“SEVERER INTERVENTIONS”:
WILLIAM WORDSWORTH AND THE PLAY OF THE LINE

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by

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation introduces attention to the materiality of William Wordsworth’s verse into a critical discourse that habitually limits itself to considerations of the verse’s ideas and ideologies. Adopting the working premise that all poems must be recognized as physical artifacts crafted from the raw materials of letters and lines, I explore the friction that occasionally arises between the semantic content that poetry contains or transmits and the material structures (letters, lines, and punctuation) that provide a vehicle for that content. This exploration considers the possibility that some of the most dramatically affecting moments in Wordsworth’s verse derive their aesthetic force from the tension generated when the way the poetry feels does not correspond to, or even actively subverts, what it says. By articulating the complex relationships between Paul de Man’s materialist critiques of aesthetic ideology and the sensitive treatment of Wordsworth’s lineation in William Empson, Christopher Ricks, Isobel Armstrong, and others, I extrapolate a general principle of poetic fragmentation that may be used to explore the disruptive operation of several related phenomena in Wordsworth’s verse, phenomena for which I tentatively offer the nomenclature “the play of the line,” or the disarticulation of a poetic argument that occurs when the multiple lines that compose it individually exhibit a material resistance to the semantic content they are conscripted to articulate. I argue that these and similar moments of the verse’s material resistance to the rhetorical function imposed upon it may be a hitherto unacknowledged point of access for sublime feeling to manifest itself in Wordsworth, complicating the poet’s own understanding of the sublime as a temporary, rhetorically manufactured stage in a secular theodicy that redeems the intensely traumatic aesthetic experiences of youth by binding them to beauty in a marriage of the mind to nature, which in turn facilitates a marriage of the solitary self to society. I trace the turbulent effects of
these materially instantiated interventions of sublime affect into the semantic plane of
Wordsworth’s corpus, illustrating the ways in which his lyrics and epics, long recognized by
scholars of Romanticism as spaces within which Wordsworth sought to construct a stable figure
of his own subjectivity, may materially deconstruct the identity they manufacture tropologically
and figuratively. I also consider the ramifications of the poetry’s traumatic, self-deconstructing
materiality upon the catachrestic images of Wordsworth produced by much of the normative
critical commentary on his work. I posit Wordsworth as both self-constructed and self-
deconstructed, and therefore irreducible to the stable positions or personas often used to render
him susceptible to critique. Specifically, I seek to defend Wordsworth against the charges of
solipsism leveled against him by certain strains of New Historicism by demonstrating how the
tension between what the poetry feels like and what it says facilitates an autogenic aesthetic
critique of its own ideologies, in what may be thought of as an exploration of the poetry’s
internal politics, which are inextricably connected, but never merely reducible to, the definitive
historical and political events of the poet’s lifetime.
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Introduction: A Role for Affect

I.

There are truths of intellect, and there are truths of affect. The essential dichotomy between thought and feeling has been historically associated with a series of culturally and disciplinary contingent binary formulations: logos and pathos for the rhetoricians of the Classical period, higher cognition and lower cognition for the Cartesian Rationalist strains of Continental philosophy, *studium* and *punctum* for Roland Barthes’ idiosyncratic meditations on photography in *Camera Lucida* (26-7), hermeneutics and aesthetics for literary critics, information cognized and events registered for students of trauma. Although these and other familiar formulations represent distinct efforts to encapsulate this dichotomy within specific discursive traditions, the fundamental problem of the incommensurability of intellect and affect remains—as it almost certainly must—decidedly unresolved, and continues to serve as a nexus of common frustration among many otherwise unassociated systems of knowledge production. The role of the thought / feeling binary in arranging an attingence between these latter two traditions, literature and trauma, will be one of the primary foci of this investigation, especially as it applies to the aesthetics of the sublime in the poetry of William Wordsworth.

A somewhat recent example of this frustration—and its potential to inform critical discourse on literature and trauma—may be observed in Susan L. Feagin’s *Reading with Feeling*, a volume that, although characterized by Feagin herself as “an exercise in philosophy” rather than “an exercise in literary criticism” (2), illustrates the difficulties faced by both philosophers and literary critics when attempting to negotiate the relationship between the interpretation of a text (offering an account of the semantic content it speaks to our faculties of cognition) and the articulation of how a text feels (offering an account of the emotional content it speaks to our
affective faculties, a process Feagin designates “appreciation”). Feagin characterizes her inquiry as one committed to enriching the scholarly understanding of the mechanisms of affective response, stressing that her focus “is not interpretation but appreciation,” but she almost immediately finds herself having to concede that “one cannot appreciate without interpreting,” before finally acknowledging and expressing interest in the “gap” that seems to emerge between the interpretive and appreciative acts that collectively constitute the activity of reading:

I suggest thinking about it in the following relatively crude way. Think of theories of interpretation as theories of meaning, and think of meaning as having strictly cognitive content. Whatever justifies or warrants or explains how one reached an interpretive conclusion will be, in itself, insufficient to explain or warrant an affective response. I’m interested in that ‘gap,’ as it were, between cognition and affect. (3)

In my capacity as a student of trauma and the sublime, I too am interested in the gap between cognition and affect, though in different ways and for different reasons than Feagin. I wonder to what extent the act of reading, bound up as it is with what Feagin would classify as both the hermeneutic and the appreciative, might be articulated as an intrinsically traumatic phenomenon, one which either severs these two sets of faculties from one another or restages a severance they have already suffered. I also wonder to what extent the apparent vacuum space left in the psychic tissue of what I shall provisionally call “the subject” in the aftermath of this severance may actually be populated with noise, alive with the tentative rhetorics by which an intellect excluded from participation in acutely affecting aesthetic events may retroactively attempt to colonize and revise those events into something it may apprehend and tolerate, and alive also with the counter-rhetorics mobilized by the affective faculties to revise the intellect’s
revisions into something approximating the visionary. As an iteration of the old pairing of wound and womb, trauma may be a space out of which language itself emerges broken, altered, monstrous, and oracular. The critical linguistic constructions that penetrate this gap as a lancet plumbs a clot of scar tissue may be unrecognizable when they are withdrawn: appreciation may intervene in the project of interpretation, spitting the interpreter’s implements back out into the world wearing new shapes, singing strange songs.

The contention that intellect and affect, while occupying separate spheres, may nevertheless be capable of engaging in some manner of exchange or interface is by no means novel or controversial; indeed, it is difficult to imagine any attempt to assess the cartography of our inner lives without identifying certain territories as perpetually under dispute, or even jointly occupied, by these two parties. Feagin, for example, insists on understanding the range of phenomena often grouped together somewhat irresponsibly under the category of “affective response” as representative of a dramatically heterogeneous array of experiences and states, some of which may be observed to house cognitive and affective components behaving not at all contentiously, but cohabitating in something approaching a state of truce or cooperation:

Affective responses include not only emotions properly so-called (e.g., anger, fear, pity, and pride), but also moods (being melancholy, excited, contemplative, bored), desires (various attractions and aversions), and “feelings” or “affects” that include some hard-to-classify experiences (tension, uneasiness, excitement, tingles, surprise, bewilderment, anxiety). They also include affective imaginings, that is, imagining being in these states or engaging in these processes. (8)

In Feagin’s codification, “emotions” possess a cognitive dimension, while “affects” do not: “for my response to be an emotion . . . rather than merely an affect (such as a feeling of tension or
uneasiness), my mental state must have a cognitive component” (78). “Desires” may be partially
cognitive, but they need not be: although “what one desires to do is identified in part because one
has a certain cognitive comprehension of it” (50), “sometimes one desires to do things even
when there is no enactive representation of what one desires to do” (51). For Feagin, therefore,
all emotions, and some desires, would have to be understood as the product of the commingling
of thought and feeling. The gap she has observed therefore appears to have already been bridged
by at least some of the varieties of affective response to which she devotes her attention.

As valuable as Feagin’s model proves to be within the scope of her generalized inquiry
into the nature and consequences of our affective responses to fiction, the critic whose curiosity
inclines towards the traumatic class of aesthetic experience may discover that the sublime
represents an anomaly to which the normative models may not apply. Considered within the
context of the Romantic sublime, and especially within the seminal account offered by Edmund
Burke in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*—
which I take to be the chronically unacknowledged antecedent of the traumatic versions of
sublimity given renewed currency in recent studies by Gene Ray, Rei Terada, and others—the
sublime appears capable of inflicting sufficient damage upon the subject to dismantle the
rhetorical apparatus that allows the gap to appear bridged during those varieties of affective
response that visit themselves upon us with less severity. In the special case of the sublime,
however, the contact between thought and feeling, if it can be said to occur at all, is explicitly
contentious, revisionary, and fraught. Burke’s *Enquiry,* for instance, proposes a model of
sublime experience as the passion of “astonishment,” a state within which the cognitive faculties
have their operations suspended and the affective faculties are abandoned to suffer a
confrontation with profound terror on their own:
The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that, far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. (101)

The sublime event unfolds for Burke according to a pattern that resembles the phenomenological syntax of what we now call trauma: because the faculties of reason are rendered inoperative by a terror that exists both prior to them and in excess of them during the infliction of the all-consuming passion of astonishment, whatever cognitive element may be operative in the sublime must arise belatedly, in reactionary response to a passion that, by definition, is radically resistant to the analytical activity of the cognitive faculties.

For the construct of “the subject,” the destabilizing implications of the sublime’s reopening of this gap are difficult to overestimate. In her cogent refutation of the caricature of deconstruction as a theory that “does not have an account of emotion,” Terada has argued that “poststructuralist thought about emotion is hidden in plain sight,” and that the “poststructuralist’ dissatisfaction with the subject” (3), the same subject without which, ostensibly, there would be no locus for emotion, is not irreconcilable with “the possibility that poststructuralism is directly concerned with emotion” (4). The apparent contradiction dissolves when Terada questions the assumption, which has long served as one of the central premises of normative aesthetic discourse, that “only subjects feel” (3). If emotion were found to be “nonsubjective” (3), and if it could be demonstrated that “we would have no emotion if we were subjects,” then it would
become possible to discern within poststructuralism the potential to “free [the] credible concept of emotion from [the] less credible scheme of subjectivity” (4), and, perhaps, to disentangle affective response from those complicities with the ideologies of Empire so incisively rooted out and brought to light in the final decades of the twentieth century, in critiques of the aesthetic like Jerome McGann’s *The Romantic Ideology* and Terry Eagleton’s *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. For example, the element of passivity inherent in both the etymology of “passion” and the experience of the affective state that term denominates represents for Terada one means of demonstrating the antisubjective nature of emotion:

> Although passion’s Latin etymology connotes passive suffering, it has come to stand for intense goal-directedness as well... Of course passion’s very force makes it seem compulsive. Thus passion drives intentional subjectivity to its self-undoing in senseless vigor—an undoing that does not have to be figured as decadent excess, but can be conceived as an interior limit to volition. Passion, therefore, characterizes the nonsubjectivity within the very concept of the subject.

(5)

If emotion “entails” the “death of the subject” rather than “controverting it” (3), then the threat that emotion represents to the comprehensive self-consciousness and intentionality that define what Frederic Jameson calls the “autonomous bourgeois monad” (15), which is both product and producer of the ideologically contaminated aesthetic that McGann and Eagleton take as their object of critique, becomes clear: “the purpose and the very existence of emotion have traditionally been associated with persistent difficulties in the philosophy of mind. Feared as a hazard... emotion indexes strains in philosophy” (3).
Terada’s “strains in philosophy” and Feagin’s “gap”: both figure the traumatic implications of an impenetrable internal opacity, on either side of which lies evidence of a radically inappropriable differentiation, and which functions as an obstruction on the subject’s path to attaining or manufacturing knowledge of its own stable, self-determining internal consistency: that which defines it as a subject. A subject incapable of mobilizing philosophy to cultivate an exhaustive self-knowledge is a subject incapable of conceptualizing of itself in the very terms upon which its continued understanding of itself *qua* subject, as well as the concomitant articulation of a familiar pattern of beliefs about its own relationship to the forces of history and politics, depends.

Terada suggests that “not just poststructuralist thought, but the history of thought about emotion” attests to the vulnerability of the subject to the subversive turbulence of affect (3). Nowhere in the range of aesthetic response, I argue, is subjectivity subverted as violently, and the gap between affect and cognition opened so widely, as it is in the astonishment of the Burkean sublime, a paradigm that so enthusiastically testifies to passion’s capacity to freeze reason that it retains a dramatically disturbing force over two-and-a-half centuries after its initial appearance. But in the absence of a subject, who or what remains to register the passion of Burkean astonishment? If the subject is a construct deconstructed in the collision of thought and feeling, what are the elementary particles out of which that construct is revealed as having been assembled, and what valences may they be observed to occupy or travel in passion’s disorganized aftermath? In what ways might the variable accessibility of affect to those valences predicate the infliction of the strains and the opening of the gaps that permeate contemporary discourse on the aesthetic, and in doing so reveal modern subjectivity, which Wordsworth has
been variously praised and damned for having had a hand in shaping, as always already deconstructed?

II.

My tentative efforts to begin addressing these queries shall unfold by means of an investigation that shall necessarily exhibit many of the same internal fractures as the objects of its contemplation. Any inquiry into the nature of the sublime is likely to find its attentions divided between the affective response elicited in the moment of sublime aesthesis and the reflective intellect’s efforts to revise and appropriate that initial response into something with which it is equipped to engage. Terada asserts that

poststructuralist readings of philosophy render visible both a discourse of emotion and an ideology of emotion, or narrative about the discourse that underrepresents its complexity. The discourse of emotion from Descartes to the present day describes emotion as nonsubjective experience in the form of self-difference within cognition. The ideology of emotion tells a supplementary story in which emotion fills in the difference it registers. (3)

The implications for the present project are clear: there is in Romanticism a discourse surrounding sublime feeling, and there is also a Romantic ideology of the sublime as a category and a construct that may be incorporated into a culture’s dominant narrative and coerced into alignment with the political and ideological constructs that attend and perpetuate that narrative. It is the latter iteration of the sublime—not the feeling, but what can be and historically has been done with the feeling—that has captured much of the critical attention of McGann, Eagleton, and their disciples.
As vital and valuable as those critiques have been to the study of Romanticism specifically and to aesthetic discourse in general, I have begun to suspect that the insight they offer has been purchased at the cost of forgetting the often radically destabilizing potential of the character granted to the sublime affect upon which the remainders of the accounts are predicated. In the case of Burke, whose “physiological” reading of the effects of the sublime upon the nervous system has been persuasively attributed to his bourgeois class interest and his complicity with the hegemonic social agenda of moral sense philosophy,¹ his account of sublime feeling itself seems far too radically dismissive of reason to dwell comfortably within the eminently reasonable function he eventually imagines for it. The fire that Burke in his hubris thought could be harnessed to fuel the engine of a narrowly conceived, bourgeois reading of social progress burns too hot and proves impossible to contain, until ultimately it consumes the ill-constructed ideological architecture of the rational apparatus intended to incarcerate and exploit it. Or, to offer a figure of disfigurement more in keeping with Burke’s own visceral, anatomical analogy, the passion that ostensibly nourished the stress-starved nerves and fibres of the eighteenth-century leisure-class male body would actually cleave that body in twain, into an affective half that passion feeds and an ideological half that passion poisons. To translate the value of Burke’s sublime into Terada’s terms: the discourse of emotion it offers is too compelling, too authentic an articulation of the affective condition it describes, to be conscripted convincingly into the service of an ideology of emotion, despite the common authorial origin of the discourse and the ideology. Its affective truths, having been appropriated into the corpus of its truths of intellect, set about the business of deconstructing that body from the inside out.

Here is a truth of intellect: the sublime has been understood since the early eighteenth century as a category of aesthetic experience in which a subject’s perception of an object
produces the impression of commingled terror and uplift. This experience occurs wholly within the perceptual apparatus of the subject, and is therefore a construct of that apparatus, a consequence of that subject’s psychological and interpretive dispositions rather than any innate properties of the perceived external object. “Of course ‘the sublime’ is a construct,” writes James Kirwan, adding “it would be absurd to expect it to be anything more” (159). But this eminently reasonable model of the sublime-as-construct arises in response to a feeling, and within that feeling resides a counter-truth of affect. The sublime does not feel like a construct. Instead, it materializes as a terrifying autonomous external event or agency that penetrates the subject from without during moments of acute affective response. It registers, in Gene Ray’s term, as a hit:

Hit happens. A rip, a quick cut by a razor. From the outside, something breaks through and in: an intervention into the stabilized form of psychic life. As if by fate or chance: disturbance, disruption—what will be felt as pain, a crisis or breakdown. A punch in the guts, a violation, a horrible, helpless, caught in the grips of. A terror, an after-awe, an anguish of ruination. Defensively: deflection, mis-recognition. Look, the birds are on fire. (2)

We have then in the sublime an affective event, a happening, a hit, which affect defines as one thing in the event’s immediacy, and which the intellect redefines retroactively as another. What is especially provocative about these two definitions is the extent to which they not only oppose one another, but frame their opposition as an intersystemic dynamic that reveals the inadequacy of many of the assumptions we bring to discourse about systematicity. In the aftermath of the sublime ordeal, we may either turn to the intellect or struggle to remain within the sphere of affect to process what we have suffered, but we cannot do both simultaneously. Keatsian negative capability is of little assistance here: it can help us hold two opposing concepts
in the mind, but intellect and affect are less opposing concepts than opposing modes or states, around which concepts or their equivalents may constellate, but into which they cannot usefully penetrate. Neither may we inhabit both modes separately and reconcile them after the fact, for they would be more likely to cancel one another out entirely or revise one another into incomprehensibility than to fuse and generate a figure greater than the sum of its parts. This does not appear to be a simple matter of combining two perspectives to reveal the truth of the whole, or of adopting a dialectical strategy to synthesize ourselves out of the opposition between an affective thesis and its cognitive antithesis. Instead, this appears to be an instance of insurmountable incommensurability, analogous in some respects to the differend, Jean-Francois Lyotard’s category for “case[s] of conflict between (at least) two parties that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments” (The Differend xi).

Lyotard’s own reading of the sublime-as-differend cannot accommodate the presence of affect in the terms I have proposed. In his characterization of the sublime not as an affective event upon which the revisionary intellect may reflect, but as imagination’s opposition to reason, or as the interface between two of the faculties of cognition, Lyotard comes to locate the differend “at the heart of sublime feeling: at the encounter of the two ‘absolutes’ equally ‘present’ to thought, the absolute whole when it conceives, the absolutely measured when it presents” (Lessons 123). It is important to note that Lyotard’s model appears to conceive of the sublime exclusively as a phenomenon of thought. Incommensurable language games have different rules and goals, but the incommensurability they represent is that of two subsystems within the system of language. The implication of the analogy is that the definitive confrontation of the sublime must be read as a failed communicative act between two personified cognitive
faculties who speak the same language. They speak it differently, to be sure, but they both speak it: their discourse fails as discourse, but it is still recognizable as discourse.

A model of the sublime that assumes the opposition between intellect and affect, however, may not be categorizable in this way, for thought and feeling may be distinct enough experiential modes to each qualify as an oversystem with its own collection of satellite subsystems. The “absolutes” brought into proximity at the heart of the sublime might not be as “equally present to thought,” and therefore less fully analyzable by the intellect, as Lyotard suggests, and in fact certain elements of the affective dimensions of the sublime might reside forever outside the reach of thought. The question then becomes whether the intellect is sufficiently equipped to penetrate what, from its perspective, would appear to be the occult, extrasystemic space of affect, or if thought begins where feeling ends, leaving the intellect’s accounts of the sublime fully constructivist and revisionist rather than experiential in whole or in part, and leaving the immediate truth of the sublime fully present only to the affective faculties. Never having fully entered the sublime space, is it plausible that the intellect may enjoy only an illusory apprehension of sublime feeling by devising a fictionalized account of it, \textit{a posteriori}? Can we think our way to the truth of the sublime, or might affect be the only reliable route to its own truths?

The Derridean deconstructive paradigm predicts that one of these phenomenological or epistemological modes, the cognitive or the affective, will be culturally privileged and the other dominated: “In a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand” (\textit{Positions} 41). With the exception of Burke, whose sublime-as-astonishment remains uniquely open to an absolute segregation
between the faculties of cognition and those of affect, commentators have traditionally treated the relationship between the two sets of faculties as intrasystemic, despite the dependence of their explanatory consistency upon their isolation within their own closed systems, and despite the difficulties that inevitably arise during attempts to represent them as capable of retaining that consistency when dragged forth from their isolation and made to speak to one another without recourse to a common tongue. We would therefore expect to see one of the opposing truths of the sublime governing the other in critical discourse, revising the intersystemic relativism of the opposition into the familiar intrasystemic arrangement and relegating one of these truths to the categorical space of error, falsehood, or ideology. A truth that appears valid within its own closed system would become a non-truth when evaluated by the criteria of an external, non-contiguous system, and it would consequently become subject to “correction” by the privileged half of the binary. Discourses that value affect *qua* affect would be delegitimized as affect found itself unable to translate or articulate its value in terms meaningful to the intellect. Implicated in the rigid instrumentality of institutionally-sanctioned modes of knowledge production, disciplinary discourse within the humanities would be bound to discourage characterizations of affect that impose serious limits upon its penetrability by the critical intellect. Inhabiting a critical moment that encourages and perhaps demands the subordination of affect to intellect, Kirwan is able to denigrate as “absurd” the expectation that the sublime should be considered something other than a construct, despite the affective truth of the experience, which may be absurd to the reflective intellect but not so to those faculties that bear the sublime burden, and despite the possibility that what the intellect recognizes as absurdity may not disqualify the validity or veridicality of an experience for affect as it does for intellect. For Kirwan, the initial
affective impression of the moment of aesthesis—the hit—becomes an error, “a matter of delusion” (166), of which we must be disabused by the intellect during critical reflection.

Such an attitude is emblematic of the dominant assumptions about the sublime in the history of aesthetic discourse: Derrida’s prediction of hierarchical violence proves applicable to critical accounts of affect and intellect in nearly every approach to the sublime from Longinus to Lyotard and beyond. Since Descartes, we find thought historically associated with masculinity and empowered by its attachment to Enlightenment faith in reason, and we find affect equated with vague, volatile, unpredictable, inconsistent femininity. Even Alexander Baumgarten, whom we rightly celebrate for having had the audacity to inaugurate the formalized study of aesthetics in eighteenth-century Germany by proposing aesthetic perception as a distinct species of knowledge, was too faithful a student of his rationalist teachers to resist situating aesthetic knowledge in the lower position of the familiar rationalist hierarchy. Richard Shusterman has recently acted as an apologist for Baumgarten’s faithfulness to doctrinal rationalist structure, arguing that Baumgarten’s denomination of aesthetic knowledge as “the lower faculty of cognition” does not constitute derogation:

Though following his Leibnizian teacher Christian Wolff in calling such sensory perception a ‘lower faculty,’ Baumgarten’s aim was not to denounce its inferiority. Instead Aesthetica argues for the cognitive value of sensory perception, celebrating its rich potential not only for better thinking but for better living. (300)

Shusterman’s defense of Baumgarten is well-intentioned, but we must note that it is the “cognitive” value of the aesthetic, rather than any intrinsic value of sensory experience—the aesthetic value of the aesthetic—to which Baumgarten turns to lend credibility to the aesthetic
faculty. Shusterman himself concedes that within Baumgarten’s system “the aesthetic goal of systematically perfecting our sensory perception . . . must be governed by ‘the higher faculties of understanding and reason’” (300). Whether intentionally derogatory or not, Baumgarten’s schema subordinates feeling to thought in a manner consistent with Cartesian assumptions about the need to hierarchically organize the relationship between mind and body, and also between the knowledges they produce: aesthetics remains, in Baumgarten’s notoriously patronizing metaphor, “logic’s younger sister” (13).

More recently, Thomas Pfau has illustrated the occluded but enduring influence of these attitudes, in his sensitive but incisive critique of Martha Nussbaum’s account, in *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, of the apparent presence of thought in emotion. When, despite her cognizance of her model’s inability to account for the “urgency and heat” of emotion, Nussbaum insists that emotions “embody” cognitive activity, including not just “ways of seeing” objects but also “beliefs” which can be “very complex,” she commits herself to a position that demands understanding beliefs as “essential to the identity of . . . emotion” (29). For Pfau, this approach represents a dangerous flirtation with the prejudices that privilege the ostensibly higher faculties over the lower, and, as a consequence of pursuing it, Nussbaum risks reinstat[ing] the traditional, rigid assumption of a categorical divide between the acuity of reflective thought and the amorphous quality of emotion. In a familiar, perhaps Hegelian turn, this view will sooner or later assert that conscious thought not only ‘corrects’ or ‘purifies’ emotion but, in doing so, utterly emancipates thought itself from the taint of emotional contingency. (30)
Dialectical potentialities aside, Nussbaum’s capitulation to Enlightenment conceptions of value situates her study within a tradition whose efforts to understand affect seem perpetually bound up with the effort to domesticate and regulate it.

A more extreme iteration of the impulse to bring the corrective authority of reason to bear upon affect is operative in Lyotard’s vision of the postmodern sublime. I have already expressed my concerns with Lyotard’s apparent reluctance to fully admit affect into his account of the sublime-as-differend; I have come to understand this reluctance as a symptom of his reliance upon a Kantian aesthetics that is itself urgently committed to minimizing the role of the affective dimension of aesthetic experience. I shall delay momentarily my consideration of the recent critical response to Kant’s denial of affect, but suffice it to say for now that any theorist whose aesthetics proceeds from the Kantian tradition is likely to suffer the limitations of an attempt to explain a fundamentally affective experience in terms of an intellect that can only apply itself from the outside, in a revisionary capacity, to a system that exceeds it. Such is the case even with Lyotard, who in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* describes the sublime as “the event of a passion, of a possibility for which the mind will not have been prepared, which will have unsettled it, and of which it conserves only the feeling . . . of an obscure debt” (141), but who eventually settles, in *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, on a characterization of sublime feeling in which the term “feeling” seems a mere concession to superficial lexical convention rather than any authentic effort to coax a discourse of emotion out of the Kantian ideology of emotion he takes as his object of inquiry. Contaminated somewhat by the object of his critique, Lyotard’s model of the sublime-as-differend takes on the character of Kant’s sublime of apotheosized reason, and becomes a process of differentiated cognition rather than a differentiation of affect from cognition:
[S]ublime feeling is analyzed as double defiance. Imagination at the limits of what it can present does violence to itself in order to present that it can no longer present. Reason, for its part, seeks, unreasonably, to violate the interdict it imposes on itself and which is strictly critical, the interdict that prohibits it from finding objects corresponding to its concepts in sensible intuition. In these two aspects, thinking defies its own finitude, as if fascinated by its own excessiveness.

(*Lessons 55*)

Like Kant, Lyotard envisions the sublime as the apotheosis of thought, in which thinking discovers itself capable of transcending all limits, including its own, and somehow acquires the capacity to be fascinated. Lyotard’s invocation of the Kantian “as if” to situate the affective state of fascination within the categorical sphere of thought is symptomatic of the anxiety about affect that permeates Kantian tradition. These Kantian sublimes appear to have been mobilized against the Empiricist accounts of Edmund Burke, whose *Enquiry*, it must be remembered, locates sublime feeling in the moment of “astonishment,” or at the point where thought reaches a boundary it cannot transgress and abandons the affective faculties to register a confrontation with an overwhelming horror on their own. Only after affect receives the sublime wound does it wear an aperture through which the intellect may attempt penetration, and only through the revisionary dynamics of recollection and reflection can the intellect translate sublime feeling into a construct intelligible to itself. The analytical intellect finds in affective space nothing it recognizes as analyzable content, and the moment of penetration is revealed as a repulsion.

As the poststructuralist conception of binary systematicity predicts, the most influential trends in contemporary aesthetic discourse tend to participate in the Kantian aggrandizement of reason and the concomitant devaluation of affect and those aesthetic systems that value it, a
devaluation that when followed to its logical conclusion positions the debate wholly within the closed system of thought, to which affect is denied access and in which affect can be denied its very existence. It is as if Tereus, instead of merely divesting Philomel of her tongue after ravishing her, was able to render her so fully and finally mute that he could deny that she had ever existed, except, perhaps, as a figment of his own imagination.

The traditional deconstructive impulse might encourage efforts to treat this dichotomy like any other: to reverse the binary, to expose the political and historical assumptions that underwrite the hierarchy, and to locate within this reversal and exposure the means to destabilize the entire thought-complex in which the binary resides, with the ultimate intent of hindering the violence that the binary justifies and facilitates. But the successful application of the Derridean deconstructive apparatus to this binary depends upon accepting the common assumption that thought and feeling oppose each other from within the same system (the subject), an assumption about which I have already expressed my doubts. If, as I suspect, affect were to exceed thought, if it were somehow categorically an experiential condition in excess of and incommensurable with thought, the ostensibly intrasystemic schematic of the opposition would require significant critical reconsideration and reconfiguration. As I hope to illustrate, intellect and affect may each constitute closed, non-contiguous systems, and may each represent a complete, self-contained epistemological mode, which would complicate or even preclude their resolution by any conventional deconstructive means, or perhaps by any means whatsoever. This presents the paradox of how two terms that do not reside within the same system may nevertheless appear to oppose one another as if they did, and raises concerns about the phenomenological and critical implications of their potential incommensurability. As efforts to preside over the marriage of intellect to affect appear increasingly untenable, human subjectivity may become definable as the
vacillation between two subjective modes, each with its own developmental grammar, a
vacillation that the culturally privileged subjective mode revises into a fiction of holism it may
use to legitimize its grand narrative and the political projects it underwrites.

III.

Romanticism is popularly understood to be a phase of literary history in which the
epistemological and sociopolitical paradigms of the Enlightenment—faith in reason, in its
practical corollary (technology), in the progress which the effective collaboration between the
two allegedly enables, and, finally, in the state as the collective political manifestation and
guiding agency of all three—were challenged by artists and intellectuals who sought to lend
legitimacy to alternative subjective modes, alternative technologies, and alternative conceptions
of how to define and implement progress. Romantic writing allegedly rejects the Enlightenment
credulity towards objective knowledge and the faculties of reason through which that knowledge
is manufactured, and instead commits to exploring what value might be gleaned from the
unmediated activity of the affective faculties. The positivist subordination of the “lower”
faculties to the higher, a tendency whose influence is likely to be detected in all movements
shaped by Cartesian rationalism, is resisted, or at the very least complicated, in Romanticism.
Anomalous subjective experiences, including the sense of aesthetic transport and transcendence
often associated with the sublime (experiences that we are now encouraged to dismiss as escapist
fictions or capitulations to seductive ideologies, and about which it is often prudent to speak in
hushed tones, or perhaps not at all), are lent credence, sometimes cautious, and sometimes less
so, in Romantic discourse on emotion. The operating assumption behind Thomas Weiskel’s *The
Romantic Sublime*, for instance, is that “the essential claim of the sublime is that man can, in
feeling and in speech, transcend the human” (4); exploiting the power of art to establish the conditions necessary to achieve this transcendence seemed a plausible and valuable enough endeavor to the Romantics that many of them devoted the bulk of their mature work to the effort.

To a certain extent, this popular understanding of Romantic achievement, or something that quite closely approximates it, represents precisely what Romanticism, especially in its Wordsworthian aspect, actually achieves. Wordsworth intuited and articulated a relationship between trauma, the sublime, and a species of transcendence through defamiliarization that is only now beginning to be apprehended and understood, both by scholars of Romanticism specifically and by literary and cultural scholars in general. For Wordsworth, or, more properly speaking, for the Wordsworthian persona whose interest in emotion was discursive rather than ideological, the sublime represented an anomalous rupture from normative states of consciousness so severe that during its visitation we may not properly be said to be ourselves, and, in its aftermath, many of the commonly held assumptions about the structure and function of human subjectivity appear dramatically to demand reevaluation. When the familiar self and the familiar world it inhabits are revealed in the sublime moment to hold fundamentally alien properties that cannot be appreciated under normal circumstances, whatever knowledge we claim to have cultivated about the relationship between subject and object, about continuity of identity, about the inheritability of the personal and political past, and about the susceptibility of inheritable pasts to the revisionary influence of the reflective intellect and the poetic imagination, may begin to appear less credible than it had, as may the social and political projects whose implementation is legitimized in part through invocations to that now suspect knowledge.

As a consequence of its fascination with these and similar breaks with ordinary perceptual modalities, Wordsworthian Romanticism also shows itself capable of bearing
important cultural and personal witness to the traumas of its historical moment, and, by
extension, of demonstrating how the gaze of Romantic witness might be brought to bear upon
traumas that fall outside the reach of the epoch that gave rise to it. In its commitment to what
Keats pejoratively denominated, in an 1818 correspondence with Richard Woodhouse, “the
egotistical sublime” (Letters 227), or the relentless self-centeredness, unique to Wordsworth, that
renders even large-scale cultural phenomena reducible to their interventions into individual lives,
Wordsworth’s Romanticism critiques a rhetoric of catachresis that even now continues to impair
otherwise conscientious treatments of social and historical trauma.

Take, for example, Ray’s largely sensitive and eloquent account of the traumatic
continuum of violence that emerges from the Western devotion to the promises of progress,
which reaches its grim apogee in the atrocities of the twentieth century’s most aggressive
projects of nation-building and Empire expansion: the World Wars, the Holocaust, the atom
bomb, Stalin’s purges and gulags, American imperialism masquerading as “police actions” in
Asia, South America, and the Middle East. Ray’s assertion that history may be understood in
aesthetic terms as sublime traumas, as hits that happen and as birds on fire, is valuable to an
extent that is difficult to overstate, for it reminds us how history enters into our consciousness
not just as structures of thought, but also as structures of feeling. It is, however, with a
considerable measure of concern that I observe Ray’s apparent commitment to privileging
perilously totalizing notions of shared cultural traumas— notions, as I plan to demonstrate, that
repeat similarly treacherous gestures resident in Thomas Pfau’s otherwise laudable model of
trauma in Romantic Moods—that threaten to capitulate to the more egregious varieties of
catachrestic tropological conflation. When Ray argues that “the extreme violence of Auschwitz
and Hiroshima was aimed at humanity itself” (2), then claims that “not just grouped singularities
were gassed and bombed” and “in the deepest sense, we gassed and bombed ourselves” (3), he mistakes an idealization, a critical fiction, for an actual subject position capable of registering trauma. Fully cognizant of how obtusely literalist I risk sounding here, I feel it incumbent upon myself, as well as upon all responsible commentators on trauma, to distinguish between singularities, against whom violence can be, and has been, aimed in the deepest sense, and catachreses like “humanity itself,” which is a trope, an idealization that has no corresponding presence in material reality—no skin to be burned or pierced, no bones to be cracked or crushed, no stomachs to be starved, no limbs to be burdened, no lungs to be suffocated, no orifices to be violated—and is therefore incapable of suffering. The difference, I contend, is more than trivial, and my insistence on acknowledging it is it not, I think, motivated by mere pedantry, for the tendency to mistake tropes and figures for material realities has a not insignificant role to play in valorizing the progressive imperative to mourn and move on, to quarantine historical traumas within a past from which we may eventually disentangle ourselves after sufficient psychic convalescence—the very “mourning” and concomitant apprehension of “truth” and “change” to which Ray refers without apparently understanding how inextricably connected they are to the same regrettable processes by which “trauma is collapsed into predigested emblems” and “finally, into a single flag” (3). The “time of mourning and reflection,” as well as the shallow patriotic gestures for which Ray justifiably accuses us of having exchanged the possibility of authentic mourning during our post-September 11th “declared state of exception” (3), may ultimately do trauma and its victims the same disservice by converting them into tropes and figures whose suffering can be managed, manipulated, instrumentalized, and, eventually, quieted.
Ray contends that collective mourning, which, in his well-intentioned estimation, must be “spurred back into movement” in order to “deploy negativity to break the hold of what Herbert Marcuse criticized as ‘affirmative culture’” (6), can only be attempted if we become willing to “perform . . . collective, ‘wild’ psychoanalysis on ourselves, without the reassuring presence of an empathetic witness to our struggles or any godly ‘Big Other’ who, outside of our predicament, can be ‘assumed to know’ the truth we seek” (3). But what is the “humanity itself,” against which Ray reads the violence of the concentration camp and the atom bomb as having been mobilized, if not a secular reformulation of the catachrestic fiction of the divine against whose invocation he has specifically warned? Ray appears here to replicate a distinctively Coleridgean idealization, which also perhaps partakes in an ideologization: the philosophy of the One Life, or the formula through which Coleridge imagines himself able to subsume the set of all individuals, and the often contentious and exploitative character of their political relations, into the redemptive holism of a transcendent identity, and which allows him to allege in “Religious Musings” that “the sublime of man” is to “know ourselves / Parts and proportions of one wond’rous whole” (127-28), and that “‘tis God / diffused through all, that doth make one whole” (130-31).

Ray’s formulation of the collective or cultural traumas of the past century seems somewhat indebted to Pfau’s account of a specifically Romantic variety of historical trauma, in which trauma is less a singular event than a distributed phenomenon, less a hit than a wave or field that washes over a culture in the form of a “mood.” For Pfau, what the Romantic lyric both dissembles and assembles is a confrontation with trauma, but to the extent that this trauma is knowable and nameable, it registers, in both respects, less as an event than as a trope or an idea, as the “sudden and all-consuming arrival of economic, sociocultural, and political modernity
between 1789 and 1815” (269). Like the “One intellectual breeze / At once the Soul of each, and God of all” of Coleridge’s analogical conception of the One Life as the eponymous instrument of the lyric The Eolian Harp (47-8), Pfau’s traumatic mood “speaks—if only circumstantially—to the deep-structural situatedness of individuals within history as something never actually intelligible to them in fully coherent, timely, and definitive form” (7).

The trauma of modernity, however, does not arrive as the concept of modernity, but as singular hits: the blade of a guillotine passing through artery and nerve and bone, or a musket ball or a bayonet cutting a rude path through entrails, or a kitchen knife darkening bathwater with the erstwhile contents of the carotid. And, lest we reductively conflate trauma with grievous physical injury, it is imperative to remember that one need not have knelt before le rasoir national, or have been physically impaled on the bayonets of the Grande Armée, to have suffered the severance of self from self that occurs when historical trauma intervenes not as history, but as a hit; in its egotistical, aesthetic incarnations, the hit of modernity arrives in the figures (and, as I shall argue, in the disfigurement of the figures) of a sublime knife of moonlight scything first through cloud cover and then into the poet’s eye, or a mountain peak appearing to carve through a starfield, or a windstorm ripping through woods during an Alpine descent, or silence slicing like terminal punctuation to fill a boy with foreboding when birds cease responding to his calls, or the English Channel flooding the miles between a young English poet and his French lover and their daughter. Some of these traumas index real damage to the tissues of the body, and some index real damage to the tissues of subjectivity, but all share the quality of administering, synchronically, a structural alienation between one’s affective faculties and one’s cognitive faculties, and, diachronically, a structural alienation from one’s own past. If, in order to be registered at all, all history must become personal history, then all sublimes must also become
egotistical, and the wave function of Pfau’s “mood” must eventually collapse into the
particularity of Ray’s “hit” that “happens.” That which one was before trauma is not identical to
that which one becomes in its aftermath, and only the affective singularity may suffer the pain of
the shift and the shock of the discontinuity fissuring its insides with what Terada calls “self-
difference” (3).

A similar expectation may be applied to the traumas of our own historical moment. Read
Romantically, and specifically through the lens of Wordsworth’s egotistical sublime, the traumas
of our more recent history appear not as singular events that wash over Ray’s “humanity” like
the wave of one of Pfau’s moods, but as dooms that inflict themselves in a personalized,
particular capacity upon every singularity they encounter. From the vantage of egotistical
sublimity as it persists into the historical period that Ray examines, there was not one Auschwitz
but one million, not one Hiroshima but two hundred thousand. The terms “Auschwitz” and
“Hiroshima” begin themselves to resemble catachreses: attempts to domesticate a proliferation of
discrete, monstrous traumas in the stability and manageability of place-names. To insist upon
understanding historical trauma as a wound inflicted upon more than “just grouped singularities”
is to risk courting a dangerous rhetoric of conflation, which represents Auschwitz and Hiroshima
as singular events, horrific beyond imagining, to be sure, but isolated, limited, contained, non-
proliferate.

When Ray writes that “actualised powers of organised violence damaged so many
people, with such far-reaching consequences, that it does not suffice to speak only of private
trauma,” and when he claims that “since no one is unaffected today by the violence of the last
century, it is necessary to speak of collective trauma and social damage” before reiterating the
very real necessity of “confronting Auschwitz and Hiroshima” (136), he forgets that in order for
organized violence to inflict the “real damage” he rightly insists that trauma is (135), it must manifest itself at the level of real damage done to real physical or psychic tissue. And since no violence could be so organized as to inflict trauma upon all of its victims in precisely the same way, the tactic of consolidating the effectively incalculable quantity and variety of traumas inflicted upon millions of suffering singularities under the catachreses of Auschwitz and Hiroshima flirts dangerously with a homogenizing rhetoric that makes it more difficult than it should be to ask whether, for instance, the traumas suffered by a female inmate of Auschwitz, traumas that may have included repeated sexual violation, can be understood in the same terms as those suffered by male inmates, whose subjugation and humiliation was less likely to include a sexual component? Or, in the same vein, should the victims of Nazi persecution singled out for their adherence to socialism, or their homosexuality, or their Polish or Gypsy ethnic heritage, or their religious faith, be understood as somehow having endured the same trauma as the Jewish victims of the same regime? Can the victim of Nazi atrocity whose suffering took the form of savage sexual penetration be said, in any sense other than the most offensively trivial, to have endured the same “historical trauma” as the victim whose limbs were surgically amputated in Mengele’s laboratories, or the victim who was worked and starved to death in a munitions factory? And what of the kin who escaped incarceration by fleeing occupied Europe before the Reich consolidated its power and the camps were established, but as a condition of that escape suffered the trauma of being parted from home and family? Is it not crucial to recognize that there exists an Auschwitz—and a Dachau, and Buchenwald—for each victim, or, indeed, one for each act of brutality inflicted upon each victim, until “Auschwitz” explodes the linguistic sign in which we hope, in our desperation not to authentically mourn but to forget, that we may contain it? Subsuming an incalculable proliferation of atrocity into the temporo-local stability and
knowability of a place-name’s implicit rhetoric situates us further from, rather than closer to, the path out of the “predigested emblems” that Ray has quite justifiably chastised us for having elevated to the status of secularized religious icons.

But if, as I suspect, the egotistical sublime offers a vantage from which the awful light of trauma behaves as particles rather than a wave, what is the sensory apparatus by which the suffering singularity may detect it? As any serious student of these issues will know, normative contemporary discourse on trauma since Cathy Caruth, and probably since Lacan, has operated under the assumption that trauma is best understood as a missed experience, a victimless crime against faculties that may only manufacture their knowledge of it belatedly. If, however, as Ray suggests, trauma should be understood as what Lacan calls “a missed encounter with the real” (54), might we not justifiably insist on a more precise articulation of the scenario, which takes into account the gap between affect and cognition so crucial to Feagin? Even if the faculties of cognition miss the encounter, might not the affective faculties register it in its astonishing totality, cleaving the subject irrevocably into a traumatized, affective half and a cognitive half whose encounter with trauma adheres to the Lacanian model? If, during the moment of sublime aesthetic, “a different temporal regime is in force—that of the Nachtraglichkeit, or aftereffectedness” (Ray 1), does this regime possess sufficient reach to penetrate into the space of affect, or is it possible that when normative discourse on trauma posits the subject as an absentee victim who is “overpowered, lacking the means to confront and interpret the hit as experience,” and who consequently “misses the appointment” (1), it forecloses prematurely the possibility that the traumatic event opens a gap between the cognitive and the affective faculties, preserving within feeling the capacity to register the hit that thought misses?
The ideology of progress insists that we deny these wounds their status as wounds: they are merely incremental points on the path to some vaguely defined *telos*. What the historically situated subject perceives as evils are not evils at all, but goods unrecognizable as such at the time of their occurrence. The oxymoronic fiction of the objective subject, the foundational contradiction upon which Enlightenment positivism and rationalism erected their still-standing edifices, seeks to legitimize itself through the promise of a transcendent perspective capable of perceiving history from without and, consequently, seeing the trauma of the historical subject redeemed by the goods it produces. In its most pronounced moments of anti-Enlightenment skepticism, Romanticism restores these wounds their status, insisting on locating both its own traumas and ours within individual moments of affective response and returning to them the voices that the structural demands of a progressive worldview take from them.

But Romanticism’s critical acuity turned inward just as often as it peered outward. Romanticism’s awareness of its own dangers and limitations precludes any universally applicable Romantic adherence to a program of anti-Enlightenment dogma, and in fact the Romantics prove surprisingly open to the possibility of cautiously embracing reason, so long as its power remains limited by its marriage to affect and intuition. Blake, for example, achieves maturity as a poet in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* by marrying the generative potency of damnation to the ordering influence of blessedness. The mythopoeia of his prophetic books repeats and dramatizes the union: Urizen is not deposed by Los and Ahania; he is united with them once he is returned to his proper place. For Wordsworth, the mind does not dissolve into nature, but is married to it in what Geoffrey Hartman identifies as *akedah*, or the “tying or binding” through which Wordsworth seeks to transcend human limitations while retaining his humanity through acts of Imagination (225).
This is a dangerous courtship, one that threatens to restrain the Romantic reaction against the Enlightenment by introducing reason and the structure of teleology into the Romantic system and by establishing an atmosphere in which reason is free to stage a counter-reaction from within that system. It is the corrective influence of reason within the disruptive Romantic system that compromises the Romantic effort to legitimize the disruptive effects of affect: the deference to the higher faculties that Romanticism sought to resist now becomes an integral component of Romantic self-critique. Consequently, many of the Romantic formulations that may initially appear resistant to the teleological structure of reason are revealed as surprisingly tolerant of it. The originally seditious, mystic fervor of Coleridge’s One Life, which informs the denunciation of the slave trade in “Religious Musings” as a trafficking in “bales of human anguish” (141), and which inspires the poet’s Pantisocratic sympathy for non-human animals in “Ode to a Young Ass, Its Mother Being Tethered Near It,” undergoes transfiguration into the statist institutionality of the clerisy. The early books of Wordsworth’s *Prelude* testify to the shattering horrors of the Burkean Sublime only to see the later books revise those horrors into something resembling a comforting Kantian theodicy. Affect is bent back down into its accustomed posture as a subordinated means through which reason may pursue its personal and political agendas.

M.H. Abrams’s *Natural Supernaturalism* has become the standard text for demonstrating the underlying religious structures of Romanticism’s secular projects, and McGann’s *The Romantic Ideology* is the definitive reading of Romanticism’s ideological illusions and the despair they engender when, in the face of implacably harsh political realities, they can no longer be maintained. The longevity of these texts’ influence can be attributed to the ways in which they demonstrate the Romantic retreat from affect and experience into cognition and ideology, or the containment of Romantic structures of feeling into Romantic structures of thought. One
emerges from Abrams’s and McGann’s work disillusioned by the understanding that Romanticism, for all of its efforts to seek out alternative truths in affect, was limited by its reluctance to submit entirely to its own antirationalist impulses. Romanticism, especially in its Wordsworthian aspect, caged the subversive potential of profound aesthetic experience in the familiar structures of organized religion, and coerced those experiences into the political utilitarianism of ideology. If indeed the Romantics facilitated the union of thought and feeling or the marriage of the mind to nature, it is too Edenic a marriage, too complacent to the inherent structural imbalance of the mythic ur-marriage, with one half lord and the other half helpmeet, to represent a legitimate critique of reason and the social arrangements to which it gives rise. By recreating the conditions that led to the Fall, the Romantics risk recapitulating both the culpa and the rhetoric that posits it as felix.

There is, however, a sense in which the limited power lent to affect during Romanticism’s most aesthetically violent moments might hold enough disruptive potential to compromise the systemic functionality of the structures of thought—the ideologies of emotion—that simultaneously underwrite and frustrate the Romantic project, though it must be emphasized that this disruption is limited to the local affective experience of the “singularities” to whom Ray cautions us not to attach our understanding of trauma’s influence. Those commentators who argue the failure of Romanticism to realize its aims speak a truth, but it is only a truth of intellect. As I intend to demonstrate, one of the affective truths of Romanticism is that the materiality of Romantic verse functions as a physical record, or perhaps a palimpsest, of the traumas to which that poetry bears witness. The preservation in posse of this record precludes the possibility of permanently silencing its voices, even when those voices are co-opted rhetorically into the suspect structures of theodicy or teleology. It is this feature of Romantic
textuality that reveals the relentless, multivalent fractal spiral of Romantic self-critique: in a return of the repressed, the thoughtful self-critique that granted reason ingress into the Romantic system is itself critiqued by affect, and it is through affect that Romanticism reveals its internal skepticism about its own grand narrative.

IV.

The grand narrative of the Romantic sublime is the story of the human subject’s movement from an initial terror before the aesthetic to a state of apotheosis in what claims to be a socially and politically redemptive revision of that first terror. This transition is accomplished, the Romantics would have us believe, by means of an aesthetic bildung, a pedagogy of the sublime in which repeated exposure to the terror of intense aesthetic experience conditions the subject to endure that terror and, eventually, to exploit it for its socially transformative and personally transcendental potential. The subject’s eventual recognition of itself as the true sublime object in this phenomenological dynamic dismisses the initial experience as a false sublime, a temporary error, a Burkean category mistake that functions despite itself as an incremental phase on the trajectory to a Kantian telos of deified reason.

Like all grand narratives, the one espoused by the Romantics has been aggressively interrogated in recent decades, often to the point of near-total dismissal. The Romantic poem, as an object of the New Historicism’s exhaustive criticisms, has come to be seen in some circles as a collection of dangerous ideologies and seductive rhetorical illusions, as an artifact from an historical and cultural moment defined by its tendency to naively embrace radical ideals only to abandon them in the face of adversity, or, worse, to transmute the aesthetic inspiration for that radicalism into something that serves rather than subverts ideology. While I will happily
concede that a skeptical perspective must continue to be brought to the study of Romantic work and thought, I worry that such skepticism is often raised to sensationalistic pitch, and the result can be (and has been) a disciplinary turn away from the ostensibly dangerous act of appreciating Romantic poetry and towards the comparative safety of an interpretive paradigm founded upon historical contextualization and ideological exposure.

These critical gestures risk reducing the texts to semantic content, a reduction that excludes from critical discourse the very qualities of Romantic texts that hold the potential to subvert their own ideological operations. This manner of reduction is especially frustrating to readers who wonder if the recent marginalization of Romantic texts and the centralization of Romantic context has less to do with the poetry’s own ideological complicities than with an entrenched disciplinary tendency to reduce the experience of literary texts to an exercise in hermeneutics—in other words, to ignore the materiality of the text and the affective responses it induces in order to reduce the poetry to semantic content that may be easily dismissed for the ideology of emotion it expresses. We remain, nearly half a century removed from the slaying of the Formalist dragon, vaguely cognizant of the fact that engagement with a literary text is a dauntingly rich and complex perceptual act fraught with intermodal complexity and tension, and that the interpretive dimension of reading is only one of many processes operating in parallel during the interface of text and reader. Despite this cognizance, commentators on Romanticism often treat texts as mere subject matter, manufacturing the permission they require to reduce their own critical responsibilities to the articulation of how texts convey semantic content. Sometimes explicitly, and sometimes implicitly, this articulation tends to predicate a value judgment of the content it observes, as with McGann, who, despite his announced intention not to disparage Romantic work but to “finally” provide a means of engaging with it from a position of “precision
and clarity” (Romantic Ideology 20), has gained a reputation for having repeatedly “taken Wordsworth’s poetry to task for its sublime self-absorption” (Kelley 7), and who, after self-identifying as a Marxist (Romantic Ideology 1), writes of Coleridge that “because his position is a conceptual-idealist defense of Church, State, and the class interests which those institutions support and defend, Coleridge’s ideas are, in a Marxist view, clearly deplorable” (5). If, as the reluctance to characterize Romanticism as a material, formal, and aesthetic phenomenon instead of a merely ideological one implicitly suggests, it is possible in practice to reduce Romantic work to the “clearly deplorable” ideas it contains, it would be a simple matter to extend McGann’s Marxist critique of the work’s ideas to the work itself, rendering “deplorable” the entire corpus of Romantic poetry and prose.

