

integrity of reason. Thrale's 'Family Book' offers an alternative discourse of maternal watchfulness, where the body also signifies – it is a system of signs to be read – and is interwoven with, rather than opposed to, rational identity. Boswell's battle with Thrale over how Dr Johnson should be written about is also a battle over what constitutes the human subject. For Boswell, reason alone ensured the subject's wholeness. Thrale's 'Family Book' however, instead reveals, with remarkable clarity and control, the discontinuity and complexity of lives necessarily lived in and through the physical body.

SUBLIME EGOS: ROUSSEAU AND WORDSWORTH

Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*, which he completed in 1770 and which were published posthumously between 1781 and 1789, seem to hark back, through the title at least, to Saint Augustine. Yet, according to many commentators, Rousseau, instead of following previous spiritual models, was ushering in, through this prodigiously sustained, even obsessional self-writing, a new model of secular autobiography for the Romantic era. According to Huntington Williams, Rousseau both exemplifies 'modern Romantic autobiography' and occupies a 'pivotal' position in its historical development. Rousseau's refusal of other sources for himself and 'radical internalization' of personal identity makes him, for Williams, both 'novel' and 'influential' (Williams 1983: 3). W.J.T. Mitchell sees Rousseau as 'the great originator' and 'the first modern man', a writer whose reputation and thinking permeated the nineteenth century to such an extent that one did not necessarily have to have read him to be influenced by him: 'simple literacy', according to Mitchell, 'was enough' (Mitchell 1990: 648).

The attribution of originality to Rousseau by these critics echoes, of course, the view promulgated by Rousseau himself; he famously heralds the *Confessions* with the confident assertion of his own singularity:

I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself.

Simply myself. I know my own heart and understand my fellow man. But I am made unlike any one I have ever met; I will even venture to say that I am like no one in the whole world. I may be no better, but at least I am different. Whether Nature did well or ill in breaking the mould in which she formed me, is a question which can only be resolved after the reading of my book.

(Rousseau 1953: 17)

Though in the very next paragraph Rousseau goes on to invoke a 'Sovereign Judge' and an 'Eternal Being', God is being given only a peripheral role to play: Rousseau addresses God as a source of emphasis at the beginning of his autobiography rather than turning to him, either here or elsewhere, as a pre-eminent and sufficient arbiter of a truth. Truth for Rousseau becomes conflated with truthfulness, the non-verifiable *intention* of honesty on the part of the author. Truth, therefore, can never be established once and for all, but can only be presented in terms of the constant reiteration of avowals and disclaimers by Rousseau himself. Rousseau transposes to 'man', and, in particular, 'natural man' or Nature, the power to know or see inside the self that once resided with God. There is, for Rousseau, no higher form of knowledge than feeling; self-knowledge, it soon becomes evident, is inseparable from conviction or intuitive self-understanding, from 'a knowledge of his heart' that belongs to him alone. 'I have only one faithful guide on which I can count; the succession of feelings which have marked the development of my being' (Rousseau 1953: 262). Without recourse to Divine help, or intervention, situated within secular time, Rousseau's 'feelings' stretch out into a succession of endlessly renewable inner revelations about himself. His 'self' is plotless and, because it is without climax or denouement, seemingly interminable. Rousseau,

having completed the *Confessions*, will embark on other autobiographical projects, the *Dialogues* (1776) and the *Reveries* (1778). The 'truth of feelings', forever renewing and repeating itself in the present, is also never complete.

Rousseau believed his task as autobiographer was to tell or 'confess' all and make himself as transparent to his readers as he was to himself. 'I must leave nothing unsaid' he reminds himself in Book Twelve (Rousseau 1953: 548). His autobiography was less an attempt to remember the past, to memorialize the life he led, than to make others recognize the inner truths about himself that he already knows through the unique access he has to his own feelings: 'Throughout the course of my life, as has been seen, my heart has been as transparent as crystal, and incapable of concealing for so much as a moment the least lively feeling which has taken refuge in it' (p.415). As Jean Starobinski says, Rousseau would have liked to offer himself as 'an open book' to the reader, to reveal his feelings without shadow or obliquity. It was only the reader's unwillingness or obtuseness which made this impossible (p.181). Transparency for Rousseau pre-existed writing; it was what the writing aspired to return to, but it was also created by the writing through the unstinting attempt to offer proof to the reader and make himself clear:

I should like in some way to make my soul transparent to the reader's eye, and for that purpose I am trying to present it from all points of view, to show it in all lights, and to contrive that none of its movements shall escape his notice, so that he may judge for himself of the principle which has produced them.

