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Article

Textual Revision and the Historicity of the Self: Some Factual Inaccuracies in *The Prelude*

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Abstract

Reading Wordsworth's *Prelude* implicates us immediately in the politics of autobiographical writing — which deliberately elides, to use Felicity Nussbaum's words, "the subject's fragmentations and discontinuities." But at the same time, one cannot help suspecting that the seemingly reasonable expectation of factual correctness in autobiography can also mask a deep denial of these essential fragmentations and discontinuities in the name of truth.

Wordsworth's revisions of the *Prelude* afford an insightful means of understanding these issues: here the imperatives of narrative self-constitution far outweigh the imperatives of literal facts. But the misdating of crucial events — such as the composition of the Glad Preamble — do not detract from its validity as autobiographical writing, but rather gives evidence of the self-problematizing nature of origins. In fact, the interest in works such as the *Prelude* lies not in how closely they adhere to historical particularities, but how tenaciously their metaphoric transcendence resists reduction back to these historical particularities. Romantic subjectivity makes no clear distinction between self and the outer world of phenomena — and also it seems between self and self. This becomes abundantly clear in Wordsworth's appropriation of Dorothy's experience. In the *Prelude* this process is traceable eminently through the process of textual revisions as the present study argues.

- 1 A fundamental irony of the study of Romanticism is how it transforms often into the very object of its contemplation. The material circumstances of literary production—such as revisionary labor and the ineluctable process by which it becomes a part of the literary works themselves—thus become obscured by essentialism.
- 2 Perhaps that is why Jonathan Arac assigns to imagination an unmitigatedly concrete "historical" function connected with revision. Its task is to fill up the discursive space opened up literally between the lines by Wordsworth's decision to expand the 1798 *Prelude* (initially into its five-book version and subsequently) into its 1805 version: "The revisions of *The Prelude* demonstrate the continuing liveliness of response in Wordsworth, his continuing power to find between the lines of the earlier text places where imagination would come to him" (Arac 234).
- 3 The present discussion, offered in the spirit of a prolegomenon to a systematic study of the processive development of *The Prelude*, begins with an analysis of Wordsworth's varying distance from Dorothy:

[. . .] Ah, then it was
That thou, most precious friend, about this time
First known to me, didst lend a living help
To regulate my soul. And then it was
That the belovèd woman in whose sight
Those days were passed—now speaking in a voice
Of sudden admonition like a brook
That does but cross a lonely road; and now
Seen, heard and felt, and caught at every turn,
Companion never lost through many a league—
Maintained for me a saving intercourse
With my true self (for, though impaired, and changed
Much, as it seemed, I was no further changed
Than as a clouded, not a waning moon) [. . .]

1805; 10.905-17

- 4 The temporal perspective of this narrative from which Wordsworth refers to his "precious friend" is September 1795 (*The Prelude* 408n9). But Wordsworth had only met him once at this time. And although during the next two years there was some correspondence between the two, it was not until June 1797, by all accounts, that Coleridge had any direct influence on Wordsworth. The reference to Coleridge raises some questions about Wordsworth's chronological organization of events in *The Prelude* and how these become linked with the processes of romantic subjectivity. In the 1816-19 revisions—which result in the 1850 *Prelude*—Wordsworth removes this assertion and attributes his recovery solely to Dorothy. Divergences between the two versions suggest how the writing in and out of crucial details such as this become a recognizable pattern of self-fashioning in *The Prelude*. The process moves in either direction, contracting or expanding to give meaning to Wordsworth's experience in narrative form.
- 5 But the removing of inaccuracies on Wordsworth's part cannot be viewed innocently as a form of correction. It raises the question—why, then, did he put it there in the first place? Surely, he knew at the time when he was composing the 1805 *Prelude* that it was Dorothy, rather than Coleridge, who exerted a direct influence on him,

In the final analysis, such scholarly occupations centre around the issue of the historicity of imagination. "The ingredients of Wordsworth's narrative [. . .] whether or not they have a basis of fact, are very close to metaphor," writes Finch. In poetry "the figurative is an idealization of the personal" (4). Crucially, Finch's statement clinches the argument for us that in the autobiographical discourse of *The Prelude* the two domains of factuality and imagination cannot but "shade" into one another, and that their demarcations are never "tidy." This critique also approximates Kenneth R. Johnston's allusion to the "double aspect" of Wordsworth's poetry, which we refer to later in this discussion.

