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"Knowledge Not Purchased by the Loss of Power": Wordsworth's Meditation on Books and Death in Book 5 of *The Prelude*

Henry Weinfield

At the end of the *Phaedrus*, Socrates inveighs against writing, as against a kind of idol worship. "You know, Phaedrus," he says,

that's the strange thing about writing, which makes it truly analogous to painting. The painter's products stand before us as though they were alive, but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words; they seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever. (275d)¹

The main charge against writing, however, is, paradoxically, that it weakens memory and leads to forgetfulness. In the story that Socrates tells, when the god Theuth comes to King Thamus with an invention that "will make the people of Egypt wiser and improve their memories," Thamus replies, "If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written" (274e–275a). Theuth (or Thoth) is the Egyptian deity traditionally associated with writing, and Thamus is the Greek name for the sun god Ammon, which means that, as in the Prometheus myth, two deities are in conflict over the giving of a particular technology to man. As against the "dead discourse" of writing, which is a kind of imitation or image of "living speech" (276a), Socrates insists that "any work . . . is a matter of reproach to its author . . . if he regards it as containing important truth of permanent validity" (277d); for only what is "written in the soul of the listener" can be of value (278a). As for the poet or the lawgiver (Homer or Solon), only if he "can demonstrate the inferiority of his writings out of

his own mouth" does he deserve to be considered, if not "wise" ("the epithet is proper only to a god"), at least a "lover of wisdom" (278c-d).²

There are peculiarities in this denunciation of writing, even apart from the question of how it fits into the larger themes of the dialogue—beauty, love, and the soul. First of all, the complaint that written words "seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent" is strangely reminiscent of biblical injunctions against idol worship—in particular, of the famous passage from Psalms: "They have mouths but they do not speak; they have eyes, but they do not hear, and there is no breath in their mouths" (135: 16–17). Furthermore, the argument that written words close off meaning rather than open it because they cannot be interrogated is curiously unconnected to the claim that writing weakens memory; one suspects a hidden motive of some kind, as if separate shards were being pieced together to form a line of attack that was not explicitly stated or formulated, either because it could not be or because the author (Socrates or Plato) did not wish it to be. Why is it that one god invents writing while another, embodying wisdom, abjures it?

I suspect that an important factor behind the attack on writing is the desire—one that figures prominently in many of the Platonic dialogues—to transcend the fear of death. It is the main theme of the *Crito*, for example, and a central current in the *Republic*, where it is implicated in the attack on poetry. What the poets say, remarks Socrates at the beginning of Book 3 of the latter dialogue, "is neither true nor edifying to men who are destined to be warriors," and he gives as an example the famous passage from *Odyssey* 11 in which Akhilleus's shade tells Odysseus that he would rather be the poorest peasant in the realm of the living than to lord it over the worn-out dead (386c).³ What we are given at the conclusion of the *Phaedrus* is a vision, remarkable for its pastoral serenity, in which all anxiety over death has been transcended and set aside, a vision in which the philosophical life of constant dialogue is uninterrupted—or interrupted only by death, which somehow does not matter. "To philosophize is to learn how to die," Montaigne says, following Cicero who himself is following Socrates.⁴ It is not the same with poetry, with the arts of writing that we call literature, which teach not so much equanimity in the face of death as a way of circumventing (or even circumscribing) one's mortality. Writing attempts to fix meaning, perhaps, but, more importantly, it attempts to contain, preserve, and hence memorialize not only a content but, implicitly, a self. As such, it represents a decidedly this-worldly path to immortality; and if one of the gods was its inventor and sought to donate it as a gift to humanity, it is not surprising that another, Socrates's god of wisdom, representing an alternate, transcendent path to immortality, should stand in opposition to a technology that binds us both to one another and to the earth.

I

If in "Tintern Abbey" the mind or memory is "a mansion for all lovely forms . . . a dwelling-place / For all sweet sounds and harmonies" (140–42), this is because it functions not only as a container but as a book in which experience is inscribed. This book is sometimes difficult to decipher; it contains "many recognitions dim and faint" (59); but the knowledge one can derive from it is instinct with creative power, rather than being "purchased by the loss of power," as Wordsworth laments so much knowledge is (*Prelude*, 5.425).⁵ ("Human knowledge and human power meet in one," asserts Bacon at the beginning of *The New Organon*, and Wordsworth is an orthodox Baconian, in at least this one respect.)⁶ When one considers Wordsworth's ambivalence to any kind of formalized learning—he writes of his experience at Cambridge that he "was not for that hour, / Nor for that place" (*Prelude*, 3.81–82)—it is interesting that the book is so central a metaphor in his poetry, but this is undoubtedly because Nature is more of a book to Wordsworth than actual books are. "With such a book / Before our eyes," he declares in his archetypal description of the experience of seeing Mont Blanc, "we could not choose but read / Lessons of genuine brotherhood, the plain / And universal reason of mankind" (*Prelude*, 6.543–46).

Book 5 of *The Prelude* is subtitled "Books," and in focusing on them as material as well as spiritual entities it covers a great deal of territory, encompassing an array of themes, including, most significantly, the problem of death and, as I shall argue, the related issues of creativity and attunement to being. In this it resembles the "Arab of the Bedouin tribes" (77), who dominates its first narrative episode; and yet, despite its elliptical wanderings, this section of *The Prelude* is beautifully unified and extraordinarily resonant almost from beginning to end.⁷ The compositional problem for Wordsworth in *The Prelude*, because of its autobiographical nature, is how to avoid diffuseness (and dullness) on both the larger structural level and the level of poetic line. The poem is actually structured around the "spots of time" and other intensely lyrical narrative episodes, but these are necessarily hinged on connecting autobiographical passages, and it is the latter that pose the obstacle to poetic unity. In Book 5, however, partly because there are fewer autobiographical intrusions, or because autobiography is less a structuring principle than a point of contact for solidifying what is essentially an allegorical frame of reference, Wordsworth succeeds especially well. Here the melding of philosophical meditation with narrative thrust is virtually seamless, and here as well the poet's uncanny lyricism and the didactic lessons he wishes to read, though harnessed to each other, are mutually liberating.

The problem posed by books in the opening meditation of Book 5 is not that they constitute “dead discourse,” not that they weaken memory and lead to forgetfulness, but, on the contrary, that, containing a “deathless spirit” (18), they are nevertheless material entities and, as such, “must perish” (22). It is crucial that we understand this duality or paradox in Wordsworth’s thinking, a duality or paradox which extends not only to books but to all “[t]he consecrated works of Bard and Sage, / Sensuous or intellectual” (42–43), and from those works back again to the being or selfhood of the individuals who create them. The value of books for Wordsworth, as of all intellectual and artistic productions, is precisely that they encapsulate an individual spirit that would otherwise be ephemeral—insofar, that is, as it remains individual and is not merely subsumed in the whole. Wordsworth’s beautiful metaphor for this capacity of books and artistic productions to concretize and contain the spirit is that of the *shrine*. The metaphor recalls the mansion of memory in “Tintern Abbey,” but here the register is distinctly elegiac. “Oh! why hath not the Mind / Some element to stamp her image on / In nature somewhat nearer to her own?” (45–47), laments the poet at the close of the opening meditation and immediately before the “Dream of the Arab” sequence: “Why, gifted with such powers to send abroad / Her spirit, must it lodge in shrines so frail?” (48–49).

As always, Wordsworth is struck by the fact that the eternal and the ephemeral meet in one, and he plainly tells us in the opening lines of Book 5 that his grief is not so much for the ephemeral “woes” that humanity suffers as for the fact that human beings, containing and manifesting “immortal being” (23), have “wrought . . . Things that aspire to unconquerable life . . . [which nevertheless] must perish” (18–22). David Perkins argues that “[t]he shrines are ‘frail,’ not merely because they may perish, but because they cannot contain our immortal being, or our oneness with Immortal Being, which we know at moments and strive to communicate”;⁸ but this reading fails to grasp the complexity of Wordsworth’s thought. It is true that books, being material entities and subject to dissolution, are frail shrines; but it is precisely because they can, in some sense, contain “immortal being” that they can be likened to shrines in the first place. The paradox is that to the extent that the individual creative spirit is an embodiment or reflection (Wordsworth is equivocal on this point) of “immortal being” or the “deathless spirit” (18), it is itself immortal, but able to manifest that immortality only in productions which, because they are material, or at least enclosed in matter, are ultimately as mortal as the human bodies that created them. With respect to the question of writing or books, we see here a kind of middle ground—one that I believe is profoundly original to Wordsworth—between the transcendentalism of the

Phaedrus and the Horatian position voiced by Shakespeare in the *Sonnets* that “sad mortality” can be overcome by “black ink” (Sonnet 65).