(Rousseau 1953: 169)

Ultimately, Rousseau believed that if the reader came to the wrong conclusion it would be his own fault. His responsibility as autobiographer was to give the reader all the evidence that was available; all, therefore, that the reader should need in order to arrive at the

correct judgement. Though the truth may be immediate and spontaneous, its communication to the reader, on the other hand, must be prolonged and insistent. 'It is not enough for my story to be truthful', Rousseau writes; 'it must be detailed as well' (*ibid.*).

From the start, therefore, Rousseau is caught up in a series of paradoxes or contradictions in relation to his autobiographical project, and it is perhaps not surprising that his 'history' or story tells of repeated incidents where he finds himself powerless to act, the victim of a plot that repeatedly turns against him. Rousseau cannot simply 'dwell in the grace of transparency', to use Jean Starobinski's phrase (Starobinski 1971a: 182); he must articulate and prove himself through 'confession'. Despite himself, he therefore becomes trapped in the mediating power of story and language, and the 'plot' of his autobiography could well be seen as displacing on to the outside world the connivances and designs which belong, at least in part, to autobiographical writing itself. Rousseau, according to John Sturrock, is the 'arch catastrophist' among autobiographers, punctuating his narrative with 'doleful markers' of the fateful turn that events are about to take (Sturrock 1993: 141). One such moment comes when, as a boy of 15, he fails to get back to Geneva before the drawbridge is raised. 'When I was twenty paces away I saw them raise the first bridge. I trembled as I watched its dreadful horns rising in the air, a sinister and fatal augury of the inevitable fate which from that moment awaited me' (Rousseau 1953: 49). Instead of extolling his ensuing bold choice of freedom, Rousseau dwells on the obstruction placed in his way: he sees himself, both here and elsewhere in his text, as the victim of external events. Fate, it seems, imposes a life on him through such arbitrary yet crucial and often malign turns; Rousseau, on the other hand, is passive, since whatever he does has already been determined by a previous event over which he had no control. Alone and without power to act except as fate determines, Rousseau cannot be blamed. While the external world and other people are untrustworthy and have proved to be duplicitous, if not downright vindictive, he is,

above all, innocent, and his autobiography is as much his 'alibi' as it is his confession (Starobinski 1971a: 194).

Given that his problems all stem, according to Rousseau at least, from his relation with the external world, with other people, the opposite also turns out to be the case: Rousseau is at his happiest when he can escape into an unbounded state of reverie, when he can wander and think without encountering limit or obstruction. Early on, he embraces a life of vagabondage, a picaresque existence, and it often seems that his mind can range freely when his body is also free to roam: 'There is something about walking which stimulates and enlivens my thoughts. When I stay in one place I can hardly think at all, my body has to be on the move to set my mind going' (Rousseau 1953: 158). At these moments, 'thrown into the vastness of things', as he says, he can think 'without fear or restraint'. He can 'dispose of all Nature as its master' (ibid.). These are also times when Rousseau is free to absorb the outer into the inner world, when the subject is 'master', and when the 'plot', which is necessarily an ongoing story of encounters and frustrations, is temporarily suspended.

Yet if Rousseau derives most happiness from his own company, when he places himself at a distance or excludes himself from society, it is also, in part, because he already feels himself to be excluded. Socially he is a poor man, without status or family to protect him. He has no special significance or importance in terms of his rank or wealth. Part of the point of his autobiography is to claim his right to be heard despite his social inferiority, to assert another 'natural' order which gives priority to inner qualities of mind and feeling and according to which his own distinction will be recognized. Far from being indifferent to other people, Rousseau is using his autobiography as a form of coercion, as an attempt to put right both social and personal sleights and misrepresentations and to prove his own specialness, his apartness. Under threat of misapprehension, Rousseau must speak out, he must, in John Sturrock's words, 'spread the truth about himself so as to bely the slanders of others' (Sturrock

