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## WORDSWORTH AND THE “SPOTS OF TIME”

BY JONATHAN BISHOP

*The Prelude* is at the center of our experience of Wordsworth; at the center of our experience of *The Prelude* are those “spots of time” where Wordsworth is endeavoring to express key moments in the history of his imagination. Basil Willey<sup>1</sup> has suggested that we might isolate the genuine element in Wordsworth by collating these passages; this essay is an attempt in that direction.

Narrowly speaking, the “spots of time” are the two incidents introduced by Wordsworth’s own use of the phrase: “There are in our existence spots of time, / That with distinct pre-eminence retain / A renovating virtue,”<sup>2</sup> that is, the little boy’s encounter with the gibbet and his wait for his father’s horses. Yet the poet’s language implies that there were in fact many such “spots” from which his mind could draw new strength, and every reader of *The Prelude* will at once associate with these two those other “passages of life” which collectively establish the greatness of the poem. Using the phrase in a looser sense, the “spots of time” must include the descriptions of Wordsworth’s boyhood exploits as a snarer of woodcocks, a plunderer of bird’s nests, a skater, a rider of horses, and such single events as the famous Stolen Boat episode, the Dedication to poetry, the Discharged Soldier, the Dream of the Arab-Quixote, the memory of the Winander Boy, the Drowned Man, Entering London, the Father and Child and the Blind Beggar, Simplon Pass, The Night in Paris, Robespierre’s Death, and Snowden. Some would wish to include the memories of childhood play at Cockermouth, and the moment under the rock when Wordsworth heard “The ghostly language of the ancient earth” (II. 309), or such border-line cases as the Druid Reverie. But a list incorporating every moment of excitement in

<sup>1</sup> Basil Willey, *The Eighteenth Century Background* (London, 1940), p. 274.

<sup>2</sup> *The Prelude* XII, 208-210 ff. References throughout are to De Selincourt’s edition of the 1850 version (Oxford, 1926).

*The Prelude* would be unwieldy and tendentious. The passages I have named everyone can agree upon; they must form the major items in any argument which seeks, in whatever terms, to express a sense of the poem.

I will assume for the purposes of this article that my reader has in fact appreciated the power of these “spots” and that I need not devote space to quotation and exegeses intended to establish their poetical existence. Let us agree that the job of introducing Wordsworth’s excellences has been done, perhaps more often than is strictly necessary. I should like to raise here a question that emerges after we have made ourselves acquainted with the general limitations and strengths of *The Prelude*, and recognized the peculiar interest of the “spots.” How do we get into them? What sense do these crucial experiences make as we go over them in our minds? What do they appear to be *about*?

The first thing that strikes us is the degree to which they tend to share common themes. Consider the way they commence: “Oh, many a time have I, a five years’ child” (I. 288); “Not less when spring had warmed” (I. 326); “And in the frosty season” (I. 425); “many a time / At evening” (V. 365-366); “When summer came, / Our pastime was” (II. 54-55); the opening lines set the date and the season of adventures many times experienced by the boy Wordsworth. This note of repetition recurs as each memory develops. Wordsworth is always conscious of movements; the river Derwent “blends” and “flows” and “winds” and the young boy “plunges,” “scours,” and “leaps”; and movement tends to become a rhythm of repeated actions: “Basked in the sun, and plunged and basked again” (I. 291), or “Scudding away from snare to snare, I plied” and “sounds / Of indistinguishable motion, steps” (I. 313; 323-324). Motion often means climbing, the ascent of a road or crag or mountain, and when the protagonist himself does not rise, another participant in the experience may. Repeated action seems to be linked with the presence of animals; the boy Wordsworth ranges heights “where woodcocks run” (I. 311); his skiff heaves “through the water like a swan” (I. 376); the skating boys are a “pack” and “hare” (I. 437); even the ascent of Snowden is diversified by the antics of a dog. Horses are especially prominent; they appear more or less importantly in *Entering London*, *Robespierre’s Death*, *The Dream* (in the form of a dromedary), and the *Gibbet*

and *Waiting for Horses*. Perhaps we are closest to the meaning horses have for Wordsworth in his recollection of mounted expeditions to the seashore, when “Lighted by gleams of moonlight from the sea / We beat with thundering hoofs the level sand” (II. 136-137).

The presence of powerfully repeated action seems linked with another common element, the emergence of a solitary figure from a crowd. While skating the boy Wordsworth detaches himself from the games of his playmates to “cut across the reflex of a star” (I. 450) as he says in a wonderful image, and the *Dedication* and his encounter with the *Discharged Soldier* each follow upon dancing parties from which Wordsworth is returning alone. There is a crowd to witness the *Drowned Man*’s rise from the lake, and to listen as the solitary flautist “blew his flute / Alone upon the rock” (II. 169-170). Is there perhaps an analogy between the separation of an individual from a crowd and the theme of repeated action? Just as, at the climax of a “spot,” the protagonist detaches himself from his companions, so the rhythm of motion, rising to a height, often receives a check, a breaking in of new experience.<sup>3</sup> The skating memory illustrates this clearly: “and oftentimes, / When we had given our bodies to the wind / And all the shadowy banks on either side / Came sweeping through the darkness, spinning still / The rapid line of motion, then at once / Have I, reclining back upon my heels, / Stopped short” (I. 452-458); transferring the skater’s motion to the cliffs around him, which wheel by him giddily. Similarly, the climax of the nest-plundering memory comes at the moment when, his own movement checked, the boy hangs on the face of the rock while wind and clouds move for him. More developed is the experience of the *Winander boy*, calling repeatedly across a lake; at moments as he “hung / Listening,” he felt “a gentle shock of mild surprise” which “carried far into his heart the voice / Of mountain torrents” exchanging for his proud shouts a heartfelt impression of the “visible scene” (V. 381-384). Wordsworth was conscious of the importance of this formula in his mental life and twice instanced the *Winander* “spot” as evidence that “an act of