We must be clear: Wordsworth’s lament in the opening meditation of Book 5 is not for the fact of death per se; he questions neither the existence of “immortal being” nor the participation in immortal being of the individual. On the contrary, what gives the poet cause for despair is the thought that “immortal being” is finally all that exists, and, consequently, that the individual and his works are unnecessary, however much they may manifest and participate in the “deathless spirit.” “Tremblings of the heart / It gives, to think that our immortal being / No more shall need these garments” (22–24), he writes—and here “garments” refers not only to the “consecrated works of Bard and Sage” (42) but, as in the old devotional metaphor, to the body itself.⁹ The garments metaphor suggests that books and other productions of the human spirit, like the body itself, can be dispensed with, but the pathos of the lines that follow—lines that, significantly, quote Shakespeare’s sixty-fourth sonnet (“When I have seen by Time’s fell hand defaced”)—emphasizes the necessity of cleaving to the human:

and yet man,
As long as he shall be the child of earth,
Might almost ‘weep to have’ what he may lose,
Nor be himself extinguished, but survive,
Abject, depressed, forlorn, disconsolate. (24–28)¹⁰

Wordsworth’s *monism*—this seems to me a more accurate term than pantheism, because what is at issue is not so much God as “immortal being”¹¹—is not a solution to the problem of mortality but an aspect of the problem itself, for the two are inevitably linked. The passages in which Wordsworth reaches for “something far more deeply interfused” are usually so enraptured that it is difficult to see that the awareness of an overarching spirit or totality that sweeps everything up into its midst is only the other side of the coin of an awareness of the essential nothingness of the individual, in the face not only of death but, strange to say, of being itself. This is part of what is conjured by the opening twenty-eight lines of the meditation; and if we fill in the blanks, we can see that the apocalyptic musings that follow them, and that then give rise to the “Dream of the Arab” sequence, are a logical outgrowth of the poet’s monism; for if oneness is ultimately all that exists, there is always the possibility that the individuals or particulars which are now subsumed under the “living Presence” (34), and which have no ultimate necessity or reality of their own, will eventually be swept up by the “living Presence”:

A thought is with me sometimes, and I say, —
Should the whole frame of earth by inward throes
Be wrenched, or fire come down from far to scorch
Her pleasant habitations . . .
Yet would the living Presence still subsist
Victorious, and composure would ensue.
But all the meditations of mankind,
Yea, all the adamantine holds of truth
By reason built, or passion, which itself
Is highest reason in a soul sublime;
The consecrated works of Bard and Sage . . .
Where would they be? . . . (29–45)

It may be true that Wordsworth's apocalypticism is connected to the autonomy of the imagination and the separation of imagination from empirical nature, as Geoffrey Hartman has influentially argued;¹² but in the above passage, it is at least as much a logical extension of his monism—and thus the question arises as to whether the shaping power of the imagination is primary or whether it is not contingent upon or parallel to a more philosophically based awareness of a religious or human problem. If poetic imagination and philosophical analysis come together in apocalyptic vision, moreover, they do so in an odd, even oxymoronic way; for what the poetic imagination embraces with joy as the falling away of mere appearances, the philosophical mind regards in a much more somber light, if not with terror then at least with resignation. As we have seen, however, apocalypticism is not the whole story, for the poet's monism is itself in tension with a quasi-neoplatonist sense that the individuals or particulars (books or spirits) manifest, reflect, or in some way participate in "immortal being." From one standpoint, then, the creative products of the mind, like the body itself, are "garments" that can be dispensed with; but from another, there is a deeply humanist sense that an attempt, however futile, must be made to preserve them and that their loss must be lamented.¹³ These two tendencies or tensions in the poet's vision will come together in Book 5, overtly in the "Dream of the Arab" and more subtly in the "Boy of Winander" sequence.

II

From the standpoint of the growth of the poet's mind, the only worthwhile knowledge is "[k]nowledge not purchased by the loss of power" (5.425). Wordsworth's relationship to knowledge is an eminently practical one: knowledge either leads to poetry or it detracts from the capacity

to create poetry; it is either connected to the creative process and attunement to being or it militates against our capacity to lead an authentic existence. This does not mean that only the knowledge that *comes* from poetry is worthwhile (on the contrary, as the "Dream of the Arab" sequence makes clear, poetry and "geometric truth" [65] are in a crucial dialectic), but that only the knowledge that *leads* to poetry is worthwhile. The question, then, is how books can lead to poetic power, which is to say, originality. The "Dream of the Arab," an intertextual allegory, is also an allegory of intertextuality, perhaps the most fully realized and extended meditation in English literature on the mysterious process by which old books are transformed into new ones and reading experiences give birth to new creation. The intertextual dimension of the "Dream of the Arab" is exceedingly complex, as will always be the case with poetry of such extraordinary richness and density. But what is striking and perhaps even unique about the "Dream" is that in this episode Wordsworth consciously and explicitly represents *in* poetry an intertextual relationship that leads *to* poetry. What we usually think of as a secondary process of critical unearthing or interpretation is here transmuted into poetry itself.

The "Dream of the Arab" is, of course, framed within an experience of reading *Don Quixote*; but we should also note that the initial philosophical meditation is linked to the "Dream" by an anecdote that serves as a kind of temporal ground for both the meditation and the ensuing narrative. Meditation and narrative are further mediated by the fact that in the anecdote Wordsworth (or his narrator) first discusses what led to the meditation with a "studious friend" and then tells the friend how and in what circumstances he came to have the dream:

One day, when from my lips a like complaint
 Had fallen in presence of a studious friend,
 He, with a smile, made answer, that in truth
 'Twas going far to seek disquietude;
 But on the front of his reproof confessed
 That he himself had oftentimes given way
 To kindred hauntings. Whereupon I told,
 That once in the stillness of a summer's noon,
 While I was seated in a rocky cave
 By the sea-side, perusing, so it chanced,
 The famous history of the errant knight
 Recorded by Cervantes, these same thoughts
 Beset me, and to height unusual rose,
 While listlessly I sate, and having closed
 The book, had turned my eyes toward the wide sea.
 On poetry and geometric truth,

And their high privilege of lasting life,
 From all internal injury exempt,
 I mused, upon these chiefly: and at length,
 My senses yielding to the sultry air,
 Sleep seized me, and I passed into a dream. (50–70)

Why does “[t]he famous history of the errant knight / Recorded by Cervantes” provide Wordsworth with his mediating intertext? Wordsworth’s circumlocution, with its high solemnity—a solemnity that reproduces Don Quixote’s solemn tone of speech as well as Cervantes’s mock-solemnity—tells at least part of the story. The words “history” and “recorded” are important here, first of all, and in making use of them Wordsworth is picking up Cervantes’s technique of pseudo-realism. Cervantes presents *Don Quixote* as a “true history,” and he often mentions that it has been transcribed or recorded by an Arab sage, Cide Hamete Benengeli.¹⁴ The technique of pseudo-realism puts the relationship between truth and fiction or history and fiction into question; and we can see how, in Wordsworth’s transmutation, Cervantes’s fiction of an Arab historian produces a strange circularity: an Arab sage records the “history” of the “errant knight” Don Quixote; the experience of reading *Don Quixote*, in turn, produces a new text, the “Dream of the Arab.”¹⁵ Wordsworth’s equestrian Arab is an Arabian *knight*, and later in Book 5 (lines 460–90) he will refer to *The Arabian Nights* explicitly, which indicates that the homonym—Mary Jacobus terms it “a happy Romantic pun”—played a role in his creative process.¹⁶ Whether Wordsworth actually had the dream, as the 1850 version of the poem would have it, or whether it was told to him by a “studious friend,” as in the 1805 version, is not important; but in the circularity of these exchanges, we can see a process of condensation and elaboration that doubles back on the precursor text at the same time as it allows for new creation. The uncanniness of this process will itself be inscribed in the tale when Wordsworth’s narrator says of the Arab,

He, to my fancy, had become the knight
 Whose tale Cervantes tells; yet not the knight,
 But was an Arab of the desert too;
 Of these was neither and was both at once. (122–25)

The fruitful inability to pin down these significations, to say that something is itself and not some other thing, reminds us that Don Quixote is an *errant* (or wandering) knight, and that the “Arab of the Bedouin tribes” whom the dreamer encounters (77) is also, therefore, a wanderer. To wander is to be in error (from the Latin *errare*). Don Quixote produces the Arab, and the latter, in turn, merges with him; but it is important

that the two remain somewhat separate: Don Quixote is an “errant knight,” whereas the Arab appears to the dreamer as “a guide / . . . who with *unerring* skill” will lead him through the desert (81–82; my italics). The comedy of *Don Quixote* is, of course, predicated on error, on windmills being taken for giants, but the high seriousness of the “Dream of the Arab” indicates that the intertextual connection has nothing to do with comedy as such. If Wordsworth’s narrator refers to the Arab as someone who has been “crazed / By love and feeling” (145–46), he also acknowledges that “in the blind and awful lair / Of such a madness, reason did lie couched” (151–52). But the same could be said of Cervantes’s protagonist, for *Don Quixote* can be interpreted either as a satire of the medieval romance or (as Unamuno read it) as the protest of idealism (in both senses of the word) against the banalities of realism or of the “real world.”