1993: 153). As Rousseau embarks on the second part of the *Confessions* he feels increasingly beset by derision; the truth which should be sufficient is, Rousseau fears, never enough. In a sense he is progressively invaded by his own fictionalized construction of the Other, the projection of all that threatens him, which his truth fails to keep at bay. 'Being forced to speak in spite of myself, I am also obliged to conceal myself . . . The ceiling under which I live has eyes, the walls that enclose me have ears' (Rousseau 1953: 263). Wanting to tell the truth in all its immediacy, Rousseau is forced into concealment; separating himself from others, he installs them again in his text through the very act of writing. Rousseau's delusion is to believe he could either totally absorb others into his own self-image or reject them. As his fictional self-image expands to fill the world, he retreats inside it; others, now re-created in the form of phantasmal presences, become, paradoxically, even more threatening, since they can easily pass through the flimsy walls of his self, monitoring and judging him from the inside.

The question of why Rousseau arrived at such a distorted sense of human relations begs a further question: What purpose did it serve for him? Rousseau himself relates his loss of trust in others to an incident in his childhood. Wrongly accused of breaking a comb when he is boarding with Pastor Lambercier and his sister, he refuses to confess and is repeatedly beaten: 'They were unable to force from me the confession they required. Though the punishment was several times repeated and I was reduced to the most deplorable condition, I remained inflexible' (Rousseau 1953: 29). For Rousseau this injustice and cruelty marks the end of innocence, 'the earthly paradise' he had enjoyed till then; a gap now opens up between himself and others; he no longer looks on his elders as 'gods who read our hearts' (p.30). Yet this seemingly paradigmatic story of innocence and vulnerability being damaged by the harshness and cruelty of others is oddly duplicated by another anecdote. This time, Rousseau has indeed committed the crime he refuses to confess to: he has stolen a ribbon in order to give it to a pretty maidservant, Marion, when

he has been employed as a valet by the Countess de Vercellis. When the ribbon is found on him, he defends himself by accusing Marion of having given it to him. They are both dismissed. In retrospect, Rousseau becomes his own accuser: 'I may have ruined a nice, honest, and decent girl, who was certainly worth a great deal more than I, and doomed her to disgrace and misery' (p.86). Indeed his remorse and need to confess this 'offence' have been so great that they are one of the chief motives for writing his *Confessions*: 'The burden, therefore, has rested till this day on my conscience without any relief; and I can affirm that the desire to some extent to rid myself of it has greatly contributed to my resolution of writing these *Confessions*' (p.88).

Paul de Man has offered a complex reading of this particular episode and in the process made an important distinction, which he believes also holds true for all autobiographical writing, between its 'cognitive' and 'performative' aspects, between what it means and what it does. Rousseau in effect does not limit himself simply to *telling* us about his crime, he also *excuses* it by reference to his contradictory inner feelings: 'But I should not fulfil the aim of this book if I did not at the same time reveal my inner feelings and hesitated to put up such excuses for myself as I honestly could' (Rousseau 1953: 88). However, whereas there is factual evidence of the theft – a ribbon was in fact stolen – we must, as Paul de Man suggests, simply take Rousseau's word for his feelings; there is no other available proof (de Man 1979a: 280). The performative dimension of the confession – the excuse – functions, then, in a different mode to the cognitive, as a verbal utterance which cannot be verified and which also keeps the meaning of the action he is confessing 'open'. The excuse fails to satisfy; it does not provide closure but could be both endlessly expanded and repeated (p.283).

Significantly, the feeling that Rousseau reveals in his attempt to excuse himself is shame: he has not meant to lie and implicate Marion, but has been overcome by shame when he was publicly exposed: 'My invincible sense of shame prevailed over everything. It

was my shame that made me impudent, and the more wickedly I behaved the bolder my fear of confession made me' (Rousseau 1953: 88). Rousseau 'confesses' to the reader that his stealing of the ribbon had to do with his desire for Marion: the ribbon was intended as a gift to her. What de Man challenges is not the feeling of shame itself but where it is located. After all, why should Rousseau, either then or now, be ashamed to reveal a sexual desire which is neither transgressive nor forbidden? Instead what de Man suggests is that shame is intimately allied to exhibitionism and that there is a connection between hiding oneself and self-revelation. De Man believes that Marion herself is insignificant for Rousseau; she is, in effect, the signifier of a desire which belongs elsewhere. His shame is simply an 'excuse' for exposure, a 'ruse' which sanctions his confession (de Man 1979a: 286). His confession cannot make reparation to his victim; instead, according to de Man, Rousseau creates 'a stage on which to parade his disgrace' (p.28); he fulfils another desire, his real desire in writing, which is to compel public admiration for his inner self.