<sup>3</sup> We may recall that in dreams, crowds are often a symbolic personification of repeated impulses. The presence of a crowd may mean that the activity or wish in question has occurred many times. See for example Daniel E. Schneider, *The Psychoanalyst and the Artist* (New York, 1950), p. 32.

steady observation, or . . . expectation,” suddenly relaxed, might carry to the heart whatever at that moment impressed the senses.<sup>4</sup> The most vivid example of reciprocation is the famous Stolen Boat memory. The boy rows his skiff out into the lake, his eyes fixed on a peak behind as a mark, “lustily” enjoying his rhythmical motion through the water. Suddenly his own actions bring about another, vaster motion and a farther peak rises up behind his mark: “I struck and struck again, / And growing still in stature the grim shape / Towered up between me and the stars, and still, / For so it seemed, with purpose of its own / And measured motion like a living thing, / Strode after me” (I. 380-385). Reciprocation has become retaliatory. His action is guilty; he has stolen the boat, and nature’s reaction is correspondingly punitive. We may recall the “low breathings” the boy heard following him when he stole birds from others’ snares, and remember that there is often a degree of guilt attached even to innocent actions; running out into the fields is “wantonness” and climbing after eggs “plundering.” At the climax of the Stolen Boat episode the language seems to put us in touch with a more severe crime than theft; we read that, astonished, he “struck and struck again” with his oars, as if an act more violent than rowing alone were meant.

The “low breathings” just noticed may also remind us of the role moving air plays in the “spots.” Wind is literally present as the boy scales the heights; it blows “amain, / Shouldering the naked crag” (I. 334-335) where the birds’ nests are found, and sweeps the skaters over the ice. Raised to its human equivalent the wind blows “strange utterance,” or, as personified Nature, “breathes.” The recurrence of occasions on which sounds are heard over a watery surface seems linked with this half-human air. The Winander boy shouts across the lake, and church bells, voices, and echoes combine in an “alien sound / Of melancholy” (I. 443-444) that resounds over the icy surface of the lake in the skating memory. In an interestingly linked series, the music of bird song from an island is echoed by “that single wren / Which one day sang so sweetly” over ground wet from “recent showers” (II. 118-120) and the climactic image of a boy sitting on an island

<sup>4</sup> The relevant autobiographical passages are most easily available in De Selincourt, p. 531, and R. D. Havens, *The Mind of a Poet* (Baltimore, 1941), II, 392.

blowing his flute over “dead still water” (II. 171). In the memories of youth and adulthood we encounter, in place of natural sounds, a voice speaking words, inarticulate or cryptic, threatening or relieving. This sound or voice seems most often to occur at the extreme moment of the repeated action, to enunciate, as it were, the check or reversal which climaxes the experience; though in the case of the Winander boy, the voice is itself the repeated action. Perhaps the presence of something written, like the initial carved in the turf in the Gibbet episode, or the pamphlet in the Paris Night memory, or the “books” carried by the Arab Quixote, are derivations from the commoner and more vivid image of an articulate cry.

Surfaces hide depths. The boy shouts over water, rows upon it, gallops beside it; he also bathes in it, and we are soon made aware of water as a powerful image of the apprehensive mind. The “uncertain heaven, received / Into the bosom of the steady lake” (V. 387-388) is a famous and explicit image for the impression made upon the boy’s heart, and the sound of his companion’s flute makes him feel that the “calm / And dead still water lay upon my mind / Even with a weight of pleasure, and the sky, / Never before so beautiful, sank down / Into my heart, and held me like a dream” (II. 170-175). These words place the boy first under the water, then identify him with it; imaginatively, he dissolves into the element that drowns him. We recall Wordsworth’s comparison of his effort to remember to “one who hangs down-bending from the side / Of a slow-moving boat, upon the breast / Of a still water” (IV. 256-258), seeking to distinguish objects on the bottom.

This metaphor is dramatized in the Drowned Man<sup>5</sup> “spot.”

<sup>5</sup> The image of the Drowned Man pursued Wordsworth throughout his poetical career. The most important use of it outside *The Prelude* is in *Peter Bell*, which employs this material on the scale of a full length narrative. In the course of his adventure Peter finds himself staring at the surface of a river:

Is it the moon’s distorted face?  
The ghost-like image of a cloud?  
Is it a gallows there portrayed?  
Is Peter of himself afraid?

Peter faints, wakes, and looks again:

Thought he, that is the face of one  
In his last sleep securely bound!

Walking alone around a silent lake as a schoolboy Wordsworth had seen a heap of garments on the opposite shore, and the next day he watched as the body, grappled to the surface, “bolt upright / Rose, with his ghastly face, a spectre shape / Of terror” (V. 449-51). A very similar figure, described in virtually the same terms, appears in the encounter with the Discharged Soldier. Wordsworth leaves a party, and starts home “up a long ascent, / Where the road’s watery surface, to the top / Of that sharp rising glittered. . . .” His reverie is suddenly interrupted by “an uncouth shape. . . . Stiff, lank, and upright; a more meagre man / Was never seen before by night or day. / Long were his arms, pallid his hands; his mouth / Looked ghastly in the moonlight” (IV. 379-396). Can we connect these spectral figures with the ghostly retaliator who lurked in nature, whose “low breathings” and “steps” he heard behind him, the “grim shape” whose “head” “upreared” behind the mountain horizon, and see him again in the “blind Beggar, who, with upright face, / Stood, propped against a wall” (VII, 639-640) in one of the London memories? It seems relevant that the sight of this beggar made Wordsworth’s mind turn “round / As with the might of waters” and that he gazed “As if admonished from another world” (VII. 643-649).<sup>6</sup> In these experiences the other world is literally beyond the limits of this; the grim shape emerges from behind the horizon, from under the surface of the water, at the crest of a road. To pass a boundary is to evoke the unknown. In *Entering London* he is

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With his staff Peter stirs the water and

The man who had been four days dead,  
Head-foremost from the river’s bed  
Uprises like a ghost!