Wordsworth’s narrator tells us that while he was “perusing, so it chanced, / The famous history of the errant knight,” the “same thoughts” that had formed the initial philosophical meditation “beset” him (59–62). What he tells us, essentially, is that there is an implicit connection between Cervantes’s novel and “poetry and geometric truth” (65). What Cervantes’s knight-errant, wandering and in error, reveals to Wordsworth, in the hidden manner of dreams, is something that his entire experience as a poet had told him was fundamental: that wandering, error, in one sense is opposed to the truth and in another *is* the truth of the human condition. (“It is and it / Is not and, therefore, is,” as Wallace Stevens says in “A Primitive Like an Orb.”)¹⁷ Admittedly, this is a truth that Wordsworth in later years will strive to exorcise. The interesting thing about his Wanderer, the central figure of *The Excursion* (1815), is that he isn’t one; there is no character in English poetry who is more dogmatic, more fixed in his opinions—and hence the failure of the poem. But to the Wordsworth of *The Prelude*—and his later reworkings of the material do not alter this fact—error is both opposed to truth and the truth itself.¹⁸ *The Prelude* opens with a paean to the joys of wandering: “and should the chosen guide / Be nothing better than a wandering cloud, / I cannot miss my way,” the poet tells himself, substituting the cloud for Milton’s Providence (1.16–18). And in “Tintern Abbey,” in what is surely a crucial moment for Wordsworth, since it involves a spiritual turning away from the darkness of skepticism, the river Wye is addressed as a wanderer: “How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee, / O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer thro’ the woods, / How often has my spirit turned to thee!” (55–57).¹⁹

That error is at once opposed to the truth and the truth of the human condition, and that this is somehow inscribed in the experience of reading *Don Quixote* for Wordsworth, speaks to both the conjunction and the disjunction between “poetry and geometric truth” (65–66), “the consecrated

works of Bard and Sage, / Sensuous or intellectual" (42–43). Both have the "privilege of lasting life, / From all internal injury exempt" (66–67), and both are involved in the renewal of the creative process (the phrase "I mused" at line 68 means "I pondered" but has the implication of poetry); but where poetry is bound up with the sensuous life of the individual, and in a way that cannot be systematized or purified of error and opinion, "geometric truth" presents itself as something transcendental.

These distinctions—the conjunction between poetry and mathematics and the disjunction between error or opinion and "geometric truth"—have a Cartesian ring to them, and, as Jane Worthington Smyser demonstrated more than thirty years ago, Wordsworth's "Dream of the Arab" is partly modeled on the famous dream (actually, the third of three dreams) that Descartes had during the night of November 10, 1619.²⁰ The dream is recorded in Adrien Baillet's *Vie de Descartes* of 1691.²¹ Descartes saw two books on a table: a *Dictionary*, which he interpreted (while continuing to dream) as representing the unification of the sciences, and a *Corpus Poetarum*, which he interpreted as representing the union of philosophy and wisdom. In the latter volume he came upon the line *Quod vitae sectabor iter* ("What path in life shall I follow?") and, at the same moment, encountered a stranger who presented him with some verses beginning *Est et Non*. Descartes told the stranger that this piece was one of the eclogues of Ausonius (a Christian poet of the fourth century). (Baillet does not mention it, but *Quod vitae sectabor iter* is also an eclogue by Ausonius.)²² Eventually, both the man and the books vanished, but Descartes remained asleep and in his sleep proceeded to interpret what he had experienced in the first part of the dream. "What especially calls for remark," says Baillet in his extraordinary account, "is that, in doubt whether what he had just seen was dream or actual vision, not merely did he decide in his sleep that it was a dream, but proceeded to interpret the dream prior to his waking" (36). Interestingly, in Baillet's account, though Descartes sees poetry as being marked by the conjunction of philosophy and wisdom, he adjudges poetry "more weighty, more full of meaning and better expressed" than philosophy (36). Descartes, says Baillet,

ascribed this marvel to the divine nature of inspiration, to the might of phantasy [*à la divinité de l'enthousiasme, et à la force de l'imagination*], which strikes out the seeds of wisdom (existing in the minds of all men like sparks of fire in flints) far more easily and distinctly than does reason in the philosophers. . . . By the poets assembled in the collection he understood revelation and inspiration, by which he hoped to see himself favoured. By the poem *Est et Non*, which is the *Yes* and the *No* of Pythagoras, he understood truth and error in our human knowledge and in the profane sciences. (36–37)

There are many fascinating aspects to this passage (“Was it a vision, or a waking dream?” one wants to ask with Keats), and while there is no evidence that Wordsworth had read Baillet on his own, it is likely that he would have known of Baillet’s account through Coleridge;²³ in any event, the symbolic affinities between Descartes’s dream and the “Dream of the Arab” are obvious: the division of knowledge into two encyclopedic books (one of which connotes scientific exactitude and the other poetic inspiration and revelation), the encounter with a stranger, and, perhaps most uncanny of all, the way in which the interpretation of the dream occurs within the dream itself or as a secondary order of dreaming. Also fascinating are the ways in which Descartes and Wordsworth, through their dreams, become mirror images of one another, and, in both dreams, in which the conjunctions and disjunctions between the two “books” continually shift ground. In Descartes’s dream the book symbolizing poetry poses the dilemma he was experiencing at this time as to what path to pursue (*Quod vitae sectabor iter*); although the two books are polarized in terms of scientific exactitude and poetry (which comprises the union of philosophy and wisdom), it is poetry that signals this dilemma—and, ironically, poetry that leads Descartes (insofar as the dreams constituted what he later called a turning point in his life) away from poetry and toward “geometric truth.”

Interestingly, Wordsworth tells us in Book 11 of *The Prelude* (“France—Concluded”) that at one point in his life he was tempted to make a similar choice. Depressed by the direction in which the French Revolution was moving, despairing of being able to resolve moral questions, Wordsworth says that he demanded “formal *proof*, / And seeking it in every thing, [he] lost / All feeling of conviction” (11.301–3); as a result, he “turned to abstract science, and there sought / Work for the reasoning faculty enthroned / Where the disturbances of space and time . . . find no admission” (328–33). Similarly, in an early passage of Book 6, which to some extent represents a continuation of the previous meditation on Books, Wordsworth tells us that in “geometric science” he recognized

A type, for finite natures, of the one
Supreme Existence, the surpassing life
Which—to the boundaries of space and time,
Of melancholy space and doleful time,
Superior, and incapable of change,
Nor touched by welterings of passion—is,
And hath the name of God. (117, 133–39)

In Book 11 Wordsworth concludes that it was only through Dorothy’s intervention that he was able to return to poetry (333–47). The phrasing of

Book 11 in particular replicates the beautiful passage in the "Dream of the Arab" about the stone, or "Euclid's Elements," which "held acquaintance with the stars, / And wedded soul to soul in purest bond / Of reason, undisturbed by space or time" (5.103–5).

Wordsworth was tempted to turn in Descartes's direction because "reason," as he formulates it in the passages quoted above, offers the precision of the Aristotelian law of noncontradiction (it is *or* it is not) without the disturbances of the passions, of individual subjectivity, or even of space and time. The second Ausonius poem that Descartes encounters, *Est et Non*, which Baillet's account says is the *Yes and No* of Pythagoras (indeed, this is the subtitle Ausonius himself gave the eclogue),²⁴ seems to offer precisely the capacity to distinguish objectively between truth and falsehood that reason demands; but the irony here too, as Mary Jacobus has noticed (she says that Ausonius's verses "mischievously provide a text-book example of the 'neither, and both at once' principle at work in the dream of the Arab Quixote"),²⁵ is that *Est et Non* could also be read as "It is *and* it is not" (and, therefore, is). Poetry turns Descartes toward "geometric truth," but "geometric truth" turns Wordsworth back to poetry.