- 12 The chronological variation between the two versions of Book 7 occurs because of this initial dislocation deriving from the "Glad Preamble." For instance, Wordsworth had returned from his visit to France in October 1790. Three months later in January 1791 he received his B.A. from Cambridge. Although the lines were composed in October 1804, it is from the temporal perspective of 1791 that Wordsworth dates his visit to London two years earlier in 1788: "Twas at least two years / Before this season when I first beheld / That mighty place, a transient visitant" (7.72-74). But the 1850 *Prelude* takes this visit to London further back to 1787 and thus reads, "Three years had flown / Since I had felt in heart and soul the shock / Of the huge town's first presence, and had paced / Her endless streets, a transient visitant" (7.65-68). What matters most in these chronological adjustments is not how they may indicate where the "true" beginnings of *The Prelude* lie, but rather how the act of remembering is subject to narrative contingencies.

- 13 In *The Prelude* there is a kind of opaque transparency which occurs when the "I" that speaks relinquishes its supervisory control momentarily and encounters itself in that uncertain zone in the interstices of the narrative. Wordsworth teases out the "hiding places" of this encounter in his elaboration of the process by which the love of nature transforms itself into "the love of man":

Yet do not deem, my friend, though thus I speak
Of man as having taken in my mind
A place thus early which might almost seem
Preeminent, that this was really so.
Nature herself was at this unripe time
But secondary to my own pursuits
And animal activities, and all
Their trivial pleasures. And long afterwards
When those had died away, and Nature did
For her own sake become my joy, even then,
And upwards through late youth until not less
Than three-and-twenty summers had been told,
Was man in my affections and regards
Subordinate to her [. . .].

1805; 8.472-85

- 14 The difficulties of storytelling are the same as those of maintaining the integrity of the "I" in the face of narrative contingencies that challenge its authority, even as they determine it. Wordsworth's encounter with this paradoxical feeling is evident in his conscious problematisation of the order of events distorted, he says, by the very narrative entrusted with giving an account of his crucial development from priest of nature to humanitarian liberal. The attempt to rectify this narrative betrayal finds its expression in the rhetoric of perceived discrepancy noted in "though thus I speak/ [. . .]which might almost seem/ [. . .] that this was really so."

- 15 The dating, "three-and-twenty summers" in this version, is changed to "two-and-twenty summers" (7.349) in the 1850 *Prelude* in order to "fit" Beauvuy's influence into the revised narrative (*The Prelude* 290n3). The factuality of Beauvuy's influence on Wordsworth is not at issue here. But the willful narrative positioning of this incident in a certain manner is. Because, to use Paul Ricoeur's words, it indicates a "feigned plot" arising from "a new congruence in the organization of events" (1: ix). This consciously unconscious act evidences the imperceptible crossing from fact to fiction in autobiographical discourse.

- 16 That the act of remembering itself constitutes a narrative movement complicated by temporality is demonstrable through Wordsworth's parenthetical remark in a key passage in the 1805 *Prelude* (10.38-82) delineating his tour of France. As the passage gets underway, one has the impression that there is a progressive intermingling of emotions arising out of actual events and emotions which are imagined so that past and present become indistinguishable.

- 17 It is night-time and Wordsworth lies in bed recollecting the eventful day. With "unextinguished taper," Wordsworth tells us, he "kept watch, / Reading at intervals" (61-62) as he reflected on the September massacres-which incidentally had occurred a month earlier, as he himself acknowledges in the two lines reminiscent of Hamlet (362n9): "I thought of those September massacres, / Divided from me by a little month" (64-65). It is at this point in the description that Wordsworth inserts the parenthetical comment about the constructedness of experience as if making a self-reflexive shift to the present, that is, the moment of composition as distinct from the memory which it recalls of that night in Paris: "The rest was conjured up from tragic fictions, / And mournful calendars of true history, / Remembrances and dim admonishments" (1805; 10.67-69).

- 18 This overt reminder of the constructedness of experience seems somewhat abrupt when we consider that the narrative's focus hitherto has been on detailing the temporal immediacy of a lived moment (made all the more urgent by its tone of unadorned yet profound sincerity: "But that night / When on my bed I lay, I was most moved / and felt most deeply in what world I was" [1805 10.54-56]) in which Wordsworth experiences certain emotions in the aftermath of the Paris massacres he claims to have witnessed first-hand, "looking as doth a man / Upon a volume whose contents he knows / Are memorable but from him locked up" (1805; 10.49-51).

- 19 This temporal complexity is compounded by Wordsworth's 1850 revision further down in this passage:

The horse is taught his manage, [and no star
Of wildest course but treads back his own steps;

For the spent hurricane the air provides
 As fierce a successor; the tide retreats
 But to return out of its hiding-place
 In the great deep;] all things have second birth;
 The earthquake is not satisfied at once;
 And in this way I wrought upon myself,
 Until I seemed to hear a voice that cried,
 To the whole city, 'Sleep no more.' [The trance
 Fled with the voice to which it had given birth;
 But vainly comments of a calmer mind
 Promised soft peace and sweet forgetfulness.
 The place, all hushed and silent as it was,
 Appeared] unfit for the repose of night,
 Defenceless as a wood where tigers roam.