Following de Man's argument, a case could be made for there being less difference than first appeared between the incident with the comb and this later one with the ribbon: both involve the re-staging within writing of a scene of public exposure, where the performance of innocent feelings – or feelings of innocence – is also the real source of desire. Rousseau makes a drama out of his previously hidden emotions, justifying the interest and importance he, as autobiographer, is claiming for himself. No wonder that Rousseau prefigured the comb episode with an account of the beatings administered by Mlle Lambercier and the erotic pleasure he derived from them. The persecutory role of other people in his life is one of Rousseau's recurrent themes. It is a role that confirms his shame and thus also, perversely, increases his pleasure; and it is because the pleasure is shameful and secret that it becomes all the more gratifying for him to reveal by confessing to it in his text.

The point de Man is making relates ultimately to auto-

biographical writing itself. The performative, according to de Man, will always be in excess of the cognitive dimension of autobiography. The textual 'I' seeks out excuses to perform itself; it creates dramas in order to stage the 'real' drama of the 'self'. What it clearly does not want to do is explain itself away through cognition. If everything could be understood, there would be nothing left to excuse and there would be no text, no justification or excuse for autobiography. For de Man the text, paradoxically, generates guilt in order to justify the excuse rather than the other way around; it is in search of an excuse for its own being (which it can never know), a reason for coming into existence at all. The point therefore is not *what* Rousseau confesses but the act of confession, the drama of the self.

In the *Confessions*, Rousseau presents himself as a shy man who is inhibited in his relationships with others from revealing his 'true nature'. He writes in order to achieve that self-possession which always eluded him in company. The nearest he can come to his ideal of spontaneous expression is reading his own work in public. The text becomes the writer's surrogate. On one occasion this stratagem proves an outstanding success. He decides to read from his novel *Julie* in order to 'save myself the embarrassment' of talking to Mme de Luxembourg, of whom he is in awe. Rousseau is rewarded with all the recognition he desires: 'Mme de Luxembourg was crazy about *Julie* and its author. She talked of nothing but me' (Rousseau 1953: 484). However, he receives a very different response to a public performance of the *Confessions* later on when his reading is greeted by indecipherable silence. This is the last paragraph of the *Confessions* and it is positioned as an 'afterword', outside the narrative:

Thus I concluded my reading, and everyone was silent. Mme d'Egmont was the only person who seemed moved. She trembled visibly but quickly controlled herself, and remained quiet, as did the rest of the company. Such was the advantage I derived from my reading and my declaration.

(Rousseau 1953: 606)

The slight bodily *frisson* quickly fades into the silent self-control shown by the rest of the audience who, in this act of physical withdrawal or sublimation, seem to prefigure later silent readers of Rousseau's text.

Rousseau, according to Jacques Derrida in another influential poststructuralist reading, uses writing as a 'supplement', a term which Rousseau also applies to the 'unnatural' act of masturbation: 'Soon I . . . learned that dangerous means of cheating Nature, which leads in young men of my temperament to various kinds of excesses' (Rousseau 1953: 108); later he also describes himself as 'seduced by this fatal advantage' (p.109). To describe writing as a supplement is to suggest that it is added on to speech; that it comes later, as supplementary. For Rousseau speaking has a 'naturalness' and immediacy which writing tries to imitate through a kind of 'artful ruse'; its artificiality attempts to 'be' natural; in other words, to 'cheat nature'. However, as Derrida points out, Rousseau is here describing a Utopian version of what it means to speak, 'speech as it should be or *should have been*' (p.141), rather than as it is. What Rousseau demonstrates in his autobiography, according to Derrida, is that it is up to writing to replace a deficiency or fill an absence where speaking should have been; it offers vicarious compensation to Rousseau who time and again fails to speak or to manage to make himself present through speaking. Writing thus takes the place of, or substitutes for, what is already lacking: 'If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence' (p.145). The meaning of supplement as 'surplus', for Derrida, therefore, cannot be separated from its other meaning as 'substitute', and Rousseau's writing can be seen to circulate between them. The onanistic pleasure of writing is that it is both 'symbolic and immediate' (p.153); it defers but does not seem to; it satisfies what, without symbolic substitution, would never have been. Derrida's point is not just that we only have access to Rousseau's essential reality within the text but that there is no 'reality': there has never been anything but writing; there have only been 'supplements, substitutive