Insofar as Wordsworth's "Dream of the Arab" is influenced by Descartes's dream, that influence is itself mediated by another series of texts that have a bearing on "geometric truth" but that also introduce the apocalyptic elements of deluge and fire that are featured so prominently in the "Dream." As Theresa M. Kelley has beautifully shown, Wordsworth's narrative can be traced to William Whiston's introduction to his 1727 edition of Euclid's *Elements* (in the Cambridge library when Wordsworth was an undergraduate there), and, from Whiston's introduction, to Josephus's *History of the Jews*.²⁶ In Josephus's *History*, Kelley notes, "Sesostris of Egypt, who had heard an Adamic prophecy of destruction, commands that the knowledge of the heavens be inscribed on two pillars—one stone and the other brick—which would then be buried." That knowledge was identified as Euclidean geometry by the 1797 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and both the *Encyclopaedia* and Josephus's *History* were eventually acquired by Wordsworth.²⁷ Wordsworth apparently derived the burial of the stone and the shell (the two "books") from Josephus; in the summary of Josephus that Whiston included in his introduction to Euclid's *Elements*, Josephus's pillars of stone and brick are not buried but are simply raised up against the catastrophe to come. With reference to the "Dream of the Arab," what is interesting in the passage from Whiston's summary that Kelley quotes is the way in which the "twofold Destruction of the Earth, one by a Deluge, the other by Fire,"²⁸ finds its way into Wordsworth's phrasing and what we can call the economy of his narrative: in the opening meditation, it is fire that is emphasized, and in the

"Dream of the Arab," flood; Whiston's phrasing is apportioned to two separate passages in the "Dream": to the "Ode, in passion uttered, which foretold / Destruction to the children of the earth / By deluge, now at hand" (95–97), and to the "twofold charge / Still in his grasp" that the Arab carries when he is last seen "hurrying o'er the illimitable waste / With the fleet waters of a drowning world / In chase of him" (134–38).

The intertextual narratives we have been tracing become the poetic narrative and, explicitly in the case of *Don Quixote*, are the poetic narrative. It is not just the books that the Arab is going to bury (which is to say, both preserve and dispose of) that are texts, but all of the symbols—the stone, the shell, the desert, the impending flood, and so on; for what the "Dream of the Arab" plainly tells us is that there is no such thing as unmediated vision. "I wondered not," the dreamer says, "although I plainly saw / The one to be a stone, the other a shell; / Nor doubted once but that they both were books" (111–13). Poetic influence is a flood (the Deluge narratives of Genesis and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are clearly implicated in the intertextual dimension);²⁹ and in order not to be inundated—that is, in order to serve as a guide to the metamorphoses attendant on the poetic process—the poet must be able not only to preserve but to dispose of the precursor texts and narratives. Metaphor on the figural level is metamorphosis on the narrative level; and from this point of view, the desire of the poet is to be flooded without being inundated and overwhelmed.

But the "Dream" also embodies a philosophical allegory that is very different from and even antithetical to this poetic allegory. From this point of view, the two "books," the shell and the stone, have different things to say to us; it is unclear whether one takes precedence, but, in any event, they tend to cancel each other out. The shell is this-worldly; it pertains to space and time; its voices have power "[t]o exhilarate the spirit, and to soothe, / Through every clime, the heart of human kind" (108–9); it inspires the individual to think of himself as being inspired by a god, and thus as being a god ("The other that was a god, yea many gods" [106]). The stone is other-worldly; it joins "soul to soul in purest bond / Of reason, undisturbed by space or time" (104–5); and far from elevating the individual to godhead, it negates the meaning of individual life as such: in the complementary passage from Book 6 that we cited earlier, it is "[a] type for finite natures, of the one / Supreme Existence, the surpassing life / Which . . . is, / And hath the name of, God" (6.133–39). In other words, there is a real choice here, and it is by no means certain that poetry—though the "Dream of the Arab" is poetry—takes precedence. "Contemplating in soberness the approach / Of an event so dire" (157–58)—that is, of a flood that would wipe out the earth—the poet-dreamer says that he could go on the same "errand" as the Arab (160); and in the following lines, which not only conclude the narrative but spiral back

to the opening meditation, the dialectic is enshrined in a number of magnificent oxymorons:

Me hath such strong entrancement overcome,
When I have held a volume in my hand,
Poor earthly casket of immortal verse,
Shakespeare, or Milton, labourers divine! (162–65)

But if philosophy takes precedence, the casket which would preserve the body of the verse is ultimately of no avail; writing is “dead discourse,” as the *Phaedrus* asserts; and the rhetoric of this very passage, even as it comes into being, is proleptic of its own demise.

III

In the two hundred-odd lines between the “Dream of the Arab” and “Boy of Winander” episodes (lines 166–364), Wordsworth returns to the discursive mode of the opening philosophical meditation. These lines deal with a range of themes, and sometimes their “drift . . . Is scarcely obvious” (293–94); but if we are to understand the “Boy of Winander” narrative, we must follow the circuitous path that leads up to it and that winds away from it. Criticism has tended to treat the “Boy of Winander” episode in isolation, and the justification for this is that it was originally published as a discrete narrative in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*;³⁰ but as will become clear, when Wordsworth expanded the episode and included it in the context of *The Prelude*, its meaning was, if not entirely altered, at least complicated considerably.

The verse-paragraph that follows the completion of the “Dream of the Arab” sequence opens with what for Wordsworth is a strange acknowledgment: “Great and benign, indeed, must be the power / Of living nature, which could thus so long / Detain me from the best of other guides” (166–68). These lines are balanced against those in the opening verse-paragraph, in which the meditation on books was said to mark a new departure (“Hitherto, / In progress through this work, my mind hath looked / Upon the speaking face of earth and heaven / As her prime teacher” [11–14]), and in departing from that departure they represent a hard-won admission; for whereas nature is living, books have previously been viewed as “shrines” or “caskets.” Nevertheless, the Arab was referred to as a “guide” (81), and so too now books can be said to be guides (just as nature is a guide) because of their capacity to “lay / Their sure foundations in the heart of man” (198–99). Books do not live like living men, perhaps (to borrow the phrasing of the boat-stealing episode of Book 1 [398–99]), but there is a sense in which they *are* alive, in which they come to life in our hands and through our voices.

It is as if the visionary power of the “Dream of the Arab”—that is, of his own poetry—had forced Wordsworth to a recognition that he might otherwise have wanted to avoid. In any event, what now follows is a gesture of unprecedented strangeness; for what Wordsworth says is that it is “just / That here, in memory of all books . . . [and] in the name of all inspired souls” (198, 201) he “should, once for all, pronounce / Their benediction” (217–18). What could it mean to speak in memory of all books—that is, in memory of those material objects whose function is to contain and transmit memory? “And yet we feel—we cannot choose but feel,” the poet had said in the opening meditation, “That they must perish” (21–22). In this attempt to memorialize that which attempts to memorialize, it is as if—in the moment of utterance, *here*—an elegy might be framed that would respond to all previous elegies (for all books are ultimately elegies) and would render them their due. The triple occurrence of “all” testifies to an enormous ambition: to frame an elegy that would encompass *all* of the inspired souls whose presence is enshrined in books,

From Homer the great Thunderer, from the voice
That roars along the bed of Jewish song,
And that more varied and elaborate,
Those trumpet-tones of harmony that shake
Our shores in England, —from those loftiest notes
Down to the low and wren-like warblings, made
For cottagers and spinners at the wheel . . . (202–8)

The movement from Homer to the Old Testament to Shakespeare and Milton proceeds along canonical paths, but in those final phrases a new tonality and a new thematic intervene; and as the passage modulates, Wordsworth makes it clear that his concern goes beyond “those loftiest notes” to encompass figures who are “sleeping nameless in their scattered graves” (215).

What we have, in other words, is a shift in the poem’s locus of concern, one that will find fruition in the “Boy of Winander” narrative (still 150 lines off) and that marks the latter as an heir to Gray’s *Elegy*. The *Elegy* had an enormous influence on Wordsworth, which he mainly tried to evade;³¹ but that this influence should manifest itself in the context of Book 5 is surprising, to say the least, for those who are sleeping nameless in their scattered graves are precisely those whose presence is not enshrined in books. They may have been inspired souls, in which case we can think of them as mute, inglorious Miltons, but in any event they are entirely forgotten and unknown. Yet if it is true even of the real Miltons that they must perish, however much they participate in immortal being, then the distinction is elided, and what books enshrine is absence as much

as presence. In this proleptic awareness, all names are ultimately metonymies for the essential namelessness of the human condition.