(De Selincourt, *Poetical Works*, ii, p. 353-358).

While Wordsworth was on a tour of the continent in 1820 a young American was drowned in a Swiss lake. Wordsworth felt himself obscurely responsible for this incident: “it was the misfortune” of the young man “to fall in with a friend of mine who was hastening to join our party.” In consequence he wrote some worthless *Elegiac Stanzas* to comfort the parent. (*P. W.*, iii, p. 193).

<sup>6</sup>One might pursue the theme of the Grim Shape through all those pictures of old men who fill Wordsworth’s poems, and see them as diminished versions of a starker original, in which terror has been converted to pity and admiration, and the stiffness of death to stoic endurance. Florence Marsh has brought together some of the main images to be found in the whole body of Wordsworth’s poetry. Her survey of the old man, sounds, water, and buildings are relevant to my argument. See her *Wordsworth’s Imagery* (New Haven, 1952), pp. 78-103.

riding on a vehicle surrounded by crowds when he suddenly becomes aware that "The threshold now is overpast" (VIII. 549), as if these words were spoken to his inner ear; whereupon "A weight of ages did at once descend / Upon my heart; no thought embodied, no / Distinct remembrances, but weight and power,—/ Power growing under weight" (VIII. 552-555). *Power growing under weight*; the image expresses a paradoxical release of inner force complementing the very pressures which inhibit it, as if suffering authorized strength. Does not such language, echoed in so many of the "spots," suggest that the moment of illumination is irresistibly followed by a punitive crushing, a death by a weight like that of water and all that water obscurely symbolizes? To be sure, Wordsworth tells us as often as not that such experiences are matter for self-congratulation, and perhaps ultimately they are, yet we should not allow his often rather sanctimonious afterthoughts to blur for us the clear drift of his language. The immediate experience is terror.

As we go over the "spots," and recall the associated areas of Wordsworth's other poetry, we come upon other evidences of a shared vocabulary. We notice how often key experiences take place in darkness, especially darkness qualified, perhaps at the moment of inner illumination, by the sudden presence of light; the role of the moon is worth following for its own sake through the whole body of Wordsworth's work. Trees, too, have a special meaning for him, though their place in the "spots" seems less prominent than one might expect. Buildings, especially ruined buildings, do appear: Cocker-mouth Castle, "a shattered monument" (I. 284), stood beside the river in which the "five-year child" bathed; in the memories of Book II a bird sings in a ruined shrine; a chapel on an island is part of the scenery in Robespierre's Death; cottages, huts, and tenements appear in other "spots." But moonlight, trees and even buildings seem relatively isolated images; to pursue them is to leave behind the context in which, if anywhere, they acquire a meaning. Our job as readers is less to establish the presence of individual items than to articulate the latent argument these recurrences suggest. What we seem to have are fragments of a drama, moments in a single action which has retired behind the reach of direct expression, leaving in our hands fragments of imagery. In what sentences will this vocabulary combine?



Perhaps a recaptulation will clarify. We seem to have in the “spots” a repeated action, something a crowd does, or the protagonist does over and over, an action with guilty overtones, expressive of power and pride, rising as it proceeds to a boundary, there to be checked and retaliated upon from without, by counter-motion, or by a voice or the appearance of a grim shape, whose arrival precipitates an oppressive catastrophe. Is this rehearsal too abstract? Objections will arise, for many a “spot” mixes or omits elements of this story: the relation between the protagonist and the grim shape, for example, is very changeable, in some memories reducing to identity. And many of the early memories never rise to a distinct crisis; we hear of customary actions, repeated experiences which stay, as it were, in the back of Wordsworth’s mind, pleasant but indistinct. When something does happen, though, the event follows at a greater or lesser distance this curious pattern.

Wordsworth himself is not certain what to name these moments. They demonstrate the workings of “unknown modes of being” (I. 393) as dreams do and we recall that the hills swirling about the skater calm down “Till all was tranquil as a dreamless sleep” (I. 464), and that the music of the flute sinks into his heart to hold him “like a dream” (II. 176). One of the major “spots” of adult life is literally a dream; others are nearer hallucination (Paris Night) or vision (Snowden). Wordsworth offers interpretations when he feels he can put the event satisfactorily into philosophic terms. The Snowden experience appears to him “The type / Of a majestic intellect” (XIV. 66-67), a symbol of the mind, a view which clearly embodies a real insight, yet the language in which the insight is elaborated, most readers will agree, is invincibly prosaic. The “philosophic mind” can interpret, but only in abstract terms; the feelings embodied in the original mysterious event remain attached to the structure of the event itself.