significations'. The idea of 'Nature' which Rousseau uses to name an originating source of meaning preceding the text has, according to Derrida, always already escaped; indeed it has never existed (p.159). The poststructuralist Rousseau, therefore, is almost the inverse of the Romantic one, for what this interpretation sees is that autobiography begins from the 'fatal advantage' of a writing which can only produce the 'mirage of the thing itself' (p.157) by means of a substitutive process. In the silence which is all the 'advantage', as Rousseau says, he gains at the end of the *Confessions*, he is dispossessed of words but he is also dispossessed by words. He has become the author who is no longer recognized as the producer of his text.

The dilemma of Romantic autobiography, for which Rousseau seems to have provided such extensive exemplary material, lies in the way the notion of an original and authentic self, the transparency which for Rousseau was his 'natural' condition, is both presumed and put into question by representation itself, by a language which performs more than it means to, which does not correspond to experience, but introduces through displacement and excess other, unpredictable meanings. The Romantic autobiographer proclaims his originality but is also obsessed by a search for origins, for the absent 'maternal' or material ground of his being. To recover it, however, would also be to lose himself, and it is only because of the absence of origins that the narrative of their recovery – the autobiographical narrative – can be staged. According to Geoffrey Hartman's influential reading, the great paradox of Romanticism was that the vaunted 'return to nature', or the desire to overcome self-consciousness, could only be undertaken through consciousness itself. Wordsworth's *Prelude* begins with a longing for a subject that eludes him. In terms of Hartman's Romantic paradox, 'Wordsworth cannot find his theme because he already has it: himself' (Hartman, in Chase 1993: 46, 49). Autobiography, in this sense, could be said to represent a privileged form for the Romantic writer as well as confirming his plight, the perplexity of a self forever recasting and repeating itself as text.

William Wordsworth began writing his long autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, in which he intended to chart the growth of his own mind, in 1799, addressing it to his friend and mentor, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Though completed in 1805, Wordsworth felt dissatisfied with it, and would go on 'retouching and revising' it for the rest of his life (de Selincourt 1932: xvii). The version published posthumously in 1850 is generally agreed to be inferior to the earlier one; yet it is also interesting to think about how the poem, in the very process of its production, remains indeterminate, in pursuit of an inviolable origin which inevitably gets dispersed into various different revised or substituted versions. The poet uses memory to attempt to return to the sources of his own poetic power in childhood, sadly diminished with the onset of maturity and the ascendancy of rationality over imagination. The poem becomes a means of restoring what has been lost, but the story of this restoration cannot be told as it never exists as a story in terms of a single narrative trajectory; rather Wordsworth remembers a series of past experiences out of chronological order, 'spots of time' (Wordsworth 1805: XI, 258) which revivify his writing in the present: 'Such moments worthy of all gratitude, / Are scatter'd everywhere' (Book XI, 274–5). The poem observes a gap between the poet's past and present selves, a 'Vacancy between me and those days' which can make him seem 'Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself / And of some other Being' (Book II, 32–3). However, the journey back to 'wholeness' can only be undertaken within the poem itself by the past being recomposed within the present time of writing. The 'vacancy' which the poem attempts to traverse is a space for the imagination but, as Paul Jay points out, the corollary of this is a dizzying self-consciousness (Jay 1984: 57). The poem could be read not as a quest for a beginning but as a series of interruptions which attempt to bring the poem back to its subject, which is none other than the poet himself.

The debate about whether Wordsworth had read Rousseau's *Confessions* or had been influenced by them is a complex one.