A passage in Book 10 in which Wordsworth explicitly invokes Gray's *Elegy* is instructive in this regard. Wordsworth describes visiting a cemetery where "mid a throng of graves, / An honoured teacher of [his] youth was laid, / And on the stone were graven by his desire / Lines from the churchyard elegy of Gray" (10.533–36). That "honoured teacher," we know, was William Taylor of the Hawkeshead Grammar School; and we also know that it was he who first encouraged Wordsworth to write poetry. "He loved the Poets," Wordsworth tells us, "and, if now alive, / Would have loved me, as one not destitute / Of promise, nor belying the kind hope / That he had formed, when I, at his command, / Began to spin, with toil, my earliest songs" (548–52). But it is crucial that Wordsworth does not tell us his name, and although the assiduous labors of academic editors have negated the poet's intentions in this regard (thereby offering us knowledge purchased by the loss of power), in a sense it does not matter. The poet stands at the grave of his anonymous teacher, who in turn stands in for the poetic guide or precursor whose lines are engraved on the stone. The teacher/precursor, having had his own promise nipped in the bud (Taylor, in fact, died at the age of 32), welcomes the new poet of promise.

We can read these lines from Book 10—like the passage in which Wordsworth takes it upon himself to speak "in memory of all books" and "in the name of all inspirèd souls"—as an exercise in narcissism, an expression of the egotistical sublime, or we can say that the poet is himself enfolded in his theme and that the namelessness he points to (anonymity and death) is an anticipation or realization of his own namelessness and somehow takes precedence over the singularity to which he himself aspires. In other words, we can either read with Wordsworth or deconstruct him in this case, and if our tendency is to do both at once, this is because the poet's overt concern with universality is shadowed by ambivalence.

In the "Boy of Winander" episode, Wordsworth stands before the grave not of a teacher but of a child, a child who is father of the man in the sense that the memory the poet has of him (whether or not this is constructed) teaches him all that he needs to know. The Boy is anonymous—and again we must respect Wordsworth's poetic intentions—but we know that in the original version he was clearly connected to the poet himself.³² In any event, as all critics have noticed, the Boy enacts and mirrors for the poet an archaic, pre-literate, Orphic, and perhaps more authentic version of the poetic process:

. . . with fingers interwoven, both hands
 Pressed closely palm to palm, and to his mouth
 Uplifted, he, as through an instrument,

Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls,
 That they might answer him; and they would shout
 Across the watery vale, and shout again,
 Responsive to his call . . . (370–76)

The episode comprises two verse-paragraphs, and the movement from the first to the second is abrupt—for any death, especially one that comes “before its time,” must be abrupt: “This Boy was taken from his mates, and died / In childhood, ere he was full twelve years old” (389–90). Hartman minimizes the abruptness of the transition, asserting that “instead of waking from consciousness of nature into consciousness of self, [the Boy] falls like sleeping Beauty into the gentler continuum and quasi immortality of Nature.”³³ This is beautifully formulated, but what it evades is the religious problem posed by the episode (and indeed by Book 5 as a whole). In company with most other critics, Hartman ignores the altogether uncanny figure of the “thronèd Lady,” who dominates the passage that follows the transition:

Fair is the spot, most beautiful the vale
 Where he was born; the grassy churchyard hangs
 Upon a slope above the village school,
 And through that churchyard when my way has led
 On summer evenings, I believe that there
 A long half hour together I have stood
 Mute, looking at the grave in which he lies!
 Even now appears before the mind’s clear eye
 That self-same village church; I see her sit
 (The thronèd Lady whom erewhile we hailed)
 On her green hill, forgetful of this Boy
 Who slumbers at her feet, —forgetful too,
 Of all her silent neighbourhood of graves,
 And listening only to the gladsome sounds
 That, from the rural school ascending, play
 Beneath her and about her. (391–406)

The “thronèd Lady” is a personification both of the Church and of Nature—or perhaps of a reconstituted Christianity that centers on Nature; but what is surprising, even shocking, is that she is “*forgetful* of this Boy”—and of everyone else, for that matter; the irony of the poet’s conception is emphasized by the repetition of this adjective. The “thronèd Lady” is blithely unconcerned with the dead—not because she is callous or malevolent (indeed, the uncanniness of Wordsworth’s conception is rendered all the more powerful by the benignity with which he has

clothed her forgetfulness), but simply because she is too busy with the living to take notice of those who no longer exist as such—or, in other words, apart from her, as separate entities.

As Wallace Jackson and Paul Yoder have observed, much of the language of the “Boy of Winander” episode is borrowed from Gray’s *Elegy*, and the word “forgetful” from one of its most densely packed figures:

For who, to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,
This pleasing anxious being e’er resign’d,
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
Nor cast one longing ling’ring look behind? (85–88)³⁴

In contrast to Wordsworth’s figure of the “thronèd Lady,” Gray’s “dumb Forgetfulness” is only conventionally a personification, since what the abstraction connotes is neither human nor even bestial but terrifyingly amorphous. In Gray’s poetic economy, “dumb Forgetfulness” is a condensation of forgetting and being forgotten—which is to say, of death and being forgotten; for all who die and drink of the waters of Lethe forget everything that has happened to them on Earth and eventually are forgotten (though in Gray’s conception a distinction is to be drawn between those who have symbolic presence in the society and those who do not).³⁵ Wordsworth’s incorporation of Gray’s conception either subsumes death in nature or nature in death, depending on how one reads the personification, but in any case it distributes the elements of Gray’s figure in such a way that life and death are gently harmonized—as Hartman’s reading of the “Boy of Winander” episode as a whole would tend to emphasize. Wordsworth applies Gray’s adjectives “dumb” and “mute,” for example (in “dumb Forgetfulness” and “Some mute inglorious Milton”), not to the “thronèd Lady” but to the Boy of Winander himself, whose final silence is anticipated both by the silent owls and by the “lengthened pause / Of silence” in which he sometimes hangs listening (379–82), and to Wordsworth’s narrator, who describes himself in the village churchyard as standing “Mute, looking at the grave in which he lies!” (397).³⁶ Where Gray provides sharp delineations between the living and the dead, presence and absence, everything in Wordsworth’s narrative is “rolled round in earth’s diurnal course.”³⁷

Nevertheless, this forgetfulness of death (or of Gray’s figure of “dumb Forgetfulness”) is given in such a way that the problem of death is opened up to us. There is a sweet serenity to the Lady’s forgetfulness, but what is forgotten, after all, is individual existence, and therefore the meaningfulness of individual existence. There is no “afterlife” (no life after life); it is all here. And this was already brought home to us, or at least anticipated, by the great passage at the end of the first verse-paragraph. “[A]nd, when a

lengthened pause / Of silence came and baffled his best skill," Wordsworth says of the Boy of Winander,

Then sometimes, in that silence, while he hung
 Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise
 Has carried far into his heart the voice
 Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene
 Would enter unawares into his mind,
 With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
 Its woods, and that uncertain heaven, received
 Into the bosom of the steady lake. (379–88)

The uncertainty of heaven—and therefore the larger question of the meaningfulness of the anonymous Boy's life, a life that would have left little trace of itself on earth—is *received* by the reader as gently as possible, as the metaphorical wavering of the reflected sky in the lake, but is received nonetheless.³⁸

IV

Why does Wordsworth stage the death of the Boy of Winander? We have answered the question from one point of view (i.e., from the standpoint of Wordsworth's revisionary relationship to Gray's *Elegy*), but there is an antithetical dimension to his thought that we have not yet explored. On the one hand, death seals off the Boy's potential: he remains a "mute, inglorious Milton," and even the benignity of the thronèd Lady's forgetfulness underscores the pathos of this relation; but on the other, death preserves the Boy of Winander from all of those factors and influences attendant upon adulthood that would deprive him of the attunement to being that he symbolizes. Just as the burial of the two books in the "Dream of the Arab" simultaneously represents their loss and preservation (the Arab is disposing of them at the same time as he is saving them, as we noted), so too with the burial of the Boy of Winander, who is at once cut off before he can fulfill his potential and preserved in his purity against the inevitable corruptions of adulthood. The Boy of Winander's attunement to being consists in his capacity to be rooted, without anxiety, in the present, not to be concerned with the future or burdened by the problems of temporality and death. Wordsworth's concern with attunement to being is subterranean and not without ambiguity, as we shall see, but there is clearly a sense in which the Boy of Winander's spirit is sealed by a slumber and in which he has no human fears.