Let us turn, with this caveat in mind, to a related group of “spots” experienced in young manhood, and see how far the pattern we have been able to find may help us to disengage a meaning. Book X begins with Wordsworth returning to Paris in October, 1792. He is on his way home, leaving Annette pregnant behind him. It is a moment of public tension. The king is in prison, and the massacres of September just past. Entering

the city, Wordsworth crosses the empty square where men had died a few weeks before, looking on the sights “as doth a man / Upon a volume whose contents he knows / Are memorable” (X. 58-60) but which he cannot read. He ascends to his bed in a “large mansion,” and with “unextinguished taper” begins to read. The elements necessary to significant experience begin to combine, as he climbs out of the populous city to his lonely nocturnal eminence, lit by a single light, and broodingly works upon himself, recalling reasons why the massacres of the previous month must be followed by new terrors:

The fear gone by  
Pressed on me almost like a fear to come.  
I thought of those September massacres,  
Divided from me by one little month,  
Saw them and touched: the rest was conjured up  
From magic fictions or true history,  
Remembrances and dim admonishments.  
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 (X. 71-85)

He works upon himself, piling images of retaliation one upon another, including as he goes references to horses, wind and sea, drugging himself to the point where a hallucinatory voice breaks in, crying “To the whole city, ‘Sleep no more.’” It is the cry of Macbeth after killing his king.

The next morning Wordsworth walks out to find a pamphlet being sold in the streets. This pamphlet reprints a speech made by a brave Girondist named Louvet, who, provoked by Robespierre’s challenge, had while “no one stirred, / In silence of all present, from his seat / . . . walked single through the avenue, / And took his station in the Tribune, saying, / ‘I, Robespierre, accuse thee!’” (X. 109-113). This story accidentally repeats the formula of the previous night; again we have a solitary man, separating himself from a crowd, walking to an eminence, and again a voice challenges the bloody deeds of a murderer. The

ambiguity of the grammar allows us to make the necessary connections: Wordsworth feels himself both as the utterer of the cry and the murderer to whom it is directed.

The depths of Wordsworth's imaginative involvement in the political events that followed that night is easy to read in his own actions. He returned to England in December, 1792; in January Louis XVI was executed. Typically, the poem does *not* mention this; we hear instead of the "shock" Wordsworth's moral nature felt when England joined the allies against France. In the middle of January he wrote his unmailed letter to the Bishop of Llandaff, accusing this fellow north countryman, liberal, and Cambridge man<sup>7</sup> of apostasy from the revolutionary creed, and taking pains to defend the execution of the king. As the Terror commenced and gathered strength, Wordsworth found himself nightly engaged with dreams of imprisonment and "long orations, which I strove to plead / Before unjust tribunals" (X. 411-412) like Louvet, with a terrifying sense of impotence and desertion. His explanation for the atrocities is interesting; he believed them the result of a "terrific reservoir of guilt" which could no longer hold its "loathsome charge" and "burst and spread in deluge through the land" (X. 477-480).

These events and preoccupations serve as a chain of associations to bind the Paris Night "spot" to the next crucial experience. One August day in 1794 he was walking on the sands of the Leven estuary. As he admired the cloud effects he meditated upon memories of his old teacher, whose grave he had that morning visited. He recalled this worthy man's last remark to him, "My head will soon lie low" (X. 538); and wept a little, for Taylor had put him on the way to be a poet.

As I advanced, all that I saw or felt  
Was gentleness and peace. Upon a small  
And rocky island near, a fragment stood

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<sup>7</sup> Legouis (*The Early Life of Wordsworth 1770-1798* (London, 1897), pp. 226-227) points out the parallels between Bishop Watson's position and Wordsworth's without appreciating their meaning. The Bishop was the son of a Westmoreland schoolmaster, a Whig and a liberal, known as a "levelling prelate" by his enemies and disliked by George III for his independence. He had first approved of the Revolution, but the September massacres made him doubt. Upon the execution of the King he determined to make a public retraction. It is clear that Wordsworth was angry because the Bishop so nearly expressed a strong part of Wordsworth's own mixed feelings from an analogous personal position.

(Itself like a sea rock) the low remains  
 (With shells encrusted, dark with briny weeds)  
 Of a dilapidated structure, once  
 A Romish chapel, where the vested priest  
 Said matins at the hour that suited those  
 Who crossed the sands with ebb of morning tide.  
 Not far from that still ruin all the plain  
 Lay spotted with a variegated crowd  
 Of vehicles and travellers, horse and foot,  
 Wading beneath the conduct of their guide  
 In loose procession through the shallow stream  
 Of inland waters; the great sea meanwhile  
 Heaved at safe distance, far retired. (X. 553-568)

The elements of significance experience begin to combine. Here is the wide surface, associated with the presence of water; here is a crowd, including horses, a multiplicity of movement; here is an island and on it a ruined building. The sea is benign; it “heaves,” but at a distance. At this moment Wordsworth is accosted by a stranger, who without prologue cries out “‘Robespierre is dead’” (X. 573).<sup>8</sup>

We may speculate that the shock of this news is compounded for Wordsworth by the theme of his meditations, for he had just been complacently enjoying a diminished version of an analogous experience. Taylor, his amiable foster father, had predicted a death, and the prediction unexpectedly comes true for a man with whom Wordsworth has for many years felt a profound connection, a villain who acted out fantasies of murderous rebellion in which Wordsworth, it is not too much to say, half-consciously participated.