Nevertheless, these two autobiographical texts undoubtedly share some important features, drawing on 'a common psychological vocabulary of sensation, feeling, memory, and imagination' (Mitchell 1990: 646–7). Both texts reveal a reverence for Nature, a love of solitude and the attempt to recover childhood experience; in both, according to poststructuralist critics, the self-aware self is radically divided, endlessly and paradoxically repeating its self-division in the rhetoric of a unique, unified or pre-existing self. Nevertheless, Mitchell is right to point to important differences: Rousseau's outlook is more tragic, his view of human relations hopeless and embittered; Wordsworth goes on affirming the value of love, not least by invoking his friendship with Coleridge in the very address of the poem, but it is in their opposed treatments of guilt that the most interesting comparison can be made. As Mitchell suggests, 'Rousseau confesses everything and feels guilty for nothing', while 'Wordsworth confesses nothing and yet seems to feel excessive, unmotivated guilt for some unnamed crime' (p. 647).

From this point of view it is worth examining the famous boy-hood episode in *The Prelude* when Wordsworth steals a boat. At this moment, cast off from the shore, engaged in his 'act of stealth / And troubled pleasure', the child is pursued by his own guilty imaginings, the censorious adult projected on to the landscape itself:

a huge Cliff,
 As if with voluntary power instinct,
 Uprear'd its head. I struck, and struck again,
 And, growing still in stature, the huge Cliff
 Rose up between me and the stars, and still,
 With measur'd motion, like a living thing,
 Strode after me.

(Book I, 406–12)

The guilt is excessive, going far beyond what an adult might think 'reasonable', and the child's subjectivity can only be approached by

opening up a gap in interpretation: 'for many days my brain / Work'd with a dim and undetermin'd sense / of unknown modes of being' (418–20). The absence of 'determined' meaning could well indicate repression, and the sexual nature of that repression might well be read, or read into, the 'strokes' of the boat which the child 'rose upon', which then returns as a vision of a potentized and frightening (castrating?) landscape. However, the fearful presence which invades the child's solitude, which takes on all the force of a gaze, is also a kind of absence: 'There was a darkness, call it solitude, / Or blank desertion, no familiar shapes / Of hourly objects, images of trees, / Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields' (421–4). The traumatic memory of a landscape which overwhelms the child with terror, which presents itself as 'spectacle' rather than meaning, and leads to near extinction, blanking his mind with 'huge and mighty Forms that do not live / Like living men' (425–6), seems also to contain an intimation of mortality, his future death. As we have seen, according to Paul de Man, *The Prelude* (like all autobiography) is also a form of epitaph (de Man 1993: 63; see Introduction: 14–15 of this volume): it is the survival of writing beyond the grave, in which death, by writing, is both anticipated and repressed. The poem reflects on a death which is unimaginable; it also denies the death which has already happened by presenting us with a vision, a writing which conceals its own status as writing by, quite literally, returning it as a face or a gaze. While Rousseau's guilt helps to generate the text in the endless play of self-justifying excuses, Wordsworth's assures him of a haunting and inexplicable indeterminacy of affect – a spectral presence – which attempts to evade the lifeless finality of the text itself.

Wordsworth's autobiography is also, of course, a poem, and, because of this obvious difference, may be seen as able to assume, unlike Rousseau's *Confessions*, a set of values which supersede his material condition, which are indeed transcendent or sublime, too vast for the rational mind to comprehend. When Wordsworth finds himself in the presence of Nature, it is also the occasion for seeing his imagination's own spaciousness and sublimity. This is

never more the case than in the famous crossing of the Alps in Book VI when Wordsworth offers a paean of praise to the Imagination: 'Imagination! lifting up itself / Before the eye and progress of my Song / Like an unfather'd vapour; here that Power, / In all the might of its endowments, came / Athwart me' (525–9). However, the problem with this passage, and its exulted sense of imaginative potency, is that it also diverts attention from a failure, an anticlimactic crossing of the Alps which has happened to the poet almost unawares. The culminating scene of Alpine grandeur could be said to repeat others where Nature in its sublime aspect is almost too much to bear, overwhelming the poet with a possible loss of self. It is perhaps providential that Wordsworth misses the supreme moment, since, instead of simply being defeated, he is able to recapture it in words and represent the processes of his own subjectivity. However, the climb down from the peaks, which is also a descent into words, paradoxically involves the poet in the evocation of a Divine face, the finding of a 'presence' which exceeds the poet's own:

Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light
 Were all like workings of one mind, the features
 Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
 Characters of the great Apocalypse.