In the polemic against mechanistic and utilitarian modes of educational practice that precedes the "Boy of Winander" episode, and against

which it is juxtaposed as an objective correlative, Wordsworth invokes the example of his mother in a way that makes his relationship to her parallel but asymmetrical to what we have in the episode itself: "Early died / My honoured Mother, she who was the heart / And hinge of all our learnings and our loves" (256–58). His mother, Wordsworth says further,

was pure
 From anxious fear of error or mishap,
 And evil, overweeningly so called;
 Was not puffed up by false unnatural hopes,
 Nor selfish with unnecessary cares,
 Nor with impatience, from the season asked
 More than its timely produce; rather loved
 The hours for what they are, than from regard
 Glanced on their promises in restless pride. (279–87)

The implicit injunction here is that we should be like the lilies of the field who take no thought of the morrow. Wordsworth praises his mother for being sufficiently forgetful of death to be without "anxious fear of error," and thus to allow the child to wander; and this in turn is linked to the connection between wandering and poetry that is once again enunciated in the paragraph immediately preceding the one in which he first refers to his mother ("Oh! where had been the Man, the Poet where . . . If in the season of unperilous choice, / In lieu of wandering, as we did . . . We had been followed, hourly watched, and noosed" [232–38]). This vision is essentially what we are given in the concluding passage of the "Boy of Winander" episode, but it is shadowed by complications that are yet to unfold. Written in the optative mood and addressed to the "thronèd Lady," the passage expresses the hope that she will "long / Behold . . . A race of real children . . . yielding not / In happiness to the happiest upon earth" (406–7, 411, 419–20). Yet these children, precisely because they *are* real (in the final analysis, Wordsworth insists on reality), are also seen as "Bending beneath our life's mysterious weight / Of pain, and doubt, and fear" (418–19). This is troubling, among other reasons, because of the echo of "Tintern Abbey." Can there be attunement to being in the pure form that the Boy of Winander apparently symbolizes if it is already burdened by the mystery? The final three lines of the episode, consolidating the poet's message, are deeply humane; but when we remember that the episode was originally composed as a discrete narrative which had nothing to do with its later contextualization in a book on books, and was possibly, in its original intention, even antithetical to that context—in the sense of being ideologically posed against books and writing—they too are darkened by anxiety:

May books and Nature be their early joy!
 And knowledge, rightly honoured with that name—
 Knowledge not purchased by the loss of power! (423–25)

Wordsworth's ambivalences and his struggle to grapple with these issues can be charted in terms of what might seem on the surface a series of trivial details: the emendations he made between the 1805 and 1850 versions of *The Prelude* to the ages of the children he evokes in the narrative—that is, the Boy of Winander and the young Wordsworth himself. In the 1805 text, the Boy of Winander dies “ere he was full ten years old,” but in the 1850 version of the poem this has been changed to twelve. The reason for this change can be linked to the other passage in which the poet corrects the age at which something of importance happens to a boy, the one in which Wordsworth refers to the period in which he first became conscious of poetry as such. The 1850 version reads:

Twice five years
 Or less I might have seen, when first my mind
 With conscious pleasure opened to the charm
 Of words in tuneful order, found them sweet
 For their own *sakes*, a passion, and a power . . . (552–56)

In 1805, however, this had been “Thirteen years, / Or haply less . . .” (575–76).³⁹ Thus, in the 1805 text the Boy of Winander dies at ten and the young Wordsworth becomes conscious of “words in tuneful order” at thirteen, whereas in 1850 this pattern is reversed: the Boy dies at twelve and Wordsworth's consciousness arrives at ten. Given the self-reflexive nature of Wordsworth's representation in the episode, what was at stake for him was whether the Boy of Winander's Orphic attunement to being manifested poetic capability more fully than written poetry (or poetry in words) could do, and hence was unmediated by the influence of books (this was possibly the spirit in which the 1799 fragment was written, but it is contradicted by the context and by the concluding lines of the episode [“May books and Nature be their early joy . . .”]), or whether that Orphic attunement, carrying the potential for poetry as a linguistic expression, was already in fact mediated by books.⁴⁰ In the former scenario, death seals off a state of attunement that would inevitably be trammelled by the onset of self-consciousness; in the latter, the state of attunement is already marked by books, and hence by a self-consciousness that includes an orientation to the future and therefore to absence. From the discrete fragment of 1799/1800 to the 1805 text and finally to the 1850 version, Wordsworth's transformation of the “Boy of Winander” episode seems to indicate an increasing emphasis on literary mediation. Perhaps this is

only because of the context in which he situated the narrative, but the very fact that he situated it in this context is indicative in and of itself. In any event, we are not permitted to say unequivocally, as Hartman does in his recent reconsideration of the episode, that “reading is, precisely *not* the youngster’s medium of vision. The direct, tutorial agency of nature is emphasized, working independently of book-related schemes of education.”⁴¹ It may be that the poet cannot look in an unmediated way at childhood experience, but this does not imply that the child’s experience, as he structures it in either the 1805 or 1850 texts, is unmediated, whether or not Wordsworth originally intended it to be when the episode was written as a discrete narrative.

The poet’s corrections of the ages at which the Boy of Winander dies and the young Wordsworth becomes receptive to “the charm / Of words in tuneful order” need to be examined against the only other passage in Book 5 in which the age of a child is specified (although here it remains the same in both versions), the “Drowned Man” episode.⁴² In the latter, which follows immediately upon the “Boy of Winander” episode, we again have an encounter with death, but here the problem of the fear of death is explicitly what is at stake. Wordsworth describes his experience as a child of watching the Lake of Esthwaite dredged for a man who had drowned and whose “heap of garments” on the shore told “a plain tale” (437, 443):

At last, the dead man, ’mid that beauteous scene
Of trees and hills and water, bolt upright
Rose, with his ghastly face, a spectre shape
Of terror; yet no soul-debasing fear,
Young as I was, a child not nine years old,
Possessed me, for my inner eye had seen
Such sights before, among the shining streams
Of faery land, the forests of romance.
Their spirit hallowed the sad spectacle
With decoration of ideal grace;
A dignity, a smoothness, like the works
Of Grecian art, and purest poesy. (448–59)

The point is that the nine-year old boy of the “Drowned Man” episode is saved from the “soul-debasing” fear of death by his prior immersion in the idealized “forests of romance” and “works . . . of purest poesy.” But if that is so, then consistency requires that the consciousness of “words in tuneful order” be traced to a similar age (“Twice five years / Or less”); similarly, it requires that the Boy of Winander’s attunement to being—partly mitigating *our* anxiety and sorrow at his death—be mediated by

books and by the development of an incipient literary consciousness that occurs prior to his death. The problem is that this attempt to maintain internal consistency only opens up other fissures in the text and in the poet's vision. Wordsworth wants books and poetry to attune us to being and to preserve us from the fear of death, but (and this was implicit in the attack on books in the *Phaedrus* and on poetry in the *Republic*) the question is whether the transcendental horizon toward which they are aimed is not also predicated on the fear of death.

Certainly there is circularity here, but it was an enabling one for Wordsworth. He tells us, immediately after the "Drowned Man" episode, that as a child he possessed "[a] slender abstract of the Arabian tales" (462), and that, immersed in them, he would *lose himself* (as we say), experiencing a sense of attunement that, in retrospect, he associates not only with "the heart of man" (i.e., with what is essential to humanity) but with Nature or immortal being:

A gracious spirit o'er this earth presides,
And o'er the heart of man: invisibly
It comes to works of unproved delight,
And tendency benign, directing those
Who care not, know not, think not what they do.
The tales that charm away the wakeful night
In Araby . . .
These spread like day, and something in the shape
Of these will live till man shall be no more. (491–97, 504–5)

"I guess not what this tells of Being past, / Nor what it augurs of the life to come," Wordsworth concludes enigmatically (510–11). It is fascinating that the book in question here is *The Arabian Nights* because the implication is that the latter is involved in the complex intertextual process that eventually gives rise to the "Dream of the Arab," and that the poet, even as he is writing these lines, is aware of the fact. But the benign sense of immersion and loss of self that the boy experiences in relation to *The Arabian Nights* is actually antithetical to the apocalyptic movement of the "Dream of the Arab"; for in the latter, when the flood of being threatens to inundate the world, the injunction is to save the two symbolic books, so that some vestige of human life can be maintained. The books that convey us beyond ourselves, those that have "power / To exhilarate the spirit, and to soothe, / Through every clime, the heart of human kind" (107–9), assuage the anxiety that we will lose touch with ourselves and will be lost entirely, but they are also responsible for fostering that anxiety.