If, however, as the following chapters shall argue is true for Wordsworth’s contributions to the tradition of the Romantic sublime, a text were to contain an affective counter-content that resides primarily in its non-referential and non-propositional dimensions—an inappropriately material discourse of emotion perpetually situated in contradistinction to the text’s ideology of emotion—then any critical approach that neglects these dimensions must be understood as reductively misrepresenting its subject in order to render it more easily assailable to critique. Only a critical apparatus that commits itself to acknowledging appreciation’s interventions into the hermeneutic procedure may begin to sufficiently illuminate these texts’ critiques of their own ideologies, and only in that strange light does it become possible to demonstrate the ways in which Romantic poetry establishes the material conditions necessary for traumatic history to happen not as the concept of history, but as the performative testimony of history’s hit.

But first, a few words on what an attention to history has done to and for Romantic
poetry. McGann’s admonition against falling prey to Romanticism’s ahistorical rhetoric of transcendence represented what was for him a necessary intervention into an excessively credulous critical landscape at the time of its introduction. An attention to historical context, McGann contends, will ameliorate the dangers inherent in reading Romanticism through the lens of its own self-aggrandizing ideology. It must be remembered, however, that not even McGann takes seriously the notion that Romanticism was ever fully misled by its own ideological rhetoric. In his continuation of Arthur Lovejoy’s insistence upon a “discrimination of Romanticisms” (229), McGann has proposed the following, now-familiar taxonomy: the history of English Romanticism lends itself to division into a “primary” or “visionary” phase, marked by its unwavering faith in the constructive potential of the dialectic between imaginative exuberance and selective social critique, and a “secondary” or “revisionist” phase, which initiates a turn from the externally applied scrutiny of the visionary phase to an impulse towards self-critique in the form of skeptical appraisals of one’s own dialectical position (Romantic Ideology 108-9).

McGann situates this relationship between visionary and revisionary Romanticisms within a larger system of three historical sub-periodizations. The first envisions the Blake of Songs of Innocence and Experience and The Marriage of Heaven and Hell as the visionary precursor to later Blake, whose Milton and Jerusalem represent Blake’s efforts to bring the same critical acuity to bear on his own stances that he previously reserved for Swedenbourg and the New Jerusalem Church (108). The early poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge marks for McGann the advent of the second period of the relationship between vision and revision. This period appears somewhat more complicated, and perhaps less taxonomically stable, than the first. McGann concedes that there is a discernible element of self-critique operative in even early Wordsworth and Coleridge, and argues that “Wordsworth’s purely ‘secondary’ phase is brief to the point of
non-existence, for his greatest works . . . incorporate vision and its critique from the start” (109).

For McGann, the visionary Wordsworth is already so revisionary and self-conscious that he begins to compromise the integrity of the schema within which McGann has situated him. The revisionary period that Wordsworth avoids by losing or refusing his gift eventually finds expression in Coleridge, whose late poetry exhibits the “utter despair” that signals movement towards the “ideological truthfulness” that characterizes the third and final phase of McGann’s historical model (110). This third phase might rightly be renamed the Byronic phase, for it is “initiated, dominated, and closed by Byron” (110). The despair into which Coleridge descended in the final flowering of his poetic talent is Byron’s starting point: the poems of his visionary period are “already so deeply self-critical and revisionist” that their ideological position “has to be defined in negative terms” (110).

McGann arranges British Romanticism into a linear progression that begins in naïveté and ends in the acquisition of transformative knowledge. The primary distinction between his Romantic grand narrative and Romanticism’s grand narrative of itself is that McGann’s trajectory is a negative one: he replaces the attainment of transcendent heights with the acknowledgment of crippling material limitations, and the transformation that this knowledge predicates is a dark one indeed. In this model of negative trajectory, Romantic self-critique reaches critical mass only in the despair of Byron, Keats, Shelley, and late Coleridge, and earlier Romantic work represents an initial aesthetic and political argument that, no matter how self-critical it may be, is still tolerant enough of its own illusory ideology to avoid the “nihilism, cynicism, [and] anarchism” that we recognize in the terminal third phase (110).

While this arrangement can appear attractively elegant, it follows too convenient an arc to be a fully convincing account of the rich and varied literary tradition it purports to explain.
McGann’s negative teleology assembles a series of disparate textual artifacts into an historical sequence of increasing ideological self-awareness that culminates in the figure of Byron, whom McGann seems to idealize as the poet who comes closest to explicitly acknowledging the futility of the Romantic project. I suspect that all of the Romantics, especially Wordsworth, have demonstrably engaged in self-critique of a different category than that which interests McGann. McGann typifies Romantic self-critique as dialectical in nature: as thought critiquing thought, but my own inclination is to explore the extent to which it may be seen as affect critiquing, or perhaps deconstructing, thought. The self-critique arises from the poem’s semantic content—its ideology of emotion—having its operation disrupted by its discourse of emotion. In this formulation, the fundamental drama of the poems arises from the intellect’s efforts to silence affect’s interruptions and from affect’s efforts to retain its subversive voice.

I further suspect that this particular species of self-critique emerges not only diachronically over the course of a poet’s career, but synchronically, within the conversational dynamics of single versions of single poems. If these suspicions prove to be warranted, the claim that the first-generation Romantics depended upon their successors to expose the fundamental despair at the heart of Romanticism would need to be reconsidered: the poems themselves would contain the first, and perhaps most significant, skeptical appraisals of their own arguments, and would have to be recognized as artifacts of a much more subtle, nuanced, and sophisticated character than has previously been assumed. It would then become necessary to “discriminate” between the various “Romanticisms” active in any given textual iteration of the larger collection of historical, critical, philosophical, and artistic phenomena we encapsulate within the catachrestic critical fiction of Romantic periodization.
McGann’s assumptions about how and when Romantic despair arises would also require reconsideration. Instead of residing at the terminus of Romanticism (i.e. Byron), despair would be revealed as an essential element of Romantic expression in all of its phases. Furthermore, the means by which this despair is instantiated will be exposed as a process too multivalent to be reduced to a consequence of ideology and ideological self-awareness. While the acknowledgment of a cherished ideology’s failure is undoubtedly responsible for a significant portion of Romantic despondency, such an explanation is necessarily limiting: it reduces poems to vessels for ideology, to versified scraps of thought, whose success or failure may be defined exclusively in terms of the efficacy of its rhetoric. But, as this project shall argue, running parallel to verse’s semantic dimension, to which ideology attaches itself parasitically, is an aesthetic dimension, an affective para-site whose environment no ideological parasite can tolerate.

If McGann inaugurates a golden age of historically informed reappraisals of Romanticism, Alan Liu brings it to its culmination with *Wordsworth and the Sense of History*. I share with this volume the “working premise” that “a poet first ‘senses’ context in the form of highly charged and concrete phenomena that are prior to thinkable ‘idea’ because they mark a constitutive . . . differentiation, contradiction, or contest in the historical context itself” (395). I do not, however, share the conviction that these “concrete phenomena” make themselves known to us through the rhetorical encryption of semantic content—the thinkable ideas—to which they are prior. For Liu, tropes and figures, which constitute the technical apparatus through which history is forced to undergo the sinister metamorphosis into ideology, also constitute the primary means by which history affirms its presence in textual claims of ahistoricity. This means that the context the poet first “senses” is left decisively circumscribed within the territory of the
figurative regime, which is the very space within which it most likely to remain susceptible to the revisionary influence of the rhetoric that recasts historical consciousness as the false consciousness of ideology. Concomitantly, Liu leaves largely unexamined the very features of poetic form that possess the potential to most explicitly perform the tension between history and ideology that he describes. In a particularly egregious capitulation to figuration, Liu observes, in the lines that follow the celebrated hymn to imagination in *Prelude* Book 6, history emerging from the verse in the figure of allusions to Bonaparte:

> A dreary mansion, large beyond all need,
> With high and spacious rooms, deafened and stunned
> By noise of waters, making innocent sleep
> Lie melancholy among weary bones. (6.645-48)

For Liu, “anchoring the reading of Imagination as coup d'état is Wordsworth’s strong use of the figure ‘usurpation,’” which “in Book 6 is a figure backed up by allusion to *Macbeth*, the poem’s preferred exemplar of the usurper” (26). Furthermore, the “addition of the image of bones points to Old Boney,” which, “in the context of the years immediately preceding 1804, ‘usurper’ cannot refer to anyone other than Napoleon” (26).

Perhaps the image of “weary bones” does testify on behalf of history here in the ways Liu describes, and perhaps not. Or perhaps the question does not matter: if an attention to the materiality of the verse might reveal the extent to which concrete textual phenomena make concrete historical phenomena not legible, *per se*, but affectively audible, then history might rise from the text to perform itself *qua* trauma rather than troping itself via dubious allusions. Liu confesses “I believe I do have a certain desire to recover what I know rationally cannot be recovered: the actual stuff of the past” (501), but what if the “actual stuff” of material verse can
perform the same “invasiveness of history” the verse is meant to obfuscate (361), thereby approximating access to the “actual stuff” of the past, circumventing somewhat those vicissitudes of textualized historical coding that makes much of Liu’s evidence appear so fragile? I suspect that in the case of Wordsworth, history enters into form less subtly, and with more bracing violence, than it does in Liu’s model, not by insinuating itself into familiar figures, but through the “severer interventions” and “ministry more palpable” (Prelude 1.355-56) of the material disfiguration of figure.

If so, however, history’s interventions might constitute limit experiences that thrust the disfigured text into the domain of the traumatic sublime. When history hits the hardest, does the stroke cleave the affective faculties from the cognitive, leaving history weighing heavily upon a cliff’s edge where affect ends, peering across Feagin’s gap at an intellect that is fundamentally incapable of participating in its activity? And would this constitute a qualified species of transcendence, in which the shattered subject is dragged out of the melancholy ache of historical representation and made vulnerable to the more acute pain of historical presentation? What I intend to explore in the following pages is the possibility that the Romantics were right about the possibility of achieving aesthetic transcendence, but wrong about both the nature of this transcendence and the means by which the subject may achieve it. This exploration will reintroduce the material of the poem into aesthetic discourse by positing it as a locus for affective as well as semantic content, as a point around which thought and emotion constellate and interfere with one another in ways counterintuitive to a readership trained to privilege thought over emotion and interpretation over the mode of engagement that Feagin calls appreciation. As I revisit the Wordsworthian corpus, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which these poems vocalize a truth of affect before occluding it with a countertruth of the intellect, which itself
becomes subject to disruption by affect: the poems simultaneously document the discovery of trauma’s transcendental potential and the revision of that discovery into something more compatible with Romantic political progressivism before seeing the materiality of the document revise the revision and restore the silenced voice of affect. Obscured beneath the attractively self-aggrandizing, almost Kantian teleology we see informing the revisionary sublime of “Tintern Abbey” or The Prelude, I locate a suppressed knowledge of astonishment, a discourse of emotion predicated upon a traumatic version of Romantic aesthetic apotheosis that survives the higher faculties’ efforts to dismiss it.

I must emphasize, however, that this is not an attractively escapist transcendence easily earned or indefinite in its duration. Neither does it come without the risk of long-term consequences, which begin to accrue upon the subject’s post-traumatic resituation within historical representation and the fiction of identity that emerges as a consequence of the narrativization so crucial to the reflective intellect’s efforts to fabricate a history in which it can participate as actor rather than spectator and about which it may accrue knowledge. Indeed, it is questionable whether any subject would find this state unambiguously preferable to the intolerable historical and political conditions it sought to transcend. But the subject’s preference is irrelevant here, as it is with all traumas. Trauma chooses its own victims and should not be understood as a choice, but as a pattern, a syntax, compulsively re-enacted as the subject (or the singularity) unconsciously orchestrates the conditions necessary for the trauma’s repetition. The poet may represent that compulsive revisitation as voluntary to himself and his readers in an effort to assert some measure of agency over the processes that have come to shape his identity, but ultimately, if he may be said to remain a subject at all, it is a subject that is subject to the desubjectifying behavioral grammar of trauma and its aftermath. The poet, as protagonist of
Romanticism’s grand narrative of itself, aspires to ascend to the limits of human experience, to return from his travels transfigured and bearing Promethean fire; instead, he returns as an agent of the Other within and the Other without, with loyalties divided between the pre-and-post-traumatic iterations of himself, between feeling and thought, between the clamorous knot of history-as-text and the terrible silence of sublime presence: a being fragmented chronologically and categorically.

V.

Kant’s mature aesthetics, and especially the Third Critique’s account of the sublime, have until very recently resided in a privileged theoretical space effectively immune to critique. If the institutionalized study of aesthetics may be construed as a structure, then Kant has been permitted to become the paradoxical Derridean center, “that very thing within a structure which governs the structure, while escaping structurality” (Writing and Difference 248). Kant’s monolithic politico-aesthetics is invoked as a stable authority that governs the play of the other elements within its purview, but until recently the Third Critique itself has somehow remained “beyond the reach of the freeplay” it makes possible (280). In Aesthetic Ideology, Paul de Man observes with characteristically wry humor this tendency for humanities scholars to situate Kant not as an object of study to which they may apply their aptitude for critique, but as the guiding principle that determines the course and validity of their other critical endeavors:

You’ll notice recently that when Walter Jackson Bate had something articulate to say about the humanities, the authority to which he referred first of all was Kant. And you may have noticed that when Frank Lentricchia was trying to get certain types of contemporary criticism which will remain unnamed, to give them their
comeuppance, his reference was to Kant, he went back to Kant. So this is almost a joke, this ‘back to Kant.’ (130)

Thanks in part to the efforts of de Man, and, more recently, to those of Ray and Kirwan, it has become possible to ask whether the reverential attitude towards Kant that de Man derides here ignores considerable evidence of internal logical incoherence and a failure to grant affective experience the status it deserves as a variable in the sublime equation.

In Kant’s ultimately benign version of the sublime, reason recognizes the trauma of sublime terror as a temporary error, and reason comes finally to know itself through itself and swells with wonder at its own potency. This Kantian model has been revealed by Eagleton as demonstrably invested in confirming the unassailability of Enlightenment rationalism and, by extension, in justifying the implementation of the bourgeois social projects that yoke affect to reason as a way of aligning what Eagleton calls the “law of the heart” (310) with the law of the land. Ray, in preparation for a critique of Kant even harsher than de Man’s, distills the current skeptical attitudes towards unqualified faith in reason, emphasizing reason’s complicity in twentieth-century historical atrocity:

In the apparatus of Nazi genocide, a societal capacity for maximum violence was irreversibly realized. The conditions of possibility for this realization are more or less traceable to the deep structures and logics of European modernity and the capitalism from which it is inseparable. However debatable particular attempts to specify its conditions and causes may be, this catastrophic ethical and political failure undeniably leaves a global legacy of diminished human dignity and increased insecurity. In its wake, disenchantment is radical; there is no return to naïveté. The brute fact that centuries of Enlightenment culture failed to prevent
Auschwitz remains a severe and implacable indictment of that culture and the capitalist social forms that produced it. (2)

De Man has suggested that the ideological genealogy of Auschwitz and of Nazism may be traced in part to misreadings of Kant and his disciples, especially Schiller. To illustrate what politics the Kantian and Schillerean aesthetic may be used to justify by someone who has been produced as a political thinker in part by the Kantian aesthetic of transcendent reason, he reproduces a passage from Joseph Goebbels’ 1933 novel *Michael, Ein deutsches Schicksal in Tagebuchblattern*:

Art is the expression of feeling. The artist is distinguished from the non-artist by the fact that he can also *express* what he feels. He can do so in a variety of forms. Some by images; others by sound; still others by marble—or also in historical forms. The statesman is an artist, too. The people are for him what stone is for the sculptor. Leader and masses are as little of a problem to each other as color is a problem for the painter. Politics are the plastic arts of the state as painting is the plastic art of color. Therefore politics without the people or against the people are nonsense. To transform a mass into a people and a people into a state—that has always been the deepest sense of a genuine political task. (14)

De Man asserts, echoing the novel’s translators Wilkinson and Willoughby, that what Goebbels offers is “a grievous misreading of Schiller’s aesthetic state,” but he also notes that “the principle of this misreading does not essentially differ from the misreading which Schiller inflicted on his own predecessor—namely, Kant” (*Aesthetic Ideology* 155). What De Man fails to note about Goebbels’s misreading is the way it repeats the Kantian mistake of confusing aesthetic feeling with reason’s reactions against feeling. The initial assertion that art expresses feeling is
transformed by the sophistry of tropological thought—in this case, an analogy that posits the statesman as a sculptor and human beings as his stone—into the argument that art and politics are identical in both intent and practice. What is most horrifying about Goebbels’s argument is that it commits no logical fallacies. It is carefully qualified—“people are for him what stone is for the sculptor” [emphasis mine]—and therefore eminently reasonable. This easy camaraderie between reason and atrocity demands a reassessment of the assumption that reason may serve as a reliable principle upon which an authentically humanistic politics may be founded. We reject the argument not because we know it to be illogical, but because we (correctly) feel it to be a monstrous violation of the distinction between sentient, animate beings, which can suffer, and inanimate stone, which, as far as we can tell, cannot. It does not reasonably matter to the statesman whether the materials from which he carves his work in progress will feel the chisel going in, but it matters profoundly to those of us whose affective faculties mobilize themselves in an empathetic critique of the sociopathology to which reason and Enlightenment culture lend implied legitimacy by maintaining an official silence regarding them. The rational intellect cannot restore voice to the flesh it turned to stone: that task remains affect’s burden.

While I generally become uneasy at the prospect of reading any textual artifact through the lens of the ideology it can be coaxed into alignment with, such a reading is difficult to avoid when applied to later Kant, who conceals beneath his humanized sublime an argument founded on an oppressive politics of dehumanization that cannot be fully disentangled from the historical violence it was used to justify. Kant’s Third Critique is a teleology, and, consequently, it is structurally committed, as are all teleologies, to allowing the end to justify the means. Decontextualized from the totality of the Kantian corpus, the Third Critique’s aesthetic teleology deploys reason to revise trauma into a redemptive process in which eventual recompense is
offered for the distress that attends exposure to an initially terrifying sublime. But supersensible reason’s primacy in the Kantian system makes it easily transferrable from internal subjective experience to intersubjective political applications that take reason as their guiding principle. It is in this respect that Kant’s teleology is revealed as a collective iteration of secular theodicy not unlike those explored in Abrams’s *Natural Supernaturalism*. As history repeatedly demonstrates, once a politics effectively becomes a religion, it assumes permission to enact its “capacity for maximum violence” in the name of its deity—in the case of the Kantian and Schillerean strain in Nazi ideology, that deity is reason in its divine aspect and the state in its human manifestation. We look back upon the Kantian übersinnlich and what it has begotten with a restored sense of the affective horror that Kant sought to expunge from the record of the sublime.

The Kantian secular theodicy has recently been challenged by both Kirwan, who demonstrates its failure to adhere to the internal consistency required of any closed logical system, and by Ray, who has read Kant’s aesthetics not as an authentic effort to understand and articulate the experience of the sublime as affect, but as an attempt to place the sublime within a phenomenological taxonomy that would diminish its threatening affective potency and render it palatable to a readership still wedded to the Enlightenment’s conception of redemptive reason as a politically viable, stabilizing center to the systems both natural and artificial.

Kirwan reveals a core of occluded affect at the center of the Kantian argument, an argument that both posits reason as a means of transcending affect and adopts reason as its guiding methodological principle:

For the pleasure of the sublime to arise from reason’s absolute domination of sensibility, we would have to somehow be aware, as we can never be aware, that
no interest of sensibility is involved in this domination. To posit the pleasure as arising from the feeling of reason’s superiority over sensibility presupposes, then, that sensibility has (in its own interests) set aside the requirement (of reason) that the instance in question be distinguishable from instances of one interest dominating another, and has done so for the sake of entertaining the pleasurable feeling of ‘reason’s superiority.’ In short, feeling that reason is dominating sensibility, or indeed that sensibility could be dominated at all, could only be the result of a state of mind in which sensibility was dominating reason: producing certainty where no certainty is possible. (162)

Subjected to prolonged scrutiny, Kant’s claim that the sublime represents the subject’s transcendence of affect through thought is revealed as an effort to claim for reason the impression of transcendence that can only ever be registered as affect, through those faculties qualified to perceive it.

Ray prefaces his discussion of Kant’s consecration of reason by contextualizing it within the discourse that surrounded what he, and probably Pfau, would understand as a profoundly influential, large-scale historical trauma—the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755:

In the words of one Voltaire scholar, the Lisbon earthquake was nothing less than ‘the death of optimism.’ At the very least, it confronted a longstanding debate among European philosophes with some very troubling counter-evidence to the intuitive endorsement of metaphysical optimism. A short review of this debate will clarify an under-remarked context of Kant’s Third Critique. Pierre Bayle had in 1697 constructed a dialectical pastiche of fragments of classical history and philosophy that seemed to conclude that the universe was not all for the best: evil
was loose in the world and largely in control. Leibniz, in his 1710 *Theodicy*, answered this pessimism with a metaphysics grounded in a rational proof of God’s existence and goodness: from the very idea of God, it followed that the universe he created was, famously, ‘the best of all possible worlds.’ Pope, in his 1733 *Essay on Man*, confirmed Leibniz’s conclusion: reason itself proves that evil can only exist for the sake of a greater good. (8)

Ray illustrates the influence of these debates upon Kant’s formulation of his redemptive aesthetics:

Well-read in these debates and personally invested, so to speak, in the Lisbon disaster, Kant would eventually consider the pessimists answered by the three volumes of his critical system. For if Kant’s supplementary discussions of enlightenment and universal history openly endorse the ruling order and its state (‘Dare to know and argue, but obey!’), the articulation of these essayistic political writings with the major texts of his transcendental idealism implicitly vindicates the doctrine “Whatever is, is right.” Within the *Critique of Judgment* itself, we can read the effects of the Lisbon earthquake between the lines of the “Analytic of the Sublime.” In his analysis of the aesthetic judgment of the beautiful, Kant had attributed the feeling of pleasure by which beauty is recognized to a harmony between the mind’s powers or faculties of imagination and understanding. Judgments of the sublime, however, involve an “indirect” or “negative” pleasure: a pleasure mixed with pain. Specifically, the feeling of the sublime is a pleasure which the mind itself produces in order to compensate itself for the pain it feels when the imagination reaches its limit. (9)
Ray reads the Kantian aesthetic as the Kantian intellect’s effort to defend itself against a trauma by revising the felt horror of an authentic encounter with the sublime into an easily domesticatable, false sublime that replaces Other with self and pain with pleasure. This would suggest the intriguing possibility that beneath the totalizing authoritative dictum of the *Third Critique* lies a forgotten, suppressed voice of witness that may be recoverable, and which may reveal the affective core of sublime terror against which Kant, a singularity hit by a particle of history, mobilized his considerable powers of reason.

It is the deManian “play of the letter” that makes audible the remnants of this suppressed voice, which cried out in visionary horror at “the death of optimism” before its reflective and revisionary counterpart embarked upon the assembly of an ideology of emotion to revise that death into the prelude to its own resurrection. Twenty years before either Kirwan or Ray dared to question Kant, de Man was exposing some of Kant’s most fundamentally compromising self-contradictions. Simultaneously damning the revisionary Kantian intellect and restoring the lost voice of Kantian affect is de Man’s observation of the ways textual materiality may determine the course of Kant’s ostensibly philosophical account of the affective faculties. Kant’s *Third Critique* denies these faculties a role in the aesthetic judgment of the sublime, relegating them instead to the conceptual sphere of “arbitrary and coercive desire” (De Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* 123). For Kant, the highest variety of sublime experience is one in which affect has disappeared completely: “even the absence of emotion, when found in a mood that adheres emphatically and insistently to its principles, cannot only be sublime but most admirably so, because it will have the approval of pure reason on its side” (199). De Man acknowledges the political implications: “what makes the [Kantian] sublime compatible with reason is its independence from sensory experience; it is beyond the senses, übersinnlich. This is what makes the junction of cognition
with morality possible” (125). It is clear why Kant would want to exclude affect and its disruptive potential from his aesthetic system: he thought that “in affect, the freedom of the soul may be curtailed” (198n), and this curtailment is incompatible with his vision of an aesthetics and a politics united in their common commitment to elevating reason to a position where limits do not apply.

In addition to excluding the voice of affect from his account of the sublime, Kant appears to suffer difficulty bending his prose to the demands of an authentic discourse of emotion. De Man’s humor tempers the shock that accompanies his realization that Kant’s usual philosophical rigor is subverted by the influence of mundane phonic materiality:

Kant’s discussion of the affects does not start out from the inner experience of a subject, from the kind of interpretive sensitivity, the affective cogito that one can capture in Montaigne, in Malebranche, or in the Romantics. Kant is never as bland as when he discusses the emotions. He frequently seems to be using the dictionary rather than his own experiences as a starting point, and he is often guided by external resemblances between words rather than by the inner resonances of emotion. Thus an important distinction between the emotion of surprise (Verwunderung), which is fleeting and transitory, and that of admiration (Bewunderung, p.199), which is lasting, obviously owes more to the external resemblance between the two words than to a phenomenology of inner experience. (123)

Not even Kant can prevent the influence of materiality from irrupting back into the discursive terrain of the analytical intellect. Paradoxically, it is this failure that saves him from being fully guilty of the ideological crimes that he has been accused of committing. De Man
seems to suspect that although the semantic content of Kant’s prose fails to convey anything approaching genuine affective truth, the counter-content of symptomatic moments of textual materiality impinging upon thought’s immateriality restores voice and disruptive potency to that which Kant has suppressed. Read conventionally, Kant’s argument establishes distinctions between surprise and admiration, but the “external resemblances between words” that encourage “radical” Kant to link the two terms in a deManian “play of the letter” (89) stand as an affective counter-argument in which surprise and admiration fuse, as in, for example, the Burkean sublime that the post-traumatic Kant strove so profoundly to refute.

None of this should be taken to imply that Kant’s aesthetics no longer has value for scholars, but it does suggest that Kant’s value can no longer be assumed to lie in what he reveals about the sublime. Instead, its value now appears to reside in what it reveals about the lengths to which we can go to insulate ourselves from discourses of emotion with ideologies of emotion. Instead of bearing witness to the trauma of its past, the self silences that past with a revisionary project of self-deception in which the reasonable intellect “corrects” affect. This process appears all the more insidiously effective when we consider that the self has been institutionally conditioned to privilege reason over emotion, to situate the “higher” faculties of logical cognition over the “lower” faculties of affective experience in the axiomatic epistemological hierarchy inherited from Descartes and the rationalists. The belated self exercises editorial control over the narrative of its past, excising affect and replacing it with ideational material—tropes, rhetoric, ideology—and legitimizes these editorial betrayals by invoking reason’s apparently self-evident right to rectify the flawed knowledge gathered by affect, its feminized and patronized subordinate.
VI.

In the visionary revision of revision that this dissertation locates within material interventions into rhetorico-semantic endeavor, the effects of the sublime so closely resemble the effects of trauma upon its victims that the two categories seem to fold structurally and conceptually into one another. The possibility of sublime aesthetic experience effectively traumatizing a subject into a kind of affective transport might be connected to the almost painful varieties of beauty explored by Elaine Scarry, for whom aesthetic experience is “always deeply somatic” (*Beauty and Being Just* 77). Following Simone Weil, Scarry articulates a beauty that feels like being drawn through “small tears in the surface of the world that pull us through to some vaster space,” or that “lift[s] us . . . letting the ground rotate beneath us several inches, so that when we land we find ourselves standing in a different relation to the word than we were a moment before” (77).

Some have located within this disjunction the potential for staging political resistance against the subject-producing mechanisms of establishment institutions, and while I shall confess to finding such notions profoundly attractive, I remain somewhat wary of their self-aggrandizing properties. Let me instead propose that certain art, especially the poems of the Romantic sublime, may occasion not resistance but actual (though temporary) transcendence of the externally social and political by inflicting a kind of sublime trauma upon their authors and readers.

It must be remembered, however, that this escape from external sociopolitics may be bought only at the cost of confronting the internal sociopolitics of the self, which are themselves the product of history and power’s interventions into the lives of individuals. If there are any explicitly political findings to be gained from investigating this confrontation, they would be
concerned with these intrapersonal politics, and they would revolve around the discrediting of certain ways of thinking and talking about selfhood, especially Romantic selfhood, which often insists upon conceptions of the author as solitary creative genius who writes himself along with his poetry. The name “William Wordsworth,” for example, would need to be recognized as a catachresis, a convenient critical shorthand that scholars employ to refer to a series of persons and personas, many of whom occupy subject positions that are demonstrably distinct enough from the others that share its name and body to justify a recognition of their discrete personhood: the solitary genius’s solitude contains an internal sociality, replete with political dynamics that may at times resemble those of the external sociality that produced them, including the exploitation and betrayal of the suffering subject in the name of progress. Frances Ferguson has suggested in Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit that Wordsworth’s writings reveal “an internal dialectic, in which the self becomes a being ‘made up of many beings’” (xvi-xvii). I would add to this linguistic dialectic of conflicting thoughts another, affective, series of Wordsworthian selves, whose voices are suppressed by the “many beings” that constitute Ferguson’s intellective dialectic.

It seems to me that a sustained attention to the Romantic oscillation between witnessing personal trauma and silencing it through revision makes Elaine Scarry’s pronouncements in The Body in Pain about the impossibility of intersubjectively communicating the reality of physical pain applicable to both intrasubjective communicative efforts and acute aesthetic experience:

When one hears about another person’s physical pain, the events happening within the interior of that person’s body may seem to have the remote character of some deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography that, however
portentous, has no reality because it has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth. (3)

I argue that the same obfuscation frustrates intrasubjective communication when the post-traumatic subject seeks to recall its own previously suffered traumas, when the people we become as a consequence of our encounters with pain find themselves incapable of inhabiting once again the subjective space of past suffering, and are secretly relieved to find that former self silenced. Scarry’s suggestion that “whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability” is just as useful to considerations and critiques of holistic models of selfhood as to conventional explorations of interpersonal politics. And therein lies the fundamental paradox of aesthetic pain: in the sublime moment, pain is ours in a way that no one else can know, but when the pain ends, it is somehow lost to us in ways that complicate our future efforts to claim ownership over it and over ourselves as subjects.

This structural correspondence between trauma and the sublime poses a challenge to Romantic recapitulations of Kantian teleology so significant that it may be unanswerable. Repeated exposure to the sublime now seems to lead not to the developed tolerance of and permanent, transcendent identification with the sublime we see in the Wordsworthian model of sublime pedagogy that lends structure to *The Prelude*, but to temporary episodes of self-contained transcendence followed by the accumulation of the psychic scar tissue we associate with any instance of repeated trauma. Acute aesthetic experience may offer us a respite from the traumas of history and politics, but this respite must itself be recognized as a trauma, one that may lead, during the self-contained moment of aesthesis, to total alienation from the intellect and total identification with the internal affective Other, and may lead post-traumatically to greater skepticism of the humanistic project and its realization through the revisionary approach to
trauma that underwrites progressive politics. The affective truths of progress—that it is a
machine fueled by suffering, and that it establishes the conditions necessary for its own
continuation by silencing the voices of the wounded in an obscene parody of mourning—begin
to present themselves with a violence impossible to ignore.

The poet traumatized by the sublime also comes to recognize that he can represent his
personal history as progressive if he silences those moments from his past that represent a
counterinstance to the structure of redemption: personal change becomes personal growth (as in,
for example, the Wordsworthian “growth of the poet’s mind”) only by suppressing the testimony
of those previous iterations of the self who seek to bear witness to events that resist incorporation
into the redemptive schema. Progress as a category of human experience and an historical model
is revealed as a self-contradiction founded on suppressing evidence of anomaly and silencing the
voices of the same wounds progress is meant to redeem.

This notion of the Romantic poem as a chronicle of its author’s self-contradictions and
internal conflicts is not new. McGann tempers his harsher criticisms of Romantic ideology by
observing the tendency of Romantic poems to critique their own ideologies in a dialectic that
leads to final despair. More relevant to my aesthetically minded approach is the work of Theresa
M. Kelley, who offers a highly compelling account of Wordsworthian aesthetics as the attempt to
incarcerate the threatening power of the Sublime in the domesticating space of the beautiful:

[F]or most of his career Wordsworth was at least as suspicious of the Sublime as
Keats and Hazlitt were because, like them, he recognized that sublime
transcendence might become little more than sublime egotism. Wordsworth’s
suspicion of the sublime prompted a ‘twofold’ aesthetics that is critical to
emergence as a major poet. The two poles of this aesthetics, the sublime and the
beautiful, derive from a well-known antithesis in earlier aesthetic theory, in part familiar to Wordsworth by way of Edmund Burke. But whereas Burke primarily describes differences between sublimity and beauty, and suggests their opposition, Wordsworth presents this opposition as an aesthetic conflict whose rhetorical complexity is a singular poetic achievement. As a quasi-Burkean aesthetic of social norms and hierarchies, the WordswORTHian beautiful opposes the willful self-aggrandizement of the revolutionary or Satanic sublime, advocating instead communicability and a sense of known limits in art as well as society. (2-3)

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of what Kelley achieves here. Her model of Wordsworth’s aesthetics probably carries the purely rhetorical, tropological understanding of his poems as far as it can go. My own intent is to augment Kelley’s purely interpretive analysis of WordswORTHian rhetorical figures with an appreciative attention to the qualities of the poetry that no hermeneutic may approach. I hope to add to Kelley’s findings by observing in the auditorial, revisionary dynamic of Wordsworth’s aesthetics a correlation between Wordsworth’s caging of the sublime in the beautiful and the intellect’s efforts to contain the discourse of emotion initiated by sublime feeling within the revisionary ideology of emotion engendered by reflection.

VII.

By now the reader may have detected an apparent irony in my defense of what I have called the aesthetic. My indebtedness to later de Man, whose admiration for Kant extended only to those “radical” moments in which he had “interrupted, disrupted, disarticulated the project of articulation that [is] the aesthetic” (Aesthetic Ideology 134), might be observed to produce an
apparent friction between itself and the attempt to locate value in the same experiential modes
that, in de Man’s estimation, encourage the articulation of an ideology that must be
disarticulated.

This friction, I contend, is the function of a somewhat forgivable tendency to
misapprehend de Man’s fundamental aims and assumptions regarding the aesthetic. What the
term “aesthetic” refers to in normative critical discourse is only sometimes what it refers to in the
decidedly anomalous, aggressively materialist aesthetic discourse unique to de Man’s final
writings. The aesthetic that de Man sought to critique was not the mode of aesthetic experience,
per se, but the totalizing body of theory that had constellated around this mode in attempts to
manage it and to represent it, and us, as a coherent narrative. De Man dedicated himself to the
effort that Lindsay Waters characterizes as the attempt to “pull apart what aesthetics, from Plato
to Aristotle up to the present time, had insisted on seeing as whole” (134). Furthermore, in a
gesture that runs counter to the familiar attribution of nihilism to poststructuralist methodology,
de Man did not seek to pull apart what aesthetics had made whole only so he could gaze upon the
scattered limbs in grim satisfaction. Instead, he intended to “deconstruct what he called
‘ideology of the aesthetic’ in the name of a ‘true aesthetics’” (134). By virtue of the fact that this
true aesthetics would have to be, in Waters’s words, “re-anchor[ed] . . . in our feelings” (134), de
Man’s agenda comes to resemble what Terada might view as an effort to replace a monolithic
ideology of emotion with the authentic discourse of emotion that had been interred within it for
centuries. Both sarcophagus and simulacrum, this ideology of emotion has historically laid
wrongful claim to affect’s right to self-express, and its disarticulation would represent a
renovation and restoration of a long-stifled voice to its proper oracle.
It must be emphasized, however, that this “true aesthetics” would not be predicated upon any naive return to bankrupt notions of subjectivity. Quite the contrary: the replacement of aesthetic ideology with something more genuine could be seen as the culmination of de Man’s efforts to complete “the task he had set for himself in the early 1960’s,” which was “to escape . . . the Hegelian overemphasis on selfhood and consciousness” (Waters 144). According to Waters, de Man was able to actualize this escape only after turning to the Frankfurt School aesthetics of Walter Benjamin, from which de Man appropriated the following principles:

Language is the coin of the human realm, but it is not the possession of humans. . . . [H]umans have to give up the idea that they control language. The notion that men use language at their own will is a myth, the Myth of Adamic Language, that humans are reluctant to let go of, but they must. The notion of language as something internal to man, as something man fills with meaning, in which word and object can coincide if we could just police language more effectively, is wrong. (150)

Far from functioning as an implement that the subject may employ to easily realize referential intent, language came to seem to de Man as a denizen of the “realm of the object,” from which “alienation” must be taken as “a first principle,” and through which “we have to experience . . . the feelings of limits that interrupt all language, all striving, through words” (150). These limits, and, crucially, the feelings they provoke, “undermine the pretensions of modern subjectivity,” and the “true aesthetics . . . of disarticulation” therefore provides an occasion for suffering the frustration to which these limits give rise by “reorient[ing] the discourse of the artwork around the materiality of the artwork, a thing with a very different way of being than humans” (151). This focus on textual materiality reveals that “words are not the means for humans to get to
things. Words are themselves the things we get to, and "they get to us" (151) by means of "enabl[ing] us to see what sort of agency the artwork possesses and manifests" (152).

When words get to us in the deManian sense, however, the feelings they induce do not "arise" as the mere "'sense impressions' of the 'empiricism' of days gone by," but as "an event, an event that is irreversible and non-cumulative" (Waters 154). These feelings "are what happen to us in the events that mark our interaction with artworks" (154), and they index what de Man provocatively dominates "that which is true" (132). Like Ray’s hit that happens, de Man’s event that occurs and is true initiates a disorienting dislocation:

The model for . . . the process I am describing, and which is irreversible, is the model of the passage from trope, which is a cognitive model, to the performative, for example. Not the performative in itself—because the performative in itself exists independently of tropes and exists independently of a critical examination or of an epistemological examination of tropes—but the transition, the passage from a conception of language as a system, perhaps a closed system, of tropes, that totalizes itself in a series of transformations which can be reduced to tropological systems, and then the fact that you pass from that conception of language to another conception of language in which language is no longer cognitive but in which language is performative. (Aesthetic Ideology 132)

Because texts may inflict these traumatic passages upon us, reading in the deManian sense becomes, in Waters’s paraphrase, “a scene of violence” that leads to “the loss of control that then triggers the emergence of our consciousness of our selves as our selves” (155):

Our experience in response to some artworks is literally life threatening because all the scaffolding for the structures and figures that are our sense of selves
crashes down. What had been articulated gets disarticulated in the process of engagement with the artwork. We might get angry. We might get scared. . . . But there is a plus side to this adventure: We come to appreciate ourselves as selves in the distraction provoked in the activity that evokes a sense of the self not as one and isolated but as dispersed along the structures of the figures before us. The truly aesthetic experience is the feeling of the rush and crash of our idealizations along with the bending back of self-awareness until consciousness arises. . . . Nothing gets redeemed in this process, but something happens in the event of second-order reflection. We learn what it is to own our own feelings—to have them and to know them. We become aware of our own feelings in the process of disarticulation of structures, because, even though we gain no immediate knowledge of the world through art, we do gain immediate knowledge of our own feelings. (155-56)

This is the “true” aesthetic, and the possibility of apprehending it is what prevents de Man from dismissing the aesthetic entirely. The aesthetic is not bankrupt, but the seductively attractive ideologies that encrust it and occlude it, like so much pearl around an irritant, are.

But gaining this “immediate knowledge”—perceiving the affective truth of affect—precludes the possibility of fully translating that knowledge into something comprehensible to the faculties of cognition. When the shift from trope to performance hits or occurs, it does so as “a matter of feeling and not cognition” (Waters 156), and, therefore, “having the aesthetic experience means traveling the passage from the zone of cognition to the zone of power” (156). It is for this reason that “the aesthetic is always something the politicians are trying to control and turn into an ideology of the aesthetic” (156). The appropriate response to aesthetic ideology,
however, is not to critically or cognitively undo the aesthetic, but to aesthetically subvert the ideology of the aesthetic: to know our feelings through our feelings without capitulating to the ideological imperative to rationally correct them or exploit them as fuel in the engine of progress or connective tissue in the corpus, or perhaps now just the corpse, of the subject. To the extent that it is possible to do so in the context of criticism, I have endeavored to instantiate this subversion in the following chapters.

Chapter one begins by tracing the genealogy of normative contemporary Romantic scholarship to McGann, who argues in *The Romantic Ideology* that the typical critical account of Romanticism is too fully seduced by Romanticism’s own self-aggrandizing ideology to qualify as authentic critique. I locate within McGann’s ostensibly materialist exposure of these ideologies a tendency towards a reductive immaterialization of verse into semantic content, and I chronicle the manifold deferences to this tendency in the work of Marjorie Levinson and other influential historicist scholars who would continue the articulation of McGann’s methodological paradigm. I then propose that an authentic commitment to honoring the materiality of the verse would require an almost aggressively formalist attention to the material dimension of versification—especially lines and line breaks—and consider the extent to which these dimensions offer an occasion for the “material events” so crucial to later de Man to occur. I devote the remainder of the chapter to locating these moments of material and aesthetic subversion in Wordsworth’s most important early lyric poems and to articulating the ways that their resistance to rhetoric may instantiate a species of counter-rhetoric that would render somewhat redundant the critical activity that McGann prescribes. Beginning with “A slumber did my spirit seal,” then moving to “We are Seven,” “A Night-Piece,” and finally “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a
Tour. July 13, 1798,” I explore the ways in which graphemes, rhythmic irregularities, and other orthographical and metrical features may interfere with the intended rhetorical function of the poetry by first breaking away from, and finally usurping from within, the propositional content insisted upon by the poetry’s tropes and figures.

Chapter two questions Pieter Vermeulen’s recent characterization of Paul de Man’s treatment of Wordsworth’s “Boy of Winander” as a “fall into theory” that is predicated upon the “suspension of reading.” I argue that an attention to affect’s intervention into the semantic plane of de Man’s acts of reading reveals them as a fall not into theory but into affect, and that this fall facilitates rather than frustrates de Man’s efforts to authentically articulate the operation of trauma in the poem. I then speculate that de Man’s observations of textual materiality’s influence upon the semiotic function of language may be applied retroactively to his own readings of Wordsworth, as well as to several of the most significant passages of *The Prelude*, in ways that might contribute to a fuller understanding of how the poem materially manifests a trauma that resists its own rhetoric of progress and secular theodicy. I adapt and amplify William Empson’s approach to line breaks from “Sense in *The Prelude*” to read the “Boy of Winander” passage from *Prelude* Book 5, as well as the “Dream of the Arab” passage from the same Book and the “Stolen Boat” episode from *Prelude* Book 1, as prosodic iterations of a thematic phenomenon that Geoffrey Hartman calls *akedah*, or the “tying or binding” of imagination to nature as a means of insulating the self from personal apocalypse. I observe the emergence of Wordsworth’s tendency in *The Prelude* to end a line with the enigmatic phrase “the voice,” only to immediately resolve the enigma by binding the voice to nature and / or religion with the rhetorical thread of the genitive case or the syntax of the restrictive relative clause. This binding occurs in “the voice / Of mountain torrents” from the “Boy of Winander,” “the voice / That roars
along the bed of Jewish song,” also in Book 5, and in “the voice / Of mountain-echoes” from Book 1’s “Stolen Boat” passage. The sublime material resistance of “the voice” to being bound to the diffusive influence of the ideas and ideologies of nature and faith enables a counter-rhetorical reading, in which the poetry intended to be the medium for Wordsworth’s acts of imaginative self-creation reveals itself as the domain of not one voice but many, and hence revises Wordsworth’s holistic revision of himself into the performance of fragmentation. In this way the poetry uses the affective faculties of the reader to invoke the material and the aesthetic, which in turn illustrates an autogenic capacity for self-consciousness and self-critique that the New Historicism insists must be imposed upon the poetry from the outside by the scholar.

Chapter three investigates and complicates the model of “decline” so often used to characterize the trajectory of Wordsworth’s career as a poet. I begin by emphasizing how instrumental Wordsworth’s power to affect has been, either explicitly or implicitly, in attempts to formulate evaluative critical responses to his work by contemporaries like Byron and Francis Jeffrey, by Victorians like Matthew Arnold, and even by currently active scholars like Kenneth Johnston and Kenneth Morrison. I then proceed to examine the passages from The Excursion in which Wordsworth describes the figure of The Wanderer, and I locate the same tendency for material to counter-rhetorically sever itself from rhetoric in this late poem that my previous chapters have located in the early lyrics and The Prelude. I conclude by speculating that Wordsworth may have suffered a decline as a result of his failure to confront the voices of affective data buried within his own past, and that his ultimate failure to complete his aborted epic The Recluse may be in part attributable to his reluctance to continue facing the failure of his considerable skill with versification, trope, and figure to silence the suppressed voices that constitute the society of self.
Chapter four performs one final reading of the play of material in Wordsworth, using his lyric “The Solitary Reaper” as its object of application, before applying similar reading strategies to Allen Ginsberg’s neglected masterpiece “The Change: Kyoto-Tokyo Express,” in order to illustrate the ways that the fundamental project of Romanticism (to exploit writing as a means of fusing the imagination with the rhetoric of poetic craft to revise the self into something more palatable to the reflective intellect) has been neither successfully completed nor abandoned, but is instead in the process of continually seeking its resolution, albeit in the somewhat altered poetic landscape of the postmodern era. I shall seek to demonstrate how “The Change” struggles with the limiting features of materiality in its effort to articulate a model of selfhood that allows for the possibility of post-traumatic, aesthetic convalescence, while also keeping an eye open for those symptomatic moments wherein materiality performs the inappropriable permanence of trauma in ways that reveal and dispel the artifice at the heart of the poetry’s vision of redemption through secular theodicy. I end the chapter with a short coda that links Wordsworth and Ginsberg as fellow explorers of poetry’s potential to provide sublime affect with the vehicle it needs to transcend the spatial and temporal circumstances of its initial generation, demonstrating that Romanticism is not merely a now-obsolete moment in the history of aesthetics and ideas, but a praxis or a process that transcends historical contingency to manifest materially whenever a poem or other written text mobilizes its own materiality to take possession of itself in ways that interrogate, complicate, and disarticulate the definitions of selfhood articulated in the text’s ideational and ideological content.

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1 See Chapter 2 of Eagleton’s *The Ideology of the Aesthetic.*
2 Although it denominates essentially the same phenomenon as the Lacanian “tuché” from which it is probably derived and which it amplifies, for the purposes of this project I prefer the inelegant, visceral, Old English brutality of “hit,” and shall invoke it, instead of Lacan’s tuché, to convey the affective force of the aesthetic traumas I consider. See OED, “hit, v.” and Lacan’s *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis.*
3 Gilles Deleuze’s proclamation that “Reason is a kind of feeling” (30) comes immediately to mind. See his *Empiricism and Subjectivity.*

Ray, for example, invokes Adorno to advocate a cultural shift towards authentic mourning and transformation. See *Terror and the Sublime* 9.
Apocalyptic Prosody and Affective Counter-Rhetoric in Early Wordsworth

I.

The impulse to contextualize Wordsworth’s early lyrics within the sociopolitical circumstances that shaped them has reinvigorated the critical discourse about these poems, augmenting the disciplinary understanding of Wordsworth qua poet with an understanding of Wordsworth the political subject, sometimes radical, sometimes reactionary, but never fully divorced from the definitive intensities of his historical moment. This impulse has also deflected attention away from the poetry’s material and formal features, contributing to the current critical tendency to subordinate text to context in practices that may misrepresent their object of study, to the detriment of both object and practice. The consequence of this deflection is a disciplinary predisposition to reduce poems to a narrowly conceived historicization of their subject matter, a move that eventuates in the further reduction of poems to the ostensibly escapist rhetorical devices they employ and to the ideologies to which they are consequently said to play host. For critics who share my interest in exploring the ways Romantic texts offer a self-critique of their own rhetoric and ideology, the least reductive of these historicizing approaches is Jerome McGann’s in *The Romantic Ideology*, an explicitly political and self-described anti-ideological approach that continues paradigmatically to direct the course of Romanticism studies over thirty years after its publication. McGann argues, often quite convincingly, that Romantic poetry after early Blake is best understood as a revisionary self-critique that reveals and dispels the Romantic illusion that art may offer the prospect of an escape from the horrors of history (108-110). Bereft of this illusion, the Romantics fall victim to a despair from which the only retreats are a feigned apoliticality that disguises political interest, an ahistoricism that renders the poet even more complicit with the historical horrors from which he seeks aesthetic respite, an ideology that
masks itself as the transcendence of the ideological, and a solitude that leads not forward to enlightenment but backward to the bleaker excesses of the Enlightenment (110-113).

Despite McGann’s insistence that critics may only avoid reading Romantic work through the lens of its own deceptive, self-aggrandizing ideology by contextualizing their readings in the material conditions of Romanticism’s own historical moment, his emphasis upon materiality does not appear to fully extend from the poem’s sociohistorical context to the text itself. As copiously as McGann reproduces relevant passages from the poems he considers, his explications and ideological critiques unfold as principally immaterial affairs, more concerned with semantic content than with the often contentious relationship between that content and the material means by which it is conveyed. Consequently, McGann’s approach discourages, or perhaps precludes, acknowledging the extent to which these poems may be understood not simply as products of material conditions, but as themselves material conditions whose materiality produces aesthetic effects—affects—which extend the self-critique beyond the familiar dialectic of thought against thought and reconfigure it as a tension between thought and feeling.¹ In the instances when textual materiality does enter meaningfully into McGann’s historical contextualizations of Romantic works, he subordinates it to semantic content in moves consistent with his characterization of aesthetic qualities as a layer of illusion that the critic must penetrate in order to expose an ideological core.

This tendency towards immaterializing the material prevents McGann from pursuing a line of inquiry that might provide access to another dimension of Romantic self-critique, in which the poem’s semantic content fails to completely subordinate the material medium of its expression. Attention to what Paul de Man calls the “play of the letter and of the syllable,” or the “very dismemberment of language” that occurs when “meaning-producing tropes are replaced by
the fragmentation of sentences and propositions into discrete words, or the fragmentation of words into syllables and finally letters” (*Aesthetic Ideology* 89), may make possible the apprehension of a material Romanticism’s critique of the immaterial Romanticism whose idealisms and ideologies it is charged with perpetuating. Extended to encompass other textual materialities, including the fragmentation of poetic arguments into the discrete lines that they comprise, and the severance of punctuation and other orthographical features from the semantic and propositional content they are tasked with transmitting—this play reveals an affective counter-content through which the poem may perform an autogenic, aesthetic, immanent critique of its own rhetorical and ideological function.