(567–570)

The poet turns from a missed encounter with sublimity only to find himself face to face with the Divine, and its apocalyptic and unreadable inscription. If sublimity threatens the self, perhaps even more threatening is the discovery that writing which does not lift itself into ephemeral and mystical realms may succumb to its own inert nature. The attempt to meet sublimity on its own terms, even if such an attempt is doomed to failure, is also a way of trying to guarantee the existence of a subject beyond the text. In Mary Jacobus' interpretation of this passage, the Divine signs are a privileged and compensatory writing, protecting against the even

greater anticlimax of the literal text: 'writing comes in aid of writing, reanimating the dead page with intimations of a meaning that always exceeds it' (Jacobus 1989: 15). The Wordsworthian autobiographer needs the sublime, we could say, in order to give life to himself in a Divine form, beyond the deathly finality of the book. The sublime could be said to be what offsets the anxieties called up by the very act of turning himself into (lifeless) words.

Gayatri Spivak has suggested that Romantic autobiography, with its emphasis on the singular 'I', was premised on the repression of sexual difference (Spivak 1987: 76). The transcendent subject, as we have seen, sustains its unity with difficulty, positioning himself beyond the body as pure consciousness, risking the recognition of his own self-alienation within language. For Wordsworth the female – be it Nature or the mother – is what the heroically questing self must separate himself from, at the same time opening up a thereby unassuageable desire for a return to a maternal source or origin. Women, insofar as they appear in *The Prelude* at all, are located in the realm of the pre-sexual, and assimilated to the masculine self, the threat of otherness thus subsumed: Dorothy Wordsworth is significantly apostrophized as 'Child of my Parents! Sister of my Soul!' (Book XIII, 204); or they are cast out, as in the episode of the prostitute in Book VII, whose solicitations are invoked only to be denied and who is thus forced to carry the whole burden of sexuality herself. Wordsworth is notably silent in *The Prelude* about his own illegitimate child. Yet sexual difference cannot be wholly repressed; it returns in the unstable rhetoric of gender which pervades the poem and which Wordsworth struggles to control. As Anne Mellor has argued, at the end of *The Prelude*, the imagination through which Wordsworth has sought to prove his autonomous masculine identity against a feminine Nature, having tracked *her* 'up *her* way sublime' (Book XIII, 282; my emphasis), reveals its residual femininity (Mellor 1993: 151). Difference installs itself at the heart of the poetic subject, and both the autonomous self and its masculine identification are open to question once again.

Romantic selfhood, based on notions of the organic development of the implicitly masculine subject, also requires the strenuous repression of its Others. Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, as Barbara Johnson has argued, that the most powerful story told by a woman in the Romantic period should be about a deviant creation or monster (Johnson 1987: 145). Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is not of course an autobiography but a fiction; moreover it is a fiction which is transmitted through the first-person accounts of three men. Yet Frankenstein's monster, with all his poignant emotions of yearning and unfulfilment, not to mention his fragmented body pieced together into the semblance of wholeness, could be read as a perverse figure for autobiography, for what it means to create a life in one's own image. If Shelley hides her transgressive act of female authorship behind the personae of articulate men while casting her women into the role of passive victims, traces of her struggle to produce the 'hideous progeny' of her book are incorporated into her text, becoming the raw material which is taken over by Frankenstein in his own desperate act of creation. Shelley turns away from autobiography, from the impossibility of fashioning a life on the model of men, only for the monstrosity of the desire to assume a life of its own in her text. Clearly we are not far away from the subject of the next chapter and Freud's understanding of the repressed as the uncanny or *unheimlich* which can strangely pre-empt the familiar, producing ghosts and terrifying doubles.

Whatever doubts are raised in relation to the notion of Romantic selfhood, however, its assumptions have continued to exert an important influence on the writing and understanding of autobiography. Paradoxically, as we shall see in the next chapter, the notion of the natural, Romantic self outlives the recognition of its own impossibility, called back to life again as a nostalgic revenant or, with a wary realism, invoked as a necessary strategy on a route to somewhere else.