At the conclusion of Book 5 of *The Prelude*, recalling the period in which he first became aware of "words in tuneful order," Wordsworth

refers (and this of course is contrary to our usual sense of him as a poet of the ordinary) to the “wish for something loftier, more adorned, / Than is the common aspect, daily garb, / Of human life” (575–77). One could see this as a tacit admission that poetry takes us beyond Nature, but Wordsworth, refusing to countenance such a perspective, insists (as the capitalization of “Nature” perhaps entitles him to do) that

he, who in his youth
A daily wanderer among woods and fields
With living Nature hath been intimate,
Not only in that raw unpractised time
Is stirred to extasy, as others are,
By glittering verse; but further, doth receive,
In measure only dealt out to himself,
Knowledge and increase of enduring joy
From the great Nature that exists in works
Of mighty Poets. (586–95)

The editors of the Norton edition gloss the passage that follows the semicolon as expressing “Wordsworth’s claim . . . that a country child will feel a special joy in poetic descriptions of Nature” (p. 184, n.3), but this is unquestionably a misreading. Wordsworth means exactly what he says: that Nature—i.e., immortal being—exists *in* the work of great poets (“Shakespeare, or Milton, labourers divine” [165]). The problem, however, from the standpoint of individual life, as the opening meditation had made clear, is that Nature or immortal being does not require anything of ours, even the work of mighty poets. This is at the heart of Wordsworth’s vision in Book 5, and the adjective “glittering,” which he here applies to “verse,” is a metonymy for vision that recalls the moment in the “Dream of the Arab” when the dreamer’s eyes “Saw, over half the wilderness diffused, / A bed of glittering light” (128–29). “Visionary power,” the poet concludes,

Attends the motions of the viewless winds,
Embodied in the mystery of words:
There, darkness makes abode, and all the host
Of shadowy things work endless changes there,
As in a mansion like their proper home.
Even forms and substances are circumfused
By that transparent veil with light divine,
And, through the turnings intricate of verse,
Present themselves as objects recognised,
In flashes, and with glory not their own. (595–605)

The oxymorons and sensory paradoxes that accumulate are similar to those in the Crossing of the Alps section of Book 6, and the imagery is reminiscent also of "Tintern Abbey." The "mystery of words," which is indeed Wordsworth's burden, suggests that poetry lifts us up even as it weighs us down. The final line in the passage, perhaps the most beautiful in the entire Book and infinitely improved over the 1805 version ("In flashes, and with a glory scarce their own"),⁴³ should be read with a slight pause before "not"—as if to say that glory both can and cannot be contained within the material covers of a book.

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NOTES

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1. Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. R. Hackforth, *The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Bollingen Series LXXI, Princeton University Press, 1961), 521.

2. The argument against writing is also developed in Plato's seventh letter (344c–345a) in a way that overlaps with that of the *Phaedrus*. See *Letters*, trans. L. A. Post, *The Collected Dialogues*, 1591–1592.

3. Plato, *Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey, *The Collected Dialogues*, 631.

4. This is the title of one of the essays in Book I of Montaigne's *Essais* ("Que philosopher c'est apprendre à mourir").

5. *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1979). All citations from *The Prelude* will be to this edition and, unless otherwise indicated, from the 1850 version of the poem.

6. *The New Organon*, aphorism 13. In *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath, 14 vols. (London: Longman, 1857–1874), vol. 4, p. 47.

7. A number of discussions of *Prelude 5* take their point of departure from R. D. Havens's argument in *The Mind of a Poet* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1941) that this section of the poem is lacking in unity as a result of its failure to take account of "the literature of knowledge as distinguished from the literature of power" and to demonstrate the role of the former in disciplining the poet's mind (375). Given Wordsworth's explicit refusal to separate knowledge from power, particularly with respect to "the growth of the poet's mind," which after all is the poem's theme, Havens's argument is a peculiar one. The argument is reformulated by Michael C. Jaye in "The Artifice of Disjunction: Book 5, *The Prelude*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 14 (1978), 32–50. It is countered by a number of critics, including J. Robert Barth, S.J., "The Poet, Death, and Immortality: The Unity of *The Prelude*, Book V," *The Wordsworth Circle* 10 (1979), 69–75; Joel

Morkan, "Structure and Meaning in *The Prelude*, Book V," *PMLA* 87 (1972), 246–54; Evelyn Shakir, "Books, Death, and Immortality: A Study of Book V of *The Prelude*," *Studies in Romanticism* 8 (1969), 156–67; and W. G. Stobie, "A Reading of *The Prelude*, Book V," *MLQ* 24 (1963), 365–73.

8. *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Sincerity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 105.

9. J. Hillis Miller observes that "[t]he traditional metaphor describing the body as the garment of the soul—rags the soul will no more need in heaven—is here transferred to the books men write" (*The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985], 86); but it seems to me that the metaphor is *extended* rather than transferred, and that what is true of books is true of the body and, in a sense, of the individual as a whole. Cynthia Chase's reading of *Prelude* 5 partly turns on the fact that the "garments" metaphor of the opening meditation is echoed later on in the "Drowned Man" episode by the literal "garments telling a plain tale" (443) that the dead man had left behind on the shore ("The Accidents of Disfiguration: Limits to Literal and Rhetorical Reading in Book V of *The Prelude*," *Studies in Romanticism* 18:4 [Winter 1979], 547–65). Andrzej Warminski, for his part, insists that because the garments in the opening philosophical meditation are metaphors for books, when they recur in the "Drowned Man" episode they should also be read as books ("Facing Language: Wordsworth's First Poetic Spirits," *Diacritics* 17 [Winter 1987], 18–31; see also, Warminski, *Mixed Crossing: Wordsworth's Apocalypses*," *MLN* 99 [Dec. 1984], 983–1006).

10. Wordsworth echoes the couplet of the sonnet: "This thought is as a death, which cannot choose / But weep to have that which it fears to lose."

11. Stephen Prickett in *Romanticism and Religion* (Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press, 1976) argues that there is a "tantalising ambiguity between Naturalism [i.e., pantheism] and Platonism" in Wordsworth, which arises because Wordsworth "is *consciously* seeking a *poetic* formulation which is neither" (85). Wordsworth, as Prickett notes, is not a systematic thinker; but if we view Wordsworth's vision as fundamentally monistic, then the ambiguity that Prickett discerns falls away. Monism partakes of both "Naturalism" (or pantheism) and Platonism; like the former it is immanent, and like the latter, transcendent: Wordsworth's "immortal being" pervades the here-and-now, but points to a unity that lies beyond the multiple particulars of experience.

12. *Wordsworth's Poetry: 1787–1814* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1971).

13. Joel Morkan recognizes this duality from a slightly different point of view when he notes that the "Tremblings of the heart" passage reveals both that "man is not eternally wedded to the earth" and that the "'garments' of human achievement are what dignify his temporal existence" ("Structure and Meaning in *The Prelude*, Book V," 247). Morkan's view of Wordsworth's apocalypticism is very different from my own, however, because he assumes that Wordsworth believes in the Christian afterlife; he refers to the apocalyptic revelation of the "Tremblings of the heart" passage as a "glimpse of that final moment which men should await with joy" (247). This seems to me false both to the spirit of the lines and to what Wordsworth actually says.

14. In Part 1, Chapter 1, for example, Cervantes writes: "Finally he resolved to call himself Don Quixote. And that is no doubt why the authors of this true history . . . assumed that his name must have been Quixada and not Quesada, as other authorities would have it" (*Don Quixote*, trans. J. M. Cohen [London: Penguin Books, 1950], 34). Chapter 1 of Part 2 opens as follows: "Cide Hamete Benengeli recounts, in the second part of this history concerning Don Quixote's third expedition . . ." (471).

15. In his reading of the episode, Timothy Bahti remarks—suggestively but, in my opinion, misleadingly—that the Arab "is both a character in the dream and its writer" ("Figures of Interpretation, The Interpretation of Figures: A Reading of Wordsworth's 'Dream of the Arab,'" *Studies in Romanticism* 18 [Winter 1979], 620). There is nothing in the "Dream" to suggest that the Arab is a writer, and, as we noted, the Arab of *Don Quixote*, Cide Hamete Benengali, is presented not as the writer of the book but as the transcriber of its "history."

16. Mary Jacobus, "Wordsworth and the Language of the Dream," *ELH* 46 (1979), 640.

17. Wallace Stevens, *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 317. Hillis Miller (*The Linguistic Moment*, 96) cites the same passage from "A Primitive Like an Orb."