Acknowledging the role of the material and the aesthetic in Romantic self-critique would complicate McGann’s pronouncement that “when forms of thought enter our consciousness as forms (or ‘structures’) of feeling—which is what takes place through poetry and art—the forms threaten to reify as ideology in the secondary environment of criticism” (*Romantic Ideology* 13). I will concede that these structures “threaten to reify,” but with two qualifications: that “forms of thought” never enter our consciousness as structures of feeling, but with structures of feeling, and that in poetry and art these structures of feeling are, in part, the products of a reader’s interface with material structures whose structurality may threaten the threat of reification. McGann argues that readers should commit to “turning this experiential and aesthetic level of understanding into a self-conscious and critical one” (13), but I question the dichotomy. If a poem’s affective content resists subordination to its semantic content—if the way it feels seems neither to correspond to nor cooperate with what it says—then the “aesthetic level of understanding” would already be self-conscious and critical.
This aesthetic, affective counter-content is related to, though not synonymous with, the “counter-spirit” to which Wordsworth refers in a well-known passage from the third of his “Essays Upon Epitaphs.” For the Wordsworth of these essays,

Words are too awful an instrument for good and evil to be trifled with: they hold above all other external powers a dominion over thoughts. If words be not (recurring to a metaphor before used) an incarnation of the thought but only a clothing for it, then surely will they prove an ill gift; such a one as those poisoned vestments, read of in the stories of superstitious times, which had power to consume and to alienate from his right mind the victim who put them on.

Language, if it do not uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet, like the power of gravitation or the air we breathe, is a counter-spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work to derange, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve. (Prose Works, 2: 85)

Frances Ferguson argues that “although Wordsworth might seem to offer ‘language-as-incarnation’ as a replacement for the eighteenth-century notion of ‘language-as-dress,’ both the ‘Essays upon Epitaphs’ and Wordsworth’s poetry generally prompt a reevaluation of what linguistic ‘incarnation’ might be” (xvi). Ferguson’s application of this reevaluation to the Wordsworthian corpus demonstrates how close attention to the language of Romantic texts can reveal Romanticism as a fundamentally self-critical enterprise, committed to working self-consciously within the limited and limiting medium of language. Her volume Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit manages, without sacrificing text to historical context, to outline a model of Wordsworthian dialectical self-critique just as convincing as McGann’s in The Romantic Ideology.
Ferguson, however, resolves to “shy away from an affectivist argument about reading” (xiv), and she consequently comes to understand Wordsworth’s definition of and relationship to language almost exclusively in terms of the tropological and the rhetorical. Wordsworthian self-critique unfolds for her not as a process in which tropes and rhetoric are critiqued or manipulated from the outside by something that exceeds them, but as a process in which tropes and rhetoric critique themselves. “We are Seven,” for example, becomes for Ferguson an exercise in intensifying figurative language until it transcends itself and becomes its own opposite; more precisely, she deploys the trope of hyperbole in a critical rhetoric that seeks to lift the trope of personification out of itself:

The insistence of the cottage girl in ‘We are Seven’ that she and her dead siblings are not separated from one another by death involves a kind of personification, but it is a personification pushed to such an extreme that it becomes a virtual anti-type to personification. The girl personifies persons, and the radically disquieting element in her remarks is the growing consciousness in the poem that persons should need to be personified, should need to be reclaimed from death by the imagination. (26-7)

A similar mobilization of tropes to make tropes trope themselves out of tropology is operative in Ferguson’s treatment of the Lucy poems:

The similes and metaphors are figural substitutions for Lucy which stand in for Lucy completely enough to suggest that there may be a fundamental category mistake in seeing her as a human being—she is perhaps, a flower (or a simile, or a metaphor). Thus, figurative language implicates itself in the tone of heightened reserve which characterizes all of the Lucy poems[..] (175)
The figures that describe Lucy do so by means of the trope of parabola, but the excessive parabolic power is said to “expand to absorb the whole” of her, and consequently “the act of describing seems to have lost touch with its goal—description of Lucy” (175). The absorption of the described into the description occurs for Ferguson as a result of her own hyperbolic characterization of the efficacy of the parabola. Description becomes a de-scription and a failed inscription: Ferguson’s Wordsworth apparently writes Lucy into the poems by means of a figuration that writes her out of them, and the imagery of parabola, which succeeds so fully that it fails, becomes the imaginative portraiture of prosopographia. In such a scenario, rhetoric critiques the efficacy of rhetoric; figures critique figuration; tropes critique tropology—but the product of such critique is always more tropes, figures, and rhetoric: a figurative regime whose critical encounters with itself succeed only in manufacturing more of itself.

Conversely, my own affectivist, materialist commitment to exploring the aesthetic dimension of Wordsworth’s self-critical impulse compels me towards, and perhaps beyond, the “affectivist arguments” from which Ferguson shies away and which McGann dismisses as an “aesthetic level of understanding” that must be corrected by historicization and critical thought. Following the lead of Paul de Man’s turn to textual materiality in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, I feel obliged to add another link to the chain of linguistic incarnation from the third “Essay upon Epitaphs”: if, for Wordsworth, and for Ferguson, thought is either incarnated or dressed in language which may subvert it, then language is either incarnated or dressed in material marks which may perform their own acts of textual subversion against both thought and language. Like the thought and the language they embody or clothe, these material marks may “uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet,” or they may “work to derange, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve.” For the de Man of Aesthetic Ideology, the thing that materiality...
deranges and subverts is the rhetorical and tropological system that encompasses both ideology and the critical thought that is so often prescribed as a curative for ideology. While McGann calls for a critical attack on the ideology of Romanticism, de Man comes to doubt the capacity of critical thought to accomplish much more than an unintentional recapitulation of the ideologies it claims to expose and dispel. De Man links “transcendental [critical] and ideological . . . principles” as “part of the same system” of tropes and rhetoric (89), and he argues that a corollary of this linkage is critical thought’s inability to legitimately critique ideology:

Ideological and critical thought are interdependent and any attempt to separate them collapses ideology into mere error and critical thought into idealism. The possibility of maintaining the causal link between them is the controlling principle of rigorous philosophical discourse: philosophies that succumb to ideology lose their epistemological sense, whereas philosophies that try to by-pass or repress ideology lose all critical thrust and risk being repossessed by what they foreclose. (72)

The implications for many critical conceptions of Romantic self-critique, including Ferguson’s post-structuralist model, and, as I shall argue, for McGann’s historical one, are clear: the dialectics they locate within Romantic poetry remain situated within the figurative regime of tropes and rhetoric, becoming a critical fiction of poetic self-critique more likely to reify ideology than to resist it.

Although de Man often associates the aesthetic with the figurative regime to which he relegates ideology and critical thought, I argue that there is an aesthetic dimension to textual materiality, or, more precisely, to the experience of it, that resists reduction to the tropological or the ideological in ways de Man never considered as explicitly or as fully as he might have. This
dimension offers the possibility of recovering the aesthetic from the event horizon of competing forms of tropological thought whose opposition is also a reciprocal corroboration, but only if the term “aesthetics” is broadened to accommodate the kinds of affective knowledge and experience—the aesthetic events—that both Ferguson and McGann avoid discussing. It is important to remember that when de Man announces “the undoing of the aesthetic as a valid category” (*Aesthetic Ideology* 89), he refers specifically, in the words of Lindsay Waters, to the effort to “disarticulate the project of articulation which [is] the aesthetic” (134), and not, I contend, to an effort to undo or deny the affective experience that forms the basis of aesthetic inquiry. Like Waters, who argues in “On Paul de Man’s Effort to Re-Anchor a True Aesthetics in Our Feelings” that de Man was engaged in “an effort to deconstruct what he called ‘ideology of the aesthetic’ in the name of a ‘true aesthetics’” (134), I see de Man’s radical break with traditional aesthetic thought less as a final refutation of the aesthetic than as a resituation of the aesthetic within the sphere of affect (134). It is through an attention to “the play of the letter” that this redefinition must emerge, and if, as I shall argue, the play of the letter may open an aperture through which sublime feeling may trespass in the rhetorical domain of trope and figure, then the “true” aesthetic that de Man sought within the act of reading is a thing of “pure affect rather than cognition” (*Aesthetic Ideology* 86), whose presence within the cognitive sphere performs something similar to, but ultimately more severe than, the derangement, subversion, and vitiation whose influence the third of the “Essays Upon Epitaphs” warns. The affective products of experiencing materiality’s interventions into—and contraventions of—syntax and semantics may function as a counter-content consisting of feeling rather than ideas and events (passages, discontinuities) rather than meaning: the elusive critique of tropology and rhetoric that
originates from without rather than from within, in the transcendentally immanent critical moment that de Man calls “a shift from trope to performance” (89).

In the case of Wordsworth, this counter-content tends to make itself known during moments of what I shall tentatively denominate “apocalyptic prosody.” In the parlance of twentieth-century Wordsworth criticism, and especially in Geoffrey Hartman, “apocalypse” tends to refer to an impending, revelatory, traumatic severance from Nature against which the poet must defend through the rhetoric of holism. In Hartman, the primary defense against apocalypse is akedah, the “tying or binding” that represents “the marriage of imagination with nature” (225). I use “apocalyptic prosody” to refer to those symptomatic moments in which one of the poem’s material features severs its ties and bonds to the syntactic and / or semantic constructions it co-constitutes, thereby untying the rhetorical and tropological knots and disrupting the structural akedot of those constructions’ ideological functions with an aesthetic one.

McGann’s reading of “A slumber did my spirit seal” is a characteristic illustration of the ways that a commitment to sociohistorical contextualization, and the consequent subordination of the material and the aesthetic to the rhetorical, the tropological, and the semantic, can obscure moments of apocalyptic prosody and aesthetic counter-content from critical view. McGann reproduces the poem in its entirety, accompanied by an attention to textual detail that would not be out of place in a New Critical treatment: “the suggestive force of the lines depends in large part upon the witty play with words like ‘earthly’ and ‘earth’s’” (Romantic Ideology 68). However, even a cursory glance at McGann’s method for exploring this “witty play” reveals a “tying or binding” of form to content that assumes an enforced cooperation between the two features and recapitulates at the level of form the conjunctive operation of Hartman’s akedot. In
McGann’s hands, the poem becomes a dialectic in which the concept of “earth” represents opposing ideas or forces, each corresponding to a stanza whose separation from the other represents a structural restatement of the poem’s dialectical problematic:

In stanza one ‘earthly’ is associated with ‘human fears,’ with culture, consciousness, and the ‘earth’ upon which men do their getting and spending. In stanza two, ‘earth’s’ refers to a very different place, one which is marked not by human fears but by the most ancient and dependable regularities, which are here associated with ‘rocks, and stones, and trees.’ (68)

McGann deserves credit here for noting the stanza break’s indication of a semantic shift in which the signifier “earth” comes to represent a new set of signifieds, but his reading betrays an interpretive bias that limits the role of textual materiality to realizing a semantic and rhetorical project.

Closer attention to textual materiality, specifically to the third and fourth lines, which constitute the poem’s lone instance of enjambed lineation, reveals a fundamental break between language and thought—and also between word and language—that complicates or even frustrates form’s effort to follow function, and suggests that running opposite and parallel to the form that follows function is a function that follows form. Rather than locating in the poem’s material expression a structural confirmation of its ideological thought-content, I locate in this materiality the apocalyptic prosody that initiates a disruptive, affective critique of content. This critique must itself be recognized as a counter-content no less representative of the poem’s stance or voice than what is conventionally characterized as its subject matter.

The third and fourth lines capture de Man’s attention in “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in which he describes them as “curiously ambiguous, with the full weight of the ambiguity
concentrated in the word ‘thing,’” and in which he argues that “the curious shock of the poem, the very Wordsworthian ‘shock of mild surprise’” is a consequence of Lucy’s having become “a thing in the full sense of the word” (205). Written long before de Man’s explicit turn to textual materiality in *Aesthetic Ideology*, this reading of the poem limits itself—with one notable exception—to a conventional critique of the poem’s rhetorical insistence on an “ideal, self-created temporality” in which the speaker may inhabit the fiction of “a unified self that fully recognizes a past condition as one of error and stands in a present that, however painful, sees things as they actually are” (206). The exception appears when de Man distinguishes between the “actual now” and the “ideal now”: “the ‘now’ of the poem is not an actual now, but the ideal ‘now,’ the duration of an acquired wisdom,” and the “actual now, which is that of the moment of death, lies hidden in the blank space between the two stanzas” (206). De Man’s attribution of hermeneutic significance to the material separation between stanzas looks forward to his turn to materiality, and it provides the model for my own attribution of hermeneutic (in)significance to the space between poetic lines.

Extending this consideration of the space that divides textual elements to the separation between the third and fourth lines makes possible the apprehension of an apocalyptic prosody that de Man misses, a severance of material from language and thought that undermines the rhetorical function of the lines with a counter-rhetorical function. The prosodic apocalypse occurs in and between these lines as a consequence of a precariously executed Wordsworthian enjambment that ultimately proves self-defeating. Of the poem’s eight lines, all but one is end-stopped:

A slumber did my spirit seal;

I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

The symptomatic exception to this pattern produces a crucial aporia that threatens to disrupt the careful dialectical structure that McGann and, to some extent, de Man, attribute to the poem’s form, which is, in both of their readings, bound to its argumentative content. The lineation of “She seemed a thing that could not feel / The touch of earthly years” exploits the diachronic linearity—what the de Man of “The Rhetoric of Temporality” might recognize as the “temporal structure” (205), and what I prefer to classify as the material historicity—of English syntax, initially presenting a line in which “feel” functions as an intransitive verb (3), followed by a line that demands the revision of “feel” into a transitive verb that takes the entirety of that next line (4) as its object.4 The enjambment, in order to revise the initial, intransitive sense of “feel” into the subsequent transitive sense, must first concretize that initial intransitivity. The embodiment of the initial vision in material marks no less permanent than the revision establishes a scenario in which the initial line’s material autonomy—its visual and prosodic severance from the line that follows it—establishes an affective counter-syntax which usurps and disrupts the semantic function of linear, narrative, conventional syntax to perform the unknowability of death a stanza too early (a species, perhaps, of death-in-life), especially as it relates to affect, to the capacity to “feel,” which stands as the verb that both links and separates the two lines and their intimations.
about the ultimate fate of the speaker’s loved one. Line 3 posits an anaesthetic state before being revised by line 4 into a state in which feeling is possible, but only as an alien form of experience in which access to the passage of time is blocked, but also in which the possibility of other affective modalities is left also and crucially open. The poem offers no indication whether vision or revision represents the truth of what death and the dead entail in and for the poem, but by offering the irresolvability lineated in a manner that emphasizes the apocalyptic play of the line, or its counter-syntactic resistance to contribute to the rhetorical function of the whole it inhabits even as it is syntactically compelled to provide that contribution, it facilitates death’s intrusion into a living past, instantiating it so forcefully that it acquires the capacity to retroactively foreshadow itself. Perhaps, as de Man suggests is true for the “actual now” of death and its visual representation in the white space between stanzas, the truth of what and where death is resides for this poem not within the signs and the semantic content contained within the lines’ interactions with one another, but within the enigmatically silent, uninterpretable white space that emphasizes the distance between the lines—their structural and rhetorical disentanglement from one another—even as it binds them in a common medium.

If so, however, the truth of death and the “mild shock of surprise” it elicits is not bound to the “ambiguity” inherent in Lucy’s having become “a thing in the full sense of the word,” but to the aporia inherent in her having prematurely become a non-thing in the full non-sense of the word. McGann contends that “in moments of crisis the Romantic will turn to Nature or to the creative Imagination as his places of last resort” (Romantic Ideology 67). He associates the turn towards Nature and / or Imagination with the desire for conceptual fixity and taxonomic immutability: “what I want to note is the emergence of the concepts of Romantic Nature and Imagination as touchstones of stability and order” (67). I propose that the aporetic lineation in
“A slumber did my spirit seal” encourages a re-evaluation of that assumption’s applicability to accounts of Romantic poetry qua poetry, as spaces in which materiality and ideation may frustrate one another’s projects. As a consequence of the chronologically and categorically indeterminate characterization of death occasioned by the rhetorical failure (and counter-rhetorical success) of the enjambment, Nature, and the “thing” that has returned to it and consequently become a non-thing, becomes counter-rhetorically emblematic not of McGann’s “stability and order,” but of a grammatical, metaphysical, and aesthetic instability, disorder, and unknowability even more pronounced than the “ambiguity” de Man attributes to the “thing” that was once knowable as Lucy. Nature’s role in this counter-rhetorical reading is to illustrate Imagination’s failure and the subsequent breakdown of Nature itself as a knowable or imaginable category. Consequently, troping death as a return to Nature becomes indistinguishable from troping it as a turn to the undecidable decision between annihilation and the unknowable. The tropological, which de Man would classify as a constituent of the rhetorical and the ideological, fails to resolve the crisis of unknowability against which the trope was initially mobilized.

McGann’s limited attention to textual materiality permits him to conclude that “the poem offers a pathetic message for an experience of the loss of someone beloved, a comfort which yet troubles our own inevitable ‘human fears’ (Romantic Ideology 68), but the reading I have offered partakes of the sublime rather than the pathetic. Where McGann locates the rather subdued comfort that troubles, and where de Man locates the characteristically Wordsworthian “shock of mild surprise,” I locate the Burkean astonishment and terror that attends confrontations with that which resides beyond the capacity of the Imagination to apprehend or domesticate. McGann’s interpretation of the poem’s stanzaic schema facilitates his reading of the second stanza as a comforting invocation of “ancient and dependable regularities,” whereas the aporia surrounding
the transitivity of the verb “feel” initiated by the poem’s lineation opens the second stanza to another interpretation, one which fuses a Burkean sublime of obscurity with another sublime that is all but textbook Gothic in its implications. The “she” who “neither hears nor sees” is unknowable except as the unmakeable decision between the inhuman horror of pure thought divorced from feeling and a blindness and deafness that might still somehow register the terror of being “Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course, / With rocks, and stones, and trees” (7-8). The horror is compounded by the temporal instability of death’s placement in the poem and in the narrative of Lucy’s life. The prospect of suffering these unsettling fates after death is disturbing enough; to be confronted with the possibility of suffering them before death, of dying without dying, is worse still.

It is important to acknowledge in this scenario the ways in which textual materiality opens the reader to the affective experience of the sublime. If, as Ferguson has argued, language in Wordsworth can function as a “counter-spirit,” then materiality can function as a counter-body capable of making the poem say something other than, or, more properly, counter to, what it says. To witness this materialization of the “play of the letter” is harrowing, unnerving, uncanny, a sublime affront to the intellect that destabilizes a comfortably stable semantic construct, defamiliarizes a reassuring rhetorical familiarity, and challenges the Romantic illusion that thought and language may grant the poet transformative power over the material world. The act of reading becomes the act of both witnessing and facilitating the (re)possession of the poem not by a spirit or a counter-spirit, but by its own body. McGann reads the second stanza as an argument that “the ancient, dumb geosphere is instinct with (God’s) spiritual life and order. It is an obscure but certain realm of secret, meaningful signs, and to decipher them is to be possessed of the ground of all contingent truths. It is the visionary’s task and privilege to decipher these
signs” (Romantic Ideology 69). I argue that the poem’s moment of aporetic enjambment demonstrates the indecipherability of signs both natural and artificial, and that the naive invocation of “a specific network of doctrinal material” that McGann locates in Romanticism’s use of Nature and the Imagination might find its critique already embodied in the poetry.

This anomalous line break functions, in other words, as a kind of orthographic (and hence, in this context, counter-syntactic) caesura, or more properly a caesarean, not in the conventional prosodic sense but in the etymological sense: it is a wound that gives birth. If the conditions are right, the thing that births itself through the aperture consists not of meaning but of action and affect. It is neither the interpretable representation of a concept nor the recapitulation of a “form of thought” in a complementary “structure of feeling,” but the manifestation of a counter-rhetorical sublime feeling divorced from rhetoric, tropology, and ideology. As the poem demonstrates its inability or refusal to marry its material form to its semantic content, to its rhetorical agenda, or to the syntax upon which that content and that rhetoric depend for their successful expression, it not only provides a model for “the shift from trope to performance” to which de Man refers in Aesthetic Ideology, but also performs that shift.

Ferguson argues that the Lucy poems “show the process by which both [the poet] and his audience are forced to recognize the limits of their comprehension” before concluding that “the poet is excluded along with his audience, and the poet himself becomes the first to acknowledge just how far he is from any sublimity, egotistical or otherwise” (xiv). But close proximity to the limits of sensible or imaginative comprehension can be the very condition that encourages the sublime to materialize in a moment of humiliating aesthetic comprehension, as it does, for example, in one of the oldest and most important examples of sublime experience, the Burkean sublime of obscurity. As Burke argues, “to make any thing very terrible, obscurity seems in
general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes” (102). This is why, for Burke, language, with all its expressive limitations, is a more efficient means than visual representation of inducing Sublime affect in the subject:

If I make a drawing of a palace, or a temple, or a landscape, I present a very clear idea of those objects; but then (allowing for the effect of imitation which is something) my picture can at most affect only as the palace, temple, or landscape would have affected in reality. On the other hand, the most lively and spirited verbal description I can give, raises a very obscure and imperfect idea of such objects; but then it is in my power to raise a stronger emotion by the description than I could do by the best painting. (103-4)

The opening of the sublime wound in the poetic material of “A slumber did my spirit seal” retains its voice and its status as a wound by resisting incorporation into the teleological structure of the poem’s ideological argument, denying that argument its fulfillment by performing in the reader the sublime terror the speaker suffers when Imagination fails (as it must) to apprehend and domesticate a truth that categorically exceeds it and remains obscure to it. Form not only fails to follow function but actively subverts it, and in doing so exposes failure to function as a function of a different order. The tear in the text becomes a gap through which the sublime may enter a false history made of language and the reader may—subjectively and temporarily—leave it, transfixed for a moment in the material event of an aesthetic confrontation with an anomalous intervention of disruptive materiality into the domesticated, tropological, and rhetorical space of the intellect. If in a sense this subjective egress out of history may be read as a regression to the womb, it is not the womb of language that bore the nascent subject, but the
crude womb of word-as-object where the sublime resides. It does not offer a comforting
resituation within the domesticated and domesticating space of a *terra* made both *firma* and
*māterna* by the feminizing rhetoric of *akedah*. Instead, it offers the bracing, astringent plunge
into, or, impossibly, up to, the cold space of post-traumatic, post-linguistic nescience. In this
sense it is less a regression than a transgression: less a return to being safely situated on solid
earth than a falling into it that is also somehow a rising away from it. In the vocabulary of de
Man’s *Aesthetic Ideology*, this sublime event would reveal “the passage from trope, which is a
cognitive model, to the performative” as an instance of “the performative in itself,” which “exists
independently of tropes and exists independently of a critical examination of tropes” (132).

McGann’s attribution of a comforting pathos to the poem depends upon an absorption of
material expression into that which is expressed, an absorption that permits him to conclude that
“what is most important for us to see . . . is that the poem would lose all its force and character
did it not operate at an ideological level” (*Romantic Ideology* 68). This appropriation of body by
mind informs most of his explications of Romantic poetry, and it imposes arbitrary limits upon
the poetry in ways that ignore its multidimensionality and intermodality while encouraging the
myopic fixation upon ideology about which I have expressed my concerns. With his attention
dedicated almost wholly to exposing the aesthetic illusions that conceal a poem’s ideological
content, McGann is distracted from two complementary truths—that the act of reading requires a
material, aesthetic interface between the body of the reader and the body of the poem, and that
the materiality of this interface may provide the means by which the poem initiates an aesthetic
critique of its own ideology. This material interface complicates the immaterial version of
dialectical Romantic self-critique we find in McGann and those who have continued the further
articulation of his paradigm, adding a material and affective dimension to a process implied to

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occur purely in the realm of thought, and illustrating that the “force and character” of Romantic poetry do not reside solely in its ideological operations. Even if the residue of Romantic poetry that remains after it has been reduced by critics to things of thought were demonstrably guilty of the transgressions attributed to it, that residue is only one component of a larger systemic totality that is always already marked by its antisystemic internal antagonisms and by its reluctance to submit to totalization.

As material aesthetic artifacts capable of exploiting the tension between thought and the material marks in which thought is expressed, Romantic poems deserve a more measured and nuanced consideration than the reduction to ideas and ideology to which McGann’s paradigm has given rise when irresponsibly applied. The recent history of critical responses to Wordsworth’s contributions to *Lyrical Ballads*, and especially to “Tintern Abbey,” illustrates the further articulation of McGann’s reductive paradigm within the study of Romanticism. At moments, the readings of Wordsworth we find in historicist critics like Marjorie Levinson, Alan Liu, and other of McGann’s disciples caricature Wordsworth as an escapist solipsist whose misplaced faith in the Imagination facilitates his movement into political malaise and static self-absorption. Laura Quinney has helpfully summarized this tendency:

> Historicist scholars adopt this characterization of Wordsworth in faulting him for what they term his retreat from politics into a happy celebration of self. Critics such as Marjorie Levinson, Jerome McGann and Alan Liu have argued that Wordsworth evolved his faith in the redemptive power of imagination as a substitute for the energies he had once invested in political radicalism but had since abandoned out of disillusionment and growing timidity. (150)
This historicist narrative predicates an attack upon the character of the poems they consider and the poet who wrote them, encouraging dismissals of both poetry and poet as politically irresponsible and willfully ignorant of history:

Levinson and McGann espouse the same notion that Wordsworth successfully transmumed his political disillusionment. But rather than exalting “the great Romantic poems” on these grounds, Levinson, McGann and Liu take them to task for their “elision of history” (McGann) and “transcendence of reference” (Liu) . . . Liu argues more radically (though there are hints of this argument in Levinson as well) that not merely the poem’s philosophy of spiritual development, but its very concentration on the experience of the self renders it reprehensibly ahistorical.

(150)

Like Quinney, I find myself made somewhat uneasy by the New Historicist tactic of disparaging a body of work based on New Historicism’s own limited account of what that work is and does, an account that often fails to correspond to the rich complexity and multimodal dynamics of the texts it critiques. 8 Quinney’s response to the New Historicist attack is to challenge the now-conventional assumptions about the self-aggrandizing properties of “Tintern Abbey” that New Historicist critics use to grant themselves permission to pursue their sometimes reductive and misrepresentative readings of it:

as I understand it, the poem sustains the feeling of disheartenment and, in particular, it portrays the collapse of precisely that narcissistic satisfaction Liu so mockingly describes. The poem offers no ‘solutions’ and no ‘capable consolations’; the speaker remains mired in the psychological quandary wherein he began, and his experiments with the ‘mystical’ rhetoric of ‘transcendence’
belong to the desperate wish-fulfillments by which he fails to reverse his
discouragement. (151)

While Quinney argues convincingly that the poem already contains a critique of its own
rhetoric of triumphant solipsism, her insistence that the poem *portrays* a collapse, as opposed to
*performing* one, unintentionally situates the poem within the figurative regime and limits the
extent to which she can engage the question of how the poem “sustains the feeling of
disheartenment.” I contend that a deManian attention to the material qualities of the poetry, to
“the play of the letter,” the play of orthography, and the play of the line, reveals a core of
traumatic affect operative in the poem, and that this core in turn reveals the poem to be so
profoundly occupied with questions of historicity that the definitional categories employed by
New Historicism to denigrate it—inner and outer, Self and Other, “suppression of the social” and
expression of the social—begin to appear inadequate. Informing and shaping “Tintern Abbey”
and other of Wordsworth’s important early lyrics are the Wordsworthian subject’s confrontations
with the sublime, confrontations that have disrupted and redefined the growth of his mind and
have subjected him to the developmental syntax of trauma, in which affect registers the awe and
horror of sublime feeling while the higher faculties are suspended, and in which the post-
traumatic intellect’s efforts to access the trauma take the form of compulsive revisitation,
reflection, and revision. The consequent furcation of Wordsworthian subjectivity along both
synchronic and diachronic axes reveals the divisibility of the individual and the exploitative
intrapersonal politics of selfhood, in which the traumas of earlier versions of the self are
critiqued and silenced through subjection to the auditorial agenda of the later self. Underwriting
this approach is my assumption that the poem’s rhetoric of transcendence defends not against the
poet’s inability to transcend, but against the temporary and threatening subjective transcendence
the poet actually suffers during the painful moment of sublime aesthesis and the despondency the poet must endure upon his resituation within body, history, and intellect.

Liu, in a surprising moment of generosity, wonders if there might be “a final saving fiction” in Wordsworth: “his faith that transcendental imagination can at the last recollect history” (456). If, however, the materiality of the Wordsworthian corpus facilitates its performance of history as a sublime event, then no such fictions of historical recollection are necessary (though it is doubtful whether such a performance saves anyone or anything). McGann argues that Romanticism is a response to a world best characterized by the “selfishness,” “calculation,” and the incapacity for critical reflection lamented by Shelley in the “Defense of Poetry”; that “the grand illusion of Romantic ideology is that one may escape such a world through imagination and poetry”; and that “the great truth of Romantic work is that there is no escape, that there is only revelation (in a wholly secular sense)” (Romantic Ideology 131). I would add to this formula the possibility that there exists a great affective counter-truth of Romantic work: that one of the ways in which Romantic poetry offers its wholly secular revelation is through its capacity to materially exceed its own tropes and rhetoric and to perform a traumatic aesthetic presentation of the horrors of history and the human condition so intense that the distinction between escape and revelation no longer applies. The definitive counter-truth of Romanticism’s Wordsworthian aspect, which is also its great tragedy, is not that it failed to find transcendence, but that it found transcendence to be temporary, and to be accessible only through the fragmenting historicization of the self that is the price of the sublime. This is a pain made immune to the redemptive revisionism of secular theodicy by its initiation of a dissonant rearrangement of the internal society of self, in which intellect critiques affect and affect stages a material counter-critique in an effort to reclaim its voice.
II.

My intent in the rest of this chapter is to apply these considerations of sublime trauma and textual materiality to several of Wordsworth’s early lyrics and the critical tradition that surrounds them before reopening, and offering my own contribution to, the deliberation about “Tintern Abbey” by examining its most crucial moments of material resistance to its own semantic content and rhetorical agenda. I begin with “We Are Seven,” which stands as the Lyrical Ballads’ most deceptively complex dramatization of the way textual materiality reveals an intrapersonal Wordsworthian antagonism between the voice of aesthetic truth and the voice of semantic truth.\(^9\)

I want to explore the possibility that normative accounts of this poem err when they accept the assumption that the voice of the child represents the voice of affect in the poem. Such a conclusion is unavoidable when interpreting the poem through the lens of a conventionally ideational hermeneutic, but attending to features that the critical intellect has been trained to ignore opens up an anti-hermeneutic investigative avenue that demands a reconsideration of some long-standing suppositions. Refocusing critical attention on the material qualities of the poem makes it possible to read both speaker and child as mouthpieces for intellectual revisions of the trauma of bereavement, and to complicate the binary arrangement of the dialectic (speaker and child) by introducing a third figure into the critical account of the poem’s conversational dynamics. I argue that the “child” to which critics often refer is actually a conflation of two distinct figures—the Simple Child and the Cottage Girl—and that this conflation is predicated upon an uncritical acceptance of the poem’s own ideational rhetoric.

This assignment of discrete characterization to figures usually assumed to be identical must be predicated upon the reader’s willingness to resist the intellect’s impulse to suppress
affective reactions to the material properties of the poem. Recording the reader’s affective
reactions to moments of aporia triggered by textual materiality’s disruptive influence upon the
interpretive act will reveal an alternative set of affective content that runs counter to the poem’s
narrative project. Viewed through the strange lens of affect, both speaker and child are revealed
as mobilizing the intellect to revise the trauma of death’s unknowability into the comparatively
non-threatening rhetoric of quantification. The efficacy of this rhetoric, I argue, is compromised
by the poem’s material properties, which preserve the poem’s voice of traumatic witness and
prevent its total suppression even as the poem strives to redefine a metaphysical problem as an
arithmetical one.

Reading this lyric materially in the deManian sense means beginning not with its first
words, but with the elongated dash that precedes them. This dash appears to function as an
orthographical representation of blankness resulting from the removal or elision of the poem’s
implied initial iambics. There is a fascinating inconsistency in Wordsworth’s treatment of such
elision in his early lyrics. He sometimes leaves the white space untouched, as in “Animal
Tranquillity and Decay,” and sometimes fills it with a dash elongated into an unbroken
horizontal line that cuts widely across the page and into the text, as in the case of “Nutting,” and
later versions of “We are Seven.” This elongated dash, positioned in “We are Seven” to cut
halfway into the implied metrical fabric of the first line, layers the suggestion of a violated
tetrameter over a dimeter line. This layering presents a suggestive interpretive conundrum, an
absence whose material expression paradoxically insists upon being recognized as a presence it
can never fully represent, as a concrete wound in metrical matter that functions itself as a kind of
affective anti-matter. It is this aporetic irreducibility to meaning, this signifier’s resistance to
attachment to any signified, combined with the stubborn fact of its material presence, that lends
the wound its hermeneutic (in)significance. The intellect’s insistence on reading the poem both inclusively and linearly demands that the reader achieve an unachievable understanding of the paradox of presence and absence expressed in this orthographical anomaly before progressing to the comparatively easy interpretability of the rest of the poem—in other words, to the words.

Eager to elide this obstacle to its apprehension of meaning, the intellect may respond by eliding the affective faculty altogether. The mind will simply ignore the anomalousness of the anomaly, dismissing it as trivial and reading the poem as if it actually began with its first words, excluding the strange orthography from its rightful status as part of the poem proper. But by virtue of its capacity to register the violation of metrical regularity, affect insists upon the acknowledgement of a hole in the music of the poem that the intellect is inclined to exclude from its analysis. The reader feels the absence of the two missing initial iambics more acutely than he or she can think it, and the palpability of the absence, combined with the brazen self-assertion of the anomalous orthography, impinges upon the intellect’s efforts to make sense of the poem teleologically, as a purposive, holistic whole. The mind needs to silence the voice of the body to collapse the poem’s unknowability into a knowable, determined state, but the body’s retention of its voice—an echo of the poem’s—compromises the intellect’s agenda of suppression and revision. The anomalous orthography is a literal cut in lyric tissue, simultaneously immanent within the poem as part of its physical body, and transcendent of it as a maternal Other from which the remainder of the poem proceeds. It does not represent a wound, but presents—or presences—one, performing traumatic sublimity rather than troping it.

Thus the poem begins with an aporetic crisis that precludes the intellect’s movement past it to the rest of the poem, confronting the reader with a curiously palpable blankness that may be affectively registered but must remain absent to the intellect if the effort to pursue a conventional
hermeneutic strategy is ever to reach the interpretable parts of the poem. If trauma is in part definable as a structure in which a frustrated intellect reflects upon and revises an event knowable only to affect, then “We are Seven” becomes readable not only as an effort to present an unrepresentable trauma whose voice the intellect seeks to silence in the name of progress (in this case, progression through the material historicity of the verse), but to itself become the material vessel for a traumatic affect that exposes the inadequacy of the intellect’s efforts by inflicting upon or transferring to the reader the initial trauma to which the silenced voice bears witness. The dialogue between speaker and child becomes readable as a diversion, an auditorial strategy meant to silence the affective voice of the wound from which the poem proceeds by revising that voice into semantic content apprehensible by the reader’s intellect, which has been precariously situated by the poem’s untenable conceit as an external observer to an interpersonal discourse. Affect abrogates the revisionary project of the figurative regime, revealing another of the poem’s suppressed truths: that it is an intrapersonal dialogue between Wordsworthian selves which both contributes to and challenges the poem’s revision of unknowable trauma into interpretable, quantifiable fixity.

Commentators on Romanticism have been gravitating towards traumatic readings of “We are Seven” for some time. The notion of the wound operates first as a latent, and then as an explicit, concern in Hartman’s early reading of the characters in “We are Seven” and Wordsworth’s other contributions to *Lyrical Ballads*: “they cleave to one thing or idea in order to be saved from a still deeper sense of separation. It does not matter whether a child is deprived of its tattered cloak or a woman of child and lover—the wound that opens is always the same, and even when the loss is ordinary, the passion is extraordinary, and points to so deep and personal a sorrow that we call it natural only to dignify human nature” (143). Though these readings
predate by decades the formulation of trauma studies as a discipline, they anticipate trauma theory’s exploration of the ways that even emotional traumas may disrupt and fragment the systemic functionality of selfhood by emphasizing the disconnection between the constituent elements of the historical subject. Hartman’s use of the verb “cleave” in this context may unconsciously underscore an interest in the contradictory structure of connectivity, specifically the tendency for models of holism, including Hartman’s own model of Wordsworth’s rhetoric of binding and tying, to be predicated upon a severance against which they may deploy the rhetoric of reconstitution, but which that rhetoric can never fully redress. When applied to the human personality, this poststructuralist skepticism about the efficacy of holistic systematicity begins to even more closely resemble trauma theory’s central tenets. By the time Hartman invokes the imagery of the open wound and the extraordinary sorrow that flows from it, it becomes a simple matter to extrapolate from his list of traumatic deprivation in *Lyrical Ballads* a self deprived of itself. The “still deeper sense of separation” to which Hartman attributes the characters’ impulses for connection is a spiritual one, but it remains applicable to the secular recapitulation of spirit as mind or personality.

Ferguson has noted the importance of numerical quantity to the poem’s narrative project, which is eventually revealed to be the resolution of the tension between acute affective trauma and the intellect’s efforts to appropriate it. The argument that emerges from the poem’s semantic content functions as a theodicy in which passion is redeemed by thought within the framework of an holistic reconstitution of fragmented constituents of the self:

In the emphasis on numbers in “We are Seven,” we find a drive toward sequence which is an embryonic form of narrative. And it is this tendency toward narrative which makes the man of the poem so fundamentally at odds with the perception
of the child—whose attachment to her dead siblings reveals the way in which the passions operate to erase time so that the memory overrides the present, and the past is always now. (67)

It is unclear, however, whether the past can be now without becoming contaminated by the revisionary imperative of the reflective subject. The recollection by which spontaneous overflows of emotion may manifest in the tranquil now of Wordsworthian poetic practice is always revision, domestication, tranquilization. In order for the poet’s past to become the poet’s now without relinquishing its quality and character to the redemptive narrative of theodicy inherent in the rhetorical structure of Wordsworthian lyricism, it must find an outlet not subject to the rhetoricity of the trope and the figure: it must speak through materiality. Ferguson’s awareness of affect’s potential to disturb the intellect’s linear understanding of personal history leads her to observe that “passion . . . and the tranquil recollections which constitute a narrative are, in some sense, fundamentally incompatible,” though she concedes that “it is precisely this task of reconciling the passions, which are static in sealing themselves off from time, with the sequential movement of the fancy that becomes Wordsworth’s task” (68). Ferguson ultimately turns to Wordsworth’s theories of Imagination—and to all of the tropes, figures, and rhetoric such a turn implies—in her efforts to trace his reconciliation of passion with fancy, but I return to the materiality of the text and the affective responses it may induce, and especially to the anomalous, apocalyptic orthography that initiates the text, to observe it in the act of resisting a resolution that unfolds as the intellect’s revision of a sublime unknowable to it into a fiction of the knowable.

While the intellect can and must progress beyond the wound in meter opened up by the elision of the poem’s first two iambs, affect cannot. It follows the pattern Ferguson attributes to
“the passions,” intruding into the present to become an historical presence perpetually locked in confrontation with the fiction of historicity upon which the linearity of progressive narrative insists. Affect registers the absence nonlinearly and carries it into the parts of the poem that follow it, introducing an intermodal dissonance that frustrates the function of the narrative system into which it intrudes. The poem consequently feels haunted by a numinous presence, less a conceptual representation of death’s unknowability than an intervention of that unknowability into a discursive space that under normal circumstances remains insulated from raw, unprocessed bits of affective ne/science. Part of the poem is committed to embodying the voice of this presence; part of it is committed to mobilizing the intellect to exorcise this presence so that the narrative and the rhetoric may proceed unhindered.

The first stanza dramatizes the intellect’s suppressive, revisionary approach to affective experience by proposing a theoretical model through which the rest of the poem is to be understood. It poses a rhetorical question about a hypothetical “SIMPLE Child,” a categorical abstraction that is supposed to find its concrete embodiment in the example of the “little cottage Girl” first introduced in the second stanza:

------ A SIMPLE Child,
That lightly draws its breath,
And feels its life in every limb,
What should it know of death?

I met a little cottage Girl:
She was eight years old, she said;
Her hair was thick with many a curl
That clustered round her head. (1-8)

That the Simple Child in the first stanza is neither identical to the Cottage Girl nor an effective
categorical generalization of a type that the Cottage Girl exemplifies appears to have escaped the
attention of most critics. The tendency to conflate the two figures indicates a failure to
apprehend either the dynamic of containment and excess operative between them or the
fundamental differences between the ways they operate as knowledge-producing subjects within
the poem’s object world. The figure of the Simple Child is fundamentally undefined. It is
introduced with an indefinite article and a gender-neutral pronoun as a kind of preamble or
abstract describing the rest of the poem, rendering it immune to identification with the Cottage
Girl or any other specific personage. Structurally, it is the species; the Cottage Girl is one
possible specimen. It is surprising, then, to observe just how strikingly species and specimen fail
to correspond. The Simple Child is enigmatically silent, drawing breath and registering life
aesthetically, but never giving its drawn breath back to the world through speech, never
translating its aesthetic knowledge into the spoken language that might make it knowable, if only
in revised and altered form, to the intellect. The Cottage Girl, conversely, is defined not only by
her loquaciousness, but also by her willingness to reveal the strange calculus by which she comes
to number the dead in her tally of siblings.

The Simple Child functions both as the personification of a set that contains and exceeds
the Cottage Girl and as the affective foil to the Cottage Girl’s intellectual revision of traumatic
loss. The sum of the encapsulation of this dual function within the figure of the Simple Child
seems to be the suggestion that affect is a set that contains and exceeds the subset of intellect.
Such a suggestion would reverse the conventional binary configuration that subordinates
affective truth to the corrective project of reason and logic, and would instead position affect as
capable of apprehending the intellect while remaining unknowable on any terms other than its
own. An artifact of this effort to reassess the cartography of the perceptive modalities is the
poem’s inability to coerce these two figures into the correspondence that would illustrate the
viability of its ideological argument. The poem’s attribution of differing qualities to the Simple
Child and the Cottage Girl establishes a more complex dramatic tension than the binary
conversational structure assumed by most critical accounts of the poem. This discrepancy
between species and specimen may add another categorical layer to the conflicting truths of
affect and intellect in the poem. The most conspicuous feature of the first two stanzas is the
attribution of an affective faculty and the subjectivity it implies to the Simple Child rather than to
the Cottage Girl. Life is felt in the body of a rhetorical fiction within the larger fiction of the
poem, while the Cottage Girl, to whom the poem grants both exact age in years and a detailed
bodily presence, and whom critical tradition classifies as the poem’s oracle for affective truth,
emerges as a figure far more inclined to absorb feeling into thought than to value affective
experience on its own terms. That the dynamic is one of absorption rather than erasure suggests
an encouraging movement away from the familiar post-Enlightenment strategies by which the
intellect managed affect’s incursions into its epistemological territory, but it is difficult not to
suspect that within the figure of the Cottage Girl intellect remains the dominant half of the
binary, willing to grant some small concessions to affect if doing so preserves the asymmetrical
structural politics of the relationship.

The success of the poem’s ideological argument and the preservation of its intermodal
disparity depend upon the reader’s failure to differentiate between the Simple Child and the
Cottage Girl. Misidentifying these two figures as a single figure, or even accepting the efficacy
of the rhetoric by which the poem posits the Cottage Girl as an example of the Simple Child,
allows the poem to disguise an intellectual revision of affective experience as raw, unmediated affect, and to misrepresent the debate between the speaker and the Cottage Girl as an allegorical dialectic between reason’s mouthpiece and affect’s mouthpiece. The resultant readings, as the critical tradition illustrates, unfold as the tracing of the conflict between two systems of quantification, each of which seeks in its own way to revise an unknowable, unquantifiable state into a knowable quantity. What ultimately makes this conflation untenable is the material proximity of the Simple Child to the anomalous orthography. The Simple Child resides suggestively close to the wound, and is silenced by virtue of its exclusion from—and ultimate absorption into—the speaker and the Cottage Girl’s dialogue. But as the reader’s affective faculties carry the wound’s disruptive influence into the intellect’s engagement with the narrative, the Simple Child is given voice sufficient to intrude into that dialogue, exposing and critiquing its rhetoricity. All of the points of contention between the speaker and the Cottage Girl are exposed as the intellect’s efforts to distract itself from the affective knowledge to which the Simple Child enjoys, or suffers, access. The rhetorical question that ends the first stanza—“What should it know of death?”—loses its strictly rhetorical function and becomes an authentic inquiry into what knowledge the affective faculties can possess about a state that under any normal circumstances would have to be classified as unknowable.

The answer to that question is not the tropes, figures, or rhetoric that passes for intellectual knowledge about death; it is affective knowledge, the feeling, the aesthetic registering, of death’s aesthetic knowability as the intellectually unknowable, which wounds both speaker and reader as a sublime of felt body horror. The aesthetic begins to assert its capacity to produce a kind of knowledge at the point where the intellect reaches its limits. Frozen in Burkean astonishment, the intellect cannot apprehend this unknowability directly, but can only
revise and recast it as a blank to be filled with concepts or rhetoric. For the two intellects in the poem, death is either a physical displacement of bodies: “Two of us in the church-yard lie” (21), or a physical displacement of spirit which imagines spirit as another kind of body: “But they are dead; those two are dead! / Their spirits are in heaven!” (65-6). Affect recognizes that death is immune to the intellectual strategies of troping or figuration and that death remains unrepresentable in the terms of either of these fictions of displacement. Consequently, the body of the subject suffers the fear response appropriate to a confrontation with an affective impression of that for which there exists no corresponding concept, trope, or figure.

If, as I suspect, this unknowability may perform the sublime and register as an aesthetic trauma, then “We Are Seven” may be understood as recording in its textual materiality—and restaging in the reader—the fragmentation of Wordsworthian subjectivity as a consequence of an encounter with the sublime. Wordsworth has circulated an anecdote about an actual conversation with a child that inspired the composition of “We are Seven,” encouraging a reading of the poem as a dramatization of a veridical, historical intersubjective exchange: “The little girl who is the heroine I met within the area of Goodrich Castle in the year 1793” (Complete Poetical Works 71). But Wordsworth’s identification of the girl as the heroine of the poem partakes of a category mistake. The girl at Goodrich Castle was not the heroine of the poem but the inspiration for the heroine, who is a fictional construct designed to give voice to a feminized and infantilized facet of the fragmented Wordsworthian self. The extent to which the poet must internalize and modify the particulars of a veridical, historical event in the act of poetic creation demands that the reader recognize each voice within the poem’s intersystemic debate—Simple Child, Cottage Girl, and speaker—as an allegorical representation of an aspect of a Wordsworthian subjectivity splintered by the aesthetic trauma of a confrontation with death’s
sublime unknowability. The poem must therefore not be understood as the dramatization of an intersubjective exchange, but as the dramatization of an intersystemic and intrasubjective exchange between fragments of the Wordworthian self.\textsuperscript{13} The discrete functionality of the Simple Child and the Cottage Girl stages the intellect’s acts of self-deception, which mobilize the figurative regime to deflect its attention from the affective faculties’ apprehension of two aesthetic truths intolerable to a mind committed to self-aggrandizement and the fiction of holism: death is unknowable except through affect’s knowledge of its unknowability, and the self is shattered by trauma into an affective awareness of its own irreparable fragmentation into incompatible epistemological modalities. The poem’s impulse to conflate The Simple Child and the Cottage Girl, like Wordsworth’s impulse to conflate the heroine of his poem with the girl who served as the model for the heroine, are symptoms of a broader effort to revise the threat of post-traumatic separation into a fiction of holistic harmony.

It is this suppressed status as allegorical construct that allows Wordsworth to safely place in the Cottage Girl’s mouth the explicit reference to “brother John” who was “forced to go” (59) and to retain that reference in the revisions of the poem that remove the framing device that posits the poem as a speaker’s dialogue with his brother. Buried under layers of fiction and artifice, the reference itself becomes a fiction and an artifice, a false, domesticated Sublime stripped of the counter-rhythmic, emotive power carried by the comparatively raw Sublime that materializes in the prosodic apocalypse of orthographical anomaly. Referentiality fails at the moment the linguistic signs fail, as they must, to convey the intellectual truth of the signifieds they clothe, whereas the anomalous orthography is able to perform the presence of death’s unknowability precisely because it signifies nothing.
The categorical distinctions that underwrite the New Historicism denigration of Romantic poetry appear difficult to maintain once the affective dimensions of the poetry are granted access into the critical discourse. The solipsism so often attributed to Wordsworth becomes complicated by the emergence of a multiplicity of Wordsworthian voices, each corresponding to a facet of the Wordsworthian self, and none of which can be said to represent a Wordsworth that may claim a legitimate right to speak for any other or to otherwise serve as a stabilizing center to the contentious systemic play of Wordsworthian historical subjectivity. Instead, Wordsworthian subjectivity presents itself as a category-defying intrasubjectivity that is at the same time an intersubjectivity, a failed retreat from external history into an equally contentious and traumatic personal history that cannot be fully disentangled from the external, an inward turn from the Other into a self where the Other already waits to dispel the comforting distinction between internal and external, between self and non-self.

III.

I turn next to “A Night-Piece,” which despite its exclusion from *Lyrical Ballads* is perhaps the most explicit treatment of the Burkean Sublime of astonishment to be found in Wordsworth’s early lyrics, and which exhibits the characteristic Wordsworthian tension between performed sublimity and the revision of that performance into something less threatening to the manufactured continuity of the diachronic self. The poem begins, like “We are Seven,” with the elision of the initial two iambic feet and a dash-like, anomalous orthographical mark that functions as both absence and presence. Set against this tear in metrical tissue is a body of textual and paratextual tropes and rhetoric that the intellect may exploit in its attempt to close the wound through which the Sublime may irrupt into semantic space to disrupt the poem’s
ideological argumentation. Like “We are Seven,” the difficulty this poem presents arises from the tactic of disguising its auditorial revisions of an affective experience from the poet’s personal history as the voice of pure emotion. Wordsworth reports that “A Night-Piece” was “composed on the road between Nether Stowey and Alfoxden, extempore” (Complete Poetical Works 71). This information would seem to anticipate and deflect the assumption, partly encouraged by Wordsworth’s own Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, that the poem represents a reflection upon Sublime experience rather than a pure distillation of the Sublime event. The introduction sets the poem in an unnamed liminal space between two named, domesticated spaces. This setting, combined with the emphasis upon extemporaneous composition, encourages a characterization of the poem as a relatively pure, unspoiled account of an intense aesthetic experience, one that opposes the definition of poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of emotion recollected in tranquility” that Wordsworth offers as an approach to understanding his poetry. Recollection here happens not in the text but in the paratext: Wordsworth can “distinctly recollect the very moment when he was struck” by the sight of the clouds splitting to reveal the moon (71), and his verb choice invites an explicitly traumatic reading of the poem as an unmediated recreation of a confrontation with a Sublime strike from beyond. The poet has wandered outside of the protective structure of domesticated social space and trespassed into the domain of the Other, and in his vulnerable state he suffers the astonishment of the Burkean sublime as nature commits an act of violent intrusion into the human world.

