 613–16; Hartman 69]

Perhaps enough has been said about the river Duddon to suggest that Wordsworth’s rivers are not to be equated with natural entities. We don’t even have to point to the further distancing from nature suggested by the exotic reference to an entity richer in mythological and literary than in natural associations; the abyss in “Abyssinian” maintains the source far beyond our reach, at a dizzying distance from ordinary perception and certainly not in “any mountain-valley where poetry is made” [69], as Hartman would have it. The fertile plain at the end occupies the same position that the historical world occupies in the last lines of the Duddon sonnet, and is thus not a symbol of regeneration. Hartman reads the “hiding” as naturally beneficial, as the protective act of nature that makes possible a fertile

continuation of the poem and of life, in contrast to the “unfathered vapour” that rejects the source in a supernatural realm. The hiding rather refers to the invisibility, the inwardness, the depth of a temporal consciousness that, when it reaches this level, can rejoice in the truth of its own insight and find thoughts “too deep for tears.” If rivers are, for Wordsworth, privileged emblems for the awareness of our mortal nature, in contrast to the natural unity of echoes and correspondences, then the use of an allegorical river at this point can hardly be the sign of a renewed bond with nature.

Hartman speaks of the need for Wordsworth “to respect the natural (which includes the temporal) order” if his poetry is to continue “as narrative” [46]. The equation of natural with temporal seems to us to go against Wordsworth’s most essential affirmation. He could well be characterized as the romantic poet in which the separation of time from nature is expressed with the greatest thematic clarity. The narrative order, in the short as well as in the longer poems, is no longer¹⁶ linear; the natural movement of his rivers has to be reversed as well as transcended if they are to remain usable as metaphors. A certain form of narrative nevertheless persists, but it will have to adopt a much more intricate temporal movement than that of the natural cycles. The power that maintains the imagination, which Hartman calls nature returning after it has been nearly annihilated by apocalyptic insight, is time. The key to an understanding of Wordsworth lies in the relationship between imagination and time, not in the relationship between imagination and nature.

A late poem of Wordsworth’s that appears among the otherwise truly sterile sequence of the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* can well be used as a concluding illustration. Like all other romantic poets, Wordsworth claims a privileged status for poetic language—a formula which was most legitimately put into question during our last session¹⁷ as standing in need of closer explanation. In Wordsworth, the privileged status of language is linked with the power of imagination, a faculty that rates higher than the fancy, or than rhetorical modes such as imitation, which, unlike the imagination, are dependent on correspondence with the natural world and thus limited by it. The language of imagination is privileged in terms of truth; it serves no empirical purposes or desires other than the truth of its own assertion:

*The mind beneath such banners militant
Thinks not of spoils or trophies, nor of aught
That may assert its prowess, blest in thoughts
That are its own perfection and reward
Strong in itself . . .*

[1805 *Prelude*, VI, 543–47; 372]

This truth is not a truth about objects in nature but a truth about the self; imagination arises “before the eye and progress of my Song” [526], in the process of self-discovery and as self-knowledge. A truth about a self is best described, not in terms of accuracy, but in terms of authenticity; true knowledge of a self is knowledge that understands the self as it really is. And since the self never exists in isolation, but always in relation to entities, since it is not a thing but the common center of a system of relationships or intents, an authentic understanding of a self means first of all a description of the entities towards which it relates, and of the order of priority that exists among these entities. For Wordsworth, the relationships towards time have a priority over relationships towards nature; one finds, in his work, a persistent deepening of self-insight represented as a movement that begins in

¹⁶In the second version, the following passage was inserted (directly after the words “no longer”) to replace the rest of the sentence:

a natural metaphor but a veiled metonymy. Wordsworth’s most daring paradox, the claim to have named the most unnamable of experiences, “the unimaginable touch of time,” is still based on a metonymic figure that, skillfully and effectively, appears in the disguise of a natural metaphor. In this least rhetorical of poets in which time itself comes so close to being a theme, the theme or meaning turns out to be more than ever dependent on rhetoric.

¹⁷A lecture on Hölderlin as read by Heidegger.

a contact with nature, then grows beyond nature to become a contact with time. The contact, the relationship with time, is, however, always a negative one for us, for the relationship between the self and time is necessarily mediated by death; it is the experience of mortality that awakens within us a consciousness of time that is more than merely natural. This negativity is so powerful that no language could ever name time for what it is; time itself lies beyond language and beyond the reach of imagination. Wordsworth can only describe the outward movement of time's manifestation, and this outward movement is necessarily one of dissolution, the "deathward progressing" of which Keats speaks in *The Fall of Hyperion*. To describe this movement of dissolution, as it is perceived in the privileged language of the imagination, is to describe it, not as an actual experience that would necessarily be as brusque and dizzying as a fall, but as the generalized statement of the truth of this experience in its universality. Dissolution thus becomes mutability, asserted as an *unfailing* law that governs the natural, personal, and historical existence of man. Thus to name mutability as a principle of order is to come as close as possible to naming the authentic temporal consciousness of the self. The late poem entitled "Mutability" comes as close as possible to being a language that imagines what is, in essence, unimaginable:

Mutability

*From low to high doth dissolution climb,
And sinks from high to low, along a scale
Of awful notes, whose concord shall not fail;
A musical but melancholy chime,
Which they can hear who meddle not with crime,
Nor avarice, nor over-anxious care.
Truth fails not; but her outward forms that bear
The longest date do melt like frosty rime,
That in the morning whitened hill and plain
And is no more; drop like the tower sublime
Of yesterday, which royally did wear
Its crown of weeds, but could not even sustain
Some casual shout that broke the silent air,
Or the unimaginable touch of Time.*

[780]