18. This is not the place to argue the point extensively, but I disagree with those commentators who insist that the 1805 version of *The Prelude* is more authentic and hence superior to the 1850 version. "Authenticity" in poetry is a function of poetic power, and not of biographical circumstances. More often than not, Wordsworth's emendations improve the poetry; he has the genius, as a reviser of *The Prelude*, to provide artistic shape to ideas and tendencies that may no longer reflect his opinions and attitudes.

19. The complexities in Wordsworth's understanding of the relationship between error and truth allow us to contrast his attitude with those of Spenser and Milton; but the address to the river Wye in "Tintern Abbey" reverberates against one of those strangely proleptic passages in *Paradise Lost* in which it is suggested that, even in Paradise before the Fall, error is the truth of our condition. The river that courses through Eden in Book 4 is described as "wand'ring many a famous Realm . . . With mazy error" (234, 239); and this is connected a few lines later to the famously ambivalent description of Eve's hair ("in wanton ringlets wav'd / As the Vine curls her tendrils" [306–7]).

20. Jane Worthington Smyser, "Wordsworth's Dream of Poetry and Science: *The Prelude*, V," *PMLA* 71 (March 1956), 269–75.

21. The manuscript in which Descartes recorded the dream was unpublished and eventually lost, but apparently Baillet had access to it. Baillet's account of the dream is contained in Book 2, chapter 1, pp. 81–86 of his *Vie de Descartes*. An English translation of Baillet's account by Norman Kemp Smith is included in his volume, *New Studies in the Philosophy of Descartes* (London: Macmillan, 1952), 33–39; this translation is cited by Jacobus, *op. cit.*, p. 643, n.25. All quotations from Baillet's account will be from the Kemp Smith translation in *New Studies* and will be cited parenthetically by page number. Smyser includes a substantial excerpt from the original French (*op. cit.*, 271).

22. In the Loeb Classical Library edition of Ausonius, *Quod vitae sectabor iter* is the second poem in Book 7 ("The Eclogues") while *Est et Non* is the fourth (Ausonius, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn White [Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1961], 1:162–67, 170–73).

23. Smyser notes that Coleridge would have known the dream of Descartes "not only because of his wide reading, but more specifically because of his particular interest in dreams and his close knowledge of Descartes" (272).

24. See Ausonius, 1:170–71.

25. Jacobus, 638.

26. Theresa M. Kelley, "Spirit and Geometric Form: The Stone and the Shell in Wordsworth's Arab Dream," *SEL* 22:4 (Autumn 1982), 563–82.

27. Kelley, 567–68.

28. See Kelley, 568–69.

29. Kelley traces the Deluge symbolism in the "Dream of the Arab" to Genesis and Ovid, but observes that "the version of Deluge narrative which the Arab dream echoes is the summary that Whiston included in his edition of the *Elements*" (568). Michael Ragusis, arguing that Ovid's story of the flood had important resonances for Wordsworth, suggests that the stone and shell symbols were taken from the Deucalion and Pyrrha story in the *Metamorphoses* ("Language and Metamorphosis in Wordsworth's Arab Dream," *MLQ* 36 [June 1975], 148–65).

30. See *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797–1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), 139–41. Wordsworth seems to have intended the narrative for the two-part *Prelude* of 1799, but for reasons not evident he did not include it until, in an expanded form, it became part of Book 5 of the 1805 version.

31. For a discussion of Wordsworth's ambivalent relationship to Gray's *Elegy*, see Henry Weinfield, *The Poet without a Name: Gray's Elegy and the Problem of History* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 164–92.

32. It is not quite accurate to say, as the editors of the Norton *Prelude* do, that the original version of "There was a boy" was written by Wordsworth in the first person (see p. 172, n.6). In the 1799 fragment that the editors cite (see p. 492), the narrative begins in the third person but then shifts to the first at line 16:

There was a boy—ye knew him well, ye rocks
And islands of Winander, and ye green
Peninsulas of Esthwaite—many a time
[] when the stars began
To move along the edges of the hills,
Rising or setting, would he stand alone . . .
. . . And when it chanced
That pauses of deep silence mocked my skill,
Then often in that silence, while I hung
Listening . . . (1–5, 15–18)

33. *Wordsworth's Poetry*, 21.

34. Wallace Jackson and Paul Yoder, "Wordsworth Reimagines Thomas Gray: Notations on Begetting a Kindred Spirit," *Criticism* 31:3 (Summer 1989), 292–93 et

passim. Peter Manning, however, focusing not on the “thronèd Lady” but on the children she oversees, traces the episode to Gray’s “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College” (see “Reading Wordsworth’s Revisions: Othello and the Drowned Man,” *Studies in Romanticism* 22 [Spring 1983], 20–22).

35. See *The Poet without a Name: Gray’s Elegy and the Problem of History*, 123–26.

36. A. W. Phinney, who also draws the connection between the “Boy of Winander” episode and Gray’s *Elegy*, writes: “Instead of ‘mute inglorious Miltons,’ we are given simply the speaker himself, ‘Mute—looking at the grave in which he lies!’” (“Wordsworth’s Winander Boy and Romantic Theories of Language,” *The Wordsworth Circle* 18:2 [Spring 1987], 68).

37. Hartman connects the “Boy of Winander” episode to the Lucy poems, observing that both Lucy and the Boy “die before consciousness of self can emerge wholly from consciousness of nature” (*Wordsworth’s Poetry*, 21). I would agree that there is a connection, but would argue that it has less to do with the question of consciousness per se than with the problem of the disappearance of the individual that Wordsworth’s meditation on death raises; and I would suggest, furthermore, that the name Wordsworth gives to Lucy, *Lucy Gray*, is not fortuitous.

38. Emphasizing the adjective “uncertain” (but not the phrase as a whole), Paul de Man argues that the “tone of uncertainty” of the passage in which the Boy hangs listening has to do with the experience of a loss of correspondence between consciousness and nature, an experience that is occasioned by death and is premonitory of death (“Wordsworth and Hölderlin,” *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1984], 52–54): “The boy’s surprise at standing perplexed before the sudden silence of nature was an anticipatory announcement of his death, the movement of his consciousness passing beyond the deceptive constancy of a world in which our mind knows itself to be in an endlessly precarious state of suspension: above an earth, the stability of which it cannot participate in, and beneath a heaven that has rejected it” (53–54). In the final phrase, de Man seems to be echoing the passage from Stevens’s “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” in which the poet refers to “a heaven / That has expelled us and our images” (*The Palm at the End of the Mind*, 207); but it does violence to the context in *The Prelude* to which he is referring to suggest that heaven has rejected consciousness rather than consciousness heaven. I would argue, moreover, that in focusing on the problematics of consciousness rather than on the problem consciousness has for its object, de Man fails to give the literal meaning of the phrase (“that uncertain heaven”) its due. De Man’s perspective on the “Boy of Winander” episode is amplified but not essentially changed in “Time and History in Wordsworth,” *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism: The Gauss Seminar and Other Papers*, ed. E. S. Burt, Kevin Newmark, and Andrzej Warminski (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1993), 74–94.

39. The editors of the Norton edition indicate that both of the corrections to the 1805 text involving age—to the “Boy of Winander” episode and to the passage in which the poet speaks of the time in which he first took pleasure in poetry—were made in the 1816–1819 period (see p. 175, n.9 and p. 183, n.7).

40. The former possibility, that the Boy’s “mimic hootings” represent an original and therefore more essential poetic capability, can be linked to what Frances Ferguson calls Rousseau’s attempt, in the *Essai sur l’origine des langues*, to delineate

an "unfallen" language (*Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977], 3).

41. Geoffrey Hartman, "Reading and Representation: Wordsworth's 'Boy of Winander,'" *European Romantic Review* 5:1 (1994), 92.

42. For a discussion of Wordsworth's various emendations of the episode, see Susan J. Wolfson, "The Illusions of Mastery: Wordsworth's Revisions of 'The Drowned Man of Esthwaite,' 1799, 1805, 1850," *PMLA* 99:5 (Oct. 1984), 917-35. Wolfson discusses Wordsworth's changes to the age of the Boy of Winander, but she is not concerned with the issue of literary mediation I am taking up here. "[A]djustments in the Boy's age," in her view, "distance poetic events from personal history and help elaborate a screen of artifice to transfigure Wordsworth's knowledge of death" (924). For a parallel discussion of Wordsworth's revisions to the "Drowned Man" episode, see Manning, *op. cit.*, 3-27.

43. The word "flash," of course, is a familiar marker of the Wordsworthian sublime and also occurs in the Crossing of the Alps narrative (6.600-3).