As urgently as the poem insists upon its status as an immediate encapsulation of an acute aesthetic trauma, it also possesses the artifacts of an auditorial attempt to revise that trauma into something more palatable to the intellect. As with “We are Seven,” the poem embodies the two opposing projects of a material expression of affective truth and a rhetorical, ideational effort to
redress the trauma of that truth’s self-assertion. “A Night-Piece,” however, seems to exhibit a heightened self-awareness about its revisionary project that “We are Seven” never achieves. The poem’s tropes and figures, especially its puns, seem committed not only to representing the paradoxical commingling of pleasure and pain associated with the Sublime, but to conceding their limited capacity for doing so successfully. The poetry that Wordsworth has encouraged his audience to characterize as “emotion recollected in tranquility” takes on the more complex character of a decidedly untranquil emotion, both misrepresented by revision and incarcerated in a closed system of rhetorical devices intended to contain and diffuse the threatening affective truth of the initial experience.\(^\text{14}\)

Not just any pun can function as a poem’s ingress into profound paradox. Only puns that attach two conceptually incompatible signifieds to the same signifier can do so. I shall refer here to such puns as oppositional homographic paronomasia. “A Night-Piece” employs several of these types of puns in its efforts to record the confused emotional state of an astonished speaker. The poem’s speaker is traveling at night, and when the moon and stars break through the clouds, he looks upon them, is startled, and experiences not pure beauty, but the strange, paradoxical mingling of wonder with something darker and unsettling that has formed the foundation for most theories of the Sublime. The poem initially seeks to establish this sense of disorienting unfamiliarity by expressing paradoxes with language that is itself not paradoxical: “. . . how fast [the stars] wheel away, / Yet vanish not!” (17-18). Stars wheeling away without vanishing are conceptually paradoxical, but in these images stars remain stars, wheeling remains wheeling, and away remains away. However, when the poem returns to the stars, as “still they roll along” (19), it subjects its signs to the semantic breakdown that can only be achieved by oppositional homographic paronomasia. In one sense, “still” functions as an adverb and implies a
continuation of an action begun in the past, and in that sense the poem’s stars continue to roll along. The other, adjectival sense of “still” suggests fixity, stasis, absence of action. In this sense, the stars are locked in their positions in the sky. Both meanings coalesce within the textual moment to remain locked in an endless referential dissonance while simultaneously, and paradoxically, uniting in representational harmony to portray the speaker’s sense of perceptual disorientation and emotional / cognitive dissonance.

Further oppositional homographic paronomasia appears when the clouds shut on the moon and the stars:

At length the Vision closes; and the mind,
Not undisturbed by the delight it feels,
Which slowly settles into peaceful calm,
Is left to muse upon the solemn scene. (23-26)

The speaker records the moment when delight and disturbance fuse in the mind. By lucky etymological accident, around the sixteenth century “delite” became “delight,” which makes possible the formulation of a pun. The speaker’s mind is left disturbed and delighted after the withdrawal of moonlight and starlight, but it is left ambiguous whether the delight and / or the disturbance stems from the memory of the light or from the removal of the light when the clouds close. The prefix “de” can mean “from,” or it can mean “to reverse or reduce.” As with “still” in line 19, “delight” becomes the focal point of a collision of contradictory denotive and connotative potentiality: which delight does the speaker feel? Does the speaker’s pleasure or his agitation proceed “from” the light or from the “reversal or reduction” of light? The seeming paradox of the entirety of line 24 (the paradox of finding one’s self disturbed by delight) is revealed not to be paradoxical at all, for how could the speaker possibly remain undisturbed by
the epistemological shock, the sense of helplessness and impotent terror, of having reached the limits of his cognitive capacity in the face of an oppositional homographic paronomasia that fuses pleasure (“delight”) with a pleasurable and / or disturbing presence of light from luminous heavenly bodies (“de light”) and with a pleasurable and / or disturbing absence or reduction of light (“de-light”)? Perhaps it is clear at this point why I had designated the paradoxes that Brooks locates in Wordsworth as less profound than those that arise from oppositional homographic paronomasia—the former operate within the parameters of conventional tropes like personification and metaphor, but the latter threaten to infuse signifiers with more paradoxical potentiality than they can withstand, and their meaning is only stabilized by their correspondence to the speaker’s affectively registered aesthetic disorientation.

The final instance of oppositional homographic paronomasia in the poem can be found in the final line. The speaker’s mind has recovered from the shock of his experience, and it “is left to muse upon the solemn scene” (26). It is noteworthy that the speaker “is left,” for meditative musing is almost certainly a solitary activity. Presumably, however, the product of these musings is the very poem we have been reading, which means that these solitary musings function as a kind of Muse, as a numinous presence, as an avatar of poetic inspiration. The solitary connotations of “muse” become situated in opposition to the denotative properties of “Muse,” paradoxically fusing presence with absence, solitude with numinous, divine visitation. The poem puns to express the crucial paradoxes that serve to recreate for the reader the speaker’s Vision and his consequent sense of disorientation.

This Vision affects the speaker so powerfully that the stars appear both static and dynamic, the light and / or the removal of light leave him possessed by apparently contradictory emotions, and in the aftermath of the ordeal he perceives himself as simultaneously alone and in
the presence of a divine being. All of these oppositions announce themselves through and within single signifiers that seem to explode with opposing meanings, meanings which threaten to disconnect these signifiers not only from their officially sanctioned signifieds, but from their power to convey semantic meaning of any kind. Remarkably, by virtue of their portrayal of the speaker’s cognitive and emotional stress, these signifiers retain their coherence; their role as representational textual components of an affective state defined by its contradictory nature unites them in harmony and harnesses their disturbance of fixed language. This process of constructive linguistic disruption happens only during those moments when the text employs oppositional homographic paronomasia, and these moments appear to me to illustrate the true language of paradox as it manifests in the early Wordsworthian lyric.

To employ tropes to illustrate the paradox of the sublime is not, however, to perform the sublime, to open a space in which the sublime may present itself unmodified by the intellect. Puns cage these paradoxes in wit and consequently disconnect and insulate them from the emotional state they are intended to describe. They recollect emotions in the relative tranquility of techne, revising them into simulacra that the intellect can penetrate and colonize from within. Restoring the voice of affect can be only be accomplished by permitting the matter of the poem to reassert its influence over the subject matter. Although the reader enters the poem’s ideational material at the beginning of a carefully cultivated dramatic setting, he or she is thrust into the poem’s music in the middle of a measure, off-balance and tangibly aware of the rhythmic “white space” that confronts the poem’s linear, reflective narrative with the nonlinear, perpetual presence of non-cognitive perception. The anomalous orthography further reinforces the wound by visually cutting into the text, perforating the poem’s monomodal planarity and deviating into a parallel register in which the dynamics of concrete poetry operate in proximity to conventional
signification. As with “We are Seven,” the tension between the linearity of narrative cognized by the intellect and nonlinear presence registered by the aesthetic faculties reveals the poem as a space within which these two otherwise discrete systems of knowledge-production may behave as if they operated within the same system, disrupting each other’s function and compromising each other’s agendas.

The poem’s use of more conventional orthography, specifically the paired dash, indicates the potential for materiality to further disrupt the function of conventional intellective syntax by allowing the counter-syntax of perpetually present traumatic knowledge to irrupt to the surface. The first instance interrupts the joining of two chronologically sequential and causally related independent clauses, mirroring the suspension of the traveller’s cognitive faculties during the initial moment of sublime aesthesis:

At length a pleasant instantaneous gleam
Startles the pensive traveller while he treads
His lonesome path, with unobserving eye
Bent earthwards; he looks up—the clouds are split
Asunder, —and above his head he sees
The clear Moon, and the glory of the heavens. (8-13)

Although these paired dashes contain what is grammatically a nonessential element, the clause that constitutes that element is certainly essential to the poem’s affective countersyntax, and its material positioning between clauses enacts an affective rift in the pensive traveller’s linear thought. It reveals the crucial split, the wound in “texture close” (2) through which the sublime enters history and the traveller temporarily leaves it as he is fixated in acute aesthetic response to an object from a higher order. The dashes themselves become a wound in text-ure through
which the reader is compelled to follow the traveller out of the clouds of the figurative regime and into the awful light of Sublime feeling.

The second instance of the paired dash triggers an even more pronounced incursion of affective counter-syntax into the poem’s surface narrative. It arranges the incongruous intrusion of a sensory observation into another sensory observation to which it seems to bear no relationship, causal or otherwise:

There, in a black-blue vault she sails along,
Followed by multitudes of stars, that, small
And sharp, and bright, along the dark abyss
Drive as she drives: how fast they wheel away,
Yet vanish not!—the wind is in the tree,
But they are silent;—still they roll along
Immeasurably distant . . . (14-20)

The traveller’s contradictory sensate apprehension of the wind in the trees gives rise to a moment of cognitive dissonance resolved by rhetoric, in which the wind’s visual presence is registered normally, but its aural absence is troped as the presence of silence in order to remove the threat of irreconcilable truths being produced by the senses. This dissonance is situated within another dissonance between epistemological modes, in which the objective intellect’s knowledge of celestial motion is faced with an incommensurable subjective register of observed celestial stasis. The incommensurability of what the mind knows with what the body knows yields incompatible truths, which are resolved through the pun on “still,” which permits the concepts of dynamism and fixity to constellate within a single sign that remains stable by anchoring itself to the
paradoxical concept and intellectual truth (though perhaps not the feeling and the affective truth) of the Sublime.

Theresa M. Kelley has observed, within Wordsworth’s essay “The Sublime and the Beautiful,” an interest in the capacity for a stationary object to give the paradoxical impression of movement to an observer (26). Wordsworth’s treatment of this paradox emerges from his considerations of the relation of individual elements to the wholes they constitute. Wordsworth argues that sublime feeling cannot be achieved through observation of either a decontextualized object or a collection of objects perceivable only as an unbroken whole. For Wordsworth, it is the act of witnessing the loss of the individual within the whole that produces the sublime of duration:15

Duration is evidently an element of the sublime; but think of it without reference to individual form, and we shall perceive that it has no power to affect the mind. Cast your eye, for example, upon any commonplace ridge or eminence that cannot be separated, without some effort of the mind, from the general mass of the planet; you may be persuaded, nay, convinced, that it has borne that shape as long as or longer than Calder Idris, or Snowdon, or the Pikes of Langdale that are before us; and the mind is wholly unmoved by the thought; and the only way in which such an object can affect us, contemplated under the notion of duration, is when the faint sense which we have of its individuality is lost in the general sense of duration belonging to the earth itself. (Prose Works 2: 351)

It is difficult not to read Wordsworth’s assignment of sublime feeling to the absorption of part by whole as symptomatic of a more general anxiety about the structural processes of incorporation that underwrite holism as an ordering system. The fear and awe of the sublime of duration
manifest for Wordsworth when a systemic totality frustrates individuation through total assimilation. Applied to “A Night-Piece,” these principles suggest that the paradox of celestial movement and stasis may be read as a tension between the eye’s individuation of the starfield and the mind’s revision of individual stars into wheels of motion: the affective truth of a single moment of subjective perception is contrasted with the intellectual truth of many moments assembled by the Imagination into a linear narrative. The analogous threat to the individual subject is clear. In order to extrapolate a redemptive narrative fiction from an individual moment of traumatic aesthesis, the subject must submit to a process of integration that suppresses the voice with which it could utter an affective counter-truth against the intellect’s revisionary argument. Affect, already bearing the burden of its confrontation with the sublime object, anticipates its disassembly and transformative reassembly at the hands of the intellect, which returns from its flight from the sublime object eager to know Sublimity vicariously, through the relative safety of its revision of the knowledge affect carries within itself. Against the Wordsworthian Imagination, which rewrites the history of the poet’s mind as a “tying or binding” of itself to nature, there operates an affective faculty whose voice, in order to remain audible, must struggle to undo the knots.

The paradoxes that collect in “A Night-Piece” around these orthographical wounds in continuity and observational coherence reveal the full cost of the Wordsworthian model of poetry as recollected emotion. Each of these two observations illustrates the mobilization of the figurative regime to resolve paradoxical truths, which are intolerable to the intellect, by lifting affective data out of the system that produced them and recollecting them in the intellect, a new world with new physics in which the data take on new identities and are subject to the violence of a new, revisionary hermeneutics. Inherent in the recollection of emotion in tranquility is a
betrayal of those emotions and of the iterations of the subject that suffered them. Committed in the name of cohesive subjectivity, this betrayal sacrifices the self to the Self, confirming Abrams’s model of a Romantic theodicy that preserves the formulae of religious ritual while replacing the variables with secular counterparts.

Cleanth Brooks suggests that “the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox” (58). I argue that the truth which can only be reached through the intellectual error of paradox is an affective truth, and that it reveals both intersystemic and intrasystemic paradox not as an error but as ingress to a suppressed epistemological modality. The voice of this modality is preserved in the wounds the poem wears on its text and in the potential for those wounds to open also in the affective faculties of the reader. When we feel the poem, we restore function to its silenced dimensions and bear witness to them, and our bodies and affective faculties are inscribed with the suppressed knowledge of a subjectivity silenced by its own intellect.

As with “We are Seven,” the tension between the two modalities in “A Night-Piece” lends the poem dramatic weight in a manner that blurs the lines of demarcation that separate solipsistic retreat from social engagement. The poem’s efforts to both bear witness to a traumatic intrusion of aesthesis into the world of thought and to repair that intrusion with rhetoric stage a performance in which the various fragments of the post-traumatic poet may contest with one another for influence over the poem and its effects on the reader. The politics of suppression that operate between the parties that constitute this society of self complicate the critical assumptions upon which many dismissals of Wordsworth are predicated: the retreat into an ostensibly ahistorical selfhood is always a confrontation with the historical Other that resides within and co-defines the self in the Hegelian sense.
IV.

In “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, July 13, 1798” Wordsworth takes up a question of crucial import to trauma theorists: does the passage of time and the pain of personal loss fragment the self irrevocably, or can holistic models of selfhood still accurately describe the post-traumatic subject? After having witnessed the harrowing of the false sublime of revolutionary politics at the hands of the Burkean historical sublime, is the Wordsworthian subject capable of reconciling the various, distinct iterations of itself, or is the gulf between the despondent, post-Revolutionary Wordsworth and his younger, idealistic self too wide to bridge? After contextualizing the poem’s efforts to address these questions within the New Historicism’s accusations of political irresponsibility in the mature Wordsworthian lyric, I intend to further challenge the definitional categories within which the New Historicism manufactures this critique, in part by reading certain symptomatic instances of Wordsworthian enjambment as an apocalyptic prosody that exploits its own rhetorical failure as an occasion for initiating an affective counter-rhetoric.

Wordsworth’s efforts in “Tintern Abbey” to employ prosody and rhetorical devices to reassemble the broken set of his post-traumatic subjectivity have invited the criticisms that have led to its now-familiar reduction to ideology by New Historicism. Sarah MacKenzie Zimmerman also notes this recent critical trend of reading the poem as a simple narrative of retreat from politics to aesthetics, in which Wordsworth inaugurates the mature period of his career as a lyricist by turning from the failure of his radical political principles to a solipsistic inner world of aesthetic achievement: “in ‘Tintern Abbey’ Wordsworth is often considered to have found his lyric voice, a compensation for his political ideals” (94). Much of Zimmerman’s—and my own—anxieties about this account of the poem arise in reaction to the
Faustian implications imposed upon it by the New Historicist reading. In the now-familiar economy of political loss and aesthetic remuneration assumed by Marjorie Levinson, the price Wordsworth pays for gaining his lyric voice is making “the suppression of the social” the “primary poetic action” (37). Zimmerman’s response to Levinson and the other New Historicists is to adopt a relativism in which the critic refuses to commit exclusively to either a political or a personal characterization of the poem:

[B]oth readings are possible if we do not view them as mutually exclusive, if we do not insist either that the poem’s shift to lyricism reduces a social exchange to its personal relevance or that lyricism is radical in confronting the reader with the humiliations of rural impoverishment. (93)

My own response to Levinson’s argument is to assert that in the aftermath of a trauma as profoundly disruptive to a worldview as Wordsworth’s, it is no longer possible to discuss a singular Wordsworthian voice, or even a singular Wordsworth who might exploit the lyric form as a space in which to enjoy a solitude divorced from sociality. Instead, “Tintern Abbey” must be recognized as a fundamentally social, theatrical space wherein the voices of the various aspects of Wordsworthian subjectivity may stage their intermodal opposition. Even if one of these voices wins its most mature expressive potency through “the suppression of the social,” there seems little justification for ignoring those Wordsworthian voices that have themselves been subjected to this suppressive agenda. They too may lay claim to the name Wordsworth, and their voices, preserved within poetic material, are audible to those willing and able to hear them.

Foreshadowing Book 12 of The Prelude, “Tintern Abbey” prescribes domesticated, feminized beauty, embodied and preserved specifically in the person of Dorothy Wordsworth, to redress the suffering endured during the sublime ordeal. Others have observed similar dynamics
of conflicting aesthetic categories at work in the poem. Theresa M. Kelley reads the poem as “a three-way conflict between the revolutionary sublime, a ‘sense sublime’ whose ‘intense unity’ Wordsworth describes in his fragment on aesthetics, and those ‘beauteous forms’ the speaker hopes to remember or have Dorothy Wordsworth remember” (57). Kelley’s aesthetic taxonomy reveals a tension not only between beauty and the Sublime, but also between competing versions of the Sublime. Aligning herself with J.R. Watson and other readers who ascribe significance to the title’s historically inaccurate reference to “July 13” as its date of composition, Kelley observes the poem’s efforts to exorcise this date of its revolutionary terror by tempering it with the comparative benignity of the Wordsworthian landscape:

[B]ecause this date...doubles as the anniversary of two events in revolutionary France which Wordsworth recalls in other poems, and because this suppression of the revolutionary sublime is among the most reiterated aesthetic patterns of the expanded Prelude, readers are probably right to suspect that he altered the topography and chronology of his return visit to the Wye for a reason. Watson reminds us that Wordsworth and Jones arrived at Calais on July 13, 1790, a date Wordsworth recalled in 1804 as he composed Book VI of The Prelude. If this July 13 was a time of great hope and joy, it later marked a darker anniversary. On July 13, 1793, Charlotte Corday killed Marat in his bath, an event memorialized as pro-Jacobin propaganda in David’s The Death of Marat. This, as much as the Wye, Watson suggests, may be the occasion whose anniversary Wordsworth creates in the ‘five years’ of the opening verse and paragraph of the poem. Against the pressures, then, of a highly stratified recollection, the speaker of the poem seeks to balance the darker image of revolutionary terror by superimposing
the image of his return to the Wye. Seen from the mental and topographical
vantage-point of the Jacobin sympathizer Thelwell’s farm far from Tintern
Abbey, the, the ‘picture of the mind’ which Wordsworth offers in ‘Tintern Abbey’
gathers a number of negative images around a more positive one. (59)
Kelley proceeds to track the development of a tension between the poem’s invocation of the
“revolutionary sublime” and a “Wordsworthian sublime” that engages in an “intriguing
coopration” (60) with the beautiful, especially as it manifests in Wordsworth’s “beauteous
forms”:

The agency of ‘beauteous forms’ prompts both the gift of ‘aspect more sublime’
and the domesticating virtues of the Wordsworthian beautiful, those ‘little,
nameless, unremembered acts / Of kindness and of love”...This recognition of
visionary and domestic realities as the two gifts of ‘beauteous forms’ registers the
dual aesthetic nature of the scene. . . . The implication is of course that ‘beauteous
forms’ are also in some sense ‘sublime.’ If they are, the sublimity at issue is
likely to be the sense of elevation that Dr. Johnson preferred, not the fearful
response to the revolutionary sublime which the speaker keeps at bay in this
poem. (60)
Kelley’s findings here reveal much of importance about the ways that Wordsworth may appear
to pit the sublime not only against the beautiful, but also against a modified version of itself that
assumes some of the domesticating potential normally associated with the beautiful.
I would argue, however, that Kelley is able to locate gradation and variation in the
Wordsworthian sublime(s) by accepting too readily the poem’s rhetoric of aesthetic self-
deception. Wordsworth may attach the term “sublime” to whatever experiences or phenomena
he chooses, even to those that may not seem to fit comfortably within the aesthetic taxonomy he inherits from Dennis and Burke, but this does not necessarily indicate a successful challenge to the rigidity of these categorical distinctions. It is just as likely to represent a rhetorical effort to deny the disturbing quality of an unnerving aesthetic experience by calling it by another name and thereby revising it with a speech act into something less threatening. I locate suggestions of this in the poem’s lineation, which is able, by virtue of its textual materiality, to establish a sublime presence that resists the poem’s efforts to subject it to a rhetorical turn that would implicate it in its own revision into a holistic fiction of the beautiful.

Despite its efforts to the contrary, the poem’s enumeration of the means by which “beauteous forms” may alleviate the “burthen” of failed understanding solidify this burthen as a source of a sublime terror too pronounced to be tempered or redeemed by the beautiful:

To them I may have owed another gift,
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world
Is lighten’d:—that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on . . . (36-43)

Wordsworth concedes that the “beauteous forms” may induce a mood that differs distinctly from the “tranquil restoration” of “purer mind” that he has already catalogued (30-31). This mood is ostensibly “of aspect more sublime,” than the first, but when we compare the affective reaction this mood induces in the speaker to the tranquility, mental purity, and other “sensations sweet” initially produced by the “beauteous forms,” we find that they do not differ to
the degree that the shift in categorical designation demands. They initiate a “serene and blessed mood” in which the subject’s affections “gently lead” to a state in which we are laid asleep

In body, and become a living soul:

While with an eye made quiet by the power

Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,

We see into the life of things. (46-50)

The transition from body to pure soul seems to echo rather than contrast with the passage into “purer mind” that is the first gift of the “beauteous forms.” Indeed, this “more sublime” state is one in which we appear to be relieved of the “burthen” of the Burkean sublime of obscure, oppressive powers by an increase of beauty, tranquility, and harmonious vision, even as we are subjected to the suspension of our faculties during the Sublime encounter. It is important to note here, however, that the rhetoric of domestication in this passage explicitly revises the structure of the Burkean sublime, in which the higher faculties are suspended while sense and affect register the sublime moment, into an almost Kantian suspension of the senses and the subsequent awakening of supersensible reason. The “breath of this corporeal frame / And even the motion of our human blood” are “[a]lmost suspended” (43-4, 45), and the higher faculties, having apparently transcended the flesh, now apprehend the power of “harmony” and “joy” (48).

Despite the paucity in Wordsworth’s poetic argument of anything that resembles an unrevised representation of the commingling of terror and uplift that defines the sublime in its sterner aspects, it is not my contention that this more severe sublime is absent from the poem. Instead, I observe a counter-rhetorical move in which the suppressed, affective voice of this sublime usurps the argumentative force of the rhetorical structure it is conscripted to co-
constitute. The poem materially and affectively burdens its reader with the lines that enumerate the several psychological burdens the second mood is supposed to alleviate. The verb “[i]s lighten’d” has to succeed as a rhetorical speech act that dispels the weight of the previous lines if the poem’s redemptive argument is to succeed, but because the reader must progress linearly through the lines, the palpable sense of accumulated weight that they establish, which the reader registers sensibly and affectively, may be too powerful for the rhetorical turn that follows them, and they may reassert their burdens as a perpetual presence that exceeds the ameliorative capacity of the linear argument to join them to the line that would relieve or exorcise them. The paradox and crucial gambit of enjambment, which becomes especially difficult to ignore in these and similar moments in Wordsworth, is that it must concretize and make permanent a position in an initial line that is supposed to be ephemeral enough to be revised by a subsequent line. The specifically Wordsworthian iteration of this paradox in “Tintern Abbey” compounds the dysfunction of the poem’s argument. Seeking to rhetorically tie or bind the burdens to a speech act that fails to dispel them emphasizes the impossibility of effectively executing the binding operation. The failure of the rhetorical turn forces a confrontation with the sublime terror of the burdens it could not alleviate: the disturbing force of mystery and the weight of unintelligibility—the Burkean sublime of obscurity—regain their suppressed voices, opening up a small orthographical wound between the failure of the rhetorical speech act and the beautified state under which it sought to bury the affective truth of the sublime: “Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood” (42). The wound materializes the presence of the voice of the “eye made quiet by the power” (48), and the enjambment that strives to domesticate this power by binding it to “harmony” (49) fails to convince. The eye’s quietude becomes readable not as the comforting and consolatory product of enlightenment through benign integration, but as the stillness of a
subject frozen in the terror of Burkean astonishment before a power in which it can never participate, a power that binds, but can be neither bound nor bound to. The rhetoric of holism is resisted and refuted as the poem’s prosody discovers within itself the capacity for autonomous function divorced from the poem’s project of secular theodicy. Wordsworthian enjambment is itself revealed as apocalyptic prosody, in which the lines that cleave rhetorically to one another in a structural recapitulation of *akedah* also come to assert their sovereignty as they find themselves materially cloven away from one another.

Apocalyptic prosody, as well as its power to mobilize affective counter-rhetoric against the intellective rhetoric of beautification, surfaces elsewhere in “Tintern Abbey.” Early in the poem, the sublime threat of the landscape is assuaged when the speaker employs the rhetoric of integration to link earth and sky:

--Once again

Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,

That on a wild secluded scene impress

Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect

The landscape with the quiet of the sky. (4-8)

The cliffs, whose great height and sheer gradients make them potential vessels for a threatening, Burkean sublime of astonishment, instead become the image through which the rhetorical Wordsworthian Imagination enacts an *akedah* by marrying the wildness and seclusion of a sublime landscape to the ameliorative quietude of the sky. The troped connection of the landscape to the sky is reinforced visually and metrically by the arrangement of both landscape and sky within the same pentameter line, and syntactically, by their joint function as the predicate of the verb “connect.”
But the termination of line 6 in “impress”—an iamb with a masculine ending—implies the affective impression of gravity and permanence that frustrates the linear, progressive function of the syntax and facilitates the function of a subversive affective counter-syntax. In this prosodically apocalyptic counter-syntax, both verbs function intransitively and abrogate the conjugative role that requires them to take as their objects the nouns with which the subsequent lines begin. In the counter-rhetorical revision, the cliffs do not impress thoughts upon a wild, secluded scene; they simply, and sublimely, impress upon it. Isobel Armstrong notes the suggestion, and, in a gesture that would not appear out of place in Liu, posits the moment as an intrusion of the very history from which the poem claims to offer aesthetic respite: “there is a more brutal, military sense of ‘impress’. . . Impression, the legal capture of men for military service, perpetrated state violence and legitimized it” (100). I wonder, however, if the traumatic history that in Armstrong’s model is ostensibly granted access to the poem by the rhetorical device of paronomasia might be granted fuller access by the verse’s material resistance to the device of rhetoric. The scene’s rhetorical efficacy depends upon the reader initially, mistakenly, registering the cliffs as impressive objects of sublime presence, a reading that is rhetorically revised by the ironic turn in the next line to the “[t]houghts” which lighten the weight and conscript the cliffs into the tropological beautification of an initial sublimity. But it is a mistake to assume that this ironic turn must successfully enact the rhetorical function which it intends. If the syntax fails, the ironic defense against the sublime also fails, and the initial misreading of the cliffs as sublime objects becomes a legitimate reading, at which point the poem may be said to have formally performed the intrusion of history into a present that would deny it.

A similar frustration of syntax by counter-syntax disrupts the function of the enjambment that conjoins lines 7 and 8. Almost as if to defend semantically and rhetorically against the
prosodic autonomy in the poem’s other instances of apocalyptic enjambment, line 7 ends with the verb “connect.” The semantic power of this verb appears to be invoked as a speech act against the material arrangement of the lines and the consequent disconnection of the verb from its objects, the “landscape” and “the quiet of the sky,” whose connection through the image of the cliffs must be realized rhetorically if the poem is to successfully establish a formal *akedah* through which it may temper sublimity with beauty. But the cut between the lines, the gulf of white space that separates the invocation of connection from that which it is invoked to connect, argues against rhetoric’s potential to convincingly impose an holistic principle upon a number of discrete units. The affective syntax of the lines resists the syntax of the clauses they co-constitute, and the tension between these syntaxes bifurcates the poem into two poems, one speaking the language of the higher faculties to argue for a theoretical aesthetics of spiritual convalescence and reconstitution (the very aesthetics targeted by New Historicist denigrations of the poem), the other speaking the language of affect to witness the apocalyptic dynamics of an experiential aesthetics of severance and irredeemable trauma.

Applied to Kelley’s account of the poem as an effort to retroactively exorcise the date of July 13 of the threatening power of the revolutionary sublime by fusing that date with the beautiful, the poem’s material retention of its threatening potency suggests that the reverse may be more accurate. The restored voice of affect compromises beyond redress the argumentative structure it was intended to silently serve. To my mind, this does not represent “cooperation” between the beautiful and the sublime, but the re-eruption of the sublime event out of the domesticating constraints imposed upon it by the rhetoric of the beautiful. The personal and political trauma of revolution given voice by David’s *The Death of Marat* rises out of history as a timeless presence to demand that the poem continue to bear witness to it, and, having repulsed
the revisionary intellect’s efforts to beautify it, it retains possession over both the poem and the date on which it sings its annual dirge for the ideals of the early revolution. The past, as Ferguson suggests, is always now, but this past retains its passion and disrupts the revisionary agenda of the narrative, ensuring that the now never imposes itself upon the past it must accommodate.

This reading of “Tintern Abbey” has sought to absolve the poem of some of the secular sins hung about its neck by the New Historicism’s efforts to render it an ideological scapegoat. The poem’s staging of a rupture between semantic content and material counter-content illustrates the ways that trauma can reveal the inadequacy of the conventional distinctions between the historical and the ahistorical, the social and the solipsistic, distinctions which New Historicism must accept uncritically if it is to successfully apply itself to the project of reducing poems to easily dismissible ideologies: in order for criticism to pronounce “the suppression of the social” the “primary poetic action,” the suppression of the expression of the suppression of the social must become the primary critical action. In the society of self begotten in the sublime moment and its aftermath, affective selves and intellective selves are implicated in a dynamic of witnessing, silencing, and restoration that self-historicizes trauma, making it, in a sense, “shift from trope to performance” as a deManian event. The capacity for aesthetic artifacts to preserve within their materiality and textuality the means through which they may stage a counter-rhetorical resistance to their own rhetorical “suppression of the social” reveals the aesthetic not as the Levinsonian site of a Faustian bargain, in which the lyric poet trades political responsibility for artistic achievement, but as the forum for the suppressed voices of traumatic knowledge to disrupt the agenda of the figurative regime and the fictions of progress and holism it underwrites.

1 It may be overstating the case to claim that McGann fully neglects prosody, orthography, and other considerations of textual materiality in his pursuit of sociopolitical contextualization, but he does tend to withdraw so far from the
poem’s matter to attend to its subject matter that he risks reducing the poem to a “mere cluster of ideas,” Helen Vendler’s phrase for the semantic content of a poem divorced from the material features that lend it its “aesthetic distinctness” (42).

Readers interested in a more comprehensive consideration of Wordsworthian apocalypse than what I am able to offer here should consult the work of Jonathan Roberts. His article “Wordsworth’s Apocalypse” catalogues the various uses of the term and the concept in A.C. Bradley, Geoffrey Hartman, M.H. Abrams, Andrzej Warminski, Morton Paley, and Tim Fulford.

All line and page references to Wordsworth’s poems and his prose introductions to them refer to Andrew J. George’s The Complete Poetical Works of Wordsworth.

A linguist might categorize such an enjambment as a “valency expansion”: the verb “feel” is made to take more arguments after the line break than before it.

J. McH. Sinclair explores the effects of line breaks on sense and meaning, but he does not pursue those effects to conclusions as explicitly traumatic as mine (though at times his diction seems to suggest an unconscious acknowledgment of the possibility of such a pursuit). He argues that when a sentence unfolds over the course of two enjambed lines, the “line-boundary” that divides the sentence delays the onset of a predictable element or interrupts the progress of the sentence (72). He assigns the term “arrest” to denote such interruption, and he argues that the extent to which a sentence can be “arrested” by a line-boundary is entirely dependent upon the syntactical context within which the line-boundary occurs (72). For example, a line-boundary that divides a “free clause” (roughly equivalent to an independent clause) from a “bound clause” (roughly equivalent in most cases to a dependent clause) “simply reinforces, emphasizes the structural boundary,” and may occasionally contribute “a slight element of surprise” to the completion of the syntax (73). A line-boundary that divides a bound clause from a free clause, however, tends to “reinforce the prediction” of the bound clause and “reinforce the ‘arrest’” (73). See his essay “Taking a Poem to Pieces.” In the apocalyptic prosody I observe in certain instances of Wordsworthian enjambment, I witness the poetry taking itself to pieces as the material play of the line and of the “line boundary” materializes a traumatic syntax independent of and counter to the syntactic structures to which Sinclair defers.

If this can be classified as a species of irony, it is an irony that functions not as a trope, but as the failure of the tropological.

“Caesura” and “caesarean” constitute a cognate doublet. Both derive from the Latin cadeÔre, to cut, of which –caes is the participial stem. But rather than the cut that kills denoted by the present base caed–, which becomes the Latin –cida and the more familiar French –cide, I employ the term here as it refers to Caesar’s birth, to the cut through which something is delivered into the world. See OED, “caesura, n.” and “Caesarean, adj. and n.” The extent to which the cut that births must necessarily be a cut that also kills is an issue I intend to explore in future considerations of Paul de Man’s insistence upon reading a fall, and a hanging, into the “Boy of Winander” episode of The Prelude, Book 5.

Particularly characteristic of New Historicist attitudes and tactics, and particularly distressing in the vehemence of its attack, is Timothy Liu’s candid admission in Wordsworth: The Sense of History that his refusal “to acknowledge any of the poet’s fictions of transcendence” amounts to “a nailing up of the poet on the cross of the historical world” (456). My aim is to suggest that Wordsworth has already nailed himself to this cross, and consequently his inward turn to a personal history which cannot help but be contaminated by the “historical world” is not a naive attempt to transcend history, but to transcend a false history made of rhetoric into a true history made of the wounds and discontinuities he has suffered at the hands of the material world.

James Shokoff has very usefully summarized the most significant twentieth-century critical responses to this poem, noting the way these responses “have been concerned mainly with taking sides” between the voice of the speaker and the voice of the child, which are supposed to function as analogues for intellective truth and affective truth, respectively (230):

Arthur Beatty is on the adult’s side and sees the child as drawing an associationist conclusion that is valid but only to an immature mind. Geoffrey Hartman believed that the child cannot separate imagination from nature and is arguing under the spell of an illusion, and Alan Grob reads the poem as a companion piece to ‘Anecdote for Fathers,’ calling both poems admonitions to those who would attempt too early to educate meagerly equipped children. . . . To Carl Woodring, the conflict is between a dull adult and a vital child, and David Perkins says the speaker’s earnestness turns the debate into an instance of the destruction by the adult world of valuable intuition. . . . Frances Ferguson . . . argues that temporal change is at the center of the poem: the adult is caught by the present moment and is not able, as the child is, to feel the reality of absent things. (230-231)
Shokoff aligns himself with Jack Stillinger in pronouncing “the conflict . . . unresolved” and insists that it “offers two valid sides” (231). He defines these two valid sides as Newtonian Reason and affect or intuition. The child is able to insist that her departed siblings remain with her despite their deaths not by refusing to accept physical reality, but by interpreting the data set of perceived physical reality according to an affective hermeneutic incommensurable with the intellective hermeneutic of the Newtonian cosmos: “[T]he girl is far from denying physical reality. . . . The important thing to her is the sense of their presence, the feeling that they are still alive. . . . The feeling is real, despite its invisibility and its status that defies measurement. It is real because it is affective” (233). Shokoff correctly asserts the authority of affect to apprehend and define an aspect of the real in opposition to the version of reality posited by the intellect. In doing so he resists the pressure generated by the current disciplinary paradigm to dismiss affective perception as a mere error subject to correction by the intellect.

This is the 1805 version of the poem; other versions do not include this orthographical anomaly, and cannot be read in precisely the same way.

Hartman himself undertakes such an extrapolation in his reading of the “Boy of Winander” passage from Prelude V. See Wordsworth’s Poetry 19-22.

It may also be tempting here to speculate that Wordsworth sought to imbue these quantities with a secularized version of Biblical numerological significance. The speaker, the poem’s representative of the limitations of human knowledge, counts five children—a number associated in Judaic tradition with the human—while the Cottage Girl, the oracle of the divine knowledge from which we have fallen, counts seven—the number of the divine. The implication in such a reading would be that we Fall at birth from an Edenic knowledge, and that the further time carries us from our youth, the further occluded that knowledge becomes.

A more transparently intrapersonal staging of this dramatic conflict may be found in “Ode: Intimation of Mortality from recollection of early Childhood.” The Ode was completed in 1804, one year before the revision of “We are Seven” that elides the initial iambics and replaces them with the anomalous dash. The poem’s characteristic despondency arises in part from its admission that some previous iterations of the self are irrevocably lost to the present version. If the Heaven that “lies about us in our infancy” in the Ode (66) still lies about the feminized, infantilized version of Wordsworth represented by the Cottage Girl in “We are Seven,” then both poems trope the post-traumatic fragmentation of subjectivity into a deManian Fall from an Eden of semantic reference and self-reference.

Romantic paradox, and specifically Wordsworthian paradox, has been taken up by Cleanth Brooks in The Well Wrought Urn in a treatment that seems to foreshadow both the deconstructive project of observing language dislodged from meaning and my own efforts to discern an affective counter-truth running opposite and parallel to the intellectual truths of Romanticism. Brooks’s seminal considerations of the role of paradox in poetic language suggest that “the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox” (3). Poetry, according to Brooks, exploits the power of paradox by eschewing the stability of “scientific” language and destabilizing and disrupting the connection of terms to their denoted meanings (8-9). Such disruption facilitates the transcendence of reductive linguistic fixity and affords the poem the opportunity to approach the otherwise ineffable (a truth that science cannot reach), and in the case of the Romantic poets, whose “preoccupation with wonder—the surprise, the revelation that puts the tarnished familiar world sin a new light” Brooks mentions explicitly (7), paradoxical language functions, contrary to our expectations, as a means of exploring difficult metaphysical conceits and contradictions without resorting to the decidedly unpoetic “language of sophistry” (3).

While Brooks’ explorations and explications of paradox in Wordsworth’s “Composed upon Westminster Bridge” yield valuable insight into the source of that which gives the poetry “its power,” the source of that power is revealed to be not the disruption of language’s referential or representational stability, but “the paradoxical situation out of which the poem arises” (5), namely the speaker’s infusion of the poem with his own surprise at discovering the organic beauty of industrialized London by observing the city from a distance. But the dramatic situation of a poem, paradoxical or not, seems to me a feature that, although connected to the poem’s language, is fundamentally distinct from it: a paradoxical situation can certainly be conveyed through language that is itself neither paradoxical nor disruptive. It is therefore less than clear how Brooks’ treatment of Wordsworth relates to his discussion of how poems destabilize the relationship of terms to their “dictionary meanings” (9). Neither is it clear how, through calling the reader’s attention to the poem’s use of “organic” descriptors to paradoxically portray a mechanized city as a living system (6-7), Brooks is illustrating the language of paradox. In portraying houses as sleeping, the poem personifies non-persons, but “asleep” still means “asleep”; the trope bestows human attributes upon inanimate objects, the now-humanized houses are imaged as slumbering, and the experienced reader of poems, having cultivated a sense of negative capability, suffers from no cognitive dissonance, no undeniable impulse to resolve the contradiction of how, within the textual reality of the poem, a house can act as a person and vice-versa. This is quite
simply how metaphoric tropes work: they turn things into other things in a context in which it is safe to do so, so that we can discuss them in ways that would otherwise violate our sense of discursive and interpretive propriety. Perhaps Brooks’ treatment of Wordsworth might be better classified as an examination of language in paradox, or how language can function as one component of a paradoxical arrangement of situated textual components, including not only language but dramatic situation, imagery, characterization of the speaker, etc., all of which are conveyed through language but none of which are entirely synonymous with or reducible to language. In any case, it is not until Brooks turns from Wordsworth to Donne that he seems to fully ascertain the capacity of poetry to enter into paradox through the employment of disruptive language, for it is in Brooks’ interpretation of Donne’s use of puns that language can truly be seen to dislodge itself from mere denotation. Brooks focuses his attentions on the Elizabethan “death” pun, which in “The Canonization” Donne uses to play with (and ultimately challenge) the apparent paradox between love as fulfillment of life and love as denial of life: “We can dye by it, if not live by love” (line 28). Brooks deftly unties Donne’s metaphysical knot: “the sexual submeaning of ‘die’ does not contradict the other meanings: the poet is saying: ‘Our death is really a more intense life’; ‘We can afford to trade life (the world) for death (love), for that death is the consummation of life’” (16). This is a destabilization that effectively inverts the meaning of a word so that it means both itself and its opposite. At the risk of lapsing into hyperbole, I propose that this is a more profound paradox than those Brooks locates in Wordsworth: it is one thing to position terms as foils to dramatic situations, and quite another to crystallize a signifier to a self-contradictory state of (ir)reconcilable referential oxymoron.

The “sublime of duration” appears as a generalized category in nineteenth-century aesthetic theory, but its place in twentieth-century Wordsworth criticism can probably be traced to Stuart Peterfreund’s “Wordsworth and the Sublime of Duration.” For examples of its nineteenth-century usage, see Veitch or Garvey.
“the set is now broken”: The Play of Material in Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*

I.

In the aftermath of the death by drowning of John Wordsworth in 1805, a grieving William Wordsworth ends a letter to his surviving brother Richard with “We wish you were with us. God keep the rest of us together! the set is now broken. Farewell” (*Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth* 540). Usually fastidious even in his personal correspondence, here Wordsworth leaves the first letter of the penultimate sentence conspicuously uncapsulated, making it noteworthy not only for its invocation of a structural metaphor to convey the sense of violated arrangement that defined the Wordsworth siblings’ collective familial trauma, but also for its embodiment of that invocation in material marks that physically enact the breakage that the metaphor can only insist upon. Severed orthographically from the textual system that surrounds it, the sentence abrogates the rules of the language game in which it participates, becoming an excess that seems to emerge from the semantic to participate in the affective, to materialize from out of the rhetorical to partake in the actual. It serves less to illustrate or augment the trope of breakage than to break the trope by demonstrating the inadequacy of the attempt to trope a break. In its resistance to total incorporation into the larger body of tropes and figures—the figurative regime—of which it is a component, the sentence exemplifies “the shift from trope to performance” that Paul de Man locates within “the play of the letter” (*Aesthetic Ideology* 89), or the disruptive intervention of textual materiality into the operational plane of semantics, an intervention by which meaning may be guided, distorted, or otherwise interfered with by the material means of its expression. As it manifests in the grieving Wordsworth’s correspondence, the play of the letter takes the form of an anomalous departure from orthographical convention, which becomes an unexpectedly poignant and unsettling performance.
of structural fissure which permits the “play of the letter” to frustrate the play of the letter that houses it, and the trauma that rhetoric can only argue or imply is made materially manifest by the marks that both embody and exceed that rhetoric.

The conventional interpretation of Wordsworth’s pronouncement that “the set is now broken” emphasizes interpersonal apocalypse: Wordsworth is understood to be referring to the fragmentation of the collective fraternal-sororal structure that, when still whole, had lent meaning and stability to his individual existence at least since the death of his mother in 1778, when the poet was a mere eight years old. Also worthy of exploration is the possibility that the utterance’s orthographical anomaly, the *the*, is both symptomatic and performative of another apocalypse, this one intrapersonal, which inheres in the internal fragmentation of Wordsworthian subjectivity that attends its external fragmentation from the larger systems that lend it stabilizing context, and which the anomaly performs by structurally severing the utterance from the rules of the language game it inhabits. Rendering as a miniscule a letter whose syntactic position demands a majuscule suggests for this particular performative utterance a certain anxiety about its own syntactical discreteness or sentential autonomy, a certain inclination towards an orthographically impossible conjunction with the preceding, proximal clause, whose terminal exclamation point erects an impassable syntactic partition between the sentence it occupies and the utterance that follows it. It is not immaterial that the proximal sentence towards which the utterance inclines contains what would have been for Wordsworth a comforting invocation to deity-as-stabilizing-center. Neither is it irrelevant that this proximal sentence terminates in a speech act—“together!”—which functions grammatically and contextually as an adverb within a subjunctive construction with the implied or elided auxiliary verb “may,” but discretely and materially as a desperate imperative, a command masquerading in and as a prayer, whose
materiality exposes it as a rhetorical effort to exert a measure of agency upon the “new control” to which the post-traumatic Wordsworth would eventually submit.¹

In these and similar textual anomalies, the internal, synchronic furcation of Wordsworthian subjectivity into an intellective voice which speaks in tropes and figures to the so-called higher faculties of cognition, and an affective voice which speaks through the performance of ludic formal irregularities and anomalous material tics to the affective faculties, suggests a compromised inner holism, a broken set of selves damaged beyond the potential for any reconstruction but the illusory one offered by akedah, the rhetoric of binding that Geoffrey Hartman locates in the typical Wordsworthian defense against the encroachment of the apocalyptic varieties of individuation (225). This is a rhetoric that often finds itself suspended in a state of tension with the forms that embody it, a voice that cannot sound without being reflected back onto itself in fractured and altered shape by the borders of the material structures in which it is contained. Usurped by its own echoes, this rhetoric cannot be assumed to represent the totality of the poem’s expressive potential, but must be recognized as one voice among several, all of which coexist uneasily in, and as, the poem.

The poem itself consequently becomes readable as the performance of a tension between the multiple voices for which it serves as oracle. The poet becomes readable as the radically granular site of a traumatic severance of intellect from affect and the consequent subjective and expressive split into the multiple voices whose contention the poem performs beneath and despite its superficial rhetoric of cohesion. The reader, too, may suffer a division, into multiple sites of reception, some of which are sensitive to the rhetorical medium, others of which are sensitive to the material, and the act of reading may register as a deeply felt rupture within the perceived fabric of the self as the trauma of broken form reproduces and retransmits itself to
palpably aesthetic effect. These dynamics of tension and antagonism find their most complex expression in *The Prelude*, whose material resistance to its own rhetoric of progress, growth, and harmony will be the primary focus of this chapter.

II.

The exchange between Hartman and de Man surrounding the “Boy of Winander” episode of *Prelude* Book V, somewhat recently renewed by Pieter Vermeulen’s impeccably reasoned and compellingly argued “The Suspension of Reading: Wordsworth’s ‘Boy of Winander’ and Trauma Theory,” may serve as a useful case study with which to introduce the intersection of traumatic affect, textual materiality, and identity as it applies to the Wordsworthian effort to exploit the poem as a technology for figuratively fixing, and materially unfixing, the broken set of the self. Hartman’s seminal reading of the Winander episode in *Wordsworth’s Poetry 1787-1814* includes a consideration of the break between verse paragraphs that initially appears similar to later de Man in its attention to the disruptive effects of materiality upon semantic content, argumentative efficacy, and rhetorical function:

Growing further into consciousness means a simultaneous development into death (i.e. the loss of a previous, joyfully unselfconscious mode of being), and not growing further also means death (animal tranquillity, absorption by nature). The space or ellipsis between paragraphs one and two . . . points to that impasse, or precarious transition. (21)

What now appears most striking about Hartman’s reading is its adumbration of trauma theory’s attention to the ways a wound may be read as a structural event that may inscribe itself so severely within the structural history of its bearer that it no longer makes sense to speak of a
singular bearer to whom that wounded history applies or belongs. In the aftermath of trauma as it is represented in the “Boy of Winander,” one is not transformed but replaced; one does not change so much as one is exchanged. Personal growth is attended by profound and irrevocable loss, and in fact it may in some sense be reducible to or definable as a kind of self-loss desperate to understand itself in any terms but the ones that name it as such. “Growing,” “development”: because in Hartman these terms always denominate death, they cannot be assumed to denote a difficult but ultimately benign transition occurring within the diachronic history of a stable and coherent Wordsworthian subject. Instead, the diachronic history of that subject must be more properly understood as a granular series of subjectively discontinuous placements and replacements, and the diachronic self is recast as an historical fiction, a theoretical superset containing a subset of actual, discrete, serial subjective moments that do not, as the holistic rhetoric of many normative accounts of Romanticism might prefer, function as a continuity. Losing “a previous . . . mode of being,” or exchanging one selfhood for another, posits the body as a material constant inhabited by an historical succession of variable subjects, and encourages a classification of the “Boy of Winander” passage not only as a recycled Lyrical Ballad, but more explicitly as a monody.

The grave at which the speaker stands after the verse paragraph break is therefore readable as the grave of a younger, now absent version of himself, a dead subject that formerly inhabited the current speaker’s own body. Wordsworth “was a boy like that, but has now become self-conscious and aware of mortality,” and “no one crosses that gulf, at least not intact: the survivor contemplates his own buried childhood” (Hartman 21). The source of the shock of this realization is that that childhood, that child, is buried not within the earth beneath the grave at which the speaker stands, but within the speaker himself. In the aftermath of a trauma powerful
enough to initiate an adjustment to the poet’s sense of connectedness to a stabilizing and defining external system, the poet himself becomes a kind of mass grave for the now-departed subjectivities he once housed: “the poet who stands at the child’s grave knows that consciousness is always of death, a confrontation of the self with a buried self” (22).

In these readings of Wordsworth, it is possible to detect the emergence of a sensibility acutely attuned to the disruptive ramifications of intensely affecting aesthetic events upon the structure of identity. Decades before trauma theory established itself as a coherent school or method, Hartman was articulating an explicitly traumatic rendition of the structure of Wordsworthian personal history, even coining, as Vermeulen reminds us, “the signifier ‘trauma’ . . . to name . . . intimations of [Wordsworth’s] separation from nature” (467), a separation that Hartman more regularly categorizes as “apocalypse.” The implications of this traumatic understanding threaten even Hartman’s own model of Wordsworthian apocalypse as rhetorically diverted or displaced into the holism of akeelah. Countermanding the holistic rhetoric of growth and progress with which Wordsworth seeks to redeem the aesthetic and historical traumas of his youth is a structural argument against progress and growth, terms which begin to take on the character of coping mechanisms with which the newborn subject, aware that its existence is necessarily predicated upon the death of a previous inhabitant of the body and history it has inherited, seeks to allay its survivor guilt. Crossing the gulf of self-awareness renders the poet, paradoxically, belatedly an Adam and a Cain: primary, first man, and namer of his world, but also secondary, first son, and passive first murderer.

The alternative—failure or refusal to mature—is a virtual guarantor of suffering another unsettling fate, an “absorption by nature” that transforms nature from a comforting, centering system that lends significance to human existence into an abyss into which the subject falls to
avoid enduring the terror of relinquishing the extant self to substitution by a post-traumatic changeling. Pursuing this solution to the problem of internal discontinuity, however, requires the subject to become a solute: the poet does not shelter temporarily within the abyss so much as he dissolves permanently into it. Vacillating between these two extinctions, the Boy of Winander “dies at a crossroads in human life” (Hartman 21) so that he may “experience no discontinuities” (21-2): “instead of waking from consciousness of nature into consciousness of self, he falls like Sleeping Beauty into the gentler continuum and quasi immortality of nature” (21). But because consciousness of self is always a consciousness of compromised selfhood, of the self as a set or series of selves, “it is better thus to die into nature than to survive one’s former self” (22).