1850; 10.78-93

- 20 When Wordsworth made these revisions (in square brackets) for the 1850 version did he think he was recollecting a reverie in such detail? Or did he feel he was embellishing a literary text? Or both? Wordsworth's inclusion of the description of a trance he claims to have been in at that time is also remarkable. Did he not remember the trance when composing the 1805 version? Did he forget to remember? These complexities of remembering, "wrought" (to apply an aptly Wordsworthian description) through textual revisions, suggest how the act of remembrance is postulated not only on the mutual constitutiveness of narrativity and temporality, but also on the mutual constitutiveness of autobiographical writing and literary self-invention.
- 21 The negotiation between truth and fiction, intensified perhaps by Stephen Greenblatt's theories of literary self-fashioning, has inaugurated a new accommodation between the two: "self-fashioning derives its interest precisely from the fact that it functions without regard for a sharp distinction between literature and social life" (3). The figure of the self presented in *The Prelude* is a concoction whose experiences are sometimes borrowed from Dorothy as we have seen. Greenblatt's critique invites us to consider the crucial "passage from abstract potential to concrete historical embodiment" (3-4). We need look no further than the compositional manoeuvres in *The Prelude*. It is here that we can appreciate the importance of textual revision in sustaining the process of writing, in making Wordsworth aware of himself simultaneously as a subject and the subject of his writing.
- 22 As Felicity Nussbaum notes regarding the emergence of notions of self in the eighteenth century, "memory, the imagination, sensibility, and fiction making are each in turn forwarded as an explanation of the continuing principle of consciousness" held together by the self (38-9). These are also key Wordsworthian values. But they could not have been sustained without concrete revisionary labors. Revision by definition enables the subject to come into being by regarding himself or herself from the outside.
- 23 Composition was an inevitable part of the cultural history of private experience in which Wordsworth was, as we know, a major figure (Morris 8). The conditions of possibility for consciousness to come into existence were provided by composition. But eventually, composition itself came to be regarded as consciousness-or as consciousness-as-writing (Slinn's description). The emergence and increasing prominence of autobiographical discourse at this time in Western history would seem to suggest so. Autobiographical discourse performs, to use the words of Philip Davis, "the post-religious functions of human memory by means of which the individual cannot escape considering his life, at some distance from himself" (337). In this process the self becomes a text and revision an essential part of composition.
- 24 Factual inaccuracies are a confirmation of this. Consider, for instance, the discrepancy in Wordsworth's claim in *The Prelude* to have witnessed the eviction of the monks in the Grand Chartreuse which he visited during his walking tour of France in 1790 with his companion Jones. But the event did not take place until 1792. Wordsworth's composition of the event for *The Prelude* (1816-19) itself is a repetition of the event as recorded in his *Descriptive Sketches* (1792). His imaginative placing of himself in a given narrative matrix is confirmation not of falsification, but the retrospective nature of composition which already makes it a re-vision.
- 25 But revision also becomes a negotiation between two orders of reality, and in closing the gap between these two orders of reality we become complicit in a cover-up of, in Felicity Nussbaum's words, "the subject's fragmentations and discontinuities" (15), persistently showing up through the text. Factuality in autobiography may not be an unreasonable expectation. One suspects, however, that such an expectation perpetuates a deep denial of the subject's fragmentations and discontinuities in the name of truth.
- 26 If, as Nussbaum says, "the relation of autobiographical discourse to the real is opaque" (9), then this is only an exhortation to demystify the process through which the material reality of lived experience-subsuming essentially the material reality of composition itself-seeks inclusion into Wordsworth's poetry, for instance. Nothing less than a microhistory of composition will do.
- 27 Wordsworth's family home-as Kenneth R. Johnston's useful study points out-served as a hub in the politics dominated by the much dreaded Lord Lowther. But who can recognize these concrete facts in "the fretful dwellings of mankind" (1799; 1.13) that we encounter in Wordsworth's poetry (15)? Such pronouncements have their origin as much in experience as in imagination. What Johnston calls the "double aspect" (289) of Wordsworth's poetry is indeed the moment of the mutual constitutiveness of the literal and the figurative. The underlying assumption of Johnston's critique is that there is a differential between the public and the private selves which serves as a principle for reading Wordsworth's poetry.
- 28 But for our part, we follow in that differential the imaginative transmutations of the historical concrete as they apply to the conditions of composition. What Paul Jay so innocuously calls Wordsworth's "asides" in *The Prelude* are arguably the evidence of the material reality of *The Prelude's* compositional process seeping in, often in dramatic ways, through the work's purported thematic program. These subterranean crossings revealed through textual revision, and not essentialist formulations of revision, are the real issue in *The Prelude*.