He is free to respond with joy; Robespierre has suffered the punishment of a regicide and Wordsworth may therefore allow himself some liberty from the apprehensions his conscience has burdened him with. “Sleep no more” is no longer addressed to *him*. The image of the deluge is evoked again as he disassociates himself from the wicked who have been “swept away” by the “river of blood” (X, 584, 586) they had affected to direct. His mind takes him back to a more innocent moment on this very

<sup>8</sup> In A<sup>2</sup>C he is a “Horseman.” See De Selincourt, *The Prelude*, p. 391 n. Haven (*Mind of a Poet*, I, 16) finds the detail about the ruined chapel on its island an irrelevant interruption. With the pattern in mind, we can understand why Wordsworth noticed and incorporated this detail.

shore, when the implications of action were uncontaminated, and the deluges of metaphor were a real ocean, as "Along the margin of the moonlight sea—/ We beat with thundering hoofs the level sand" (X. 602-603).

Such a paraphrase of the political "spots" and the biographical material with which they are associated may bring out the additions these particular "spots" make to the pattern. We notice that the grim shape of the earlier memories has become a definite human figure, who speaks articulate words, and that the criminal activity hinted at in some of the earlier memories has acquired, in the new context provided by political awareness, a definite outline. The violent death of a king and of his executioner is at the center of Wordsworth's political preoccupations.

If with the clues suggested by these revolutionary memories we turn back to the private experiences with which Wordsworth explicitly linked his general remarks about the "spots," we find this theme of violent death re-translated into terms which, we may feel, come closer to the emotional sources of Wordsworth's disquiet. Consider the Gibbet episode. As a very young child Wordsworth finds himself lost among barren hills, leading a horse. He stumbles upon a ruined gibbet: "The gibbet-mast had mouldered down, the bones / And iron case were gone; but on the turf, / Hard by, soon after that fell deed was wrought, / Some unknown hand had carved the murderer's name" (XII, 237-240). Terrified, he runs away up a hill, "Faltering and faint, and ignorant of the road: / Then, reascending the bare common, saw / A naked pool that lay beneath the hills, / A beacon on the summit, and, more near, / A girl, who bore a pitcher on her head, / And seemed with difficult steps to force her way / Against the blowing wind" (XII. 247-253). The event preserves several of the images we have noticed, including wind, water, something written, a horse, a ruin, and an ascent toward a limit. The theme of murder is explicit. Yet the order in which the images appear is broken. We may identify the initials on the turf with the voice whose cry climaxes so many "spots," but here it appears at the beginning, rather than the end. And in place of a grim and ghostly masculine shape we have a living girl. Can we read the extraordinary concentration upon the separate images of pool, beacon, and girl as a displacement of feeling from the evidences of crime and punishment to accidental concomitants of an experience too overwhelming to be

faced directly? The three static impressions have become symbols which bear all the weight of a meaning not directly their own. Some portion of that meaning presumably resides in the gibbet from which the boy flees; we may gather hints of the rest when we recall that this experience takes place at Penrith, that it is to be dated at a time close to his mother's death, and that his later associations with the scene were those of young love.<sup>9</sup>

The Gibbet memory is immediately followed by the memory of climbing a crag with his brothers to wait for the horses that would take them all home from school for the Christmas holidays:

There rose a crag,  
That, from the meeting-place of two highways  
Ascending, overlooked them both, far stretched;  
Thither, uncertain on which road to fix  
My expectation, thither I repaired,  
Scout-like, and gained the summit; 'twas a day  
Tempestuous, dark, and wild, and on the grass  
I sate half-sheltered by a naked wall;  
Upon my right hand couched a single sheep,  
Upon my left a blasted hawthorn stood;  
With these companions at my side, I watched,  
Straining my eyes intensely, as the mist  
Gave intermitting prospect of the copse  
And plain beneath. (XII. 292-305)

The expectation depicted in these lines is not consummated then and there; Wordsworth breaks off, as he so often does in an important memory; it was, he says, days later that his anticipation was reciprocated unexpectedly by his father's death.<sup>10</sup> The feelings roused by this event revert upon the experience of waiting, fastening upon the "single sheep, and the one blasted tree, / And the

<sup>9</sup> The naked pool reappears in *The Thorn*, a poem about a mother who has murdered her child, either by hanging or drowning, it is not clear which. A stanza of this poem brings us back to the "spot" describing the drowned man: "Some say, if to the pond you go, / and fix on it a steady view, / the shadow of a babe you trace, / A baby and a baby's face," (*P. W.*, ii, p. 248).

<sup>10</sup> The experience is also described in an early poem, in such a way as to suggest that he received the news of his father's death while waiting on the crag. See *The Vale of Esthwaite*, II, 422-423 (*P. W.*, i, p. 279). Miss Moorman believes that *The Prelude* version is nearer the facts of the case. (*William Wordsworth: 1770-1803* [Oxford, 1957], p. 68 n.). H. W. Garrod (*Wordsworth: Lectures and Essays* [Oxford, 1923], p. 207-208) believes the crag spot was written immediately after Wordsworth heard the news of his brother's death. If this is true the pathos of the episode is so much the more meaningful.

bleak music from that old stone wall" (XII. 319-320), making of these symbols to which, as he writes, he can repair to "drink, / As at a fountain" (XII. 325-326). Is it an accident that these two "spots" should be linked together, and that the first should appear to deal with the child's fantasies about his mother, the other about the death of a father? Does the presence of a gibbet in the first memory suggest that, in fantasy though not in fact, the later event preceded the earlier? It is interesting that the "spots" which Wordsworth chooses to illustrate his general theory of the restorative value of childhood memories should be the ones which most directly concern family feelings, and that in both the weight of emotion shifts from the human occasion to associated images. Such memories bring us some distance from the public world of the political "spots": "The hiding-places of man's power / Open; I would approach them" (XII. 279-280), but the threshold cannot be passed either by Wordsworth himself or by his readers.