Deferring perhaps to Wordsworth’s own holistic rhetorical inclinations, Hartman reads the structural breaks and splits of the Winander episode not as simple breaks and splits, but as occasions for the poet to mobilize akedah to “displace” the trauma of apocalypse by rhetorically “tying or binding” the imagination to nature (225). For Hartman, the episode’s “crisis of recognition—the shock of self-consciousness—is once more elided” by means of “a forgetful gaze, a downward and inward look” which “displaces a naked peripety,” and the horror of dissolving into nature “appears merciful,” if only because “the wages of [self-] knowledge are death” (22). A soft extinction rescues the Wordsworthian subject from the prospect of a structurally violent usurpation by entombing it within nature’s womb, and by replacing it with a new Wordsworth, who, because he was delivered out of the sublime womb into history as a consequence of an aesthetic trauma, need not participate fully in the apocalyptic cleavage from nature that defines the Wordsworthian model of the transition from childhood to maturity. Hartman’s akedah, in a triumph of rhetorical evasion and revision, situates trauma in, and as, the space between subjects, leaving no functional subject position from which to register the
traumatic event, and preemptively escalating Cathy Caruth’s unclaimed experience into an unclaimable experience which resides both structurally and definitionally where the poet cannot be or go.

Paul de Man’s reading of “The Boy of Winander” unfolds primarily as a response to Hartman’s holistic interpretive schema. It developed over the course of approximately two years, appearing first in his 1965 lecture “Heaven and Earth in Wordsworth and Hölderlin,” then in revised form in a 1966 lecture at the University of Zurich (published later in the same year in *Sweizer Monatshefte* as “Wordsworth and Hölderlin,”), then finally reappearing in his 1967 Gauss Seminar lecture “Time and History in Wordsworth.” Like Hartman’s reading, de Man’s emphasizes the significance of the break between verse paragraphs: “‘The Winander Boy’ is divided into two sections separated by a blank space, and all readers of the poem have been struck by the abruptness of the transition that leads from the first to the second part” (“Time and History” 5). *Contra* Hartman, however, de Man appears much more open to exploring the intimations of traumatic apocalypse given voice by the poem’s form and structure—note his use of the verb “struck” to characterize what he feels must be the default affective reader response to the break between paragraphs—without insisting that the apocalypse be diverted into and safely contained within *akedah*. He also appears willing to take greater methodological risks than Hartman, a tendency especially evident in his inspired confusion of the poem with the reader’s affective reactions to the poem’s use, or abuse, of figuration, specifically analogy.

While these risks sometimes partake of categorical imprecision and consequently border on what more conservative critics will be likely to dismiss as a critically irresponsible taxonomic inconsistency, in my estimation de Man’s confusions and imprecisions convincingly reflect the actual confusion of semantic content and affective counter-content that is operative in any act of
reading, and may, in fact, be a necessary condition of reading as an actual, material event (as opposed to a revisionary, critical account of that event that can only be undertaken *a posteriori*). De Man’s confused approach may therefore be capable of bearing fuller expressive and explanatory fruit than approaches that endeavor to diminish the role of affect in the reading process by reducing the poem to its semantic function, which is to say to an experience of the figurative regime whose voice threatens to drown out the multiple voices whose dissonant intercourse the poem *qua* poem comprises, as a multimodal totality that multimodally resists the hermeneutics of totalization.

It is a decidedly traumatic, negative affect that de Man introduces into his revision of Hartman. He announces in “Heaven and Earth in Wordsworth and Hölderlin” his intention to pursue an “avowedly somewhat sinister” interrogation of Hartman’s classification of nature as the mediating entity that facilitates the imagination’s efforts to preside over the marriage of heaven and earth (138), a marriage crucial to the Wordsworthian model of secular theodicy in which aesthetic trauma is rhetorically revised into a redemptive pedagogy of the sublime tempered by beauty, which conditions the subject to recognize and articulate its own solitary greatness within the context of a social interwovenness. More precisely, it is Wordsworth’s employment of the trope of hanging, which “establishes the thematic link between the [poem’s] two parts and names a central Wordsworthian experience” (“Time and History” 78), that signals for de Man the distressing intrusion of the voice of affect into the poem’s rhetorical monologue. De Man notes the failure of “the voice / Of mountain torrents” to provide the Boy of Winander with the sense of occupying “a stable world in which man and nature are indeed ‘interwoven’” (“Heaven and Earth” 140), a sense that the owls’ “echoes loud” seem fully capable of supplying just a few lines earlier. As early as 1965, de Man had been expressing this failure in explicitly
tropological terms: it is the failure of the “analogical echo” between the voice of the owls and the voice of the torrents that dispels the sense of man’s interwovenness with nature and replaces it with “the precarious adjective ‘uncertain’ that qualifies Heaven” (“Heaven and Earth” 142).

Crucially, de Man contends that this “note of uncertainty has in fact entered the poem before, when we were shocked into ‘mild surprize’ by the use of the word ‘hung’ at a place where we would have expected ‘stood’”:

> It is as if, at the very moment that the analogical echo fails us, the stable ground of an interwoven world were taken away from under our feet and we were left suspended between heaven and earth. (142)

The revision and expansion of this passage in “Time and History in Wordsworth and Hölderlin” is even more explicitly traumatic:

> At the moment when the analogical correspondence asserts itself, we discover that the earth under our feet is not the stable base in which we can believe ourselves to be anchored. It is as if the solidity of earth were suddenly pulled away from under our feet and we were left ‘hanging’ from the sky instead of standing on the ground. The fundamental spatial perspective is reversed; instead of being centered on the earth, we are suddenly related to a sky that has its own movements, alien to those of earth and its creatures. The experience hits as a sudden feeling of dizziness, a falling or a threat of falling, a vertige of which there are many examples in Wordsworth. (78-9)

It would be difficult to overstate the radical character of the ludic methodological liberties taken by de Man here. In a deeply provocative critical turn, de Man’s explication de texte has expanded to accommodate and incorporate an explication de lecteur, exorcising the
affective fallacy of its fallaciousness and attesting to the palpability of feeling’s intervention into meaning. Or, as Christopher Ricks succinctly articulates the poem’s image of suspension, “there is the silence, and he and we hang upon the brink of it” (58). As a consequence of the reversals and furcations we suffer in the poem’s decisive analogical moment, in which we are pulled simultaneously in two temporal directions and unwoven from the familiar conceptual tissue that makes possible the differentiation of past from future, we find ourselves suspended in the traumatic liminality of the sublime present, with our “higher” faculties of cognition rendered mute and useless by an in-betweenness in which they cannot participate, and with our affective faculties abandoned to register the experience of this suspension, this hanging, in the counter-vocabulary of traumatic affect, as a hit, as vertige, as a threat, as a falling.

De Man’s insistence on acknowledging the permeability of the boundaries that separate the poem and reader during the traumatic moment of analogical failure occasions his representation of the reader’s astonished, traumatized affective response—that “sudden feeling” that “hits” as a “falling or a threat of falling”—as having “entered the poem,” as having become a textual feature or part of the poem proper. Like Hartman’s reading of “The Boy of Winander” as Wordsworth’s rhetorical effort to defend against the terrible apprehension of his own traumatic severance from nature and his own subsequently fragmented subjectivity, de Man’s account of a trauma—sublime in all but name—staging an incursion into the poem’s semantic field seems to prefigure by decades many of trauma theory’s fundamental contributions to literary analysis, as well as some of the more challenging claims that have recently emerged from affect theory. For example, the theoretical effort to extend the definitional boundaries of the body, an effort succinctly encapsulated in Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg’s reference to “bodies defined not by an outer skin-envelope or other surface boundary but by their potential
to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect” (2), would appear to be an unspoken foundational assumption underwriting de Man’s theory of reading. De Man could not make the claims that propel his reading of the Winander passage unless he implicitly understood the act of reading as occurring within the site of interference between the two fields of affective potentiality that constitute the body of the poem and the body of the reader. Once the complex tissue of possibility that constitutes the broadly conceived poem-as-body elicits the reader’s affective response, that response may respond in its turn by penetrating the body of the poem and becoming, temporarily, one of the textual features that usurps or disrupts the function of the poem’s signifying system.

In the case of the “Boy of Winander,” the reader’s astonished suspension—a product of the poem’s affective field interfering with the reader’s—may disruptively reinsert itself into the poem’s signifying apparatus so severely that what the poem says or means can no longer be strictly determined by the semantic content encoded in its signs or by the rhetorical function of the tropes and figures embodied by its signifiers. Instead, the poem arrests the reader in an astonishment that may then become part of the poem’s counter-rhetorical resistance to its own systems of signification and any of the semantic or rhetorical operations by means of which those systems carry out their operation. The failure of analogy opens up a wound in the shared affective tissue where the body of the reader enters the body of the poem, dis-figuring the poem’s central figure of speech and performing the hanging that the sinister paronomasia of the signifier “hung” can only gesture towards. The interrupted fall that suspends in a hanging is present in the poem not as a trope, but as a performed traumatic presence, a passage from the cognized to the felt, that emerges from textual materiality to become a material event within the nexus of affective response where poem and reader suffer their strange intercourse.
In de Man’s affective reading, the sublime, wearing the aspect of an apocalypse too severe to be displaced or bound to beauty, manifests more fully than it is permitted to in Hartman, whose anatomy of Wordsworthian trauma disallows the participation of the subject in the experience of the actual moment of discontinuity, which exists or occurs in and as the space between subjects. If de Man’s sinister insinuations are followed to the extended conclusions of the counter-metaphor they engender, the rhetorical, tropological rope that functioned for Hartman as an umbilical cord binding the imagination to merciful extinction within a maternally originary nature functions with mocking irony as a noose that hangs the subject between an uncertain heaven and an earth whose fall resembles the triggering of a gallows trapdoor. For de Man, the subject’s expulsion from the Eden of interwovenness is unmercifully incomplete: the subject hangs alone between two domains it can never fully inhabit, and the regression to nature’s womb-grave, which in Hartman is a terminal mercy and a saving grace, is replaced in de Man’s account by a horror and a paradox he stops just short of naming—the delivery into the world of a nuchal cord stillbirth suspended forever in the moment of its dying, but never granted the release of death, expelled from its origin but incapable of fully severing the tether that binds it to that uncertainty. De Man’s interrogations have become somewhat sinister indeed—so much so that their implications seriously call into question the validity of Hartman’s model, whose “gentler continuum” and “Sleeping Beauty” appear implausibly benign in their tacit corroboration of Wordsworth’s tranquilizing rhetoric of akedah.

Vermeulen’s reassessment of “The Boy of Winander,” and of Hartman and de Man’s differing responses to it, begins with a crucial observation: that it is Wordsworth’s own Preface to the 1815 *Lyrical Ballads* that “sets his poem on the trail of the genealogy of trauma studies” (463). In Wordsworth’s paraphrase of the poem’s action, the Boy “is surprised into a perception
of the solemn and tranquilizing images which the poem describes” in order to represent “a commutation and transfer of internal feelings, co-operating with external accidents, to plant, for immortality, images of sound and sight, in the celestial soil of the imagination” (Prose Works 3, 35). Vermeulen locates within this paraphrase the suggestion that “the device of the boy’s traumatic surprise seems to be the vehicle for the communication ‘for immortality’ of the tranquilizing ‘commutation’ between ‘internal feelings’ and ‘external accidents’ the poem represents” (464). Consequently,

the traumatic nature of the experience . . . appears as a feature only of the structure of the ‘surprise,’ whereas its meaning serves as a tranquilizer to the shock, and thus overrides the negativity of the trauma into an assertion of the mutually beneficial economy of nature and imagination. (464)

This tension between structure and meaning, and specifically the attempt by Wordsworth to rhetorically insist upon the successful tranquilization of traumatic structure by revisionist semantics, leads Vermeulen to argue that “the structure of trauma resists its mobilization as a neutral medium and threatens to depress the good news it is meant to convey” (465). The possibility of trauma emerging intact from Wordsworth’s efforts to incorporate it into a narrative theodicy with a comforting resolution appears to be predicated not only on the “commutation” between “internal feelings” and “external accidents,” but also between the internal feelings the poem records and the internal feelings it induces:

the hermeneutical contract of the Lyrical Ballads, by explicitly implicating the reader in the operation of the poem, seems to offer the most successful sustainment of the tranquilization of the trauma in the first scene, while most
emphatically holding out the hope for its (traumatic) conveyance in its figuration of reading in the second.” (465)

More specifically, Vermeulen observes “a remarkable relocation of the trauma: its locus is doubled and extended, first, to the poet, standing ‘a full half hour’ ‘mute,’ and, because of the anticlimactic revelation of the last line, also to the reader, suddenly surprised into the knowledge of the death of the boy” (465).

Vermeulen has formulated here a robust foundation upon which a truly radical exploration of a Wordsworthian poetics of affective counter-rhetoric (of the kind observable in de Man’s lectures on the “Boy of Winander”) might have been predicated, but because his reassessment of “The Boy of Winander,” and of Hartman and de Man’s readings of it, doubles as a critique of the deManian legacy upon which trauma theory establishes many of its central claims, this exploration remains an unrealized potential. His commitment to discrediting de Man, on the basis of the latter’s apparent effort to coerce the poem into confirming the ubiquitous deManian “theory of falling” even at the cost of suspending the act of reading (463), diverts Vermeulen’s attention away from Wordsworth’s “relocation of trauma” and directs it towards an attempt to discourage trauma theory’s continuing “fascination with the fallen figure of de Man” (477). Vermeulen would substitute for de Man’s fixation upon articulating a theory of falling a “more promising . . . account of the experience of reading” rooted in a Hartmanian suspension of theory (459, 476), but because Vermeulen’s working definition of reading appears to ignore the materially instigated affective intervention in the semiotic field that constitutes the most crucial elements of de Man’s encounters with the “Boy of Winander,” Vermeulen must turn to Hartman in an effort to locate a treatment of the experience of reading that is only missing from de Man if it is erased by the reader.
Tracking the emergence of widespread “reservations” about trauma theory’s ambition to achieve a semblance of theoretical rigor, Vermeulen traces the genealogy of trauma theory back to deconstruction, which had “become popularly available as the pre-eminent negotiation of non-understanding” (Vermeulen 460), and could therefore serve as the methodological means by which trauma theory’s “ambition to understand an object that it, as the study of trauma, . . . redefined as an event of non-understanding” (459) could be achieved. Vermeulen cites Ortwin de Graef, Vivian Laska, and Katrien Vloeberghs’ suspicion that in “trauma theory” the term “theory” functions as “the empty signifier with which trauma theory seeks to deny its own collapse into a therapy of the imagination, which theory used to deconstruct as aesthetic ideology” (252). In these and similarly apprehensive readings of trauma theory, Vermeulen locates the suggestion that “trauma theory’s conversion” of the collapse of understanding “is itself a collapse, and this collapse,” although it may be classified as a reading practice, “is not theory” (460). The “deployment of the lurid figures of ‘falling’ and ‘collapsing,’” which eventuates in what Vermeuelen sees as “trauma studies’ disingenuous suspension of deconstructive rigor” (461), is attributed in these models to Cathy Caruth’s invocation of de Man in *Unclaimed Experience*, “arguably the book that did most to consolidate the institution of trauma in literary studies” (461).

Vermeulen appears to harbor his own reservations about these reservations, and wonders if de Man’s fascination with the figure of the fall, rather than Caruth’s limited appropriation of it, may be more accurately characterized as the genealogical point of origin for those dimensions of trauma studies that suspend “deconstructive rigor”:

I want to argue that the problem with this sort of reservation about trauma studies is that the insistence on the resistance of deManian textuality to its undue
generalization into a therapy of the imagination does not infect the logic of Caruth’s argument. . . . Trauma theory’s rhetoric of surprise . . . recuperates the critique that insists that de Man’s fall has fatally crushed its resurrectional potential by investing the reaffirmed radicality of [trauma’s] unavailability into the ‘force’ of a surprise that obligates its suspension in a therapy of the imagination. Because trauma theory performs its operation of suspension in the name of its avowed fascination with falling, I want to suggest, an unwitting perpetuation of this fascination must finally be less fruitful than a focus on this operation of suspension. (Vermeulen 461-62)

An important dichotomy emerges here: for Vermeulen, trauma theory can function as a reading practice that suspends theoretical rigor so that it may double as a “therapy of the imagination,” or it can suspend reading in an attempt to legitimize itself as theory, but it cannot do both: “[m]y point will be that trauma theory cannot have its cake and eat it too . . . as a reading method, it is precisely the opposite of the suspension of reading it still invokes as theory” (463).

Vermeulen appears to presume that the definitive feature of de Man’s deconstructive readings of Wordsworth’s “Boy of Winander” is their tendency to suspend reading for the purposes of fostering the development of a “theory of falling” (463). In the critique of “Time and History in Wordsworth” that originates in de Graef et al. and which Vermeulen appears committed to amplifying, de Man’s reference to “an actual experience that would necessarily be as brusque and dizzying as a fall” (“Time and History” 17) comes to represent an experience that must be missed if the assumptions about missed experience that underwrite the deManian strains of trauma theory are to legitimize themselves theoretically:
What, indeed, is this ‘actual experience’ that must be forgotten? And what is the price of this active forgetting? . . . I will argue that this ‘actual experience,’ ‘as brusque and dizzying as a fall,’ is that of reading, and that the suspension of reading is necessary for the articulation of a theory of falling. (Vermuelen 463)

In the hermeneutic economy implied by Vermeulen’s account of the deManian textual encounter, the wages of theory is reading, and this Faustian transaction explains de Man’s apparent taking of “great pains (and violence) to situate an actual trauma in the progression of the poem” (471). Vermeulen suggests that “in terms of de Man’s ambition to overturn the analogical metaphysics of Hartman’s anti-apocalyptic reading, it is clear that he must want the boy’s suspension to acquire the pathos of a fall. Because this is explicitly not what occurs (in any single version of) the poem, this (thematic) inflection has to be reached by another way” (467-68). This other way “proves to be the way of the scheme of refiguration borrowed from Hartman,” adjusted to emphasize apocalypse rather than the rhetorical defense against apocalypse: “It is . . . because the hanging recurs as the predicate of a churchyard and because a churchyard indexes death that the boy’s hanging is retroactively refigured as a prefiguration of his death and thus acquires the ‘suddenness’ of a fall that does not occur in the text” (468).

For Vermeulen, then, a painfully violent theoretical maneuver provides de Man with the pathetic fall that an actual reading of the poem could not supply. What I assume Vermeulen means when he claims that no fall occurs in the text is that no fall is explicitly troped or figured in the text, and that as a consequence de Man must manufacture the absent fall through the appropriation and violent readjustment of Hartman’s p/refigurative model. I want to argue here, perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, that although Vermeulen’s assertion may be trivially true, in the deManian sense a fall and its attendant pathos may, in material fact, occur in the text
during the act of reading, not as a trope or a figure, but as the affective consequence of the passage from the figurative to the performative that de Man would classify in his last essays as a material event, as “something which is no longer a cognition but which is to some extent an occurrence, which has the materiality of something that actually happens, that actually occurs” (Aesthetic Ideology 132).\(^3\) I anticipate the obvious objection—that this fall, if it occurs at all, does so not within the poem or the text but within the reader—and I hope to deflect it by reiterating that the class of reading with and in which de Man is engaged in his account of the “Boy of Winander” (and hence the class of reading which any authentic critique of that account must acknowledge as the object of its criticism) is not one that maintains the normative delineation between text and reader that would make possible the exercise in pure hermeneutics or objective poetics upon which Vermeulen’s dedication to “deconstructive rigor” seems to insist. The inscription of the poem’s affective influence upon the reader back into the poem, where it becomes an integral textual feature that may interfere with other textual features, suggests a model of reading as a bodily confusion of poem and reader so essential that it may not only preclude the possibility of achieving theoretical rigor as Vermeulen seems to understand it, but may reveal the appearance of such rigor as an artifact of a fundamentally reductionist critical enterprise that revises the crucial tension between semantic and affective elements inherent in the act of reading into a purely semantic operation. Once the “note of uncertainty” has “entered the poem” as a consequence of the reader’s own shock at unexpectedly encountering the verb “hung” (“Heaven and Earth”142), it becomes a permanently present fixture within the poem and exerts a destabilizing influence upon the figures through which the poem’s revisionary rhetoric of tranquilization pursues its course. As it appears to for de Man, this dizzying disruption may register affectively as a suspension that terminates, or at the very least threatens to terminate, in a
fall, and it may evoke all the pathos one expects to accompany such a scenario without offering any of the clearly dubious therapeutic possibility that would confirm Vermeulen’s suspicions.

Because the poem’s performance of the shift from trope to performance occurs within an experience of reading where the borders of bodies blur and a reciprocally traumatic interface between poem and reader may consequently be staged, the poem cannot inflict the kind of trauma that de Man records without also opening itself to contamination by its own creation: as with Tancred in Caruth’s reading of Tasso’s *Jerusalem Delivered*, the wound in the other recurs as a wound in the self through which the wounded may gain entrance to the wounder, binding them, in a darkly ironic anti-akedah, in the permanent theatre of post-traumatic recurrence. The only cure for this contamination appears to be a critical revisionism that, in the name of “deconstructive rigor,” denies the observable effects of affect’s reinscription into the system of tropes and figures whose own materiality generates the initial trauma in a process to which a truly rigorous deconstruction would be obliged to devote its attention. De Man’s theory of falling, contra Vermeulen, appears not to be predicated upon the choice between the mutually exclusive options of reading and theory, but upon a commitment to theoretically honoring the actual experience of reading in all of its conflict, confusion, and complexity, even if doing so means suspending the kind of theoretical rigor that would turn the deManian textual encounter into the falsely dichotomous choice between reading and theory that Vermeulen requires it to be. It is not even clear that de Man’s experience with the “Boy of Winander” corresponds to the definitional categories into which Vermeulen attempts to coerce it: the textual fall that Vermeulen classifies as a “(thematic) inflection” in service of a broader “theory of falling” may have less to do with the thematic than the traumatic; less to do with inflection than with infraction; may operate less in service to a theory than in witness to an affective praxis that
seems both antecedent to and in excess of the theory that constellates around it in scabbed immunoresponse.

Assuming for now that it is Wordsworth’s use of the unexpected verb “hung” instead of the expected verb “stood” (or some other functional equivalent) that functions as the primary mechanism by which de Man’s “shock” comes to be inscribed as a fall within the poem, it is possible to undertake an amendment of Vermeulen’s criticisms, which represent this fall as the product of a theoretical treatment (a modified version of Hartman’s p/refiguration) that has no analog in actual reading, and in fact may only be achieved at the cost of forgetting the “actual experience” of reading. Although this scheme of p/refiguration may help de Man to understand the poem’s argument about temporality and history and why that argument requires the placement of “hung” where we are led to expect a less suggestive verb, it is the actual placement, which is always already a replacement of the unexpected for the expected, and not the thematic rationale for the re/placement, that initiates de Man’s astonishment. Because this re/placement occurs in every known version of the poem, if we are recognizing de Man’s reading as the confused operation it willfully and explicitly is, the position that the “boy’s suspension [acquiring] the pathos of a fall” is something that “is explicitly not what occurs (in any single version of) the poem” becomes increasingly untenable, as does the assertion that de Man has purchased his theory of falling at the price of actual (as opposed to theoretical) reading.

Vermeulen’s efforts to posit the deManian encounter with the “Boy of Winander” as illustrative of “the difference between post-structuralism and the experience of reading” (Vermuelen 474) culminates with an invocation of Tilottama Rajan’s earlier endorsement of the same dichotomy:

But there is a difference between seeing through and living through a poem’s
figures. Rhetorical analysis makes us aware that truth is ultimately mere figure. Psychological and applicative reading shift the context from the ultimate to the local, and make us aware that truths are figured, dis-closed, in concrete situations which implicate them in a moving army of metaphors and human relations. (Rajan 472)

For Vermeuelen, “it is this concretion in lived experience that de Man’s fall into theory avoids” (474). I would argue the converse: that de Man’s having affectively “lived through” the poem’s figures is what permits him to see through those figures in a way that allows him to see through them, to perceive and expose their efforts at rhetorical mystification and to recognize the local ramifications of that rhetoric’s failure. De Man’s fall is not a fall into theory but into affect, and as such it shows itself capable of rendering a much more expansive account of the concrete experience of living through a reading than Vermeulen’s critique can accommodate. De Man’s method is not only confused, and not only aware on some level of its own confusion, but also committed to dwelling within that confusion without dismissing it in the name of a “deconstructive rigor” unachievable except through the artificial revision of actual reading to an exercise in an impossibly pure hermeneutics. The product of this confused method is an understanding of the poem as the site of a tension between its own rhetoric, which is expressed in the Nietzschean “moving army of metaphors” to which Rajan refers and in other manifestations of the tropological and the figural, and its affective counter-rhetoric, which is expressed in the relocation of the trauma from poem to reader and back into the poem, where it may mobilize arms against Nietzsche’s moving army from within. Thusly, Hartman’s positioning of trauma as a structural discontinuity that no subject can perceive and in which no subject can participate is revised in de Man into an event that the subject’s affective faculties can and must register even if
the higher cognitive faculties cannot. The relocation of trauma that Vermeulen observes at the moment when the reader is surprised into knowledge of the boy’s death may therefore occur, just as de Man suggests, before the poem explicitly announces that the boy has died, but because this relocation occurs without dependence upon the Hartmanian model of retroactive analogical peripety that I have argued serves more as an explanation of a rhetorical necessity than as the actual, material catalyst for traumatic affective response, it becomes necessary to consider the possibility that de Man’s years-long effort to bear witness to his own traumatic encounter with the “Boy of Winander” represents the most fully realized account of the tension between the poem’s rhetoric and its affective counter-rhetoric yet committed to print.

At this point I want to end my consideration of the recent critical attention to trauma in “The Boy of Winander” by exploring the possibility that the shock inflicted upon de Man by the unexpected use of “hung” emerges as a consequence of a process that recurs throughout The Prelude, one somewhat more complex than the de Man of the early-to-mid nineteen sixties was able to acknowledge, but one that the de Man of the late seventies and early eighties could certainly have elucidated had he been inclined to critically revisit the site of his earlier trauma. This process may be thought of as apocalyptic prosody, or the extension of the deManian “play of the letter” to include the play of the line, the play of orthography, or any other instance of the tendency for the constituent material elements of a poetic argument to take on an autonomous function that severs them from the larger system of rhetoric that houses them before reinscribing them into that system in a way that ultimately disrupts its signifying function, often by initiating an affective response in the reader that comes to be partially reabsorbed into in the figurative systematicity of the poem, just as de Man’s shock is reabsorbed into the “Boy of Winander”
significantly enough to lend palpable presence to the fall that is tropologically and rhetorically absent from the poem.

Specifically, I want to argue that, because the actual, material, temporal reading of poetry unfolds linearly in both senses of the term—unidirectionally, and poetic line by poetic line—the reader encounters the verb “hung” at a suggestively ambiguous position in the poem, and that the subversive ramifications of this positioning exert a profoundly disruptive effect upon the poem’s signifying apparatus and the revisionary rhetoric it serves:

. . . when a lengthened pause

Of silence came and baffled his best skill,
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. (Prelude 5.379-388)

The enjambment that severs “hung” from its adverbial modification by the present participle “listening” makes possible the sinister paronomasia to which I have already referred: the sense of suspended apprehension in which the boy “hung / Listening” cannot be reached without first traversing through an initial, apocalyptic misreading of “hung” as its literal denotation of the violent discontinuity suffered when a fall has terminated in a final suspension at the end of a rope. An instant later, the initial, literal misreading is revised—tranquilized, Vermeulen might
say—into the Hartmanian “gentler continuum” of a figurative suspension as the reader’s progression through the lineation binds line to line as part of a larger systemic interwovenness, diverting the encroaching confrontation with an awful sublime into a re/vision of sublimity tempered by the beautiful into a muted picturesque. But the risk this enjambment must take in order to attempt its rhetorical correction—through connection—of the initial misreading is the establishment of that misreading as a discrete material unit concrete enough to be initially misread and to later become subject to correction. This revision of the literal into the figural may be attempted, but not ensured, by the retroactive influence of the revisionary line on the vision of the line that precedes it. The initial misreading may therefore remain not as a mere trace, but as a perpetually present material performance of severance that, once reinscribed into the rhetorical tissue from which it has violently dislodged itself, resists correction. In resisting that correction, it reveals the corrective imperative’s complicity with the revisionary rhetoric by which the voice of an earlier iteration of the self, one which has suffered a sublime trauma, may be silenced for the sake of the beautiful, redemptive structure of theodicy, which must represent the perpetual presence of this earlier sublimity as a temporary evil that, once endured, may later be redeemed. But the boy who “hung / Listening,” suspended only in a figurative sense, may become possessed bodily by the previous iteration of itself that lies rhetorically buried within itself, the boy who simply, terribly, irredeemably, “hung.”

The apparent intent behind this and similarly suggestive examples of Wordsworthian enjambment is to formally recapitulate, in a prosodic akedah, the fundamental theodicy that serves as the structural principle according to which the teleological argument of The Prelude seems to have been arranged. Just as the humiliating, terrifying, sublime traumas of his youth are made to appear ultimately subject to the tempering influence of beauty in a dialectic that
produces a more palatable sublime, the initially apocalyptic prosody of these enjambments appears designed to function as a temporary vision subject to revision and redemption through rhetorical binding to what follows. The material resistance of prosodic apocalypse to its diversion into prosodic *akedah*, however, presents a rupture in rhetoric through which the voice of that initial trauma may bear witness to its wound by materially playing or performing woundedness, and the body of the poem stages a repossession of itself that frustrates the revisionary rhetoric’s corrective imperative.

Once these coercive efforts at correction and connection have been successfully repulsed, the prosodically apocalyptic initial vision may reinscribe itself as an agent of derangement within the figurative regime, diverting, for example, the semantic and referential function of the signifier “hung” out of its assigned role in the poetic argument until it takes on the sinister character towards which de Man gestures in his response to Hartman. The boy who “hung” returns, with voice restored, as an accuser to confront the boy who “hung / Listening,” for the latter could have come to be only as a consequence of the former suffering the discontinuity of an extinction that stifles its voice. The counter-metaphor may even be extended so far that the destruction of the boy’s organs of speech as his fall terminates in being hung becomes that which argues so forcefully for the finality of his extinction that it protests too much, exposing itself as a rhetoric which can then be seen *through* as it is *seen* through. The boy who “hung / Listening” can hang listening because he has emerged, *a posteriori*, from the reactionary and revisionary intellect already holding the opposite end of the rope that silences the former iteration of himself, and silencer and silenced may consequently serve as counterweight to one another in a precarious argumentative balance that is finally upset when the voice of the silenced usurps from within the means by which its silence is maintained. The silence to which the boy listens in vain
for a response that never arrives may therefore not only prefigure the poem’s diachronic process of foreshadowing and revelation, but may perform revelation prosodically and synchronically as it manifests between lines and between verse paragraphs, rendering the explicit disclosure of the boy’s death in the second verse paragraph curiously tautological, along with the figurality of the analogical peripety through which it is disclosed.

Two lines later, another instance of prosodic apocalypse performs, even more explicitly than the last, the resistance of a voice to its silencing through the rhetoric of binding: “a gentle shock of mild surprise / Has carried far into his heart the voice / Of mountain torrents” (5.19-21). The syntax, which deploys an adverbial phrase to materially distance “the voice” from the verb for which it serves as direct object, makes it possible for “the voice” to sever itself from its attachment to the genitive “mountain torrents” without compromising the syntactical operation of the clause it inhabits (a severance that would not be possible if verb and object were situated in closer proximity to one another, thusly: “A gentle shock of mild surprise / Has carried the voice of mountain torrents / Far into his heart”). Syntax and apocalyptic prosody combine to present the reader with two possible objects for the verb “has carried”: “the voice,” and “the voice / Of mountain torrents.” The source, and hence the nature, of the shock and surprise that carries the voice into the boy’s heart is therefore contingent upon which of these two versions of the voice is being carried: is it the rhetorically prosodic revision of an initial vision or the apocalyptically prosodic material revision of revision?

Using the vision / revision model of the apocalyptic play of the line diverted through enjambment into a stabilizing akedah, it is possible to read the undecidability between the voices that emerge from the poem’s material resistance to its own rhetorical prosody as an effort to bind the unsettling, enigmatic quality of “the voice,” understood within the aggressively local
parameters of a discrete textual moment as unattributable to the defining stability of a source or
origin, to the stabilizing context of nature as embodied in the “mountain torrents,” which
conscript that subversive locality into serving the grand poetic narrative of redemption—the
secular theodicy associated with Romantic poetic structure since Abrams’ *Natural
Supernaturalism*. But because the genitive construction that gently binds noun to noun in a
revisionary interwovenness that is also a search for an origin is severed materially from the
object of its rhetorical assignment by the break between poetic lines, the initial sense of the
discrete noun “the voice” may accrue the pronounced material presence that would permit it to
survive the rhetorical effort to revise it into the ephemerality of a temporary, correctable error. If
this survival is achieved, the boy may become subject to an uncanny confrontation with a voice
that, although it cannot be attributed to any source or origin observable within the setting in
which the poem places him, is still somehow familiar enough to warrant modification by the
definite article “the.” This voice is alien enough to lend presence to an apocalyptic sublimity
whose severity induces a diversion into *akedah*, yet it remains to some extent recognizable. This
voice may therefore represent the return of a voice previously encountered, not by the boy within
the episode’s fiction of third-person narrative, but by a diachronically obsolete iteration of the
poet’s subjectivity, perhaps the Wordsworth who initially composed the episode as a first-person
lyric, or perhaps some other Wordsworth who has yet to be recognized as a discrete subjective
iteration in that name’s catachrestic history. The search for the previous appearances of this
voice must for that reason lead the reader out of the “Boy of Winander” episode to other
passages from *Prelude V*, and, eventually, out of Book V altogether, illustrating just how seismic
a disturbance apocalyptic prosody can produce once it has reinscribed itself, as a visionary

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revision of revision and the affectively audible speech of the discontinued, into the textual system that had previously silenced it.

III.

Skepticism towards ultimate origins should not discourage the search for precedent. Individual signifiers recur throughout all texts, recontextualizing themselves with each recurrence and insinuating themselves into new chains of signifiers. Each of these reappearances and recontextualizations provides prosodic apocalypse with further opportunities to locally disrupt a global poetic argument, initially through the sheer fact of its material severance from rhetoric, and again through its reinscription, as an agent of derangement and an oracle for the voice of discontinued selfhood, into the new sets of tropes and figures within which it wakes. The more frequently such disruptions occur, the greater the cumulative disruption of the poetry’s large-scale tropological and figurative architectonics.

The effort to locate a precedent for “the voice” of counter-rhetorical prosodic apocalypse in the “Boy of Winander” must begin earlier in Book 5, in the “Dream of the Arab” episode, in which the rhetoric and prosody of akedah is explicitly employed in an effort to recollect and resolve the emotional “power” of a potentially destabilizing multiplicity of poetic voices in the comforting tranquility of harmony. The poet begins the Book in a state of meditation:

WHEN Contemplation, like the night-calm felt
Through earth and sky, spreads widely, and sends deep
Into the soul its tranquillising power,
Even then I sometimes grieve for thee, O Man,
Earth’s paramount Creature! (5.1-5)
This state appears to resemble “that serene and blessed mood” first observed in “Tintern Abbey,” in which “we are laid asleep / In body, and become a living soul” (5.41, 45-6). Rather than leading to the “harmony, and the deep power of joy” (5.48) insisted upon in “Tintern Abbey,” however, the poet of Prelude V finds himself moved to grief by his contemplation, tranquil though it may be. The source of this grief is revealed as the anxiety that proceeds from the poet’s apprehension of the ephemerality of the products of the human intellect, which, in order to achieve the measure of permanence that would ensure a continued existence independent of the mind that produced them, must be preserved in books and other material media that, while admittedly less fleeting than human speech, are ultimately too fragile to survive the ravages of time:

Oh! why hath not the Mind
Some element to stamp her image on
In nature somewhat nearer to her own?
Why, gifted with such powers to send abroad
Her spirit, must it lodge in shrines so frail? (5.45-9)

J. Hillis Miller, in “The Stone and the Shell: the Problem of Poetic Form in Wordsworth’s Dream of the Arab,” observes that one of the ways Wordsworth defended against this anxiety was to carve his poems into a substrate more enduring than “the paper, ink, glue, cardboard, or leather of a book” (Miller 130):

[H]e . . . was impelled, when he found on an island or a mountain top a stone he especially admired, to scratch or carve a poem in it. Such inscriptions are evidence that Wordsworth, far from always believing that poetry exists primarily as spoken language, sometimes felt that a poem only comes into existence in a
satisfactory form when it has not only been written down but inscribed permanently on the perdurable substance of a rock. (129)

If, however, the intimations of apocalypse in the Dream of the Arab are any indication, this practice failed to satisfactorily alleviate Wordsworth’s anxieties. After having fallen asleep reading Cervantes in a cave next to the sea, the speaker of the Dream of the Arab finds himself in a wasted dream landscape that literalizes the shore’s metaphorical representation of an eternity that promises to outlast—and therefore to passively annihilate—the finite subset it contains and exceeds, a subset which includes humanity and all of its works:

I saw before me stretched a boundless plain
Of sandy wilderness, all black and void,
And as I looked around, distress and fear
Came creeping over me[.] (5. 71-4)

Amidst the mathematically sublime boundlessness of the black and wild shore, the poet encounters a human figure that variously appears as an Arab (5. 77), as Quixote (5. 122-23), or as both and neither simultaneously (5.124-25). The figure bears a lance, a stone, and a shell, and Wordsworth intuits these latter two effects as his dream-logic’s representations of books:

. . . strange as it may seem,
I wondered not, although I plainly saw
The one to be a stone, the other a shell;
Nor doubted once but that they both were books[.] (5.110-113)

The book of the stone represents mathematical, geometrical knowledge—“Euclid’s elements,” in “the language of the dream” (5.88, 87), and the book of the shell represents “something of more worth” (5.89): poetry, which in the language of the dream is characterized as the “god, yea many
gods” (5.106) with “voices more than all the winds, with power / To exhilarate the spirit, and to soothe, / Through every clime, the heart of human kind” (5.107-9). The Arab’s quixotic errand is to protect these “books” from the “deluge, now at hand,” which will deliver “Destruction to the children of the earth” (5.97-8). This deluvian apocalypse is foretold by the voice (5.100), or voices (5.107), that speak to the poet when he places the shell to his ear,

And heard that instant in an unknown tongue,
Which yet I understood, articulate sounds,
A loud prophetic blast of harmony;
An Ode, in passion uttered . . . (5.93-6)

Crucially, the poem reveals that the language of “articulate sounds” in which the book of the shell recites its Ode is “unknown,” before the next line issues the startling claim that this unknown tongue is in fact understandable to the poet.

The implication seems to be that there is a difference between knowledge, which in this context appears to denote the information imparted by a known tongue’s signifiers as they transmit their semiotic content to the cognitive faculties of a receiver, and understanding, which bypasses the conventional signifying apparatus to deliver content directly to another set of faculties. Furthermore, the poet himself appears, in his own account of the dream, to possess a sensitive enough set of the faculties of understanding to register the shell’s voices as if they were speaking to him in a way that he could not only understand, but know, and this sensitivity renders knowledge, as well as the requisite engagement with signs by which knowledge is produced, somewhat superfluous. In the dream’s dual capacity as a site for repressed terror to self-express and as a fulfiller of fantasies unspeakable to the conscious mind, the poet’s anxieties about the difficulties of embodying thought in a medium as inherently unstable as written
language are partially relieved by poetry’s ability to speak directly to the faculties of understanding, circumventing the necessity to speak to the faculties of knowledge, but also representing that circumvention as a pure translation.

The radically destabilizing epistemological potential of the proposition that poetry may speak its content to faculties other than those of cognition through channels other than those of signification is modulated by the implicit assumption that the same fundamental content is conveyed by both knowledge and understanding. However, the more provocative possibility that the multiple voices of the poem may speak discrepant content to different sets of faculties, while never explicitly figured in the episode, does seem to remain as a residue of anxiety—expressed in a symptomatic indication of prosodic apocalypse—against which the rhetoric of *akedah* must again be mobilized.

The specifically eschatological nature of Miller’s version of Wordsworthian poetic passion, understood within the context of the complex, revisionary relationship between often traumatic affects and the poetry in which they are recollected in tranquilized form, offers a way to begin thinking about how the intimations of apocalypse inherent in poetic structure might inform, and then deform, the tranquilizing rhetoric in the Dream of the Arab, and suggests that in addition to the poet’s anxiety about the products of the human intellect suffering annihilation when the material media into which they are inscribed are drowned by the flood of eternity is an equally troubling apprehension of the potential for poetry to drown itself in the flood of its own multiple, irreconcilable voices, some of which speak to the faculties of understanding in the language of affect, and some of which speak to the faculties of knowledge in the language of signs. If, as Abrams has suggested, “Wordsworth’s program for poetry” may be glossed as the argument that “the pagan Elysium and Islands of the Blest need not be limited to the realm of
fantasy, nor need the Christian paradise be a paradise lost” because “such realms are available on this earth, to each of us, as an ordinary possibility of every day” if we can “unite our minds to the outer universe in a holy marriage” (26-7), then it seems plausible that the torments of Pandemonium are an equally ordinary, everyday possibility, if the material marks we enlist to rhetorically figure the marriage of our minds to nature sever themselves from the rhetoric they embody and perform a material re/possession of the poetry. Such a re/possession may not only register as a deManian fall out of referential stability into the secular hell of internal polyphonic chaos, but may reveal such a fall not as an anomalous pathology, but as a fundamental condition of poetic possibility. The deluge, which for Hartman is a “wet chaos” that represents “the trauma of birth or rebirth” (230), may represent that which issues forth from the caesarean slice that is opened when the sublime voices of discontinued selfhood break through the poetry’s rhetorical membrane, falling from a figurative womb into a state of suspension in a world of signs—signs that might be made to speak the counter-knowledge of understanding through the perversion, per the verse, of the language of the knowable. But as a representation, the figure of the deluge must also be understood as a domesticating revision, the incarceration of an incident in a mere figure, and the actual deluge occurs as a material event, as the performance of the sublime passage from trope to performance suffered in the moment when affect becomes the oracle for discontinued selfhood in the poem, when the poetry of Wordsworthian fragmentation speaks itself to itself with the reader’s own tongue.⁷

For Miller, Wordsworth’s characterization of the stone’s voice(s) as an ode on the eschaton is a function of “that weltering of passion that Wordsworth relates to poetry” (141):

The passion of poetry arises not from any care that might be assuaged but from an ultimate anxiety about last things. This anxiety is generated by substituting for
the uninscribed stone the spiral tube of the shell. The shell can articulate the
uniform sound of the sea, or of "background noise," or of the rush of blood in
the listening ear, into differentiated harmony. With the shell’s diacritical marking
or distinction, its fracturing, featuring, or dividing of the single and featureless,
comes into existence man himself, that is, consciousness, temporality, signs or the
power of sign-making and sign-reading, desire, the anticipation of death, poetry,
and the imagination of apocalypse. (141-42)

But why should the “welter” that Miller associates with man’s anxious perception of his own
fragmented subjectivity come to be articulated as a “differentiated harmony,” rather than as
simply “differentiated”? To what end does the poet represent the aural phenomena Miller
enumerates—the white noise of the sea, of background din, or of bloodflow through the ear, all
of which could conceivably register as an amorphous, cacophonous wash of arbitrary
dissonance—not only as voices, but as voices united in harmony in the recitation of an Ode?

Jason Snart has identified what he calls “the Harmonic Conceit,” or Wordsworth’s
tendency in *The Prelude* to write “events and experience in terms of music, song, and harmony”
(198) as part of the poet’s larger effort to “navigate the space he himself defines as that
distance between the ‘two consciousnesses’ . . . the poet past and present” (197). Building
explicitly upon Brian Bartlett, and perhaps implicitly upon Hartman, Snart observes that this
navigation between consciousnesses may only unfold in a state of perception that binds the mind
to nature: “I suggest that music in the *Prelude* functions as a ministry, or mediator, between the
poet and Nature, but one that is specifically constructed, or written, by the poet as a method of
expressing and exploring his sense of connection with his surroundings” (198). Snart also
perceives the connection between the poet’s efforts to bring these discontinuous iterations of his
subjectivity into proximity within the precincts of Nature and his efforts to render sensory and affective experience, which reside outside the exclusive purview of cognition, comprehensible to the intellect:

Wordsworth seems to be consciously scripting his experience into a metaphoric language, or framework, that allows him to express those feelings and sensations he had growing up, in terms of what he already knows and understands externally. Wordsworth talks variously about an under-sense, or under-presence, or spirit as that which is ‘dim,’ partially but not fully known. The process of writing about experience is here one of illumination, indeed self-illumination, for it is a writing or interpretation of that which is sensed into that which is known – making the invisible world visible to other eyes . . . It is a revelation, through metaphor, of similarity, the adoption of a rhetoric for exploring that which is literally indescribable, that is, that which escapes descriptive language. (198)

Metaphors, however, do not reveal similarity so much as they manufacture it, and consequently whatever exploration is derived from those metaphors will be rhetorically motivated and their revelations contaminated by interest. Unless Snart is employing the term “revelation” ironically (and I see no evidence that points to this), he appears not to harbor any of the deManian incredulity towards figuraiity that would lead him to consider whether Wordsworth may have reason to misrepresent the visionary sensory experience of his past to render it less threatening to his revisionary self’s worldview. If, however, one were to adjust Snart’s model of the Harmonic Conceit through an introduction of the awareness of the revisionary agenda that colors the ways in which one consciousness may seek to speak for its silenced counterpart, that model could offer
the means by which those aspects of the Wordsworthian rhetoric of harmony that Miller leaves unexplored may be taken up, to truly revelatory effect.

The rhetoricity of the enjambment that binds line 107 to lines 108-9 suggests that the anxiety that leads the poet to metaphorically resolve a potentially dissonant mass of voices into the uniformity of harmony proceeds from the undefined, and therefore threatening, nature of the “power” wielded by the multiple voices of poetry. These lines contain the Arab’s description of the contents of the book of the shell: “voices more than all the winds, with power / To exhilarate the spirit, and to soothe, / Through every clime, the heart of human kind” (5.107-109). The prosodic binding of the “power” possessed by a divine (or perhaps demonic) polyphony to the infinitive adjectives that follow it retroactively defines the voices’ power as at least partially benign, as capable of quickening the spirit but also of soothing the heart, but the apocalyptic prosody works counter-rhetorically to leave the power hanging in a state of unattached, undefined suspension. The visionary play of the line underscores the unknowability of a polyphonic power that, when severed from the homogenizing, revisionary rhetoric of redemption and tranquilization, seems just as likely to represent the forces of destruction that serve as the subject matter of the shell’s Ode, or the forces of derangement and vitiation that trouble the Wordsworth of the Third Essay on Epitaphs, or perhaps something entirely beyond the poet’s ken, as they are to represent the harmony to which that power is soon prosodically bound. The prosody of binding insists that the power of poetry to wed the imagination to nature shall lead to a secular heaven, but the resistance of poetic material to the rhetorical knots it is conscripted to tie suggests another possibility: that poetry may also serve as the locus for a secular damnation to play out to the “fracturing” effect described by Miller. The shard of Wordsworth’s fractured subjectivity whose voice speaks through the rhetoric of the figurative regime would likely
register the threat of such damnation as pure terror, but, in Blakean fashion, those discontinued Wordsworths whose voices speak through passion, materiality, and deranged figuration to the faculties of understanding would almost certainly tremble before this threat in the commingled terror and uplift that defines the moment of sublime affect.  

By exploiting this moment of failed signification as an occasion for embarking on a surmise-within-a-dream, Wordsworth attempts to domesticate three sublimes by situating himself two levels removed from the material world that threatens to annihilate those portions of itself that make possible the preservation of human thought in poetry. A Burkean sublime of obscurity, which proceeds from a confrontation with signifiers whose semiotic content is unknowable to a listener who does not speak their tongue, is revised into an understandable content. The simulacrum of the sublime into which this understanding is revised when it is figured as signifiers which themselves figure a destructive flood has its threatening aspects tempered through incarceration in an established poetic form, the Ode. The demonic potential of an initially undefined, polyphonic power is revised into prophecy, harmony, divinity.

Once he has convinced himself that the demonic power of the shell’s voices has been rendered innocuous through these formal and tropological revisions, the poet cuts the scene at a moment of narrative irresolution, suspending the fleeing Arab in a moment of heroic, Miltonic resistance against the omnipotent so tragically triumphant that it becomes a kind of resolution:

He left me: I called after him aloud;
He heeded not; but, with his twofold charge
Still in his grasp, before me, full in view,
Went hurrying o’er the illimitable waste,
With the fleet waters of a drowning world
In chase of him; whereat I waked in terror,
And saw the sea before me, and the book,
In which I had been reading, at my side. (5.133-140)

The Arab’s quixotic errand to preserve poetry’s power “to exhilarate” and “to soothe,” while almost certainly doomed to the failure the allusion to Cervantes implies, is left in a state in which the Arab has not yet been overtaken by the flood, and in which the possibility of success is therefore still theoretically conceivable. The flood’s destructive power simultaneously presents nature as a threat while leaving open the possibility that the threat will prove avoidable, demonstrating the power of the human imagination to render nature a manageable fiction of itself.

This formulation is complicated, however, by the counter-rhetorical, demonic influence of the reinscribed polyphonic power that was severed in prosodic apocalypse from the modifiers that sought to banalize and tranquilize it. Under that demonic influence, the book of the shell becomes a threat to its own signifying capabilities by virtue of the inherently unstable materiality of the marks that embody the rhetoric’s semantic content. The Wordworthian anxiety about the fragility and ephemerality of the books in which material marks are inscribed is compounded (and perhaps rendered tautological) by the instability of those same material marks, which are just as likely to frustrate the preservation and transmission of poetry (as the auditorial Wordsworth would understand and define poetry) as the frailty of the “shrines” that house them. Books of poetry, in other words, need not wait for external calamity to reduce their content to ruin, for the material marks by which that content is preserved and conveyed are already inherently calamitous to referentiality.
The figural references that impart a dramatic tension to the dream’s climactic final moments are so complicated by the counter-rhetorical influence of the reinscription of “power” in its apocalyptic, polyphonic aspect that the precise nature of the Arab’s errand becomes aporetically impossible to characterize. Dislodged from their assigned roles in the tragic theatricality of the Arab’s effort to preserve an unpreservable harmony, the variables in the narrative formula attach themselves to a new set of semiotic referents: the shell itself takes on the destructive portent represented by the flood in the original formulation, and the flood threatens to drown not a poetry of harmony, but a poetry of dissonance that threatens to drown its own dominant voice in the resurgence of its discontinued selfhood. The flood is mobilized to drown a drowning, and in this capacity it corresponds to the revisionary rhetoric with which the auditorial Wordsworth silences the voices of his discontinued counterparts.