- 29 Progressively, Wordsworth sought meaning not so much in experience per se as in the complex patterns of changing textual configurations. Susan Wolfson characterizes this process as a form of return which constantly sends Wordsworth back "to manuscripts past and to a reperusal of the surfaces and gaps of his narrative" (918). It is only in such forms of analysis that we begin to understand the role of textual revision in producing Romantic effects. The "recollective activity" which makes Wordsworth so dear to us is indeed a revisionary activity.
- 30 Although Wolfson's analysis refers to a monumental example, the "Drowned Man of Esthwaite" episode in *The Prelude*, the gaps in Wordsworth's narrative are pervasive. The two versions of the opening of book 4, "Summer Vacation," describing the view of the prospect from the heights of Kendal illustrate this point:

A pleasant sight it was when, having clomb
The Heights of Kendal, and that dreary moor
Was crossed, at length as from a rampart's edge
I overlooked the bend of Windermere.
I bounded down the hill, shouting amain
A lusty summons to the farther shore
For the old ferryman; and when he came
I did not step into the well-known boat
Without a cordial welcome. [. . .]

1805; 4.1-9

- 31 This account, which gives an economical treatment of Wordsworth's raptures on reaching the familiar sights of home, is much more abbreviated than the one we get in the 1850 version. Only in retrospect does Wordsworth unearth greater detail and ever-new meanings absent in the earlier version of the experience:

Bright was the summer's noon when quickening steps
Followed each other till a dreary moor
Was crossed, and a bare ridge clomb, upon whose top
Standing alone, as from a rampart's edge,
I overlooked the bed of Windermere,
Like a vast river, stretching in the sun.
With exultation, at my feet I saw
Lake, islands, promontories, gleaming bays,
A universe of Nature's fairest forms
Proudly revealed with instantaneous burst,
Magnificent, and beautiful, and gay.
I bounded down the hill shouting amain
For the old Ferryman; to the shout the rocks
Replied, and when the Charon of the flood
Had staid his oars, and touched the jutting pier,
I did not step into the well-known boat
Without a cordial greeting. [. . .]

1850; 4.1-17

- 32 Although Wordsworth's introduction of a classical reference (incorrectly applied, as de Selincourt points out in his 1933 edition of the 1805 *Prelude* [260]) adds an element of studied ceremoniousness not in evidence in the earlier version, it does not detract from the rapturous freshness of expression in the 1850 *Prelude*. In contrast to the much abbreviated description of its predecessor in the 1805 *Prelude*, this version provides greater detail in which "the bed of Windermere" composed at once by "lake, islands, promontories, gleaming bays" appear with an "instantaneous burst." Both memory and revision are by definition retrospective activities whose essential functions are to modify earlier texts. The indistinguishability of the two here highlights the embeddedness of the metaphysical in the physical, as Alan Bewell argues.
- 33 In that sense, experience itself may be a text perpetually modified by memory and composition always already a re-vision. At least the composition of the Simplon Pass episode would seem to suggest so. In fact, as Geoffrey Hartman's 1964 essay points out, it was "not until the moment of composition, some fourteen years after the event" that "the real reason behind his upward climb and subsequent melancholy slackening strike home." The significance strikes home "so hard that he gives to the power in him revealed by extinction of the immediate external motive (his desire to cross the Alps) and by the abyss of the intervening years, the explicit name Imagination" (40). Wordsworth's apocalyptic vision – which Hartman calls "the tragic, pervasive, and necessary condition of the mature poet" (41) – functions only retrospectively.
- 34 But finally, for us the depth of such retrospective qualifications may only be assessable through its textualisations in concrete forms of revision. A trip down memory lane is also a trip down revision lane. The term *reflexivity* or *self-consciousness* – commonly associated with Wordsworth's *Prelude* – may be taken as an essentialist delineation of this situation evacuated of its history.
- 35 At the very end of the 1805 *Prelude* Wordsworth expresses the hope of finding "solace in the knowledge which we have" (13.436); interestingly, in the 1850 *Prelude* Wordsworth's revision rearticulates this sentiment, though in different terms, as the hope of finding solace in "knowing what we have learnt to know" (14.440). "Knowing what we have learnt to know" immediately implicates us in the textual politics of revision which produces it as a form of reflection on an earlier state of knowledge. It is an example of how textual configuration itself provides the conditions of possibility for "doubling" within *The Prelude* (Chase xv).

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