This does not of course prevent us from essaying acts of interpretation: my own is implied in the manner in which I have paraphrased the "spots" we have just been considering. The prevailing tendency among critics of Wordsworth has been to see the experiences the "spots" record in quasi-mystical terms, to find their subject the relation of mind to nature and reality. Havens' massive study is perhaps the best representative of what can be done in this line. Yet there are obvious objections to linking Wordsworth with the mystics. The experiences recorded in the "spots" are not impersonal, but private; in them Wordsworth, far from finding himself rapt from the world, discovers a special importance in the details of common life. He does not feel, as the mystic traditionally does, an unqualified joy, nor are claims made of insight into a supernatural reality; the claims that are made are imaginative and emotional. Indeed Wordsworth's *religious* life tends to be quite distinct from the "spots," and to mean, psychologically, a state of affairs in opposition to the part of life they embody. The mystic rejects words; the "spots," as we have seen, are embodied in a special vocabulary. We have besides the negative evidence that Coleridge, who would have known, never thought of them as mystical.<sup>11</sup> If we stress the mystical dimension

<sup>11</sup> Havens admits this himself (I, 167).

in these experiences we are forced to rule out certain "spots" in favor of others,<sup>12</sup> yet if any one is important, they all are; if they vary, it is in poetical fullness and imaginative authority, not mystical purity. Is there perhaps a certain unconscious devaluation of the imagination on the part of readers who wish to make Wordsworth over into a thinker or mystic?

An analogous short-circuiting may be behind the desire to associate the "spots" with a single period in Wordsworth's creative life. The boyhood memories of Books I and II were written at Goslar in 1798-99; the existence of MS V proves this. But the speculation that the equally significant Snowden "spot" was written at the same time can be called no more than probable.<sup>13</sup> The same is true of the Gibbet. The Discharged Soldier is definitely early,<sup>14</sup> but Paris Night and Robespierre's Death were as far as anyone knows written in late 1804. The Simplon Pass experience, I shall argue in a moment, takes place in the act of composition, i. e., sometime in March or April, 1804. The temptation to translate one's awareness of the literary and psychological equality of the "spots" into bibliographical terms must, it seems to me, be resisted. Wordsworth's creativity was not limited to the Goslar period.<sup>15</sup>

My re-telling of the political and personal "spots" makes plain the direction it seems to me most rewarding for the modern reader to go. We have a group of memories; these share a vocabulary of imagery, a vocabulary which seems to combine into a story, a story which, so far as it is interpretable, tells of the fears, curiosities, and guilt of childhood. The memories we have seem to acquire their special meaning from other and more remote sources; the repetition of language and situation becomes, once it is noticed, a clue to something farther back.

A recent article in *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* "On Earliest Memories" is suggestive.<sup>16</sup> Its authors, in summing up professional work on this subject, point out how similar ones earliest memories are to dreams, how they are chosen, as it were, to

<sup>12</sup> Havens, I, 168.

<sup>13</sup> See De Selincourt, p. xxxv, and Havens, p. 638.

<sup>14</sup> De Selincourt, p. xxxiii.

<sup>15</sup> Nor was everything written at Goslar good. A VII, 721-729 is entirely dull stuff, and A VII, 21-37 merely cute.

<sup>16</sup> Leon S. Saul, Thoburn R. Snyder, Jr., and Edith Sheppard, "On Earliest Memories," *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, XXV (1956), 228-237.



represent one's life style. They "reveal, probably more clearly than any other single psychological datum, the central core of each person's psychodynamics, his chief motivations, form of neurosis, and emotional problem." Selected and distorted to express their possessor's "nuclear emotional constellation,"<sup>17</sup> they persist through life, less influenced by superficial experience than dreams. They are added to only through some major shift in the interior balance of power. Do we not have, in the "spots," experiences to which these generalizations will apply? To be sure, there are obvious differences between the fragmentary recollections recorded in the autobiographical portion of Christopher Wordsworth's *Memoirs*, memories we can literally call "earliest," and the much more developed and expressed experiences, occurring at intervals well into adult life, which the "spots" articulate. Yet we have seen that they share common themes. Can we suppose that we have, in Wordsworth, a mind with an extraordinary capacity to recreate, or have recreated for it, moments which embody the significance of its own life, as the ordinary mind can no longer do, once it has emerged from early childhood, except in the very much weaker and more ambiguous forms of dreams? Given a chance conjunction in Wordsworth's environment of certain elements which have an *a priori* significance for him, together with a state of mind under a sufficient condition of tension, waking experiences as vivid, symbolic, and mysterious as a dream could overwhelm him, with all the advantages of his waking mind at hand to help him articulate the event. Legouis quotes a saying of Landor that Wordsworth gives us the protoplasm of poetry, rather than poetry itself.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps, in Wordsworth's case, the distinction is not worth drawing. For it is precisely the most poetic moments which come closest to their creator's central concerns. We may even claim that *The Prelude* constitutes the record, half-concealed in a commonplace autobiographical structure, of a process which, in these days, we would call a self-analysis; the precipitate of an interior battle, a sequence of manoeuvres against the incomprehensible, fought out in the public domain of verse. To be sure, every artist, so far as he achieves an imaginatively convincing structure, embodies in that structure a dramatic self-illumination from which he may, merely as a man, profit: it is Wordsworth's special genius that he should have devoted himself

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 229 and 230.

<sup>18</sup> Legouis, p. 317.

so massively to the imagination taken in this sense as to be, virtually, the first and last of his line.<sup>19</sup> With all this held in mind I should like to forestall some of the criticisms my argument may have evoked in my reader by returning to the poetry, and address myself to two “spots” in which the imagination as such explicitly figures.