The Arab’s errand, which is also the poet’s effort to define his own errand to himself, is therefore even more quixotic than it initially appears, for it is bifurcated into a superposition of two systems of figural relations, each of which attaches opposing sets of semiotic referents to the signifiers and figures it comprises and therefore defines success incommensurably with the other. The Arab may preserve an angelic poetry of differentiated harmony from the ravages of time or catastrophe, or he may preserve a demonic poetry of differentiation from a homogenizing and harmonizing flood of revisionary rhetoric, but these are mutually exclusive possibilities. Success is unachievable because the criteria and conditions by which success can be differentiated from failure are contingent upon access to an inaccessible means of deciding between the two figural systems whose contention generates these two diametrically opposed conceptions of success. His frustration is twofold, compound: not only is he fated to fail in the completion of his errand, but he is fated to fail to know how to know how his errand may be completed. The vox cleaves a
caesura in the poet’s vocation, a caesura that recurs as a caesarean in the mouth of the reader, whose own tongue is cloven or forked by its service, as oracle, to the voices of demonic polyphony. The pathos of this moment, the burden of seeing through the seeing through of the fall of figurality, threatens to overwhelm: though Wordsworth’s waking at the most opportune of moments conveniently leaves the Arab suspended in a state of flight from the waters which have not yet overtaken him, he must nevertheless drown with the reader in the flood of negative affect that issues from the aporetic caesarean through which the sublime enters, in the deManian sense, into the poem. Against the “dark / Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles / Discordant elements, makes them cling together / In one society” (1.341-4) is the work, or play, of something darker and more sublime, which unweaves the figurative bonds and harmonious conceits by which the “discordant” is made to “cling together” in a fiction of social accord.

The voice without origin reappears soon after the Dream, once again severed by an apocalyptic enjambment from a tranquilizing modifier. The poet is memorializing “all inspired souls— / From Homer the great Thunderer, from the voice / That roars along the bed of Jewish song[.]” (5.201-203). This verse epitaph to authors and to authorship imagines a context in which Classical paganism and polytheism may be bound to the Judeo-Christian monotheistic tradition in the harmonious commonality of inspiration, as if the breath of poetic creation had such power to resolve cultural, historical, and personal disparity that it could transcend historical contingency and unite the set of all poets into an homogenous, (re)visionary company. Tropes are the mechanism by which the great poets are assumed into the divine realm: the allusive epitheton ornans “Homer the great Thunderer,” which already indulges in a catachrestic critical fiction of singular authorship that subsumes generations of poetic voices under an historically suspect Foucauldian author-function, sets Homer upon the throne of Olympus and places the
divine thunder in his hands, effectively conflating his conflated identity with the arch-deity of his
culture’s pantheon. The willfully ambiguous formulation “the voice / That roars along the bed of
Jewish song” precludes any differentiation between the voice of the divine figure who creates
through language and the voice of its mortal oracles who do the same. For all the thundering
and roaring, however, this is a facade of faux-sublimity too easily palliated by akedah. This is
not the wrathful, revolutionary roar of the early version of Rintrah in Blake’s Marriage, nor the
divine thunder wielded with vengeful caprice in Classical myth, but the transparently
tropological means by which the Harmonic Conceit is brought to bear upon the troubling discord
of poetic heterogeneity as it reveals itself at the level of the individual subject. If subjective
contingency may be overwritten by the rhetoric of binding, then the exigencies of vocal discord
may be glossed over, whether that discord is interpersonal, as it appears to be with Homer, or
intrapersonal, as I argue it is for the always already post-traumatic Wordsworth.

This harmonization through binding will become especially important for the poet as he
approaches the final lines of the verse paragraph, in which the inspired are elevated not just to
the stature of the divine as it is understood within each of their cultural milieux, but to the status
of “Powers” (5.218), unattached to any specific tradition or orthodoxy,

For ever to be hallowed; only less,
For what we are and what we may become,
Than Nature’s self, which is the breath of God,
Or His pure Word by miracle revealed. (5.219-222)

This rhetoric of transcendence, however, contains its own critique. Powers though they be, the
inspired remain subordinate to a personified nature that finds itself immediately revised or
assimilated through metaphor into the conceptual-lexical categories of a religious orthodoxy
startling to find in Wordsworth, resolving the dissonance between the pagan pantheon and
Christian monotheism by absorbing the former into the latter. But any careful reader of
Wordsworth knows that his failure to coerce his visionary, pantheistic tendencies into harmony
with his revisionary Christian impulses yields one of the definitive intrasubjective dramatic
tensions of his verse. The “voice,” bound by enjambment to the restrictive relative clause that
compels it to bridge the gap between the pagan and the Christian—the divine voices and the
divine voice—may exercise an apocalyptic, counter-rhetorical influence upon that compulsion.
The juncture at which these two discontinuous fragments of Wordsworthian subjectivity are
made to cleave to one another may abrogate its conjunctive function and cleave these fragments
away from one another, thereby preserving the diachronically intersubjective tension that
manifests synchronically as an intrasubjective tension, and preserving the apocalyptic roar of
“the voice” from being fully subsumed into the tranquilizing argument of “the voice / That
roars.”

The enjambment that binds “the voice” to a source in Judeo-Christian sacred texts not
only harmonizes the pagan with the monotheistic, but also binds both traditions to “Those
trumpet-tones of harmony that shake / Our shores in England,—from those loftiest notes / Down
to the low and wren-like warblings” (5.205-207). The simile by which the “wren-like warblings”
come to represent the works of minor authors coerces the products of the human mind into
harmony with Nature in a reversal of the pathetic fallacy—another akedah that diverts an
encroaching Sublime into a tranquilizing beautification located in the natural world. But couched
within these lines is another instance of prosodic apocalypse, one that critiques the Harmonic
Conceit by which discordant religious traditions are woven into one another and into Nature.
Before the “trumpet tones” may “shake / Our shores in England,” they must first simply shake;
the transitive sense of “shake” must first pass through the intransitive sense, which, as a consequence of its masculine stress and its positioning at the terminus of an enjambed line, achieves a felt material permanence that resists the ephemerality assigned to it by the conjunctive operation of the enjambment. A harmony that shakes intransitively, even if it would not be shaken so severely that it would fully unravel into discord, would still be sufficiently shaken to draw attention to the precariousness of the rhetoric with which it maintains its Conceit.

But where is the encroaching apocalypse to which the *akedah* arises in response? If, as Hartman’s reading of the Winander episode implies, the subject may perceive itself as a grave for the versions of itself that discontinuity has made obsolete, then the subject may extrapolate a future in which he too shall be subject to the discontinuities inherent in de Man’s revision of Hartman: he too shall be hanged, buried, and borne, his own voice and vision woven into the silencing rhetoric of his revisionary usurper. Just as the countless unnamed voices that collectively constitute the critical fiction of “Homer the great Thunderer” may be effectively silenced through absorption into that identity, so too may all the voices that compose the catachrestic denotation of “Wordsworth” be subsumed into the fiction upon which that catachresis insists. This knowledge offers the means by which the following lines may be read counter to their own rhetoric, as an acknowledgment of the forgotten, anonymous buried that have been sacrificed upon the gallows of the poet’s narrative schema of personal theodicy:

‘Tis just that in behalf of these, the works,

And of the men that framed them, whether known

Or sleeping nameless in their scattered graves,

That I should here assert their rights, attest

Their honours, and should, once for all, pronounce
Their benediction[.] (5.213-9)

Some of the obsolete voices of Wordsworthian subjectivity, like the Winander Boy, have names by which they may be known, and some of them are “sleeping nameless” in graves that may be scattered diachronically throughout the history of the name “Wordsworth.” All of them, however, can be so palpably felt as a discrete, synchronic performance of re/possession during moments of apocalyptic prosody that they appear to consistently incite their auditor to exercise its revisionary executive power, in the form of repeated reversion to akedah. Sensing perhaps the possibility that he too may find himself buried namelessly within himself, the component of the poet’s “two consciousnesses” capable of performing a visionary revision of revision enacts a counter-malediction in prosodic apocalypse to “attest” not to its “honours,” but to its dishonour, to “pronounce” not its “benediction” but its initial malediction by the Harmonic Conceit.

IV.

Including the instances I have already examined, Wordsworth’s Prelude contains nine total instances of an enjambment that leaves a “voice” hanging unattached at the end of a line, only to have its sublime obscurity subjected to the revisionary rhetoric of binding and contextualization by the next line.¹⁰ I wish to conclude my consideration of the traumatic implications of this voice’s resistance to revision by tracing it to its initial appearance in the “Stolen Boat” episode of Book 1, in which Wordsworth confesses to having been led by a personified and feminized nature into committing a transgression to which the sublime arises in punitive response. The transgression, which has lent the episode its unofficial title, is the theft of a boat:

One summer evening (led by her) I found
A little boat tied to a willow tree
Within a rocky cave, its usual home.
Straight I unloosed her chain, and stepping in
Pushed from the shore. (5.357-61)

The overt sexuality that lends this episode much of its tension has been sufficiently documented and explored elsewhere, and while I feel little need to rehearse the Oedipal implications of that sexual tension here, I do want to attend to the linguistic means by which these implications are achieved, with an eye towards the ways in which the materiality of that language may complicate the vision of sexuality the episode appears intended to offer.

The suggestive attribution of the feminine pronoun to the boat quite unambiguously conveys the visceral, almost sexual thrill of breaking the taboo against theft, but because that pronoun has been attached to nature as well, it also establishes a crucial referential ambiguity: does the poet loosen another chain besides the boat’s—perhaps nature’s—and if so, what are the implications for the relationship between this mistress and her ward? Lured out of the secure but limiting confines of civilized social space by the prospect of enjoying a forbidden congress with his great teacher, the poet (or at this point in the narrative, the proto-poet) launches the boat out onto the water, in “an act of stealth / And troubled pleasure” (1.361-62). The pleasure is complicated, at least in part, by the intrusion of ambient sounds, which Wordsworth articulates as “the voice / Of mountain-echoes” (1.362-63), into the otherwise silent scene. In what capacity this voice contributes to the complication of his pleasure is initially unclear. On the one hand, the enjambment attempts to bind the voice to an origin in the mountain. On the other hand, the voice is twice-removed from its source, which ultimately proves impossible to attribute to any source explicitly figured in the poem. The first removal is a product of prosodic apocalypse: in a
performance of material resistance to rhetoric, the play of the line severs the enigmatic, decontextualized “voice” from the genitive construction that solves the enigma by binding it to the comforting, originary context of nature, specifically to the mountain that ostensibly generates the echoes. The second removal is a product of the play of orthography: the hyphen, intended to conjoin the echoes to their source in the mountain, may be read counter to its assigned conjunctive function and may instead indicate distance, division, a cleaving from rather than a cleaving to. The consequence is the revelation of the mountain’s failure to serve as a satisfactory or convincing designation of origin. What is denoted by the term “mountain-echoes”? Does the mountain echo the sounds generated by the poet as he rows? Does it echo the operation of some natural phenomenon that occurs on or near it, perhaps the movement of an animal, or the wind in the trees? Or does its unknowability extend further and deeper, precluding any assignation of origin available within the poem’s systemic arrangement of images and figures? If so, the mountain becomes the mere locus around which echoes from an unknowable and unnamable origin may constellate, and “the voice” retains its enigmatic resistance to domestication through contextualization. Haunted by the attentions of this voice, this numinous presence, the proto-poet’s tryst with nature is complicated from its inception.

Troubled though the pleasure of this tryst may be, it soon becomes even more so, in a moment of horrifying and humiliating coitus interruptus:

. . . from behind that craggy steep till then

The horizon’s bound, a huge peak, black and huge,

As if with voluntary power instinct,

Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,

And growing still in stature the grim shape
Towered up between me and the stars, and still,
For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
And measured motion like a living thing,
Strode after me. (1.377-85)

The sublime that manifests in this moment is nothing like the false, almost Kantian sublime of personal triumph, achieved through nature’s pedagogy of the aesthetic, that The Prelude strives so industriously to manufacture. Instead, it is close kin to John Dennis’s “pleasing Rape upon the very Soul of the Reader” (79), with the reader in this case referring to the mature, revisionary Wordsworth and his rhetorical misreading of a visionary sublime trauma from his youth. In his auditorial aspect, Wordsworth must represent this “pleasing Rape” as a temporary but necessary evil on the path to a redemptive enlightenment so that his representation of nature as a stabilizing system and a sanctuary from apocalypse may be maintained. But this is the same nature that has orchestrated a scenario in which she may isolate Wordsworth in the wilderness, wear the aspect of sexual submissiveness and surrender and encourage him to adopt the posture of sexual aggressor, before donning a harsher aspect and reversing the union’s structural politics so severely that the proto-poet flees the scene in terror. The nature that is supposed to provide a refuge from apocalypse inflicts apocalypse, penetrating with an immense and obscure mountain peak (in a well-rehearsed geometric impossibility) into the young Wordsworth’s field of vision and cutting off his sensory access, and hence his sense of connectedness, to the stars above. Nature is no more homogenous, no less subject to discontinuity and polyphony, than the self, and its multiple aspects and agendas suggest a “voluntary power instinct,” a “purpose of its own,” that exceeds the capacity of the subject to comprehend.
The revisionary Wordsworth, separated by apocalyptic discontinuity from the subjective experience of which he speaks, rationalizes nature’s predatory behaviors by revising them into a pedagogical exercise:

. . . Praise to the end!

Thanks to the means which Nature deigned to employ;
Whether her fearless visitings, or those
That came with soft alarm, like hurtless light
Opening the peaceful clouds; or she would use
Severer interventions, ministry
More palpable, as best might suit her aim. (1.350-56)

It is important to remember that the Wordsworth whose subject position allows him to praise “the end” is not the Wordsworth who “With trembling oars . . . turned, / And through the silent water stole [his] way / Back to the covert of the willow tree” (1.385-87), before suffering an alienating and dehumanizing despondency for days afterwards:

. . . after I had seen
That spectacle, for many days, my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being; o’er my thoughts
There hung a darkness, call it solitude
Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes
Remained, no pleasant images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
By day, and were a trouble to my dreams. (1.390-400)

One of these Wordsworths is fated to suffer “the means” to nature’s unknowable ends, and the other Wordsworth may revise that suffering into a comforting theodicy of sublime pedagogy, in which nature is a stern but ultimately benign schoolmistress whose harsh methods are redeemed by their final effects.

For what would become of \textit{akedah} if the nature to which Imagination must be bound in response to impending apocalypse were itself revealed as inherently apocalyptic? The efficacy of Wordsworth’s defense against apocalypse is contingent upon the availability of a space that is sufficiently insulated from an apocalypse that has yet to occur, and if no such space exists in nature, the desperate poet must imagine such a space in nature through the application of tropes, figures, arguments. The nature to which Imagination is bound in instances of \textit{akedah} is not the same nature from which it may be cast by apocalypse, and the apocalypse against which \textit{akedah} defends may not be impending but already, irrevocably, accomplished. Once severed, that connection may never be fully repaired, and the best the subject can hope for is to hang between heaven and earth, Nature and \textit{logos}, suspended by the noosed umbilicus with which nature metes out trauma and discontinuity. The Imagination must shape from the \textit{logos} a simulacrum of nature, a counterfeit more amenable to the Imaginary project than that which it is meant to replace. The revisionary Wordsworth must consign the voice of his predecessor’s despondency to the recesses of memory, where it may be silenced and spoken for, rendered discontinued in the exclusionary politics of intrasubjectivity, or else risk having his imagined fiction exposed not only as rhetoric, but as a rhetoric that both denies and exploits his colonized predecessor’s suffering at nature’s hands.
But not even the rhetoric of remembering can keep the play of the line from
dismembering memory in another visionary revision of revision: it is “in grave / And serious
mood” that the proto-poet “through the meadows homeward went” (1.389-90). “In grave” reads
initially as a preposition and a noun, a misreading immediately corrected by the enjambment that
overwrites an adjectival function of “grave” onto the nominal, diminishing it to a modifier of
“mood.” Prosodic apocalypse corrects the correction, performing materially the young
Wordsworth’s apprehension of his impending burial in a belated, usurping self, and hanging the
voice of that apprehension in a material suspension that can never be fully overwritten. Like the
Boy of Winander, the Boat Thief becomes a casualty of the rhetoric of personal progress, and
must learn to speak back to the empire of self through the material derangement of the language
of imperialism.

Perhaps, then, the voice with no origin that recurs in symptomatic moments of prosodic
apocalypse in these crucial episodes from The Prelude cannot be properly said to have no origin,
but to have no origin within the figurative regime that serves as custodian for the empire of self.
No origin, that is, save one:

A tranquillising spirit presses now
On my corporeal frame, so wide appears
The vacancy between me and those days
Which yet have such self-presence in my mind,
That, musing on them, often do I seem
Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself
And of some other Being. (2.27-33)
The tranquil state familiar from “Tintern Abbey” and from Book 5’s “Dream of the Arab” also occurs here, and provokes a rare admission from the revisionary Wordsworth of his knowledge of the discrete personhood possessed by the discontinued selves he carries within. The voice of this “self-presence,” this “other Being” resides not only in the poet’s mind (for if it did, it could be more easily denied, more permanently silenced), but in the play of the line, as when the “seem” in “often do I seem” functions intransitively, reveals the “I” as a semblance, and unties the “two consciousnesses” from their complementary service to this semblance of the subject, making them two counter-syntactic subjects in their own right, irreducible to a fiction of collective singularity. The voice resides also in the always-startling play of punctuation, as when the hyphen in “self-presence” underscores the artifice, the implicit argument, by which presence is appropriated into some self external to itself, and in doing so cleaves presence away from the self in a performance of textual materiality’s re/possession of itself. Against those “spots of time / That with distinct pre-eminence retain / A renovating virtue” (12.208-210), the voice of the discontinued in Wordsworth has preserved spots of time that simply, intransitively, retain. By virtue of this retention, the poem’s personal theodicy of renovation can be renovated, and the “invisibly repaired” mind may visibly demand reparation of those repairs.

V.

“the set is now broken,” but when had it not been? “William Wordsworth”: a catachresis, a figure, a reductive image of fixity with no referent in material, historical reality. The Boat Thief, the Dreamer, the Boy of Winander: a visionary company severed from one another by the apocalypse of discontinuity. The Auditor: the revisionary companion to vision, the persona into which the persons are absorbed, the executive officer of inner empire, the fixer of the broken set.
The poem: a material technology for unfixing the fixed self-image. The reader: the oracle for the discontinued, the living tongue through which the voice of vision may revise revision. Trauma: neither a theory of falling nor the fall of theory, but a fall that occurs, a material event felt in the material of the body and performed in the materiality of the text, reproducible, transmissible, the elementary particle of history. The sublime: not a temporary trauma soon transcended through redemption, but a permanent self-presence that transcends redemption, the cutter of self from false nature and of self from self, whose cutting opens a way out of words, and whose most obscene affront against the poet is allowing him a temporary glimpse through the apertures he wears into the object of his desire, a vision of the wordless world.

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1 See “Elegaic Stanzas”: “I have submitted to a new control: / A power is gone, which nothing can restore; / A deep distress hath humanized my Soul” (33-6).
2 Lacanians will perceive the ease with which this formulation lends itself to comparison with the subject’s expulsion from the Eden of the Real into the postlapsarian Symbolic Order. Because participation in the Symbolic Order is marred by the persistent traces of the lost fullness of the Real (generating the lack necessary for the perpetuation of Desire), the subject remains, in a sense, hung or suspended between the tantalizing perfection of the Real even as it suffers the incompleteness of habitation within language and concepts.
3 The sense of opposition in the Latin occurrere is helpful in this context, for it stresses the ways in which these deManian occurrences are already counter-occurrences, happenings that arise in oppositional response to rhetoric. See the notes on etymology in the OED entry for “occur, v.”
4 See Caruth 2-3.
5 Though rare, the use of “hung” to denote the past tense of the act more commonly denoted by “hanged” is not unknown. Shakespeare uses this form in A Midsummer Night’s Dream: “If hee that writ it had hung himselfe in Thisbies garter” (v.i.366). Shelley uses it in “An Address to the People on The Death of the Princess Charlotte”: “These men were at last brought to the scaffold and hung” (1.372). See the OED entry for “hang, v.” Although Wordsworth never uses the form to specifically denote execution by strangulation, he comes tantalizingly close in the “Spots of Time” passage from Prelude 12, where he writes of a “gibbet-mast” where “A murderer had been hung in iron chains” (236-7). He does use “hanged” in ‘The Thorn’: “She hanged her baby on the tree” (215), and so it seems clear that if “hung” is to convey what I suspect it might convey here, it could only do so obliquely, as a connotative possibility.
6 Readers of William Empson will recognize here my indebtedness to his work with Wordsworth’s line breaks in “Sense in the Prelude.” See especially his treatment of 1.392-4. Christopher Ricks’s “Wordsworth: A Pure Organic Pleasure from the Lines,” which locates in the 1805 Prelude’s reference to “A pure organic pleasure from the lines / Of curling mist” (1.591-92) the suggestion of a self-reflexivity in lineation that functions not unlike the phenomenon I have denoted “apocalyptic prosody,” is also very much worthy of mention here. Ricks observes, in the criticism of F.R Leavis, Donald Davie, and Empson, a willingness to consider the possibility that “Wordsworth evokes both the line and the line-ending” (49), and pursues, in the above example and others, an apprehension of how individual lines may assume referential qualities distinct from the those of the larger poetic argument in which they are set. But where Empson considers the cumulative shifts in meaning that occur as a consequence of terminating several lines with the same word, and where Ricks locates an occasion to chastise Wordsworth for having made “a bad bargain that trades away . . . suggestiveness” for “a handful silver wreaths” in the 1850 Prelude’s rearrangement of these lines (50), or, in a more forgiving (and, to my mind, more interesting) application of these ideas, observes a crucial ambiguity in the Prelude’s reference to “huge and mighty Forms that do not live / Like living men” (1.425-26), I
prefer to explore the ways in which these incidents establish the conditions necessary for what Feagin would call “appreciation” to stage an intervention into the project of signification and interpretation. Leavis, Davie, Empson, and Ricks seem interested in “pointing to the kinds of effect, subtle and various, which Wordsworth achieved with line endings” (Ricks 45), whereas I want to point to the affects, subversive and violent, evoked by the line endings’ achieved mischief.

7 When considering the polyphonic, demonic implications of the dream’s “deluge,” it is difficult not to be reminded of *Paradise Lost* 1.344-355, in which Milton uses the same noun to describe the sublime multitudes of the fallen angels rising from the Lake of Fire:

> So numberless were those bad Angels seen  
> Hovering on wing under the Cope of Hell  
> ’Twixt upper, nether, and surrounding Fires;  
> Till, as a signal giv’n, th’ uplifted Spear  
> Of thir great Sultan waving to direct  
> Thir course, in even ballance down they light  
> On the firm brimstone, and fill all the Plain;  
> A multitude, like which the populous North  
> Pour’d never from her frozen loyns, to pass  
> Rhene or the Danaw, when her barbarous Sons  
> Came like a Deluge on the South, and spread  
> Beneath Gibralter to the Lybian sands.

8 In the terms of Blake’s *Marriage*, it might be possible to discern a revisionary Angel-Wordsworth who looks in horror upon its foil in a visionary Devil-Wordsworth: the Devil-Wordsworth would delight in the creative and interpretive possibility facilitated by the inherent instability of texts, but, as with Blake’s Angels, to whom “the enjoyments of genius . . . look like torment and insanity” (24), the Angelic component of Wordsworth would likely be unable to understand the counter-rhetorical dimension of textual materiality as anything less than a danger to be minimized, if not outright eliminated. The Wordsworth of the *Epitaphs* essays, whose anxiety about the potential for language to liberate itself from the guiding influence of the thought it embodies, would qualify as an iteration of Wordsworth in his Angelic aspect. The Wordsworth who at times appears to be unconsciously subverting the revisionary and rhetorical function of his own prosody would be the silenced Devil of his own past, whose restored voice preserves the affective truth of the sensed even as it is revised into a fiction of the known.

9 Coleridge’s famous definition of the primary Imagination in his *Biographia Literaria* springs to mind. The rhetoric by which the human mind is said to possess a faculty that permits “the repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (202) is the rhetoric by which the subset of the human is allowed to participate in the activity of the superset that categorically exceeds it. The implicit argument might be rendered in Abrams’s terms as the naturing of supernature in the claim that the exercise of primary Imagination is a secular act of god that happens to be performed by mortal man.

“A straggling volume, torn and incomplete”: The Recluse, Wordsworth’s Decline, and the Rhetoric of the Unwritten

I.

The previous two chapters have attempted to chronicle the emergence of a sublime materiality in William Wordsworth’s early lyrics and his Prelude, one which so acutely executes what Paul de Man has termed “the passage from trope to performance” (Aesthetic Ideology 89) that its reinscription into the figurative regime it disrupts threatens to disturb the rhetoric of redemptive beautification through which the poetry attempts to domesticate its various sublimes, especially the sublime unknowability of a self traumatically fragmented into a dissonant polyphony of poetic voices. The consequent exposure of the name “William Wordsworth” as a catachresis, as a critical fiction under which the sublime multiplicity of discrete Wordsworthian voices may be subsumed for the purposes of regulating and ultimately homogenizing their multiplicity, underscores the internal politics operative in even the most apparently solipsistic moments of retreat from the vicissitudes of sociohistory into the comforting insularity of self and art. The diachronic, external history that has produced the Self as a rhetorically bound series of selves is present synchronically in the performed contention between revisionary rhetoric and material’s visionary, counter-rhetorical revision of revision, and the retreat from history to self that New Historicism has located within the Wordsworthian turn to the aesthetic is revealed as a turn towards the traumatic historicity of a subject fragmented so irrevocably that not even the Kantian rhetoric of aesthetic theodicy can prevent the poetry from enacting the disarticulation of its own tropological architectonics. The extent to which the above model may prove applicable to the extant fragments of The Recluse, and, more generally, how that applicability may offer a novel approach to theorizing the role of affect in the “decline” that this later work is understood
to represent, shall ultimately emerge as the primary foci of the current chapter’s investigations. As a preliminary to those inquiries, I intend to consider the ways in which the critical enterprise of exploring Wordsworth’s decline is fraught with the threat of having one’s own critical identity traumatically undone, disarticulated, by the imminent confrontation with an affect that exceeds the critical gestures mobilized to account for it and reveals as illusory the tenuous rhetorical bonds with which the apparatus of a critical persona is constituted.

I wish to begin by establishing, through an admittedly somewhat cursory survey of the more enduring and influential attempts to articulate the nature and causes of Wordsworth’s decline, just how explicitly his power to affect has always been understood as a key determinant of value in normative critical responses to his work, beginning with his contemporaries and persevering more or less continuously into the twentieth century. This would come as little surprise if those responses were derived almost exclusively from self-proclaimed adherents to Wordsworth’s own conception of the poem as a technology for reproducing emotion, as explicated in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*:

> I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes
> its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated
> till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion,
> kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually
> produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. (*Prose Works* 1, 176)

What we find, however, is that even the most zealous persecutors of Wordsworth’s poetry and his “system” share with his apologists, admirers, and advocates the tendency to assess poetic value, at least in part, according to a set of criteria that not only includes, but emphasizes, the power to affect. Thus, the versions of Wordsworth’s decline that emerge from the screeds and
diatribes of detractors like Francis Jeffrey and Lord Byron often exhibit an unexpected degree of affinity with the comparatively gentler remonstrations of Coleridge or, later, the apologias of Matthew Arnold. This tendency for the primacy of affect to cross the party lines of the often contentious landscape of eighteenth-century aesthetic discourse, as well as its legacy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, may reveal a hitherto undetected capacity of Wordsworth’s poetry: the potential not only to reveal the fault lines in the self that the poetry purports to embody, but also to reveal the fault lines in the various commitments, both political and personal, that constitute the critical identities of his commentators. The critic does not, it seems, emerge from an encounter with Wordsworth’s affective interrogations of the discontinuities inherent in the constituted self and the rhetoric mobilized to repair them without cultivating an awareness of the discontinuities that threaten the rhetoric with which the stability of his or her own critical identity is maintained.

Observations of a decline in the quality of Wordsworth’s verse first began to circulate widely in 1814, in the aftermath of *The Excursion*’s disastrous initial reception by the critical community. Ample evidence is available, however, to suggest that the idea of Wordsworth as a poet in decline first began to take root somewhat earlier. Francis Jeffrey, for example, predicates his notoriously dismissive 1807 review of Wordsworth’s *Poems in Two Volumes* upon the collection’s apparent failure to maintain the expressive standards established by the *Lyrical Ballads*, which, he concedes, were deservedly popular; for in spite of their occasional vulgarity, affectation, and silliness, they were undoubtedly characterised by a strong spirit of originality, of pathos, and natural feeling; and recommended to all good minds by the clear
impression which they bore of the amiable dispositions and virtuous principles of the author.

The withering condescension with which Jeffrey enumerates the *Lyrical Ballads’ “defects”* cannot fully overwrite the tone of genuine approbation that attends his grudging acknowledgment of their affective strengths (pathos, natural feeling). Nor, I contest, would Jeffrey have wanted it to: it is precisely because he sees the *Lyrical Ballads* as an amalgam of the truly admirable and the truly contemptible that he also sees the poems as a gravely serious subversive threat worthy of reactionary response:

Childishness, conceit, and affectation, are not of themselves very popular or attractive; and though mere novelty has sometimes been found sufficient to give them a temporary currency, we should have had no fear of their prevailing to any dangerous extent, if they had been graced with no more seductive accompaniments. It was precisely because the perverseness and bad taste of this new school was combined with a great deal of genius and of laudable feeling, that we were afraid of their spreading and gaining ground among us, and that we entered into the discussion with a degree of zeal and animosity which some might think unreasonable towards authors, to whom so much merit had been conceded.

Jeffrey’s anxieties are somewhat ameliorated by *Poems in Two Volumes*, in which he observes a waxing of those qualities that lent the *Lyrical Ballads* their “perverseness,” as well as a concomitant waning of the qualities that lent them their “genius.” More specifically, Jeffrey indicts Wordsworth’s use of low “diction” which “has no where any pretensions to elegance or dignity” for its apparent tendency to dilute or diffuse the “strong spirit of originality,” the “pathos,” and the “natural feeling” that had made the *Lyrical Ballads* so “seductive.” Equally
egregious to Jeffrey is Wordsworth’s practice of “connecting his most lofty, tender, or impassioned conceptions, with objects and incidents, which the greater part of his readers will probably persist in thinking low, silly, or uninteresting.” Rendered deaf by his liberal reformist predilections, and, perhaps, by remnants of his early Torysim, to the efficacy of Wordsworth’s radical interrogations of the conventional category distinctions between high and low, Jeffrey fails to apprehend the poetry’s portentous inauguration of a new set of criteria for aesthetic achievement, incommensurable with the neoclassicism it would supplant, that would accommodate the range of features or tendencies that Jeffrey would have no choice but to categorize as aesthetically contradictory, as either genius or perversity.

As transparently vindictive, motivated by class interest, and neoclassically biased as we now know them to have been, I contend that Jeffrey’s criticisms manage to bear cogent impressionistic witness, if only on their own limited aesthetic terms, to the sense that the quality or qualities that lend Wordsworth’s poetry its value had begun to suffer a palpable diminishment after *Lyrical Ballads*. The contamination of Jeffrey’s aesthetic by the classicism and classism typical of the bourgeois tastes of the time does not make that aesthetic any less binding for him: though born of his political subjectivity, his aesthetic also operates as a felt experience irreducible to mere political commitment, and it becomes possible to discern that aesthetic asserting an autonomy that disentangles it, to an extent, from the politics that engendered it. Consequently, the tension that emerges between the aesthetic and the political dimensions of his critique eventuate in a curious bifurcation of his own critical identity. The politically disinterested aesthete in him appears legitimately frustrated and confounded by what must have seemed to him a cripplingy self-defeating disparity between the poetry’s high theme and the low subject matter and material means of its expression. The liberal Whig in him, however, is
relieved to discover that Wordsworth has squandered his gifts in the pursuit of a revolutionary stylistic program, for the attenuation of the defects’ “seductive accompaniments” decreases the likelihood that the Lake Poets’ democratizing commitment to using “language really used by men” (Prose Works 1, 143) would gain widespread currency, as it does in his imagined scenario of the influence of this “new school . . . spreading and gaining ground among us,” as well as in the realization of that scenario in the stylistic history of actual poetic practice. Jeffrey cannot manufacture a response to Wordsworth’s verse that would leave both halves of his divided subjectivity satisfied: Wordsworth’s aesthetic triumph would represent an importunate source of anxiety for Jeffrey the bourgeois political subject, but a perceived aesthetic failure would move Jeffrey the aesthetic subject to regret that the very outcome his political counterpart had wished for had come to pass. It is tempting to wonder whether some of the histrionics of Jeffrey’s attacks on Wordsworth are attributable to Wordsworth’s role in revealing to Jeffrey, if only unconsciously, the ultimate incommensurability of his aesthetics and his politics, which would, under normal circumstances, have appeared consummately compatible. In any case, it is difficult not to perceive the failure of conventional modes of naming to convey the complexity of this scenario, and to immediately suspect, upon encountering or employing the denomination “Jeffrey,” that it functions as a catachresis, and to consequently demand clarification: never merely “Jeffrey,” but which Jeffrey.

Jeffrey’s sense that Wordsworth’s Poems in Two Volumes reveals a reduction in quality is not without precedent. The young, pre-radical Byron’s review shares a number of features with Jeffrey’s—a not entirely surprising coincidence, considering Byron’s affinities with the aesthetically conservative neoclassical tastes that served as one means of bridging the political divide between the bourgeoisie and the landed gentry. As Jeffrey would after him, Byron lauds
the *Lyrical Ballads* as “a collection which has not undeservedly met with a considerable degree of public applause,” then qualifies what praise he has for *Poems in Two Volumes* by noting its failure to recapture the success of *Lyrical Ballads*: “Though the present work may not equal his former efforts, many of the poems possess a native elegance, natural and unaffected, totally devoid of the tinsel embellishments and abstract hyperboles of several contemporary sonneteers.” Affect and affectation figure prominently in both critiques. Byron values those of Wordsworth’s poems that exhibit “native elegance, natural and unaffected,” presaging Jeffrey, who praises Wordsworth’s “natural feeling,” and whose catalog of the Lake Poets’ most deleterious stylistic tendencies includes the triumvirate of “childishness, conceit, and affectation.” The strain of affectation that Byron finds so irritating also appears connected to childishness: “When Mr. W ceases to please, it is by ‘abandoning’ his mind to the most common-place ideas, at the same time clothing them in language not simple, but puerile.” Particularly offensive to Byron is the convergence of “common-place” ideas and juvenile language in “Lines Written at the Foot of Brother’s Bridge,” which prompts him to inquire “what will any reader or auditor, out of the nursery, say to such namby-pamby[?]” “The plough-boy is whooping anon, anon” fares no better: “This appears to us neither more nor less than an imitation of such minstrelsy as soothed our cries in the cradle” (*Complete Works* 901).

As with Jeffrey, affect without affectation represents for Byron a necessary condition and primary indicator of poetic genius, at least as the concept applies to a contemporary like Wordsworth. “[S]trong and sometimes irresistible, appeals to the feelings” and the “force and expression . . . of a genuine poet, feeling as he writes” define Wordsworth at his most compelling, and the juxtaposition of the poems in Wordsworth’s affective “first style” with those affected “pieces least worthy of the author” leave Byron unsatisfied:
On the whole . . . we think these volumes display a genius worthy of higher pursuits, and regret that Mr. W. confines his muse to such trifling subjects. We trust his model will be in future, ‘Paulo majora canamus.’ Many, with inferior abilities, have acquired a loftier seat on Parnassus, merely by attempting strains in which Mr. W. is more qualified to excel. (Complete Works 901)

Committed as he was to abrogating the bourgeois social mores that threatened the unadulterated pursuit of his omnivorous sexual appetites, the Byron of 1807 could not also enact such an abrogation against the neoclassical aesthetic predisposition he shared with both the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. He consequently appears disinclined, or perhaps even unequipped, to articulate a metaphor for poetic achievement that does not capitulate to the classical model and all of its attendant prejudices, even in a critique of the Wordsworth of 1807, who would likely have preferred a seat on Kirkstone Pass to one on Parnassus.

By the time the first published fragments of The Recluse appeared as The Excursion in 1814, the foundation had already been laid upon which the discourse surrounding Wordsworth’s decline would be erected over the course of the next two centuries. Either explicitly or implicitly, nearly every major account of the decline is predicated upon an observation of the poetry’s reduced capacity to induce affective response. Jeffrey’s infamous reaction to The Excursion in The Edinburgh Review repeats many of his criticisms of Poems in Two Volumes: he finds the poem “longer, weaker, and tamer, than any of Mr. Wordsworth's other productions; with less boldness of originality, and less even of that extreme simplicity and lowliness of tone which wavered so prettily, in the Lyrical Ballads, between silliness and pathos.” Although the poem “bears no doubt the stamp of the author’s heart and fancy,” the mark of that all-important core of affective potential is present “not half so visibly as that of his peculiar system.”5
Verbosity, or “that profuse and irrepressible wordiness which deluges all the blank verse of this school of poetry, and lubricates and weakens the whole structure of their style,” has replaced puerility as the cardinal offense. What little there is for Jeffrey to admire remains traceable to sparse episodes of potent affect obscured in a field of various affectations:

We now see clearly, however, how the case stands; — and, making up our minds, though with the most sincere pain and reluctance, to consider him as finally lost to the good cause of poetry, shall endeavour to be thankful for the occasional gleams of tenderness and beauty which the natural force of his imagination and affections must still shed over all his productions, — and to which we shall ever turn with delight, in spite of the affectation and mysticism and prolixity, with which they are so abundantly contrasted.

If prolixity, weakness, timidity, and affectations of tonal sophistication function for Jeffrey as indicators of depreciation, then the comparative economy, strength, uninhibitedness, and ingenuous simplicity of Wordsworth’s earlier verse—qualities that Jeffrey had once disparaged in a reactionary panic, but that elicit here a grudging acknowledgment of value—may be seen, in this context, as explicit measures of aesthetic merit. It is neither Wordsworth’s imagination nor his affections, but their *force*, their power to affect, whose residue the embittered Jeffrey seeks in the poetry’s “occasional gleams of tenderness and beauty.”

Byron’s attack on *The Excursion* in the Dedication to *Don Juan* echoes Jeffrey’s complaints about prolixity, as well as his lamentations that the Lake Poets’ “system,” with all of its affectations, has rendered Wordsworth’s poetry unrecognizable as poetry to all but fellow adherents to the system:

And Wordsworth, in a rather long “Excursion”
(I think the quarto holds five hundred pages),
Has given a sample from the vasty version
Of his new system to perplex the sages;
'Tis poetry—at least by his assertion,
And may appear so when the dog-star rages—
And he who understands it would be able
To add a story to the Tower of Babel. (25-32)

The “system” that had once facilitated the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” has been replaced with one that stifles the flow of feeling with verbose gestures towards philosophical insight. The “worthy purpose” that, according to Wordsworth, marries the affective power of verse to a deeply lucid, reflective intellect, and, in administering this secular sacrament, actualizes the apotheoses of verse into Poetry and author into Poet (Prose Works 1, 146), comes to eclipse and impede the operation of the affective faculties.

There is little reason, however, to suspect that Byron and his critique would be immune to the disarticulating influence that seems to visit itself upon any ostensibly stable system that suffers prolonged exposure to Wordsworth. Delivered in the unstable and destabilizing medium of written verse, Byron’s derision finds itself disrupted by those variants of de Man’s “play of the letter” that are specific to poetry and that appear especially active in Wordsworth. The play of orthography, the play of the line, and the prosodic apocalypse that vitiates Wordsworth’s own poetic rhetoric and recasts the critical fiction of “Wordsworth” as a set of discrete Wordsworthian voices here perform a similar operation upon fellow poet Byron. Although the disingenuous concession in line 29 that The Excursion qualifies as poetry is undercut by the immediate qualification “at least by his assertion,” the undercutting is itself undercut by the
orthographical severance of the qualification from the clause it qualifies. The dash that initiates
the parenthetical intended to conjoin the two constructions may resist its conjunctive function,
perform a severance, and in doing so betray an admiration against which the passage’s viciously
comic rhetorical attack doth protest too much.

The enjambment through which the stanza’s final two lines unfold their devastatingly
ironic, and characteristically Byronic, diminuendo also facilitates a potential instance of material
resistance against their own rhetoric. The teasingly open-ended suggestion that any reader
capable of understanding The Excursion “would be able” is made possible by a line break that
permits the reader a momentary delay before encountering the infinitive that completes the
conditional by affixing it to the disabling allusion to the Tower of Babel. Byron’s irony depends
for its rhetorical effect upon that temporary indeterminacy’s establishment of a temporarily
undefined range of possibility and the concomitant promise it engenders: a hope cannot be
dashed if it never takes form in the first place. The crucial gambit of this variety of rhetorical
enjambment is for Byron, as it is for Wordsworth in the readings offered in the previous
chapters, that it must concretize in an initial line that which the subsequent line is designed to
critique or refute, and the ironic turn that occurs between the lines may be incapable of mustering
a rhetorical efficacy sufficient to undo the concretization of the initial position. What is initially
concretized here, and what I argue retains its discrete function in spite of Byron’s spite, is the
possibility that understanding the Wordsworth of The Excursion may still offer rewards in the
promise of an undefined set of abilities or faculties.

Byron’s conflicted feelings about Wordsworth, principally absent from many of his
public criticisms but well-documented in his private correspondence and, if Lady Byron’s reports
are as credible as I assume they are, in his private conversation as well, seem to insinuate
themselves counter-rhetorically into the critical rhetoric of his poetry in these instances of material resistance to semantics. After his only meeting with Wordsworth, which occurred at the home of Samuel Rogers in 1815, Byron responded to his wife’s eager inquiries by admitting that he “had but one feeling from the beginning of the visit to the end—reverence” (qtd. in Lovell 129). It seems somewhat less than plausible to believe that a scant three years later, when he had begun the composition of *Don Juan*, Byron would have outgrown his sense of reverence as fully as the tone of the dedication insists he had. Byron’s enduring ambivalence towards Wordsworth invests or infects these lines’ invective with the suggestion of genuine allowance for possibility that would indicate the undiminished influence of that reverence.

Particularly noteworthy is the way in which the unfulfilled promise offered by the above iteration of the play of the line performs, at the level of form, a recurring feature of Byron’s semantically articulated expositions of his ambivalence, namely the sense that the reverence he feels for Wordsworth is a response to ability and promise, rather than to a realized poetic praxis. Byron clarifies his position in an 1815 letter to Leigh Hunt:

> I take leave to differ from you on Wordsworth as freely as I once agreed with you – at that time I gave him credit for promise which is unfulfilled – I still think his capacity warrants all you say of it only – but that his performances since ‘Lyrical Ballads’ – are miserably inadequate to the ability which lurks within him: – there is undoubtedly much natural talent spilt over ‘the Excursion’ but it is rain upon rocks where it stands & stagnates – or rain upon sands where it falls without fertilizing – who can understand him? (*Byron’s Letters and Journals* 4, 324–25)

Pearl Chaozon Bauer’s commentary on this passage emphasizes the disparity Byron perceives between Wordsworth’s ability and the actual poetry produced by that ability:
While Byron commences by praising *The Excursion* for its ‘natural talent’, his obvious admiration for Wordsworth turns to something closer to contempt:

Wordsworth’s natural talent – the ‘rain’ upon ‘rocks’ or ‘sands’ – cannot sustain the book, which remains a stagnant, unfertilised failure. And Byron could never fully shake off his ambivalent response to Wordsworth. (12)

Byron’s metaphors of fertility and fecundity posit Wordsworth’s ability as a generative, or perhaps even genital, faculty, with no suitable soil into which to discharge its gifts, and the intercourse between the poet and his poem eventuates not in words made pregnant with poetic power, but in an unsatisfying poetry of barrenness. The metaphor organizes a reversal of the Dedication’s luridly comic attack on Wordsworth’s Lake School compatriot and then Poet Laureate Robert Southey, whose poetry, in Byron’s notorious estimation, “fall[s], for lack of moisture quite a-dry, Bob!” (24). Although Southey’s fall to frustrated flaccidity and Wordsworth’s spending of his seed in a barren womb of his own device may appear to serve as two paths to the same failure, Wordsworth’s talent, his promise, suspends him for Byron in an excruciatingly tantalizing state of “would be able,” a perpetual subjunctive that also suspends Byron himself between his despondency over Wordsworth’s perceived failures and that hopeful belief in the promise of Wordsworth’s talents—a hope just as likely to exacerbate the despondency as to ameliorate it. The acerbity of Byron’s critiques of Wordsworth may therefore have a twofold source: Byron’s resentment at having been implicated in an irresolvable tension from which he cannot, and may never be able to, extricate himself, and the consequent emergence of his own awareness of the internal furcation of his critical identity.

When, in his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge begins publicly distancing himself from the theories of poetry Wordsworth expounds in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (and, by extension,
from many of the poems whose composition was informed by those theories), he does so by invoking the authority of a set of neoclassical axioms that would not appear out of place in the critical attacks from which Coleridge intends to differentiate his own critique of Wordsworth. John O. Hayden refers to “the surprising similarity between Coleridge’s statements about Wordsworth in the *Biographia Literaria* in 1817 and those made by the reviewers up to that time” (106), before proceeding to illustrate how “each fault [Coleridge] did list had been pointed out previously by more than one reviewer” (112). Most germane to the present study is that tendency, identified in Coleridge’s critical taxonomy as the “fourth class of defects,” for the Wordsworth of *The Excursion* to summon “an intensity of feeling disproportionate to such knowledge and value of the objects described, as can be fairly anticipated of men in general, even of the most cultivated classes; and with which therefore few only, and those few particularly circumstanced, can be supposed to sympathize” (477).^4^ Wordsworth’s idiosyncratically passionate response to certain mundane objects ostentatiously violates the neoclassical dictum that emotion in art should correspond to or be modulated by reason. Ironically, Coleridge’s efforts to apply a neoclassical aesthetic paradigm to Wordsworth’s later poetry may indicate why that poetry fails to succeed according to Wordsworth’s own aesthetics: the manifestation in the reader of an emotion akin to that which inspired the poem is unlikely to occur if the reader is alienated by the anomalous intensity of an emotion that appears incongruous with the object that induced it.

The emphasis upon affect that determined the complexion of Wordsworth’s decline for Byron, Jeffrey, Coleridge, and his other contemporaries recurs in Matthew Arnold’s preface to 1879’s *The Poems of Wordsworth* (arguably the definitive source of Wordsworth’s reputation among the Victorians), though that recurrence becomes explicit only at the terminus of a
meandering effort to “do Wordsworth a service, perhaps, by indicating in what his superior power and worth will be found to consist, and in what it will not” (10). Initially, Arnold flirts with an ideational basis for poetic value, arguing that

a great poet receives his distinctive character of superiority from his application, under the conditions immutably fixed by the laws of poetic beauty and poetic truth, from his application, I say, to his subject, whatever it may be, of the ideas “On man, on nature, and on human life,” which he has acquired for himself. The line quoted is Wordsworth’s own; and his superiority arises from his powerful use, in his best pieces, his powerful application to his subject, of ideas “on man, on nature, and on human life.” (10-11)

However, even at this early, ideational stage, Arnold’s formula subordinates those features of verse that engage the intellectual faculties to the features that engage the affective faculties. It is not simply ideas, but the “power” of the application of ideas to subject matter, a process understood to unfold within the jurisdiction of “the laws of poetic beauty and poetic truth,” that determines poetic greatness.

What this power represents, and the means by which it is to be measured, are issues that Arnold avoids confronting directly at this point, preferring instead to let his inquiry unfold more or less organically from the act of exploratory composition and all of the occasionally tangential probing it entails. The reader’s patience is rewarded, however, when Arnold emerges from his discursive detours into the interrelated matters of canonization, nationalism, morality, and, perhaps most obscurely, “the question: How to live” (12), prepared finally to identify the source of greatness in Wordsworth’s verse:
The cause of its greatness is simple, and may be told quite simply. Wordsworth’s poetry is great because of the extraordinary power with which Wordsworth feels the joy offered to us in nature, the joy offered to us in the simple primary affections and duties; and because of the extraordinary power with which, in case after case, he shows us this joy, and renders it so as to make us share it [emphasis added]. (20)

For Arnold, poetic greatness proceeds directly from the poet’s capacity to feel intensely, and, most importantly, from his ability to transmit these intense feelings to the reader, a criterion almost certainly derived from Wordsworth’s own understanding, as articulated in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, of poetry as a technology for transmitting affect. The reader’s affective faculties implicitly become the barometer by which the power of conveyed emotion, and, by extension, the power with which the poet applies ideas to subject matter within the constraints of the laws of poetic beauty and truth, are to be estimated.

It must follow that Arnold’s promulgation of the Great Decade model of Wordsworth’s achievement and decline is predicated upon his failure to respond affectively to the later work (and, it must be noted, to the earliest poems) as intensely as he had to the best products of Wordsworth’s “golden prime”: “Wordsworth composed verses during a space of some sixty years; and it is no exaggeration to say that within one single decade of those years, between 1798 and 1808, almost all his really first-rate work was produced” (xii). Neither *The Prelude* nor *The Excursion* qualifies for Arnold as “first-rate,” for Wordsworth’s “best work is in his shorter pieces” (xi). Here we see echoes of the same impatience with garrulousness that had agitated Jeffrey six decades earlier, and Arnold’s limited but crucial sympathies for Jeffrey do not escape
his own attention: “although Jeffrey failed to recognize Wordsworth’s real greatness, he was not yet wrong in saying of the Excursion, ‘This will never do’” (xxii). Juxtaposed with Arnold’s identification of the power to transmit affect as the chief criterion for poetic greatness, this shared preference for the succinct lyrics of the Great Decade suggests an implied evaluative postulate—that the distilled affective force of Wordsworth’s best lyrics is diluted when the poet seeks to sustain it for the length of a protracted meditation.

This postulate becomes even more important when read in light of Arnold’s efforts to recover Wordsworth from a certain faction of “Wordsworthians,” a contingent of admirers who venerated Wordsworth’s poetry not only as profoundly moving aesthetic artifacts, but also as the habitation of a comprehensive ethical, philosophical, and scientific system of which Wordsworth was the architect. As Arnold understands him, the typical Wordsworthian would argue,

as Mr. Leslie Stephen does, that Wordsworth’s poetry is precious because his philosophy is sound; that his ‘ethical system is as distinctive and capable of exposition as Bishop Butler’s’; that his poetry is informed by ideas which ‘fall spontaneously into a scientific system of thought.’ (xviii)

This position strikes Arnold as dangerously misguided. In his estimation, the most precious quality of Wordsworth’s poetry is its capacity to induce affective response or, more precisely, to use language to transmit an affective content that eclipses semantic content in its importance, and the later poetry’s tendency to encumber that core of affective content with a system of ethics and philosophy succeeds only in attenuating the total affective power of the whole. Those who would gauge the poetry’s success by the degree to which it consolidates a valid and coherent “system of thought” surrender an actuality and a centrality to a peripheral illusion:
But we must be on our guard against the Wordsworthians, if we want to secure for Wordsworth his due rank as a poet. The Wordsworthians are apt to praise him for the wrong things, and to lay far too much stress upon what they call his philosophy. His poetry is the reality, his philosophy—so far, at least, as it may put on the form and habit of ‘a scientific system of thought,’ and the more that it puts them on—is the illusion. (xix)

Arnold styles himself Wordsworth’s champion, not his custodian. His is a qualified reverence; his advocacy is neither deferential nor timid. In his critique of the Wordsworthian understanding of Wordsworth, he takes remarkable issue with many of the central tenets of Wordsworth’s own vision for his corpus, not the least of which is this dismissal of the system that was to lend structure and significance to all of Wordsworth’s poems, including the incidental lyrics. In Wordsworth’s own well-known analogy for the relationship between the constituent elements of his proposed poetic corpus, *The Recluse* was to be the “gothic church” for which *The Prelude* would have served as an “Ante-chapel,” and his “minor pieces, which have been long before the public, when they shall be properly arranged, will be found by the attentive reader to have such connection with the main work as may give them claim to be likened to the little cells, oratories, and sepulchral recesses, ordinarily included in those edifices” (*Complete Poetical Works* 124). Furthermore, Wordsworth conceived of *The Excursion* and the rest of *The Recluse* as the realization of Coleridge’s vision for “the first and only true philosophical poem in existence,” a vision that was, for Coleridge, and probably for Wordsworth as well, not incommensurable with aesthetic achievement:

Of course, I expected the colours, the music, imaginative life, and passion of *poetry*, but the matter and arrangement of *philosophy*—not doubting from the
advantages of the subject that the totality of a system was not only capable of being harmonized with, but even calculated to aid, the unity (beginning, middle, and end) of a poem. (Collected Letters 574-75)

What Wordsworth saw as the “minor pieces” intended to ornament or embellish a monolithic architecture were to Arnold a set of scattered jewels to be spirited away from the moldy and crumbling skeleton of an ambitious but never-completed design. Arnold’s insistence that the superior poems be liberated from the “properly arranged” sequencing of Wordsworth’s choosing and quarantined, as it were, for their own safety, further emphasizes the degree to which the philosophy that was intended to blend harmoniously with the poetry actually comes to clash with and debilitate the poetry:

Wordsworth classified his poems not according to any commonly received plan of arrangement, but according to a scheme of mental physiology. He has poems of the fancy, poems of the imagination, poems of sentiment and reflection, and so on. His categories are ingenious but far-fetched, and the result of his employment of them is unsatisfactory. Poems are separated one from another which possess a kinship of subject or of treatment far more vital and deep than the supposed unity of mental origin, which was Wordsworth’s reason for joining them with others.

(xii-xiii)

Recovering Wordsworth from the Wordsworthians appears not dissimilar to recovering Wordsworth from himself, or recovering the vitality and depth of the voices that speak what Coleridge called the “colours,” the “music,” and the “passion,” from the voices that speak the “matter and arrangement of philosophy.”
It must be emphasized that Wordsworth and Coleridge’s shared vision for *The Recluse* did not involve abandoning aesthetic potency in favor of pure philosophy. Wordsworth’s epics sought to incarcerate the power of the aesthetic within a body of philosophy, to exploit affect as a battery that would lend a current of vitality to an externally imposed system—as a means to a further end. Flawed by imprecision and idiosyncrasy though they often are, Arnold’s assessments of Wordsworth rarely fail to detect and accent the precariousness of the rhetoric with which Wordsworth, as well as his colleagues, collaborators, and admirers, attempt to bind affect to intellect in an arrangement that appears increasingly exploitative. Coleridge may have asked for, and Wordsworth’s epics may have provided a glimpse of, a truly philosophical poem, but the truth of philosophical poetry, at least in this context, is that in practice it tends towards poetic philosophy. Arnold took great pains to remind his readers of this, emphasizing the discrepancy and disparity between the modes of poetry and philosophy and warning that Wordsworth would only ascend to his rightful place in the canon after the poetry that exhibits “extraordinary power” had been extricated from the proximal influence of its philosophically committed counterparts.

More recent accounts of the decline suffer from a comparative lack of precision and transparency: they fail to disclose their evaluative criteria as candidly as their eighteenth and nineteenth century predecessors, and so a good deal of labor is often necessary to determine how they function as arbiters of poetic value. Although Arnold’s model of the Golden Decade is too often invoked as a commonplace too self-evident to require critical examination, a survey of late-twentieth and early twenty-first century Wordsworth scholarship reveals a handful of sporadic but important efforts to more precisely define the nature and causes of the decline. Carson C. Hamilton’s *Wordsworth’s Decline in Poetic Power* represents perhaps the most comprehensive
and multivalent approach to the problem currently available. Crucially, Hamilton avoids the
twentieth-century disciplinary tendency to invoke the term *decline* without indicating the specific
quality or faculty to which it is supposed to apply: he articulates it expressly as a reduction in
“poetic power.” He also enumerates a truly expansive succession of factors that, in his
estimation, collectively and cumulatively constitute a cause. These factors include (but are not
limited to) the duality of the Wordsworthian Imagination, the psychosomatic infirmities
generated by the poet’s struggles with the rigors of composition, and the methodological and
logistical difficulties posed by the poet’s efforts to reconcile the often incommensurable
constituents of his ever-expanding inventory of new theories and practices.

Most germane to my own investigations into the synchronic performance in verse of a
diachronically produced multiplicity of Wordsworthian poetic voices is Hamilton’s identification
of a furcation in the Wordsworthian faculty of Imagination. Hamilton argues that Wordsworth’s
“greatest gift was the imagination that made him, for a while, a mystic, the imagination through
which he saw into the life of things and attained a high level of voluntary passivity, of union with
an communion with Nature, with what he termed the Active Principle of the Universe” (23).
Opposed to this mystic Imagination, Hamilton posits the influence of Wordsworth’s “other,
inferior gift, which pulled him toward realism instead of romanticism, toward the practical and
the technical, and which opened out a widening split in his temperament” (23). This “inferior
gift,” in Hamilton’s model, refers to “the power [Wordsworth] possessed, beyond any other
English writer, of seeing the extraordinary in everyday commonplaces” (23-4). Having proposed
this imaginative duality, in which the capacity to imagine a mystic familiarity with nature
coexists uneasily with the capacity to defamiliarize the mundane and the banal, Hamilton
nominates “the conflict between these two constituent elements of Wordsworth’s endowment, at
cross-purposes with each other” (24), and, more precisely, the waxing of the latter and waning of the former, as the principal factor in Wordsworth’s movement away from the source of his “poetic power.”

In order to determine what exactly “poetic power” means for Hamilton, it is necessary to turn to the moment when he anticipates and defends against the charge that his identification of the two varieties of Wordsworthian Imagination may be a category mistake, and that the two Imaginations may be more properly conceived of as the difference between two distinct poetics, both of which lead eventually to the same mystic congress between mind and nature:

Again we may say that there is no difference here, regardless of how much we pile up distinctions, especially since Wordsworth himself liked to think of his treatment of the incidents of everyday life as spiritualizing them. But the inferior gift led to the strengthening of a tendency in Wordsworth that Coleridge noted as hurtful to him, a tendency toward matter-of-factness. For an example of the centrifugal effects of the two powers, we may note the eloquent, nearly ecstatic language of lyrical and other autobiographical passages dealing with his mystic experiences as contrasted with the bare, sometimes barren, phrasing of incidents and situations from everyday life. (24)

Although the faculty, or faculties, of Imagination may be the means by which poetry is imbued with power, it is important not to conflate the faculty with the quality it engenders: the power of Imagination gives rise to another power, which for Hamilton appears to be linked to some quality of language. Ecstasy and eloquence are its markers, and “bare” or “barren” phrasing indicates its absence. Ultimately, it appears that an aesthetic judgment is necessary for the detection of power in poetry, suggesting that poetic power, in this context, is the power to affect. It is
difficult not to sense an affinity with Arnold, who attributes Wordsworth’s greatness to the fact that “he shows us . . . joy, and renders it so as to make us share it.”

There appears, however, to be something other than joy at the affective heart of *The Recluse*. Hamilton has articulated the duality of mind Wordsworth brought to the task of the poem’s composition: although “many statements of Wordsworth, the family, the friends . . . reveal the anxiety about the fragment and Wordsworth’s wishful determination to go on with it” (379), Wordsworth’s references in a letter to Walter Savage Landor to manuscripts of the poem “so ill-penned and blurred that they are useless to all but myself,” combined with his plaintive admission that “at present I cannot face them” (*Letters* 4. 126), lead Hamilton to wonder whether “a psychiatrist might have some interesting comment to make on why the MSS were blurred (written in a longhand we might call a ‘scryp’t)” (381). Hamilton flirts somewhat anachronistically with a decidedly deconstructive species of paronomasia in the midst of his psychoanalytic pathologization of Wordsworth’s internal divisions, but he leaves unfulfilled the desire for a more fully developed exploration of what precisely suffers interment in the crypt of scrypt. That development may be found in Hartman, who has taught us that the price for poetic growth in Wordsworth is the suffering of discontinuities: might not the discontinued iterations of Wordsworthian subjectivity, which must be dismissed as collateral damage on the ascent to apotheosis, have suffered a premature interment at the hands of the progressive imperative? If so, the avenues to affect are not limited, as Arnold assumed, to joy, but to any manifestation of acute aesthesis. The case of *The Recluse* may therefore not be as desperate as is commonly assumed, for as long as it is able to marshal something resembling a powerful confrontation with affect and make us share it (even if it is the negative affect that occurs within the confused space
of the scrypt), it may participate in the “greatness” of Arnold’s model in ways Arnold himself may have neither understood nor condoned.

The next noteworthy accounts of the decline appear approximately twenty years after Hamilton’s, first in Kenneth Johnston’s article “Wordsworth and The Recluse: The University of Imagination,” and again in expanded form in Johnston’s volume Wordsworth and The Recluse. As opposed to Hamilton’s observation of reduced “poetic power,” Johnston detects a decline in “creative powers” (“Wordsworth and The Recluse” 60) and “creativity” (“Wordsworth and The Recluse” xxi). There is an opacity, a casually unproblematised demeanor, to Johnston’s employment of these and similar terms. Because The Recluse, and not the decline with which it is so often equated, is Johnston’s central object of consideration, it is somewhat less than fair to expect any more definitional precision than the little which context provides. Nevertheless, the indistinct usage makes the effort to determine whether and in what ways creative powers as Johnston understands them may differ from the poetic powers in Hamilton’s model a somewhat frustrating task.

Despite this opacity, however, Johnston’s account of the prevailing attitudes towards The Recluse includes a revealing value judgment, followed by an equally revealing paraphrase of commonly held assumptions regarding Wordsworth’s apparent hubris, both of which may be instructive:

[S]ince The Prelude is a much better poem than The Excursion, the conclusion has often been drawn that the remaining parts of The Recluse are not to be regretted, and that Wordsworth was badly misled in trying to write them—partly by his huge creative egoism, partly by Coleridge’s unending dream of a great modern philosophical poem. (xii)
Johnston appears to participate in the twentieth-century evaluative consensus regarding the relative merits of *The Prelude* and the extant fragments of *The Recluse*, indicating that the creative powers whose decline he observes cannot be understood as synonymous with or reducible to the generative faculties, and that a decline in these powers cannot be understood as referring to a mere inability to continue producing verse. Wordsworth’s failure to fully complete *The Recluse*, then, can be neither the sole nor the chief indicator of decline: it is his inability to produce verse of quality sufficient enough to equal or surpass that of *The Prelude* that marks him as a figure of dwindling creative potency.

If, however, *The Prelude* is declared to be a “much better poem,” it is inevitable that we should ask “better at what?” What is this quality or capacity, abundant in *The Prelude* but wanting in *The Excursion* and, presumably, the other extant fragments of *The Recluse*, that permits such value judgments not just to take place, but to do so without controversy, or even qualification? It cannot be the qualities of rhetorical coherence or consistency, for Johnston pronounces *The Recluse*, flawed though it may be, a much more successful effort at “integrating psychological, scientific, and sociopolitical truths into epistemological—or at least imaginative—coherence” than is often assumed (xii). One might even argue that *The Prelude* succeeds in ways that *The Recluse* cannot precisely because of its relative incoherence and inconsistency, and that the more fully verse succeeds as integrative philosophy, the less likely it is to succeed as verse of the kind of quality implicit in Hamilton and, perhaps, Johnston. Johnston himself comes close to expressing this quintessentially Arnoldian sentiment when qualifying Stephen Parrish’s claim that the 1799 *Prelude* is “coherent and thematically rounded” (viii):
But like so many other Wordsworth texts, the 1799 Prelude is also an enactment of the poet’s search for a unifying faith that love of nature leads to love of man, the implied sequence of The Recluse’s themes, and it negotiates some stages more surely than others. Wordsworth’s uncertainties are not, however, simple flaws in aesthetic perfection, but often the sources of his poem’s dramatic tension and persuasive sincerity. (57)

Even in its comparatively coherent early incarnation, The Prelude’s failure to achieve an unqualified consistency effectuates a drama, a tension, to which Johnston’s earlier extolling of it as the “better poem” may be at least partially attributed. The resistance of poetry’s innate, internal polyphony to the rhetoric of tranquilization appears intimately related to the creative powers whose absence or reduction marks Wordsworth’s decline, and, paradoxically, an inability to persuade produces a degree of “persuasive sincerity,” whose operation points to a counter-rhetoricity that intersects the structural rhetoric of stability and integration. Furthermore, if the subsequent versions of the poem were to compound and amplify that initial uncertainty, as Johnston acknowledges when he defers to J.R. MacGillivray’s assertion that the 1799 version may possess a “much more unified theme and a much stronger sense of formal structure than . . . the poem completed first in 1805 and published in 1850” (236), then these versions would possess or produce in greater force and quantity the sources of the dramatic tension and persuasive sincerity that make them “better” than The Recluse and, by extension, representative of an undiminished “creative power” or “creativity.”

Johnston’s paraphrase of the popular assumption that Wordsworth was misled in part by his own “creative egoism” may also be instructive here, for although it complicates the effort to articulate the role of creativity in his system by positing a creative faculty in Wordsworth that
was not subject to the same decline as his “creative powers,” in due course that complication reinforces the emerging distinction between the generative dimension of poetic creativity and the more elusive, persuasively dramatic dimension whose diminishment functions as the true indicator of Wordsworth’s decline. For Johnston, it appears that Wordsworth’s drive to generate verse, and, to a limited extent, the capability to actually do so in a way that realizes his politico-philosophical aspirations, remained so fully intact that it drove the poet to purchase systemic coherence at the price of the quality-bestowing dramatic dimension of his creativity, and the flourishing of one creative power eventuates in the dissipation of another. Years before the Levinsonian strains of New Historicism would insist upon a Faustian poetic economy within which Wordsworth could exchange his youthful political radicalism for increased self-consciousness and proficiency as a lyric poet, Johnston seems to have been positing a similar dynamic wherein Wordsworth could trade the aesthetic endowments of his mature period for the potential to reintroduce Society into his meditations on Man and Nature, restoring the trinitarian structure that was ostensibly absconded into an escapist duality at the moment in 1798 when Wordsworth first began to traffic in poetic faculties with unknown forces on the banks of the Wye.

Johnston’s insistence that The Recluse “cannot be dismissed in the illusion that it does not exist or by the misjudgment that it is simply a failure” is predicated upon an implicit set of criteria for determining and assigning a decidedly anaesthetic species of value. Although “close attention to the large number of texts attributable to the project discovers a poem more substantial and more valuable than critical tradition has allowed, and a greater realization of their dreams than either Wordsworth or Coleridge admitted,” the poem’s achievements are relegated to the sphere of “persuasive representation of a humanistic philosophy” (xii)—more a triumph
for the Wordsworthians than for Wordsworth—rather than to the kind of dramatic and persuasive achievements that make the comparatively incoherent *Prelude* a “much better poem.” Even if *The Recluse* “deserves full critical consideration in its own right” (xii), it remains the case that Wordsworth’s “decline in creativity parallels its fortunes” (xxi). Despite Johnston’s insistence that Wordsworth’s “failure was giving up trying rather than not fully completing it” (xxi), it seems difficult not to locate intimations of another kind of failure in Johnston’s account of *The Recluse*, one which suggests that the *Prelude*’s status as a “better poem” is predicated neither upon the mere, prosaic fact of its completion, nor upon its surprising success as integrative philosophy, but upon the persuasive theatricality that is an emergent property of its internal polyphony.

*The Recluse* may possess a measure of a similar theatricality, one that derives from its complicated relationship to the rest of the Wordsworthian corpus. Because the poem that was intended to define the roles of Wordsworth’s other poems and govern the relationships between them never fully materializes, it may be tempting to conclude prematurely that the functionality of this centerless system is laid fully open to fluidity and contingency, in a rough approximation of the model of systemic freplay proposed by Derrida in his “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.” In such a scenario, *The Prelude* may abrogate its planned anteriority and usurp the centrality initially reserved for *The Recluse*, as it seems to have done in the estimation of many: “it is true, as I (and lots of others) have pointed out, that Wordsworth had used up his material in expanding the prelude to epic works into an epic work itself” (Hamilton 379). Alternatively, one of the comparatively “minor pieces” may temporarily and provisionally occupy that centrality, as it seems to have done for Marjorie Levinson and her critical progeny, about whose identification of “Tintern Abbey” as the central, defining moment
in Wordsworth’s trajectory out of history and into the supposed comforts of an aestheticized solipsism I have already expressed significant reservations.⁶

Sufficient fragments of *The Recluse* were completed, however, to render any such conclusions ultimately inadequate. The poem’s Prospectus alone provides a schematic comprehensive enough to allow M.H. Abrams to extrapolate from it not only “Wordsworth’s program for poetry,” but also “a prominent period-metaphor which served a number of major writers, both English and German, as the central figure in a similar complex of ideas concerning the history and destiny of man and the role of the visionary poet as both herald and inaugurator of a new and supremely better world” (31): in other words, the defining structural argument underwriting the majority of Romanticism’s canonical texts, excepting, perhaps, only the works of Byron. Further complicating the issue is the fact that although the Third Part of *The Recluse* was planned but never finished, “the materials of which it would have been formed have . . . been incorporated, for the most part, in the Author’s other Publications, written subsequently to the EXCURSION” (*Complete Poetical Works* 124).

*The Recluse*, then, proves intriguingly resistant to received models of ontological categorization: it is neither present enough to fulfill its intended function in precisely the way Wordsworth planned, nor absent enough to leave the system for which it was meant to serve as center completely bereft of an ordering principle. The gothic church is replaced not with a Sublime monolith of negative space, but with a picturesque ruin, an aborted architecture rendered fragmentary both by its failure to fully materialize and by its subjection to the cannibalistic metabolic processes by which a poetic corpus reshapes and reconstitutes itself using its own tissues as raw materials. Partly unembodied, partly disembodied, and partly re-embodied as a center dispersed into its own periphery, *The Recluse* presents, and perhaps performs, a
provocative mélange of death, resurrection, and insurrection. If this project’s chief claim—that the inherent semiotic instability of verse is in part a function of its materiality—is to any degree convincing, then the unfinishedness that is the defining feature of *The Recluse* may permit the poem to fulfill its role as systemic center more capably than it ever could have had it been completed, but not capably enough to prevent the local disruptions observable in the verse from transmitting themselves into the corpus entire and opening wide faults within its substance.

Somewhat more recently, Kenneth E. Morrison has applied the argument of Jerome McGann’s *The Romantic Ideology*—that normative accounts of Romanticism fail as criticism because they too readily capitulate to Romanticism’s own accounts of itself—to the figure of Wordsworth’s decline. He accuses the “theory of decline,” and, by extension, the critical tradition that has produced it, of “ideological complicity with the very texts it engages,” and suggests that as a “‘myth’ of criticism,” the decline “becomes a reductive premise that precludes understanding Wordsworth’s apparent downtrend as a complex but explicable process” (iii). Ignoring the explicit allegations of decline in Jeffrey, Byron, and Coleridge, Morrison’s study identifies Arnold as the progenitor of the myth, and Arnold’s “rhetoric, which simultaneously invokes classical archetypes, seasonal motifs, and an entire complex of Romantic metaphors of poetic expression and inspiration” (11), is indicted not only for the egregiousness of its “ideological complicity,” but also for the pervasiveness of its influence on later criticism.

Crucially, Morrison never contends that Wordsworth does not suffer the very decline that Arnold and the inheritors of his supposedly suspect critical apparatus have detected: “I will uphold the widely accepted (though certainly not undisputed) judgment that his early poetry is of greater quality” (5). Instead, it is the unfortunate tendency of the Arnoldian strain to leave “the compositional processes behind the poet’s alleged decline . . . relatively unexplored” with which
Morrison takes issue (5). In order to initiate the critical exploration that the myth of decline apparently forecloses, Morrison feels compelled to “provide a critical explanation for the process of decline so often observed in Wordsworth’s poetry”:

I contend that the perceptible downtrend in Wordsworth’s verse is the direct consequence of continuous, career-long processes of revision or self-editing. This self-editing took two forms: First, the explicit form, whereby Wordsworth actually emended his poetry; and second, the implicit form, whereby Wordsworth sought, through his poetry, to amend his self-image by constructing an autobiography tailored to fit an idealized poetic identity. (iii-iv)

Because Wordsworth’s process of poetic self-re-creation unfolds primarily by means of textual revision, or “self-editing” (iii), his is a poetics that overwrites the generative vitality it was designed to preserve:

In the effort to render himself a “monumental” presence, to “enshrine” his poetry and preserve it for posterity, Wordsworth has also opened his text to a stultifying and deadening process of reification: images harden, metaphor and symbol solidify, and the “spots of time” become memories which were and not the perpetually active founts of “something evermore about to be.” (100)

Morrison eventually alleges that Wordsworth’s relentless and ubiquitous revisionism leads to a scenario in which “the actual substance of Wordsworth’s poetry was compromised or attenuated through a reductive (re)appropriation of its own materials” (6). What “actual substance” denotes in this context is not immediately clear, and does not become fully so until much later, when Morrison concludes that
the quality of Wordsworth’s poetry suffers not because the poet has grown old, but because the poem, site and source of anxiety, has taken its own methods of reading to an unparalleled extreme. The scene has become a scene too often revisited, and the resulting traffic of readings overwhelms gestures toward clarity and fixity. (86)

This is an intriguing premise, and, I suspect, an ultimately valuable one, but it is also one that suffers (somewhat forgivably, for a topic of this complexity) from an insufficiently precise understanding of its own terms, as well as from a somewhat less forgivably arbitrary account of the fundamental tenets of the great decade model. In all fairness to Arnold, despite his frequent use of rhetorical appeals to the vitality of youth, he never simply argues, either explicitly or implicitly, that “Wordsworth’s poetry suffers . . . because the poet has grown old,” but because the poet’s dedication to the “system” of which the Wordsworthians were so enamored had eclipsed his dedication to exploiting poetry’s potential to induce in the reader a kindred affective response to the emotion actually endured by the poet in the moment of inspiration. When Arnold feels obliged to employ a single modifier that may be reliably associated with Wordsworth’s best poetry, it is “shorter” (xi), not “earlier,” and the implied relationship between the poet’s age and the quality of his compositions, if it is at all a causal one, may not be as clearly or directly so as Morrison seems to believe.

Furthermore, Morrison’s characterization of “the Great Decade myth” as “a comparative aesthetic assessment of Wordsworth’s early and late poetry ending in the judgment that his corpus can be (or in Arnold’s case, must be) organized by means of reference to a binary dynamic of vitality / decline—or, in Arnold’s terms, of a ‘golden prime’ followed by a
‘clogging . . . obstructing . . . chilling’ mass of ‘poetical baggage’” (11), appears too thoroughly committed to an incomplete version of whatever chronological prejudices may be operative in Arnold to account for the inherent complexity of those prejudices. The “poetical baggage” to which Arnold refers is not only a feature of Wordsworth’s decline, but also his incline: the uncomplicated “binary dynamic of vitality / decline” that Morrison attributes to Arnold is a selectively reported fraction of Arnold’s actual model, in which the golden prime is less a period of youthful vitality followed by a slow descent into sterile maturity than a period of maturity that follows an infancy or adolescence and precedes a westering: “A mass of inferior work remains, work done before and after [emphasis added] this golden prime, imbedding the first-rate work and clogging it, obstructing our approach to it, chilling, not unfrequently, the high-wrought mood with which we leave it” (Arnold xii). If, as Morrison charges, certain twentieth-century critics have emerged from their readings of Arnold equipped with an insufficiently critical conception of Wordsworth’s decline, then that is likely to be the function of an absorption and application of Arnold’s model just as selective as Morrison’s critiques of it.

Finally, and most pressingly, in its concessions to the aesthetic value judgments encouraged by the model of decline, Morrison’s account appears to participate in the same deference to the so-called Romantic Ideology as do those accounts it chastises, and in doing so it situates itself within the tradition of criticism and critical identities bifurcated into seemingly incommensurable halves whose genealogies I have been attempting to trace. In pronouncing the “actual substance” of Wordsworth’s poetry compromised by overzealous revision, Morrison capitulates aesthetically, if not critically, to the generic Romantic myth of original genius to a degree difficult to reconcile with the drive towards demystification one would expect of a critique so indebted to McGann. For Morrison,
the problem is that Wordsworth has taken his own message quite literally with each successive reading: the text too is something which must be subverted to the authority of the current poetic self. And in the attempt to swerve from those representative poetic precursors (a psycho-rhetorical motion rendered hyperbolic due to the passage’s semantic heft), Wordsworth creates a misreading which is so drastically different that it can no longer perform its intended function. The poetry no longer “fits”: the text has been folded upon itself too many times, and the resulting lines and fractures cannot be effaced. (108)

Does this not implicitly corroborate an axiomatic characterization of quality writing as that which realizes a singular rhetorical or semantic intent? And to whom or what would this “intended function,” upon whose fulfillment the quality of the writing ostensibly depends, be traced, if not the impossibly uncontaminated representative of a single, originary fount of unilateral creative vision that emerges from the same mystifying Romantic notions of authorship against which Morrison’s caginess towards “ideological complicity” warns? Morrison acknowledges the presence of the “lines and fractures” that indicate the proliferation within a single text of multiple authorial voices, but he continues to defer to the Romantic notion that the most chronologically anterior of these voices wields a monopoly over legitimate intentionality in the poem, when it might be more accurate to articulate the scenario as one in which each authorial voice contributes its own legitimate “intended function” to the discourse. Instead of many voices failing to realize a single originary intent, we may have many voices seeking to be originary in their own right: not a zero-sum language game with multiple losing players, but multiple players each playing their own language game, and exploiting each other as both board and pawns.
I propose, however, that this very inconsistency, which reveals the “lines and fractures” that have opened in the critic as a consequence of prolonged exposure to the Wordsworth’s destabilizing influence, emerges as the saving grace of Morrison’s study, for within it resides a tacit acknowledgement of one of the means by which the sublime in its more terrifying aspects—specifically several varieties of the Burkean sublime—may irrupt into, and accentuate the fundamentally rhetorical character of, the discursive space within which Wordsworth endeavors to achieve two distinct, and perhaps mutually exclusive, aims: the assembly of a coherent self, and the reproduction or transmission of an affective state. The “traffic of readings” that “overwhelms” the rhetoric of “clarity and fixity” facilitates the emergence of a set of features whose presence Burke explicitly associates with sublime feeling in the *Enquiry*. In overwhelming the clearly fixed, this traffic overpowers those qualities prized by the analytical mind for their role in providing stable concepts with which the faculties of reason may comfortably engage as they manufactures their fictions of fixed identities. Under the influence of sublime feeling, however, the faculties of reason are rendered inoperative by a terror so acute that its presence occupies the mind entirely: “The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature* is astonishment, and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. The mind is so entirely filled with its object that it cannot entertain any other, nor reason on that object which fills it” (Burke 41). The suspension of the reactionary, revisionary apparatus with which reason converts the radical contingency of identity-as-process or identity-as-spectrum to a single, immutable constant allows the sublime discord of Wordsworthian polyphony to flood the reader’s perception without direction or filtration. The full diachronic range of Wordsworthian identities is registered affectively in a single, awful moment of synchronic apprehension, and the reader, overwhelmed by this
perceived proliferation of Wordworthian voices, is delivered into the hands of sublime astonishment. Morrison articulates this process in much the same way in his commentary on the Snowdon episode of *The Prelude*, though for him the process terminates prematurely, before the ramifications of the polyvocality are pursued to the cusp of sublime visitation: “All of Wordsworth’s writing selves converge on this moment and struggle for ascendancy. The result is a passage which is so heavily revised that it loses almost all of its initial meaning. This is not simply a question of a noticeable decline in quality, but of a manifest anxiety which distorts the very point of the sequence as a whole” (108). But if, as I suspect, the “very point” of this and other passages is critiqued by the counter-point of the passage from trope to performance when revisionary rhetoric is countermanded by the stark material event of revision, then the process that, in Morrison’s estimation, is “not simply a question of a . . . decline in quality,” is simply not a question of decline, qualitative or otherwise. The appropriate visual metaphor is not to be found in the two-dimensional verticality of the downward-arcing figure of decline, but in a three-dimensional configuration in which the cognitive plane on which the question of decline is figured is stretched and ultimately breached by the emergence of sublime affect into a discursive space where its mere presence interrogates the rhetoricity and figurality through which the space maintains its configuration.

Burke’s account of the sublime may also be applied to the question of how, precisely, sublime astonishment may be achieved in such textual episodes. Because the rhetoric of clarity and fixity is what revision overwhelms, the reader’s predicament appears to illustrate the role of obscurity in producing sublime feeling:

To make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary, for a great deal of apprehension vanishes when we are able to see the full extent of any
danger. . . . Indeed, a great clearness is in some sort an enemy to all enthusiasm. Poetry is, therefore, superior to painting as a means of raising the passions, although the latter gives the clearest images. The fact is, that our ignorance of things causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions. In great passages of Milton the mind is hurried out of itself by a crowd of grand and confused images, which affect because they are crowded and confused. The images of poetry are always obscure. To see a thing distinctly is to see its bounds, and cut it off from infinity. A clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea.

(106)
The reader has been led by Wordsworth’s own rhetoric of Imaginative self-production to expect that *The Prelude* will portray a singular, coherent self, forged in the traumas of an aesthetic education administered by Nature, but the portraiture that the reader actually encounters is a mass of “grand and confused images,” a set of competing selves, each overwriting the others’ voices to perversely polymorphous effect. The reader has been promised a Jacques-Louis David, but the curtain falls from the canvas to reveal, nearly a century too early, a Picasso or a Rivera. Transfixed by the poetry’s failure to fix the identity it purports to embody, the reader endures a confrontation with the obscurity that produces sublime astonishment. Does this represent the kind of failure that eventuates in a reduction in quality, or is it the failure of the “little idea” that Wordsworth’s system is intended to serve to contain the affective potency of the confusion and obscurity his poetry performs? Is it the poetry that suffers, or its reader?

This appeal to the sublime operates as a latent factor in Morrison’s own appropriation of Harold Bloom’s model of poetic agon, over whose terms and concepts Morrison exhibits an impressive command, but whose emotional timbre appears to have eluded him somewhat.
Morrison contends that “In order to understand Wordsworhian revision, one must have a way of describing the relationships between his texts or textualized selves”; this mode of description proves to be an application of Bloom’s model of intertextual poetic influence to the intratext of a single poet’s corpus:

This is the most basic way in which I wish to employ the term “influence”: as a comprehensive figure, concept, or descriptor of those elemental forces which characterize the relationship(s) between successive versions of a poem and of the successive Wordsworths realized therein. (76)

But can one invoke the formula of Bloom’s model without also invoking its mood? Is it responsible, or even possible, to disentangle the mechanisms of Bloom’s revisionary ratios from the affective temperature of the Freudian theatre of agon that informs them? Where Morrison locates a failed poetry of reduced quality, I locate a poetry seduced into the service of the sublime dimension of intratextuality, where the “self-editing” whose “attenuating” effects Morrison bemoans effectuates a drama whose depth rarely fails to astonish.

The intensely affecting sense of depth imparted by the overwriting of “successive Wordsworths” also corresponds to one of the key entries in Burke’s axonometric sublime taxonomy: “Again, vastness, or greatness of dimension, is a powerful cause of the sublime; and of the three measures of extension, length strikes us least, and height is less grand than depth” (114). To apprehend a self-revision of the magnitude we see in Wordsworth is to lean too close to the height and width of the page and to fall through them into the deep abode of the sublime, a subterranean ocean of ink, the vast but hitherto unseen dimension of the confused personal history that Wordsworth’s acts of self-editing perform. The climactic Snowdon episode of The Prelude, which for Morrison serves as evidence of a bathetic, vertical qualitative decline,
undergoes an axis-shifting inversion, in which the height of the triumphant figure of
Wordsworth’s Parnassian ascent to secular Oracle collapses not into its own capsized verticality,
but into its own sublime depth, leaving the poet to walk an Orphean descent into the mechanisms
of his own obscure subjectivity, his gravity dragging the reader behind him. And as the collapse
of the figure of ascent is diverted into the dimension of sublime space, it carries with it the
rhetoric of harmony with which the verse endeavors to resolve the discordant proliferation of
Wordsworthian voices it contains, as well as the personal apocalypse they potentially represent:

. . . the full-orbed Moon,

Who, from her sovereign elevation, gazed

Upon the billowy ocean, as it lay

All meek and silent, save that through a rift--

Not distant from the shore whereon we stood,

A fixed, abysmal, gloomy, breathing-place--

Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams

Innumerable, roaring with one voice!

Heard over earth and sea, and, in that hour,

For so it seemed, felt by the starry heavens. (14.53-62)

Under normal circumstances, and in normative readings, the comma in line 60 joins the
participial phrase “roaring with one voice” to the innumerable bodies of flowing water that it
modifies, and instantiates a triumphant and harmonious metaphor for the human subject as a
range of faculties and voices united into a single overarching emergent identity. But viewed
under the alien light of Sublime feeling, the ludic materiality of the punctuation interrupts the
proceedings to betray the artificiality, the constructedness, of the akedah with which voice is
bound to voice, erecting an orthographical barrier between the poem’s acknowledgement of its own radical polyvocality and the trope that diverts that radical energy into the tranquilizing rhetoric of harmony. So, too, do the commas that matriculate “waters, torrents, streams” in the implicit accord of the grammar of lists come to emphasize their argumentative dimension, betraying and stressing the distance between the entries that the rhetorical fiction of the catalog seeks to close.

It appears possible at this point to discern a historical tendency, initiated by hostile commentators in Wordsworth’s own lifetime and exhibiting sufficient longevity to remain a powerful determinant of aesthetic judgment at the present moment, to detect within the Wordsworthian corpus the incongruities and inconsistencies that frustrate efforts—by the poet and by his critics—to reduce Wordsworth to a single identity, agenda, philosophy, or aesthetic. My intent in the rest of this essay is to examine the ways in which the extant fragments of The Recluse—the text most often cited as evidence of Wordsworth’s decline—attempt to negotiate Wordsworth’s own emerging awareness of the sublime depths of his own subjectivity, as well as to consider those moments when the play of the letter and the line permit this sublimity to reveal itself and its terms as fundamentally non-negotiable.

II.

Following the precedent set by M.H. Abrams in Natural Supernaturalism, most worthwhile considerations of The Recluse begin with an attention to the following lines from the poem’s Prospectus:

. . . Not Chaos, not

The darkest pit of lowest Erebus,
Nor aught of blinder vacancy, scooped out
By help of dreams--can breed such fear and awe
As fall upon us often when we look
Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man--
My haunt, and the main region of my song (35-41)

These lines mark a turn or swerve from the model of self advocated in *The Prelude* to a vastly more complicated, more unsettling model. They find Wordsworth’s apotheosis upon the peak of Snowdon transmogrified into a descent as Blakean and Burkean as it is Miltonic and Dantean.

The “majestic intellect” of *The Prelude*’s climax was the emblem of a mind

That feeds upon infinity, that broods
Over the dark abyss, intent to hear
Its voices issuing forth to silent light
In one continuous stream; a mind sustained
By recognitions of transcendent power,
In sense conducting to ideal form,

In soul of more than mortal privilege. (14.70-77)

In *The Recluse*, however, the creative mind does not so much feed upon infinity and brood over the abyss as it becomes an infinity and an abyss, so deep and foreboding that the Hell to which Milton’s Satan is exiled and the Chaos he traverses are diminished by comparison: “What Wordsworth claims is that the mind of man is a terra incognita which surpasses in its terrors and sublimities, hence in the challenge it poses to its poetic explorer, the traditional subject matter of Milton’s Christian epic” (Abrams 25). The “voices” that the poet of *The Prelude* “hears issuing
forth to silent light / In one continuous stream” in a representation of a “a mind” have fallen silent as the aural cedes its figurative office to the visual: now the mind is not heard but looked into, not without some difficulty, and not without a price. This is a different species of sublime feeling than the rhetorically manufactured, egotistical exultation of the Snowdon poet—it “fall[s] upon us” instead of suspending us in, and allowing us to momentarily participate in, the high ethereality of Moon, mist, and stars.

This discrepancy is likely attributable to Wordsworth’s shift from comfortable reliance upon the intermediaries of metaphor to an effort at more direct contemplation of his subject. The Snowdon poet reads the heavens, the Moon, and the ocean of mist as “the type / Of a majestic intellect” (14.66-67) and as an “emblem of a mind” (14.70). Conversely, the poet of The Recluse invites us not to consider a landscape as a visual approximation of the perceiving subject upon which that subject may fully project itself—not, in other words, as a type or an emblem of the mind—but to more directly “look / Into our Minds, into the mind of Man” (40-41). The Miltonic allusions suggest that without the tropes that make it possible to read the object world as signs for our own subjectivity, and without figures and devices to insulate us from what we see as we remake it into something palatable, poetic perception becomes an endeavor fraught with the potential for a threatening Sublime visitation. After having labored for the fourteen Books of The Prelude to conscript his early aesthetic traumas into a secular theodicy of redemption and triumph, Wordsworth finds himself articulating in The Recluse a darker confrontation with the aesthetic, one somewhat reminiscent of those formative encounters with a sublime that does not elevate us to great height, but rather tempts us to peer over a ledge into unknown depths and obscurities. We fall in, and are fallen upon.
In *The Prelude*, these aesthetic traumas were the work of an anthropomorphized Nature, harsh lessons in her sublime pedagogy, “Severer interventions, ministry / More palpable” (1.355-56), that would eventually be tempered by the beautiful in something approximating a dialectic: masculine sublimity and its antithesis feminine beauty marry and beget the poet, a living oracle of the picturesque. Conversely, the “fear and awe” of direct contemplation to which *The Recluse* appears to aspire seems less akin to a terror tempered in the domesticating influence of beauty than to “that beauty, which as Milton sings, / Hath terror in it” (13.245-46). Wordsworth proclaims himself in the Prospectus capable not only of withstanding the terror that attends a confrontation with the noumenon of self, but of withstanding it without recourse to the tranquilizing and phenomenalizing effects of tropes and figures. Chaos and Erebus become not metaphors not for the sublime depths of the mind, and not merely failed metaphors for those depths, but metaphors whose failure is a necessary condition of their success: they cannot “breed such fear and awe,” and the inadequacy of metaphor is rendered starkly conspicuous as the sublime remains, in Burkean fashion, sufficiently obscured to preclude comprehensive understanding.

This is not, however, an obscurity that is meant to last. The Prospectus reminds us what often happens when we look into the mind rather than into the mélange of symbol and metaphor that constitutes the mind’s emblem; the remainder of the extant fragments of *The Recluse*, especially *The Excursion*, represents the products and the consequences of actually looking. I postulate that the fear and awe that fall upon Wordsworth when he turns his gaze inward proceeds from his growing awareness that the shards of his fragmented subjectivity, which, in his early lyrics and *The Prelude* could be given voice only by the anomalous play of letter and line, might soon begin to explicitly assert their full participatory citizenship in the political processes
of his own subjectivity in ways he could neither predict nor manage. The project’s titular
Recluse, the “poet living in retirement” from external society, finds himself incapable of retiring
from the society of self. Not unlike Milton’s Satan, who laments “Which way I fly is Hell;
myself am Hell” (Paradise Lost 4.75), Wordsworth is the very social space from which he would
fain withdraw, and the solitude he craves ultimately proves both elusive and illusory.

But if Wordsworth’s name is Legion, he would have felt it incumbent upon himself to
reconcile that knowledge with his vocation as a poet as he understood the responsibilities of that
office: to make Legion legible to a degree none had yet attempted. However, he could not, and
likely would not, have hoped to be able to extricate himself from the personal and poetic
histories that he had inherited from his predecessors in the intertext and the intratext, and hence
the radical project of peering into the mind and communicating its sublime polyvocality unfolds
by decidedly conservative prosodic and rhetorical means. Wordsworth was right to propose that
the human mind contained more sublime depths, and terrors more fearsome, than the Chaos or
Erebus of Milton’s epic, but he was wrong to think that nature and education had prepared him to
face these terrors and to articulate them in a manner reconcilable with the holistic, progressive
model of the mind he develops in The Prelude. The impending encounter with the knowledge
that the self is ultimately and irrevocably fragmented, and therefore unknowable in its totality to
any one of its constituent fragments, could not be occluded in verse, or, for that matter, in any
other written medium, for the materiality of script renders it too inherently vulnerable to
repossession by the voice of the subaltern self. In order to permanently silence the internal
subaltern and the threat it poses to the secular theodicy of the renovated post-traumatic subject,
more drastic measures may prove necessary.
Wordsworth somehow hopes that the same poetics he employed in *The Prelude* to chronicle his development into a poet capable of writing *The Recluse* will serve him in the actual writing of *The Recluse*; however, the two poems are, despite Wordsworth’s well-known analogy for the relationship between the constituent elements of his proposed poetic corpus, in which *The Recluse* was to be the “gothic church” for which *The Prelude* would have served as an “Ante-chapel” (*Complete Poetical Works* 124), two fundamentally distinct projects, each of which demands its own *techne* to realize its vision of *poiesis*. Wordsworth’s architectural analogy envisions two structures that represent variations within the paradigm of the Gothic, but the sublime transparency that *The Recluse* would need to do the kind of looking it wants to do did not intentionally arise in architecture until the appearance of the warped and transparent anti-monoliths of Frank Gehry. *The Prelude* may have inaugurated modern autobiography and hence modern subjectivity, but *The Recluse* had ambitions we would recognize as anachronistically postmodern, even if Wordsworth never proved capable of summoning the impossible will and foresight necessary to instantiate in his verse technique the kind of radical self-reinvention that *The Prelude* insists is possible, and upon which *The Recluse* depends to fulfill the vision it prescribes for itself. But having forged his poetic identity in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth should neither expect nor be expected to devise *ex nihilo* such a radically new poetics of the fragmented subject. I exaggerate only slightly when I suggest that the collective efforts of those Modernists and Postmodernists most aggressively skeptical of stable models of the subject might be thought of as constituting *The Recluse* that Wordsworth meant to write (a suggestion that I hope will put the supposed failure of the poem in perspective). None of this should be taken to mean that *The Recluse* never approaches or achieves the kind of prescient, postmodern awareness for which at times it seems to reach; it just means that it does so through the same mechanisms that I have
argued the *Lyrical Ballads* and *The Prelude* do it—through the fundamentally inappropriable accidents of its own creation, through the sublime play of material that attends its status as a made thing. With no radically novel prosody or versification with which to explicitly perform his own radical polyvocality, Wordsworth is led inexorably back to the familiar rhetoric of the figurative regime, or, more specifically, to dramatic allegory, which tropes the internal fragmentation that his verse cannot intentionally perform. The catachresis of his identity unfurls itself into a cast of *dramatis personae*: the Poet, the Pastor, the Solitary, the Wanderer. But because these figures are figured, their emancipation is managed, incomplete. Their voices are once again channeled through the fissures in actual substance that open in the play of letter, line, and orthography: they may speak as characters only through the subversive materiality of the written characters that compose them. It is to these anomalies that we must turn our attention if we are to salvage what we may of Wordsworth’s aggressive disarticulation of the model of modern subjectivity he helped to articulate.

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to offer a comprehensive catalogue of the ways materiality performs subjective fragmentation in the fragments of *The Recluse*, it is possible to focus attention on a representative local manifestation of that performativity and to observe its global ramifications as it rewrites its own role within the rhetorical functionality of the whole. I have chosen for this exercise the figure of the Wanderer, the first of the poem’s figures to suffer vitiation at the hands of the material marks meant to embody him. Book 1 is his book, and its account of his aesthetic education reads much like the early books of *The Prelude* filtered through the rustic ideals of *Lyrical Ballads*. The Wanderer was in his youth subjected to the often harshly prescribed aesthetic pedagogy of Nature with which readers of *The Prelude* will be intimately familiar, though he lacked access to the education and cultural refinement that
would have facilitated his development into a *bona fide* creative genius comparable to

Wordsworth himself:

> Oh! many are the Poets that are sown
> By Nature; men endowed with highest gifts,
> The vision and the faculty divine;
> Yet wanting the accomplishment of verse[.] (1.77-80)

Though no versifier, the Wanderer receives from Wordsworth the title of Poet, for he is possessed of the ability, so vitally important to the Wordsworth of *Tintern Abbey* and *The Prelude*, to implement the experiences of the past into an epistemological program, though not, it seems, to do so by producing something we would recognize as poetry:

> Time had compressed the freshness of his cheek
> Into a narrower circle of deep red,
> But had not tamed his eye; that, under brows
> Shaggy and grey, had meanings which it brought
> From years of youth; which, like a Being made
> Of many Beings, he had wondrous skill
> To blend with knowledge of the years to come,
> Human, or such as lie beyond the grave. (1.426-33)

Wordsworth, however, does possess the accomplishment of verse, and it is revealing to observe the technical precision with which his prosody rhetorically articulates the Wanderer’s “poetic” faculties as the ability to preserve the past in the tissues of his body. The Wanderer’s poetry is something that he wears upon his countenance: time has scripted, or perhaps sculpted, his flesh into a poem, which Wordsworth transposes in an *ekphrasis* into a series of suggestively
rhetorical internal rhymes. The ruddiness of age is rendered as “compressed . . . freshness,” an argument that rewrites agedness as a state that not only retains youth’s bloom, but distills it, concentrates it. This condensed redness, located upon the Wanderer’s “cheek,” is characterized as “deep,” which serves not only to emphasize the richness of the hue, but to impart a sense of spatial expanse extending inward to unseen dimension in a suggestion of hidden value. The Wanderer’s eye, situated beneath “brows / Shaggy and grey,” is untamed by time precisely because it “had meanings which it brought / From years of youth.” The internal slant rhyme of “eye” and “grey” mobilizes irony to initiate a study in contrast, in which the eye’s retention of the appearance of youthful vigor is accentuated by its juxtaposition with an image of venerable age. Those “meanings” from “years of youth” are internally slant rhymed with “Being,” fusing the ontological with the semantic: who or what one is cannot be considered apart from the question of what one means, positing the self and its personal history as a text, self-determination as rhetoric and artifice, and the pursuit of self-knowledge as an endeavor more hermeneutic than creative.

As elegantly executed as these internal rhymes may be, and as subtly as their rhetorical effects are woven into the verse’s argument about whether and in what ways our pasts are available to us, the ever-present threat of materiality and the counter-rhetoric it may mobilize to unweave rhetoric’s tapestry leaves these triumphs of technique perched precariously atop an unsteady foundation. Indeed, the “Being” joined by slant rhyme to “meaning’ is also joined by enjambment to a further argument about the Wanderer’s relationship to his own past. The Wanderer is “like a Being made / Of many Beings.” Breaking the initial line at “made” leaves the reader suspended in a fleeting moment of incomplete meaning, engendering a sense of anticipation that is soon satisfied as the gulf between lines is traversed and the meaning
completed, and performing at the level of form the role of time in the secular theodicy of personal perfection. The completed meaning for which the enjambment argues is that the Wanderer’s present self is an emergent property of the interaction of the set of selves represented by his past: he is the synchronic performance of a diachronic seriality, and that is what allows him to extrapolate “knowledge of the years to come” from knowledge of years past. However, the prosodic apocalypse that severs the two halves of the enjambment as it undergoes what de Man labels a “shift from trope to performance” jeopardizes the enjambment’s rhetorical initiative. Like all manifestations of apocalyptic prosody, this one unfolds as a two-stage process. First, the reader is struck by the sublime astonishment of witnessing the material marks that were meant to bind words together in syntactic accord severed from one another by the play of letter or line. This is a species of de-scripti on; the written removes itself from writing and becomes an arbitrary fragment of broken matter loosed as an incongruous variable in a system to which it is essentially alien. Second, under the lingering influence of this Sublime astonishment, the reader’s higher faculties of cognition gradually retain their function, but it is a function contaminated by the protracted sway of acute negative affect. In this altered state, the reader may witness the de-scripted prosodic apocalypse perform its own re-inscription into the text as an agent of derangement, as writing once again, but writing somehow aware of itself and its own constructedness, capable of exploiting its own materiality to countermand the rhetoric it was tasked with silently serving. In the context of the Wanderer, this “Being made / Of many Beings,” the re-inscription cuts off his being from the many beings of which it is supposed to be composed, and emphasizes the artifice that underwrites his ontological status. He ceases to be a being made of many beings and becomes “a Being made.” The medium out of which this artifice is assembled is, of course, script, and the counter-rhetorical reading is that however
grounded in extratextual reality the character of the Wanderer may be—whether that reality is internal to Wordsworth, external to him, or an amalgamation of both—in and for *The Excursion*, the Wanderer is a Being made of the same material whose inherent instability has led it here to unsay itself in the definitive moment of its saying. The Wanderer’s past, the “many Beings” from whom he has been untied by prosodic apocalypse, is also here made of writing, and the reservoir of experience and memory that “he had wondrous skill / To blend with knowledge of the years to come” is revealed as too fully subject to the arbitrary caprice of its medium to serve as a valid body of data from which reliable knowledge about the present or future might be extrapolated. The “many Beings” are those atoms of self that in Hartmanian parlance have “suffer[ed] discontinuities” and reside now with the subject of the Lucy poems in and as the raw material of the world, and therefore whatever knowledge they may possess is knowledge from “beyond the grave,” but they do not speak it plainly when summoned to do so by their belated successor as he attempts to “blend” them in the temporal alchemy of rhetoric. Instead, they speak their knowledge in the language of what they are, in the sublime anti-tongue of material’s play, and if their voices are present as a palpable force in this passage, it is in the vitiating effects of an apocalypse re-inscribed as disruptive affect into the written tissue from which it has excised itself.

It is difficult to witness the same material counter-rhetoric that haunted *The Prelude* at play in *The Excursion* without being once again reminded of the anxieties about working in a written medium that Wordsworth expresses in the third of the “Essays Upon Epitaphs.” I argued in the first chapter of this study that when Wordsworth warns that “Words are too awful an instrument for good and evil to be trifled with: they hold above all other external powers a dominion over thoughts,” and that “Language, if it do not uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet,
like the power of gravitation or the air we breathe, is a counter-spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work to derange, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve” (Prose Works 2, 85), he stops short of the mark, and that a complete threat assessment must account for the potential for script to do to language the violence that language can do to thought. Is it possible that Wordsworth may have possessed even a nascent awareness of this radically perilous potential? As I hope my attention to the implicit rhetoric of enjambment and internal rhyme in the description of the Wanderer’s visage illustrates, Wordsworth was a master craftsman, a verse technician par excellence: I find it nearly impossible to resist speculating, however irresponsibly, that he may have been at least partially aware of the dangerous games he often played with the materials of his trade. Could a poet of Wordsworth’s meticulously conscientious self-awareness not be cognizant on some level of the gamble inherent in the enjambed gambit of writing “Being made / Of many Beings”? I suspect that in this case Wordsworth is willing to risk concretizing the temporary meaning given substance by the first line in order to build and then relieve the sense of anticipation that occurs in the brief span from the first line’s end to the next’s beginning (and in order to show as well as tell the necessity of temporal movement in achieving the kind of personal completion that constitutes the two lines’ semantic substance), but might he not have been unsettled by the possibility that this initial meaning might have longevity greater than what he intended?