At one point during his first visit to France Wordsworth and his friend Jones found themselves climbing among mountains up a dubious path in pursuit of their guide. As they climb they meet a peasant, from whom they ask direction. He tells them they have crossed the Alps. Obscurely depressed by the news, they hurry downwards through a gloomy chasm, whose rocks, torrents, and tumult seem “like workings of one mind, . . . symbols of Eternity” (VI. 636, 639).

As it stands this is no more than a minor experience, though the descent into the chasm is vividly expressed and reminds the re-reader of the *Prelude* of the chasm in the Snowden “spot” from which the roar of water ascended. What makes this section of the poem extraordinary is an interruption in the description of this past event. As Wordsworth writes the words, “we had crossed the Alps,” the articulation of this old experience of passing a limit takes effect in the present; Wordsworth breaks off, filled with an immediate emotion. And here we see the heroic quality of the poet’s mind; instead of allowing his feelings simply to be, his pen put down until the spasm passes, he sets out to express what he feels: “Imagination—here the Power so called / Through sad incompetence of human speech, / That awful Power rose from the mind’s abyss / Like an unfathered vapour” (VI. 593-595). The peasant’s words were, he has just said, “translated by our feelings”; a symbol was interpreted. As he reviews this event it

<sup>19</sup> At this point Dr. Leavis breaks in with an objection. Having noticed the “spots” from something of the same position, he rejects the temptation to move on: “If these ‘moments’ have any significance for the critic . . . it will be established, not by dwelling upon or in them, in the hope of exploring something that lies hidden in or behind their vagueness, but by holding firmly on to that sober verse in which they are presented.” (*Revaluations* [New York, 1947], p. 174). The distinction between honest criticism and vulgar psychologising asks for the automatic bob and curtesy it commonly receives; no one wants to seem a bad amateur analyst. But is the apposition really exclusive? Don’t we in fact, precisely by attending to the verse (“sober” seems an odd word to use about the “spots”) find words in which we can locate, impeccably, the cause for our curiosity? “Holding firmly” need not mean “holding exclusively” to anyone but a grammarian.

suddenly acquires a double sense. Just as he and Jones had interpreted the peasant's remark once, so now, as he writes, Wordsworth finds himself "interpreting" the meaning of the whole experience.<sup>20</sup> The tone shifts and he speaks directly to a new companion: "Imagination—" The imagination itself becomes as it were a solitary, a grim shape of greater dignity than the literal peasant from which by association it derives; an "awful power," ghostlike, it rises, self-born; the dead father of the other "spots" lurks here as an adjective.

". . . unfathered vapour that enwraps. / At once, some lonely traveller. I was lost; / Halted without an effort to break through" (VI, 595-597). His forward movement as a writer is checked by a half-comprehended shock of recognition. He sees obscurely, why *not* checking his climb over the mountain range was so moving. When is he "halted?" Presumably right after he tried to start, that is, right after writing the key word, "Imagination." May we speculate that he was preparing to say something prosy *about* the imagination, something analogous to the lecture he does read us in the last books of the poem, when it came over him that the word was also a cry, a call to a person? Whereupon there rose within him the reality of which, in its abstract form, he was about to speak. The interior power holds him, enwraps him, halts him; he is checked by the very power which, if he could break through, would endow him with some scarcely imaginable flow of strength. He is caught at the moment of psychic paradox; his true self is his enemy.

A moment of silence follows the semi-colon; then, "But. . . ." There are several possibilities. "I will make an effort? I *have* made an effort and I give up? In any case?" The tense shifts to the present: this is what he finds he can say: "But to my conscious soul I now can say" (VI, 598). We should not mistake

<sup>20</sup>I am aware that "here" is ambiguous: Wordsworth may mean either "just now, as I was writing" or, more prosaically, "at that moment, in 1791." The chief argument for the first interpretation is, I suppose, the tone of the following lines. Wordsworth expresses his admiration in the present tense because he is immensely relieved at being able to see the power in whose grip he has just been as benign. I am glad to find myself in this matter on the same side as Havens, (I, 158) and Moorman, (p. 139 and note). This passage is not the only place where a present emotion finds its way into *The Prelude*. When he recalls the "bravest youth of France" marching to the frontiers, tears start to his eyes. See *The Prelude*, IV, 263-269 and following.

the 18th century meaning of “conscious” for the sense the word has now; but there has been a shift of address, a movement, perhaps accompanied by a loss, from the all-inclusive name “Imagination” to the limited, traditional, “conscious soul.” Is there also some dwindling of the original impact in the distance implied by *what* he says? “‘I recognize thy glory’” is spoken from a place apart. The imagination, now the conscious soul, is “recognized” as a legitimate ruler; yet the emotion in all its ambiguity is still alive, for it is the “usurpation” accomplished by the imagination with its primitive strength that he goes on boldly to praise, following the fruitful inconsistency of the political metaphor with a more explicit paradox, a “light” that goes out in a “flash”: “‘I recognize thy glory:’ in such strength / Of usurpation, when the light of sense / Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed / The invisible world, doth greatness make abode, / There harbours; . . .” From here on the development is firm, unqualified; the voice honors the reality he has experienced magnificently:

whether we be young or old,  
 Our destiny, our being’s heart and home,  
 Is with infinitude, and only there;  
 With hope it is, hope that can never die,  
 Effort, and expectation, and desire,  
 And something evermore about to be.  
 Under such banners militant, the soul  
 Seeks for no trophies, struggles for no spoils  
 That may attest her prowess, blest in thoughts  
 That are their own perfection and reward,  
 Strong in herself and in beatitude  
 That hides her, like the mighty flood of Nile  
 Poured from his fount of Abyssinian clouds  
 To fertilise the whole Egyptian plain. (VI. 603-616)

To feel intuitively and directly some portion of the meaning of the memory he is describing, to apprehend as a present experience what is symbolized by the breaking of a barrier is to release the associated stores of emotion as an overwhelming power, a power which Wordsworth with wonderful courage and, we can be sure, exact insight, immediately names the source of poetry itself, the efficient cause of the splendid lines on the page before us. The psychic reserves locked in the key experiences of his life are at rare moments available to a mind strong enough to face

them, to address a lifetime to their articulation. At such times the mind may joyfully congratulate its own nature, and the flood of unconscious energies are, like those of the Nile, benign.

Floods, however, are not always fertilizing. Consider the other "spot" which deals explicitly with the imagination, the famous dream of the Stone and the Shell. I don't want to spend time on the details of the dream as such; anyone who has come so far with me and recalls the story will understand the degree to which the adventure of the dream incorporates the vocabulary of the other "spots," with its wide waste of sand, its movement, its grim shape in the form of a strange Arab, who rides a dromedary instead of a horse. This figure carries a stone, representing geometry and a shell, standing for poetry. He presents the shell to the dreamer, who puts it to his ear, "And heard that instant in an unknown tongue, / Which yet I understood, articulate sounds" (V. 93-94), prophesying destruction by deluge to the inhabitants of the world. Explaining that he intends to bury the two objects, which he calls "books," the Arab races away, with the dreamer in chase. As he rides the Arab looks back; following his glance, the dreamer sees "over half the wilderness diffused, / A bed of glittering light" (V. 128-129). He is looking at "'The waters of the deep / Gathering upon us'" (V. 130-131) Pursued by the "fleet waters of a drowning world" (V. 137), the dreamer wakes in terror.

Let us look first at the shell.<sup>21</sup> The Arab tells the dreamer in so many words that it represents poetry, and though the allegory is a little stiff,<sup>22</sup> we need not hesitate to accept this interpretation as broadly correct. There are two facts about shells which make this interpretation exciting. First, they come from the sea. If the

<sup>21</sup> The other images in this dream all have an important history. The sea and the desert may be found, together or apart, in *The Affliction of Margaret* (P. W., ii, p. 49); *To Enterprise* (P. W., ii, p. 284); *The Solitary Reaper* (P. W., iii, p. 77); *The Borderers* (P. W., i, pp. 195-197); and in *The Prelude* itself, book VI, 142-154. The shell image may lie behind the famous lines in the *Ode*: "Hence in a season of calm weather / Though inland far we be, / Our souls have sight of that immortal sea / Which brought us hither," for how else can a "soul" see the ocean from far inland? This is supported by *The Excursion*, IV, 1132-1140. *The Blind Highland Boy* floats to sea on a huge shell (P. W., iii, pp. 88-96), and Wordsworth himself comments on and defends his use of the shell image in an I. F. note. (P. W., iv, pp. 397-398).

<sup>22</sup> The stiffness may be due to the fact that Wordsworth consciously or unconsciously borrowed this element from the "studious friend" to whom the whole dream is assigned in the early versions of *The Prelude*. Jane Worthington Smyser has recently

shell is a book of poetry, the sea from which it has its being must be the creative mind. We have seen how the experience of the imagination eventuated, in the Simplon "spot," in an image of a fertilizing river: here, the destructive aspect of this image predominates, pursuing life to destroy it. Once again, the act of understanding an image is dangerous; as one handles the symbol one evokes the reality for which it stands; and this is as likely to mean destruction as renewed creativity. Comprehension too often means catastrophe. The real source from which catastrophe comes we learn when we consider the other fact about shells. When you hold one to your ear, the roar you hear is the tide of your own blood. The deluge, in other words, wells up from within.<sup>23</sup>

We may now paraphrase the dream as follows: "If you choose poetry as a way of life, as you have done and are bound to do, you run the severe risk of being overwhelmed by the unconscious forces from which your poetry must derive its vital inspiration and the significant portion of its subject matter; if you lose your nerve, you will find yourself 'burying' your talent to escape the emotional turmoil it brings upon you."

As Wordsworth himself understood when he contemplated his hopes for his poem, "This is, in truth, heroic argument, / . . . which I wished to touch / With hand however weak, but in the main / It lies far hidden from the reach of words. / Points have we all of us within our souls / Where all stand single; this I feel, and make / Breathings for incommunicable powers" (III, 184-190).

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suggested ("Wordsworth's Dream of Poetry and Science," *PMLA*, LXXI [1956], 269-275) that the idea of two books, one representing science and the other poetry, originates in a dream of Descartes, perhaps told Wordsworth by his friend Beauport.

<sup>23</sup> More than one reader of Wordsworth has made the connection between water and the imagination. See Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Unmediated Vision* (New Haven, 1954), pp. 31-45; Kenneth MacLean, "The Water Symbol in *The Prelude*," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, XVII (1948), 372-389; and note 6 above. The psychoanalytic interpretation of water symbolism is relevant here. Pools, oceans and floods are commonly associated with the mother. Is the experience of drowning then an inversion of terrors associated with the idea of birth and coitus? Marie Bonaparte's "The Legend of the Unfathomable Waters," *The American Imago*, IV (August, 1946), 20-48 is worth looking at in this connection. The most extravagant and still the most interesting pursuit of the subject I know is Sandor Firenczi, *Thalassa*, trans. Henry Alden Bunker (Albany, 1938).