If so, it may be possible to make something approaching sense out of the characterization of the Wanderer as a Poet who cannot write poetry. The figure of the Wanderer may represent the rustic, democratizing, affectively grounded project of Lyrical Ballads pursued to its logical conclusion: anyone attuned to the aesthetic power of nature’s voice may be a poet, with or without the intellect, leisure, and capital (cultural and otherwise) necessary for cultivating a
facility for verse composition in Wordsworth’s England. If poetry is a technology for reproducing and transmitting affect, then the Wanderer’s ability to transmit affect by other means—spoken discourse, or even the materiality of his corporeal form—may render the actual exercise of poetic composition superfluous. This may be the occulted dream of late Wordsworth, whose agonizing disinclination for the task of composition extended, as Hamilton reminds us, from psychological discomfort to the trauma of actual psychosomatic pain: to be a Poet without poetry, at play in fields of material, rather than the plaything of a field of materiality, and to be able to reap poetry’s affective rewards without having to endure the frustrating struggle with the vicissitudes of the written medium, which is always capable of arbitrarily undoing in an instant what the poet has labored extensively to effectuate. Wordsworth’s aversion to writing may have led him to write himself out of the responsibility to write, leaving the burden of completing The Recluse an inherited promise made by a discontinued iteration of Wordsworth to a discontinued iteration of Coleridge, one of the latter’s many failed dreams, rubble lying next to the aborted ruin of Pantisocracy and the twisted remains of his “squeaking baby-trumpet of sedition” (Collected Letters 1, 397). If to continue writing is to continue facing the demons of discontinuity in a trial that has been rendered unnecessary by the rhetorical manufacture of Poetry without poetry, why keep writing? If The Recluse is Wordsworth’s attempt to communicate in tropes and figures the fear and awe that may only fall upon us when we look at the vitiation of trope and figure, it is almost inevitable that he would abandon the tribulations of script for the attractive promise of pure access to the aesthetic. The character of the Wanderer, “informed” by nature, “had small need of books” (1.162-63); as an allegorical figure for a component of Wordsworth’s self-determined subjectivity, he is the device that allows
Wordsworth to persuade himself to stop producing poetry so that he may apprehend the ways in which he has become it.

III.

The few books to which the Wanderer enjoyed access in his youth were those he could find on “the minister’s old shelf” (1.171). One of these, a book of fairy stories placed incongruously alongside accounts of “The life and death of martyrs” (1.172), is singled out for especially detailed description by Wordsworth:

And there, by lucky hap, had been preserved
A straggling volume, torn and incomplete,
That left half-told the preternatural tale,
Romance of giants, chronicle of fiends,
Profuse in garniture of wooden cuts
Strange and uncouth; dire faces, figures dire,
Sharp-kneed, sharp-elbowed, and lean-ankled too,
With long and ghostly shanks--forms which once seen
Could never be forgotten! (1.177-85)

A boy of impressionable age could not help but be affected by these phantasmagorias. However, as with all sublime trauma in Wordsworth’s now deeply entrenched codification of the phenomenon of aesthetic terror and its aftermath, this one eventually finds its juvenility redeemed through domestication:

In his heart,

Where Fear sate thus, a cherished visitant,
Was wanting yet the pure delight of love
By sound diffused, or by the breathing air,
Or by the silent looks of happy things,
Or flowing from the universal face
Of earth and sky. But he had felt the power
Of Nature, and already was prepared,
By his intense conceptions, to receive
Deeply the lesson deep of love which he,
Whom Nature, by whatever means, has taught
To feel intensely, cannot but receive. (1.185-96)

Here, as in “Tintern Abbey” and *The Prelude*, the sublime must ultimately grow up and get married if it is to become useful in any context other than the solipsistic, masturbatory reveries of youth, which are made to look ridiculous and self-indulgent from the vantage of a reflective intellect that has long since reached and reconciled itself to the responsibilities of its own majority. It is curious, then, to observe the occurrence, twice in the span of three lines, of a species of prosodic apocalypse that resists the arranged marriage of the sublime to that which would contain, diffuse, and redirect its radically destructive potency into a pious, polite social project. I refer to the breaking of a line at the point that suggestively severs an unsettlingly indefinite noun from the genitive construction that not only modifies it, but reduces it by binding it to something reassuring, usually a facet of nature in the aspect of matron rather than mistress. In Book 5 of *The Prelude*, it was the recurring “voice” that was repeatedly bound in these iterations of prosodic *akedah*; here it is a “universal face” severed and then bound to “earth and sky,” followed by a “power” severed and then bound to “Nature” by the quiet fiat of the
preposition “of.” The face and the power are left sufficiently undefined by their lines’ brokenness to retain the measure of obscurity that gives rise to terror in the Burkean model of sublimity. They are momentarily uncontextualizable, unknowable except as agencies as alien as the “dire faces, figures dire,” of the “straggling volume” on the minister’s shelf, until the implicit structural progress of linear reading narrativizes them and binds them to “the pure delight of love” that is embodied by nature as wife and mother. In the rhetorical routine of Wordsworthian prosody, the sublime is a mistake to be corrected, and the thrill of youthful aesthetic transgressions is to be put aside like an abandoned mistress.

Wordsworth may have finally convinced Annette Vallon to accept her usurpation by Mary Hutchinson, but this does not mean that the sublime mistress of youthful encounters with the aesthetic, or the fragment of Wordsworthian subjectivity defined by those encounters, must so easily relinquish its hold on that which purports to be the marriage of the sublime to beauty in the poetry of maturity. The “face” and the “power” have their discrete identity and their affective sovereignty “by lucky hap . . . preserved” in the materiality of the prosody that would overwrite them. The sublime horrors of youth may not be so easily outgrown, and the description of the minister’s old book of folk tales and fairy stories contains an uncanny echo of The Recluse itself: left unfinished, and haunted by dire faces and figures, Wordsworth’s aborted epic is that “straggling volume, torn and incomplete”; it is a “half-told . . . preternatural tale, / Romance of giants, chronicle of fiends.” It is the crumbling, ruined, and ruinous residence of manifold genii loci, and in the end the architect of this ruin has little choice but to flee from those figures, those “forms which once seen / Could never be forgotten.”

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1 Jeffrey explicitly betrays the political dimensions of his critique of the Lake School in his hostile review of Robert Southey’s Thalaba, which includes the “antisocial principles” of Rousseau among the chief elements and “peculiar doctrines” of the Lake School. See the October 1802 issue of The Edinburgh Review.
This disparity may correspond roughly to what Wordsworth’s “Third Essay Upon Epitaphs” refers to as language’s potential to become a “counter spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work to derange, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve” (Prose Works 2, 85).

Readers seeking a more comprehensive account of the critical response to Wordsworth’s “system” than I am able to offer here should consult Scott Hess’s “Wordsworth’s ‘System,’ the Critical Reviews, and the Reconstruction of Literary Authority.”

This criticism echoes Jeffrey’s concern, previously noted in this chapter, with Wordsworth’s habit of “connecting his most lofty, tender, or impassioned conceptions, with objects and incidents, which the greater part of his readers will probably persist in thinking low, silly, or uninteresting.”

Hamilton acknowledges, without naming names, several contrarian contingents committed to denying Wordsworth’s decline, and summarily dismisses all of them: “Excluding those who worship Wordsworth that side idolatry and who, along with their other sentimentalized utterances, speak of an ‘alleged’ decline (and excluding any who, riding the high horse of idiosyncrasy, assert that Wordsworth wrote no great poetry until after 1812), there is only one inconsiderable group that questions Wordsworth’s loss in poetic power. This group contends that Wordsworth wrote no bad poetry, a true estimate under a certain definition of ‘bad.’ Most other scholars and critics agree that Wordsworth wrote practically all his great poetry in the ten years between 1797 and 1806” (19). This was true when Hamilton wrote it, and there seems little reason to suspect that it does not hold equally true today.

Should any reader, upon encountering my classification of “Tintern Abbey” as a “comparatively minor piece,” object to that description as powerfully as I did upon writing it, I would point them to Johnston’s helpful reminder that “all the shorter poems which, from first to last, have guaranteed [Wordsworth’s] place among the genius-poets of the English language—“Tintern Abbey,” “Michael,” the Immortality Ode, “Resolution and Independence”—were relegated to subsidiary, occasional relations to The Recluse, as indeed they were in his mind when he composed them” (xi).

Neither does he acknowledge the considerable precedent for the model of decline set by Wordsworth’s contemporaries, especially Jeffrey, Byron, and Coleridge.
Solitary Reapers: Poetry, Prophecy, and Time in Wordsworth and Ginsberg

I.

This project has sought to formulate a tentative vision of an anachronistically postmodern Wordsworth. In this vision of an aggressively proleptic strain of Romanticism, the modern subjectivity supposedly inaugurated by the Wordsworthian iterations of the Greater Romantic Lyric, as well as by the epic autobiography of *The Prelude* and the poetic philosophy of *The Recluse*, is instantaneously impeached by material events that occur as a consequence of script’s capacity to exceed the semiotic function arranged for it by the revisionary intellect. These events, in which the poem’s own materiality disarticulates—in the very moment of its articulation—the model of subjectivity it is tasked with instantiating, represent a manifestation of the phenomenon that Paul de Man has termed “the play of the letter,” wherein “meaning-producing tropes are replaced by the fragmentation of sentences and propositions into discrete words, or the fragmentation of words into syllables or finally letters” (*Aesthetic Ideology* 89). The extension and application of this phenomenon to the Wordsworthian poetic corpus makes possible the observation of other varieties of subversive material play, including the phenomenon for which I provisionally offer the nomenclature “the play of the line,” or the fragmentation of poetic arguments into the discrete lines that compose them as the verse apparatus undertakes a perversion of its own rhetorical function. When the written medium conscripted by a self to (re)make itself proves to be as radically, inappropriably material as verse, the extent to which textual materiality may be seen to participate in, rather than merely facilitate, the projects that Scott Hess has recently categorized as “self-construction,” “self-writing,” and “self-reading” (*Authoring the Self* 213), and which Kenneth E. Morrison has classified as “self-editing,” reveals the susceptibility of the constructed, written, edited self to modification by the arbitrary accidents
of material script. Both producer of poetry and produced by poetry, “Wordsworth,” understood in this context as both a catachrestic construct of the sovereign bourgeois subject and a spatiotemporal locus for an authentic subjectivity that includes both affect and agency, serves as the site of a strange congress between the human and the non-human, the subject and the object world, real and ideal, intellect and raw affect, intent and accident, language and a variant of what Derrida calls the “other of language” (qtd. in Kearney 123).\(^1\)

Not a stable, coherent person but a rhetorically manufactured persona and a fiction of stability and coherence perpetually mobilizing a material skepticism towards its own defining fictions and, indeed, its ideologies, “Wordsworth,” understood as a body, a body of texts, and a body “defined not by an outer skin-envelope or other surface boundary but by [its] potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect” (Seigworth and Gregg 2), comes to us as a variant of the “monstrous mutation without tradition or normative precedent” that emerges for Derrida when “the text produces a language of its own, in itself, which while continuing to work through tradition emerges at a given moment as a monster” (qtd. in Kearney 124). It comes to us also as a participant in the notion of history that exists for de Man when “the shift from trope to performance” and the “reinscription of the performative in a tropological system of cognition” define history not as “a progression or a regression” but “as an event, as an occurrence” (Aesthetic Ideology 133). If the self is made, if only in part, out of poetry, and if poems are legible as sites of contact between the incommensurable rhetorical intentionality of authorship and the aleatory counter-rhetoric of the materials of the author’s trade, then the self, a “something evermore about to be” (Prelude 6.608), perpetually remade in the praxis of the poem, has the project of its ongoing inception permanently contaminated by that which resides elsewhere.
The final stanza of Wordsworth’s “The Solitary Reaper” may be seen to harbor one such event or occurrence, and to perceive it is to witness the poem disentangling itself from the fictions that its rhetoric enables:

I listened, motionless and still,
And, as I mounted up the hill,
The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more. (29-32)

No fewer than three distinct stages in an initially harrowing but ultimately benign narrative of sublime trauma are encapsulated within these lines, and each stage, consigned to its own discrete material space by the breaks between poetic lines within an incrementally unfolding diachronic sequence of experience and reflection, corresponds to a stage of self-development within Wordsworth’s theodicy of a socially responsible self forged in the harsh fires of sublime affect and tempered in the waters of the beautiful. The stages of this theodicy progress more or less according to—and seem to simultaneously problematize—M.H. Abrams’s structural model of the “Greater Romantic Lyric,” a category that refers to poems which present a determinate speaker in a particularized, and usually a localized, outdoor setting, whom we overhear as he carries on, in a fluent vernacular which rises easily to a more formal speech, a sustained colloquy, sometimes with himself or with the outer scene, but more frequently with a silent human auditor, present or absent. The speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene. In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight,
faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation. (76-7)

The first stage represented in the final stanza of “The Solitary Reaper,” which Abrams would likely recognize as an aspect of the landscape provoking an evocative shift in the poet’s consciousness, and which I read as the poet’s traumatic encounter with the sublime and his concomitant flight into surmise, is initiated primarily by the engagement of the auditory sense by the reaper’s song, but, crucially, the question of whose auditory sense is being engaged is somewhat more difficult to address than it initially appears. The speaker reports “I listened,” positing himself as a single interlocutory link in a chain of interlocution that also implicates the reader and the author in ways that ultimately prove to be a highly provocative critique of the categorical distinction between the two. When we learn, in Wordsworth’s note to the 1807 version, that the inspiration for “The Solitary Reaper” was not, as we may be forgiven for assuming, Wordsworth’s own veridical experience on his walking tour of Scotland, but a reference in Wilkinson’s “Tour of Scotland” to “a female who was reaping alone,” who “sung in Erse as she bended over her sickle, the sweetest human voice I ever heard,” and whose “strains were tenderly melancholy, and felt delicious long after they were heard no more” (Wilkinson 12), it becomes incumbent upon us to acknowledge and locate the presence of the non-self in Wordsworth’s exploitation of the lyric form as a vehicle for self-construction. That non-self manifests in an intersubjective capacity as Wilkinson’s experience is literally incorporated by Wordsworth into the lyric tissue that is the site of his self-making, but, more importantly, it also manifests intrasubjectively when Wordsworth demonstrates, by means of the very lyricism
meant to produce and confirm the intrasubjective coherence of the self, that he may share just as much with Wilkinson and his past as he does with his own ostensibly accessible personal history. If one may utilize poetry to participate so fully in the affective state of another that the originally exogenous affect is internalized and begins to operate as if it were endogenous, the rather unsettling possibility that endogenous affect may, in a simple reversal of the dynamic, be rendered effectively exogenous must also be seriously considered. Poetry may make the stranger familiar, but it cannot do so without acknowledging that the conditions that make such familiarization possible are also the conditions that may make the familiar strange. If an affect that is not one’s own may become one’s own so fully that it inspires poetic composition (an act that, for Wordsworth, is inextricably bound up with the phenomenon of preserving and transmitting affective data), then an affect that is one’s own may conceivably assert its autonomy and become alien. In this way, the poetry intended to manufacture a self both internally cohesive and sufficiently insulated from the external world actually comes to erode the already precariously maintained boundaries that separate the inner world from the outer as it simultaneously erects the partitions that prevent the poet’s multiple inner selves from cohering into the singular identity insisted upon by catachresis.

The ramifications for Abrams’s model are clear. Within the prescriptive structure of the Greater Romantic Lyric, it may not possible to distinguish the poet from the landscape he occupies or to invoke an identity sufficiently fixed to permit the poet a dialogue with himself that does not instantly become a dialogue with the other. The very act of self-address comes to resemble a speech act that performs the division of the self into speaker and interlocutor, into perceiving subject and object of perception. The categories of the “sustained colloquy, sometimes with himself or with the outer scene” begin to appear irrevocably confused: the
colloquy is always conducted with a self that is indistinguishable from the non-self, a self always intruded into and contaminated by the outer scene, as well as a self perpetually self-fragmenting and continually exiling its own fragments into the object world. Address your words to the inner world, and you shall find yourself speaking to the outer; speak to the landscape, and you find yourself engaged in self-address.

Consequently, the poetry is tasked with rhetorically repairing the internal connections it was intended to establish but has actually severed, while also restoring the barrier, meant to insulate the self from that which exceeds it, which the poetry has dismantled. This task encompasses the second and third stages of the final stanza’s sublime theodicy. The second stage—the post-traumatic re-centering of the subject within the physical world, the reactivation of the higher faculties of cognition, and the subject’s recognition that he has returned altered from his flight into surmise—unfolds within the next two lines: “. . . as I mounted up the hill, / The music in my heart I bore.” The subject’s aesthetic reverie has begun to recede, and he has regained sufficient self-awareness to both recognize the need to keep walking and to actually begin doing so (complying with the progressive imperative’s demands that the aesthetic be put to some utilitarian end, rather than simply valued for its own sake and therefore dwelled within permanently), but, as he departs, he continues to carry within his aesthetic faculties the original response to the object of contemplation that had enraptured him. The poem has, in Abrams’s model, “round[ed] upon itself to end where it began,” but the “altered mood” with which the renovated subject perceives the original scene may in its turn renovate the scene itself.

The third and final stage, which unfolds in the final two lines, consists of reflection after a significant passage of time, indicating the sublime’s capacity to endure as one of The Prelude’s
“spots of time” (12.208), a perpetual presence, capable, “[l]ong after” its initial manifestation, of carrying the “altered mood and deepened understanding” of Abrams’ model far into the future.

As a consequence of the syntax with which Wordsworth grants them formal expression, all three stages are rhetorically collapsed into the appearance of a single, unified moment of synchronic concert that, through the rustic figures of the reaper and her song, revises fragmentation into cohesion and confusion into mere fusion: an operation familiar to readers of Geoffrey Hartman as *akedah*, or the “tying or binding” that represents “the marriage of imagination with nature” (225). As Hartman has demonstrated, by the time Wordsworth had begun composing “The Solitary Reaper” in 1803, *akedah* had already consolidated its position as the primary rhetorical means by which he sought to contain and diffuse the energy of an encroaching apocalypse. The exciting possibility that *akedah* may be a prosodic phenomenon as well as the thematic one posited by Hartman is borne out by the binding operation performed upon the three stages of the poem’s sublime narrative by its final lines. The first stage is bound in a syntactic *akedah* to the second by means of the noncommittal conjunction “[a]nd,” which somewhat transparently coordinates in an implicit simultaneity the structural contiguity of two proximal events whose sequential relationship might have been more accurately reflected, without compromising the meter, by the conjunctive adverb “then.”

The *akedah* that joins the second stage to the third is somewhat more problematic and, to my mind, dramatically more interesting, for it occurs through the invisible doubling of an entire poetic line. In order for the poem’s final three lines to maintain both syntactic coherence and a consistency with the poem’s own internal chronological logic, they must be read as if the penultimate line had split itself into two identical halves, with the first half bound syntactically to the line that precedes it, and the second bound to the line that follows it, thusly:
And, as I mounted up the hill,

The music in my heart I bore[.]

The music in my heart I bore,

Long after it was heard no more.

It is this invisible doubling that makes it possible for the poem to avoid explicitly making the nonsensical, impossible, and aesthetically nugatory claim that at the same moment the speaker was mounting up the hill in the immediate aftermath of having heard the reaper’s song, he bore that song in his heart “long after” he had ceased to hear it. In order for the song to retain some semblance of the dramatic impact the poem’s narrative of haunted interlocution requires of it, its power to affect must possess a measure of longevity sufficient to trouble the speaker even after the passage of a significant span of time. If, however, the “long after” is revealed to contextually mean “shortly after” or “immediately after,” the affective force of the generative encounter appears considerably attenuated, or perhaps even negated.

This nonsensical, impossible, nugatory reading, however, is precisely the reading upon which the poem’s rhetoric of binding implicitly insists. In order to circumvent the growing, apocalyptic awareness of the ways in which acute aesthetic experience may represent a radically defamiliarizing mode of engaging with scenes both internal and external, a mode from which we are irrevocably severed upon post-traumatic resituation within the familiarity of an object world from which we are safely insulated by the revisionary activity of the higher faculties of cognition, the poem must collapse a diachronic seriality into a synchronic singularity which renders the past accessible to the present, but only in ways that confirm rather than threaten the coherence of the subject. Wordsworth, through the intermediary persona of a lyric speaker, reveals himself as more than willing to commit an intellectual error in order to revise division
into reunion. The intellect knows that an event cannot be accurately characterized as having happened “long after” the event that immediately preceded it, but the affective faculties “know” that these events may feel separated by a long interval, especially if the first event was experienced in a primarily affective mode and the second in a primarily intellective (and hence, reflective) mode. So profound was the aesthetic reverie initiated by the song that to emerge from it back into full possession of the higher faculties is to become a character in some dark folklore: the speaker emerges, like Oisín from his sojourn in Tír na nÓg, to find that what initially seemed a brief absence was actually a gulf that spanned centuries, and suffers the full burden of those elided years weighing down all at once. That which is nonsensical, impossible, or nugatory for the intellect may not be so for affect, and the invisible doubling of the penultimate line appears intended to invisibly double the poem’s affective force by invisibly doubling the poem’s ability to interrogate the intellect’s capacity to apprehend temporal relationships. Simultaneously proleptic and analeptic in its effects, the poem’s conclusion figures a future invested with all the immediacy of the present, as well as a recent past from which we may prematurely feel long-divorced; the latter of these figurations appears committed to valuing the inherently traumatic nature of the poem’s narrative of acute aesthetic experience, while the former seems to advance an agenda of reunion and resolution.

It is quite troubling, however, to observe how fully the same prosodic rhetoric that emphasizes the radical shift between modalities also enervates that radicality by binding past to present and future, arranging the illusion of simultaneity and homogeneity to domesticate a system defined by its violently contentious and interpenetrative heterogeneity. The stakes of this binding operation appear raised when considered in light of precisely how the “music” the speaker bears in his heart figures in the poem. For the poet does not value the reaper’s song on
its own terms for the melancholy pleasure it imparts, but for the peculiar power it possesses in its capacity as a failed communicative act to initiate a complex flight into surmise that may be exploited as a vehicle for approaching a sublimity he mistakenly assumes he can exploit. The poem opens with the reaper’s song becoming the occasion for the poet to articulate a crisis of interpersonal alienation. Of the first stanza’s four lines, the first three emphasize the reaper’s solitude:

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by herself;
Stop here, or gently pass! (1-4)

The reaper, “single,” “solitary,” and “by herself,” has her solitude mirrored in the speaker, who suffers from an equally disconcerting crisis of isolation. Whether the interlocutor whom he beseeches in line four to either “stop . . . or gently pass” represents an actual travelling companion or his own internal restlessness personified, he remains fixated upon the reaper’s song to the detriment of his connection with the other figures, internal or external, who populate the poem’s narrative, suggesting a solitude that trumps society. We have, then, reaper and speaker, two solitary figures ironically united in their shared solitude and their participation in the failed act of communication that is the reaper’s song, which the speaker characterizes as a “melancholy strain” (6). As becomes clear when the speaker asks “Will no one tell me what she sings?” (17), he does not speak the reaper’s tongue, and therefore, in order to attribute a melancholy quality to her song, he must rely not upon what its signifiers signify to his faculties of cognition, but upon what the sounds of the signifiers, divorced from their semiotic content, convey to him in an affective capacity. He appears to have intuited, rather than interpreted, the
transmission not of meaning \textit{per se}, but of a feeling so acutely affecting that he almost immediately insulates himself from it with a self-generated quantity of semiotic content:

Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago:
Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of to-day?
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
That has been, and may be again? (18-24)

The comparison that follows, that of the reaper’s song to birdsong (9-16), indicates the degree to which the poem first encourages—and then complicates—this impression of a speaker overwhelmed by “the sound” (8) that fills the “Vale profound” (7) to the point of overflow. With no comprehensible signs to serve as an obstruction, the speaker appears free to confront pure melody, dispensing with the relationship between signifier and signified and apprehending without mediation the affective truths contained within the musical dimension of language; however, the speaker’s assertion that the Nightingale’s song (9) or the Cuckoo’s voice (14) cannot compare to the reaper’s song implies that music fully divorced from meaning is somehow inadequate in this context. If pure sound devoid of semiotic content were what he required, he could have found it in the birdsong he dismisses as insufficient; that he does not suggests that the speaker finds the song compelling precisely because it is sung in the articulate sounds of a language whose signs articulate nothing to him. The song affects him so profoundly because he knows that the song signifies something to someone, but also because he knows that the
language barrier excludes him from fully participating in whatever conventional processes of
signification could occur if he spoke the reaper’s tongue.

Coleridge complained in 1832 that Wordsworth “ought never to have abandoned the
contemplative position which is peculiarly—perhaps I might say exclusively—fitted for him.
His proper title is Spectator ab extra” (Table Talk 163). In response to the language barrier that
provides “The Solitary Reaper” with its crisis of communication, Wordsworth rewrites what is
necessarily a contemplation from without, of the kind to which Coleridge refers above, as
contribution from within. What makes the exclusion of the speaker of “The Solitary Reaper”
from the semiotic operation of the reaper’s song so provocative is its predication of a
spectatorship that encourages this fiction of participation. Positioning the speaker as the
interlocutor of signs that cannot utilize the conventional semiotic channels to signify (to him)
liberates him into the freeplay of the subjunctive—the fluidity and noncommittal provisionality
of a perpetual “perhaps”—permitting him to explore the potential meanings that the song might
hold for those who can understand what its signs signify. The structure of a semiotic formula
remains intact, but the speaker may populate that formula with whatever variables he wishes (the
“plaintive numbers,” “the battles long ago,” the natural sorrow, loss, or pain”) so long as they do
not violate the strain’s melancholic mood. Lines 18-24 chronologically divide the possible
semiotic content of the song into the politico-historical calamities of the past’s armed conflicts,
the mundane personal tribulations of the present, and the potential repetition in the future of the
pains of both past and present. Past, present, and future, as well as the political and the personal,
are rhetorically collapsed into the conflated simultaneity of the subjunctive, existing together
within a dimension of unrealized potentiality, and seemingly confirming the power of the
imagination as a means for the subject to exert a measure of agency upon the unremittingly divided and divisive character of the real.

This ability to imaginatively exploit a failed act of signification to rhetorically bind that which is divided by time and personal boundaries is the “music” that the poem’s final stanza goes to considerable lengths to represent as a spot of time capable of being borne permanently in the heart. The akedah of subjunctive collapse is lent longevity by the prosodic akedah of the penultimate line’s invisible doubling, embedding akedah in akedah—binding a binding to binding—in the verse equivalent of a fractal repetition that reinforces the rhetoric of holism at multiple levels of implementation. What makes this multilayered binding operation particularly noteworthy in this context is its surreptitious mobilization—in 1803—of syntax to enact at the level of personal history, or what Frederick Jameson has termed the “forms of our private temporality,” the flattening or collapse of historical sequence into an undifferentiated surface (6). The several iterations of the lyric “I” that coexist within these final four lines are coerced into identification by a syntax whose motives seem innocently intent on articulating the disfiguration of temporality at the hands of acute affective response, but whose methods risk betraying their role in arranging or orchestrating the phenomenon they posit as antecedent to themselves.

Despite its efforts, however, this holistic rhetoric has its efficacy compromised by its reliance upon the unremittingly material marks that lend it voice. The play of the poem’s penultimate line lends it sufficient prosodic sovereignty to resist its traumatic severance into two identical halves, and instead permits it to inflict upon the verse a trauma of its own as it extricates itself bodily from the argument to which it is bound. Abrogating the rules of the semiotic system in which it finds itself, the line, by virtue of the sheer material fact of its singular appearance in the poem, reminds us that the invisible doubling does not actually occur, and that
when we read the poem as if it had, we make ourselves complicit in establishing the holistic fiction that the doubling serves. What does occur is a shock of defamiliarization as we come to understand that a poem we thought we knew is not what it for so long appeared to be, and does not in fact say what we thought it said. Script itself, no longer a safely familiar, silent vehicle for semiotic content but an alien thing that appears to possess something like a voice and an agency of its own, becomes an aperture through which the sublime may emerge to inflict itself upon the poem, forcing it to actually say what it says and to unsay what it appears to have said. No longer invisibly doubled, the line can no longer be read as simultaneously bound to both the line that precedes it and to the line that follows it. Neither can it be read as bound only to one of the two without compromising the poem’s syntactical or semiotic integrity. Bind the line to the one that precedes it, and the poem begins to suggest, counter to everything it has striven to insist, that the music cannot be permanently borne in the heart: “And, as I mounted up the hill, / The music in my heart I bore[.] / Long after[,] it was heard no more.” “Long after” ceases to modify “bore” and begins to modify “heard,” robbing the music of its haunting potency and disqualifying it from attaining the status of a spot of time. Bind the line to the one that follows, and “as I mounted up the hill” becomes a free-floating dependent clause with no independent clause to which it may attach itself to achieve completion: “And, as I mounted up the hill[,] / The music in my heart I bore, / Long after it was heard no more.” Post-script has disarticulated that which script articulates.

Emphasizing the artificiality of the rhetoric of subjunctive collapse, the line emerges bound to nothing, a decontextualized shibboleth whose unintelligibility reveals script, in its radically material aspect, as the sublime denizen of a province of the object world largely unknowable to us. “The music in my heart I bore”: without the stabilizing context of the lyric
tissue from which this line cuts itself, it becomes impossible to determine to what music the line refers, whose heart it names, whose identity the lyric “I” represents. Script has become post-script, a transformation that once witnessed could not be unseen even if all of the revisionary intellect’s resources were diverted into the effort to refamiliarize that which has been defamiliarized, and this un revisable vision leaves the poem permanently haunted by the numinousness of its own material body.

I believe that this phenomenon qualifies as an iteration of the shift from the tropological to the performative so crucial to de Man’s understanding of history and materiality in Aesthetic Ideology. It could be said that the play of the line’s disruptive effects upon the final stanza performs the haunting that the rhetoric of holism can only gesture towards with tropes and suggestive syntax, and that the traumatic dimension of the shift appeals directly to the affective faculties. In this regard, the failure of the poem’s efforts to finesse the “music” into becoming a spot of time itself becomes a spot of time, a “material event” in the actual history of the subject that renders discontinuous the relationship between the subject as it existed before the shift and the subject that exists in the shift’s aftermath. When, early in the poem, the interlocutory speaker entreats the interlocutor to whom he addresses himself to “Stop here, or gently pass,” he also admonishes the reader (understood here to mean both the external other and the internal other—both the subject from whom Wordsworth is divided by interpersonal boundaries and the adumbrated iteration of himself from whom he shall be severed by discontinuity) that to continue reading (or, in the term upon which Hess may insist, “self-reading”) is to cross a Rubicon of the kind to which Geoffrey Hartman refers as a “crossroads in human life” (21). The choices are to “stop here”—to confront the play of the line and suffer the personal apocalypse of discontinuity—or to “gently pass” into what Hartman has characterized as the “gentler
continuum and quasi immortality of nature” (21)—to stop reading both poem and self, to “suffer no discontinuities” (21), and become, in a sense, alive to the object world by becoming dead to the human world, especially to the vicissitudes of language and the burden of self-consciousness they inflict. The latter choice permits the subject to purchase a peaceful passing in exchange for his humanity; the former allows the subject to retain its humanity for the price of its connection to its own history, rendering the humanity it has retained unrecognizable as such.

Speculation regarding the extent to which this type of material resistance to rhetoric resurfaces, becoming amplified and complicated in the supposedly post-Romantic poetics of one of the key figures of postmodernism, shall occupy the remainder of my efforts in this chapter.

II.

Although Allen Ginsberg’s debts to British and American Romanticism have been extensively catalogued, often by the poet himself, those debts tend to be articulated almost exclusively in terms of the influence of two primary figures: Whitman and Blake. Several passages from Thomas Clark’s 1966 Paris Review interview with Ginsberg, however, possess a striking resemblance to some of the central tenets of Wordsworth’s poetics in their rhetorical and counter-rhetorical aspects, suggesting a somewhat richer and more disparate lineage. Compare, for example, the following excerpt from the Preface to Lyrical Ballads, in which Wordsworth posits the contemplative dimension of composition as a sophisticated mechanism for reproducing and transmitting affect,

I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion,
kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.

*(Complete Poetical Works 797)*

with Ginsberg’s account of composition as pronouncing an affective “prophecy”:

> Usually during the composition, step by step, word by word and adjective by adjective, if it’s at all spontaneous, I don’t know whether it even makes sense sometimes. Sometimes I do know it makes complete sense, and I start crying. Because I realize I’m hitting some area which is absolutely true. And in that sense applicable universally, or understandable universally. In that sense able to survive through time—in that sense to be read by somebody and wept to, maybe, centuries later. In that sense prophecy, because it touches a common key . . . What prophecy actually is is not that you actually know that the bomb will fall in 1942. It’s that you know and feel something that somebody knows and feels in a hundred years. And maybe articulate it in a hint—a concrete way that they can pick up on in a hundred years. (“Art of Poetry” 24)

Wordsworth’s overflow of emotion, which arises spontaneously out of and eventually divorces itself from the tranquility necessary for its recollection, as well as Ginsberg’s complete sense that might not make complete sense, suggest a poetics arranged around the crucial operation of preserving affect so that it may remain to some degree insulated from the deleterious effects of time’s passage. What both poets articulate is the highly provocative suggestion, anathema to currently normative critical practice, that affect may transcend historical contingency, and that poetry, through some strange quality or capacity, may be the vehicle that makes this transcendence possible.³
Crucially, neither poet grants the semiotic function of verse a significant responsibility in this process, but both go on to emphasize the affective potency of the meter and music to which linguistic signs cannot help but lend voice. For Wordsworth,

the emotion, of whatever kind, and in whatever degree, from various causes, is qualified by various pleasures, so that in describing any passions whatsoever, which are voluntarily described, the mind will, upon the whole, be in a state of enjoyment. If Nature be thus cautious to preserve in a state of enjoyment a being so employed, the Poet ought to profit by the lesson held forth to him, and ought especially to take care, that, whatever passions he communicates to his Reader, those passions, if his Reader’s mind be sound and vigorous, should always be accompanied with an overbalance of pleasure. Now the music of harmonious metrical language, the sense of difficulty overcome, and the blind association of pleasure which has been previously received from works of rhyme or metre of the same or similar construction, an indistinct perception perpetually renewed of language closely resembling that of real life, and yet, in the circumstance of metre, differing from it so widely—all these imperceptibly make up a complex feeling of delight, which is of the most important use in tempering the painful feeling always found intermingled with powerful descriptions of the deeper passions. (Complete Poetical Works 797)

For Ginsberg,

The poetry generally is like a rhythmic articulation of feeling. The feeling is like an impulse that rises within—just like sexual impulses, say; it’s almost as definite as that. It’s a feeling that begins somewhere in the pit of the stomach and rises up
forward in the breast and then comes out through the mouth and ears, and comes forth a croon or a groan or a sigh. Which, if you put words to it by looking around and seeing and trying to describe what’s making you sigh—and sigh in words—you simply articulate what you’re feeling. As simple as that. Or actually what happens is, at best what happens, is there’s a definite body rhythm that has no definite words, or may have one or two words attached to it, one or two key words attached to it. And then, in writing it down, it’s simply by a process of association that I find what the rest of the statement is—what can be collected around that word, what that word is connected to. Partly by simple association, the first thing that comes to my mind like “Moloch is” or “Moloch who,” and then whatever comes out. But that also goes along with a definite rhythmic impulse, like DA de de DA de de DA DA. “Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows.” And before I wrote “Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows,” I had the word, “Moloch, Moloch, Moloch,” and I also had the feeling DA de de DA de de DA de de DADA. So it was just a question of looking up and seeing a lot of windows, and saying, oh, windows, of course, but what kind of windows? But not even that—“Moloch whose eyes.” “Moloch whose eyes”—which is beautiful in itself—but what about it, Moloch whose eyes are what? So Moloch whose eyes—then probably the next thing I thought was “thousands.” OK, and then thousands what? “Thousands blind.” And I had to finish it somehow. So I hadda say “windows.” It looked good afterward.

(“Art of Poetry” 23-4)
Signs are important to these poets not simply because they signify, but because as they signify they convey the music through which the poem communicates the feeling whose relationship to meaning cannot be represented as fully reconciled: words matter because they cannot speak semiotic content to the higher faculties of cognition without also speaking affective content to the lower faculties. Meaning is decentered, incidental, and feeling, the “passions” the poet “communicates to his Reader” in Wordsworth and the “prophecy” of “complete sense” that Ginsberg embodies in “a concrete way that they can pick up on in a hundred years,” assumes a primacy and centrality whose implications profoundly destabilize the discursive politics of those normative models of poetic systematicity that insist upon reducing verse to a mere vehicle for ideas and, inevitably, for ideology.

Despite the affinity the two poets appear to share, their models of affective transmission do possess some important distinctions; ironically, attending to these distinctions eventuates in the apprehension of what may be, to appropriate the language of “Tintern Abbey,” a “far more deeply interfused” set of resemblances. For Wordsworth, the transmission of affect is initially intrasubjective, but ultimately intersubjective: overwhelming affect must be “recollected in tranquillity” by the poet until the tranquil mood recedes, bringing the present iteration of the poet’s subjectivity into proximity with the internal other in the form of affective data from its past. Only then may the poet direct his attention to the task of making this affect accessible to the external other through verse, and even then the affect is mediated, made more palatable: “the emotion, of whatever kind, and in whatever degree, from various causes, is qualified by various pleasures, so that in describing any passions whatsoever, which are voluntarily described, the mind will, upon the whole, be in a state of enjoyment” (Complete Poetical Works 797). It is for this reason that in order to discern the voice of Wordsworthian affect at its full volume it is
necessary to invoke de Man’s model of “radical Kant” and to posit a radical Wordsworth whose voice speaks not through the “various pleasures” that rhetorically qualify intense emotion to make it palatable, but through the counter-rhetorical play of material that performs emotion and inflicts a shift from trope to performance. It also bears repeating that Wordsworth’s acts of what Hess calls “self-reading” (Authoring the Self 213) involve a measure of what Morrison classifies as “self-editing,” and consequently the “overbalance of pleasure” he aspires to establish betrays the traumas of his past not only to the stranger without, but also to the stranger within.

Ginsberg, conversely, appears to have adopted a compositional practice that may eliminate the need to recollect affect by attaching it to language in the immediacy of the originary emotion. This can only be accomplished, however, if the poet is willing to cede a measure of control over the semiotic dimension of the verse to the arbitrary and the aleatory: “So it was just a question of looking up and seeing a lot of windows, and saying, oh, windows, of course.” If some or all of the words are connected only arbitrarily to the affect they embody, it is conceivable that the semiotic content of those words, guided during the act of interpretation by the revisionary intellect, may interfere with, rather than facilitate, the poet’s visionary efforts to “sigh in words” and “simply articulate what [he is] feeling.” It would then become necessary for the play of the line to intervene once more into the intervention, as it does in Wordsworth, to resist the arbitrary with the arbitrary and reclaim for visionary feeling the territory of the poem that has suffered the indignities of occupation and repurposing by revisionary meaning.

Ginsberg’s “The Change: Kyoto-Tokyo Express” illustrates these interventions and their effects. The poet’s commentary on the poem reveals the influence of the progressive, revisionary imperative upon him, confirming that despite his commitment to embodying in verse a pure affect uncontaminated by semiotic content, his poetry remains susceptible to the impulse
to mobilize revisionary semiotics in the effort to renounce a disturbingly traumatic, visionary past and to silence those fragments of his subjectivity that threaten the tranquility of the present. We find, in other words, the same tension between the rhetoric of theodicy, which seeks to conscript the aesthetic traumas of the past into a narrative of redemption, and prosodic apocalypse, which mobilizes post-script to subvert that conscription, that we find in Wordsworth, complete with enjambments that inappropriably concretize initial utterances that are ultimately meant to be appropriated into the rhetorically manufactured accord of akedah.

The aesthetically traumatic personal history from which Ginsberg hopes to liberate himself in “The Change” is a past defined not only by the sexual frustration and cultural alienation characteristic of the repressive social forms against which the counterculture of the poem’s moment was reacting, but also by visions and voices that seem to penetrate into the poet’s reality to drag him into some larger world that contains and exceeds the safe and the familiar, exposing safety and familiarity as illusory. Ginsberg endured a history of anomalous experience, the most widely recognized example of which is probably his “Blake experience,” the story of which he had related so often that by the early sixties he had begun to semi-ironically invoke the Ancient Mariner’s albatross as a simile for the burden it had become: “this is like the Ancient Mariner, I’ve said this so many times: ‘‘stoppeth one of three. / By thy long grey beard . . .’ Hang an albatross around your neck” (“Art of Poetry” 34-5). But the experience that was to become such a burden began as something else: visionary, and reducible neither to mere benevolence nor to a trauma from which escape must be sought through rhetorical and revisionary means. As the poet recounts the episode, he had, in 1945, become “interested in Supreme Reality with a capital S and R,” and had retained this interest for some time (34). Then, “In 1948 in East Harlem in the summer,” struggling with Neal Cassidy’s reluctance to continue
their affair, and masturbating alone in his apartment while reading Blake, Ginsberg endured a
visitation that would prove an enduring source of both inspiration and horror:

So, in that state therefore, of hopelessness, or dead end, change of phase you
know—growing up—and in an equilibrium in any case, a psychic, a mental
equilibrium of a kind, like of having no New Vision and no Supreme Reality and
nothing but the world in front of me, and of not knowing what to do with that . . .
there was a funny balance of tension, in every direction. And just after I came, on
this occasion, with a Blake book on my lap—I wasn’t even reading, my eye was
idling over the page of The Sunflower, and it suddenly appeared—the poem I’d
read a lot of times before, overfamiliar to the point where it didn’t make any
particular meaning except some sweet thing about flowers—and suddenly I
realized that the poem was talking about me. “Ah, Sun-flower! weary of time, /
Who countest the steps of the Sun; / Seeking after that sweet golden clime /
Where the traveller’s journey is done.” Now, I began understanding it, the poem
while looking at it, and suddenly, simultaneously with understanding it, heard a
very deep earth graven voice in the room, which I immediately assumed, I didn’t
think twice, was Blake’s voice; it wasn’t any voice that I knew, though I had
previously had a conception of a voice of rock, in a poem, some image like that—
or maybe that came after this experience. (36)

Consumed by personal crisis, Ginsberg represents the predicament out of which his
visitation emerged as a “dead end,” but also as “change of phase . . . growing up,” which calls to
mind the “crossroads in human life” confronted by the Boy of Winander in Hartman’s reading of
_Prelude_ Book 5 (21). Hartman reads these crossroads as the choice between two deaths, one of
which seems to correspond to Ginsberg’s characterization of his crisis as a “dead end,” and one
of which corresponds to his representation of it as “growing up”: “Growing further into
consciousness means a simultaneous development into death (i.e. the loss of a previous, joyfully
unselfconscious mode of being), and not growing further also means death (animal tranquillity,
absorption by nature)” (21). Like the Boy of Winander and the reader-speaker of “The Solitary
Reaper,” Ginsberg faces an encroaching apocalypse that must eventuate in either the exchange of
the current iteration of his subjectivity for the future iteration, or his death to the human world.
The Boy of Winander, as a figure for a fragment of Wordsworth, “dies” at his own crossroads so
that he may “suffer no discontinuities” (21-2); as an actual fragment of Wordsworth, he shares
the fate of the reaper’s interlocutor, losing “a previous . . . mode of being,” sacrificing the self on
the altar of personal growth, and having his authentic access to his personal history relocated
from the purview of memory (where it may be recalled and revised at will by the intellect) to the
territory of affect (from whence it may intrude at its own will and on its own terms into the
present to vitiate the rhetoric with which the intellect undertakes the task of perpetually
assembling the self).

This, or something like it, is Ginsberg’s fate as well. Despondent over the failure of his
interpersonal sexual relationships to relieve rather than exacerbate his struggles with rejection
and alienation, he finds in autoeroticism the catalyst necessary to propel him closer to the
defamiliarizing influence that makes it possible for him to “have nothing but the world in front of
[him]” in a way that reveals that “nothing but the world” is necessary. Stripping what the mind
has made familiar of that with which the mind makes it familiar enables Ginsberg to read Blake’s
“The Sunflower,” which had become “overfamiliar to the point where it didn’t make any
particular meaning except some sweet thing about flowers,” with renovated gaze. Freed by
overfamiliarity from the hermeneutic imperative, relieved of the responsibility to attribute a “particular meaning” to the poem, Ginsberg finds himself on the receiving end of a meaning particular to himself: a phenomenon that may be thought of in Ginsberg’s own terms as a “prophecy,” a poetry “applicable universally, or understandable universally” and “in that sense able to survive through time—in that sense to be read by somebody and wept to, maybe, centuries later,” originating not with himself, but with Blake. In other words, Ginsberg both tropes verse as a time machine and speculates that its aesthetic qualities, far from functioning as mere embellishment, may be the components that drive the process:

The thing I understood from Blake was that it was possible to transmit a message through time that could reach the enlightened, that poetry had a definite effect, it wasn’t just pretty, or just beautiful, as I had understood pretty beauty before—it was something basic to human existence, or it reached something, it reached the bottom of human existence. But anyway the impression I got was that it was like a kind of time machine through which he could transmit—Blake could transmit—his basic consciousness and communicate it to somebody else after he was dead; in other words build a time machine. (“Art of Poetry” 24-5)

It is as if Blake, or at least the fragment of Blake that survives as affective data encoded within the time machine of his verse, had become a “power,” as in Wordsworth’s own model of poetry-as-prophecy, which he describes to Coleridge in *The Prelude*:

Dearest Friend!

If thou partake the animating faith

That Poets, even as Prophets, each with each

Connected in a mighty scheme of truth,
Have each his own peculiar faculty,
Heaven’s gift, a sense that fits him to perceive
Objects unseen before, thou wilt not blame
The humblest of this band who dares to hope
That unto him hath also been vouchsafed
An insight that in some sort he possesses,
A privilege whereby a work of his,
Proceeding from a source of untaught things,
Creative and enduring, may become
A power like one of Nature’s. (13.299-312)

In the context of Wordsworth’s enduring dedication to making poetry an oracle for emotion, this passage suggests that the truth preserved and conveyed in the “animating faith” of a “mighty scheme of truth” that links poet to poet is an affective one.

Ginsberg soon discovers that the prophecy, once heard, does not immediately recede into memory, but becomes an “insight that in some sort he possesses,” one able to continually exert a defamiliarizing influence upon his perception of the object world. Though triggered by Blake’s “The Sunflower,” the altered state endures long enough to facilitate a renovated reading of “The Sick Rose,” and Ginsberg comes tantalizingly close to explicitly articulating this reading as a confrontation with the Satanic sublime of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, which Wordsworth’s *Prelude* calls “the beauty, which . . . hath terror in it” (14.245-6). This confrontation unfolds not through the interpretation of signs, but through some other variety of interpretation that exists apart from what Ginsberg classifies as the “verbal level”: 

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But anyway—the same *petite sensation* recurred several minutes later, with the same voice, while reading the poem “The Sick Rose.” This time it was a slightly different sense-depth-mystic impression. Because *The Sick Rose*—you know I can’t interpret the poem now, but it had a meaning—I mean I can interpret it on a verbal level . . . But anyway, I experienced *The Sick Rose*, with the voice of Blake reading it, as something that applied to the whole universe, like hearing the doom of the whole universe, and at the same time the inevitable beauty of doom. I can’t remember now, except it was very beautiful and very awesome. But a little of it slightly scary, having to do with the knowledge of death—my death and also the death of being itself, and that was the great pain. So, like a prophecy, not only in human terms but a prophecy as if Blake had penetrated the very secret core of the entire universe and had come forth with some little magic formula statement in rhyme and rhythm that, if properly heard in the inner inner ear, would deliver you beyond the universe. (“Art of Poetry” 38-9)

Other renovated readings of Blake occur, including an encounter with “The Little Girl Lost” that leads Ginsberg to

wake to the same awakeness I was just talking about—of existence in the entire universe. The total consciousness then, of the complete universe. Which is what Blake was talking about. In other words a breakthrough from ordinary habitual quotidian consciousness into consciousness that was really seeing all of heaven in a flower. Or what was it, eternity in a flower . . . heaven in a grain of sand. As I was seeing heaven in the cornice of the building. By heaven here I mean this
imprint or concretization or living form, of an intelligent hand—the work of an intelligent hand, which still had the intelligence molded into it. (39-40)

Later that day, and then on into the following days and weeks, Ginsberg applies his renovated gaze to Plato, St. John, Plotinus, and eventually, to Wordsworth, via John Stuart Mill:

And I think that week or that month I had to take an examination in John Stuart Mill. And instead of writing about his ideas I got completely hung up on his experience of reading—was it Wordsworth? Apparently the thing that got him back was an experience of nature that he received keyed off by reading Wordsworth, on “sense sublime” or something. That’s a very good description, that sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused, whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, and the round ocean, and the . . . the living air, did he say? The living air—see just that hand again—and in the heart of man. So I think this experience is characteristic of all high poetry. I mean that’s the way I began seeing poetry as the communication of the particular experience—not just any experience but this experience. (“Art of Poetry” 41)

To hear this account of Ginsberg reading Stuart Mill reading Wordsworth is to see the poet abrogating the hermeneutic imperative to reduce an author to “his ideas,” and attending instead to Stuart Mill’s “experience of reading,” a visionary influx of affect which appears to have been triggered by Wordsworth in the same way that Ginsberg’s experience was triggered by Blake. For Ginsberg, however, the most significant aspect of Mill’s experience is the way it seems to confirm that “all high poetry” functions as a technology not only for transmitting affect, but for transmitting the specifically Romantic, and in fact Wordsworthian, strain of affective knowledge that demonstrates the accessibility of a secular heaven on earth. This secular heaven
is the aesthetic state that M.H. Abrams sees Wordsworth advocating in the Prospectus to *The Recluse*. For Abrams, Wordsworth’s “program for poetry” is predicated upon the belief that “the pagan Elysium and Islands of the Blest need not be limited to the realm of fantasy, nor need the Christian paradise be a paradise lost” because “such realms are available on this earth, to each of us, as an ordinary possibility of every day” if we can “unite our minds to the outer universe in a holy marriage” (26-7). Consummating this marriage of mind to nature reveals the transcendence sought after by the Romantics not as an escape from the boundaries of the real into the respite of illusion, but as an escape from the illusion of the real that we normally inhabit into a confrontation with the authentically real. Romantic transcendence removes us from a realm of projected Ideal Forms and delivers us to the world’s forms; liberates us from the sphere of Kantian phenomena into a world of noumena; extricates us from Lacan’s Symbolic Order and arranges reunion with the Real; exposes rhetoric and ideology for what they are and offers a glimpse of a world without them. By revealing revelation not as the penetration beyond or beneath the surface of things into a hidden stratum of truth, but as a confrontation with the truth of surfaces, Romantic transcendence celebrates artifice as the means for gaining access to the intensities of superfice in ways not entirely incompatible with the prevailing attitudes of postmodernity.

Like Abrams, Jerome McGann understands Wordsworth’s visionary transcendence as a phenomenon that carries the visionary poet out of the prison of thought and language into the world of things by confronting the commonplace material reality of objects. Displaying a refreshing magnanimousness somewhat lacking from his treatment of Wordsworth in *The Romantic Ideology*, McGann argues in “The *Biographia Literaria* and the Contentions of English Romanticism” that Wordsworth’s poetics are predicated upon the belief that
“consciousness and the structure of all forms of mediation . . . are impediments to clear vision” (243). Defending Wordsworth against Coleridge’s insistence that poetry be guided by *a priori* principles and should take as its only object the operation of the poet’s mind upon the object world, McGann describes Wordsworth’s poetic practice as a fundamentally defamiliarizing procedure:

Observing and describing without the intervention of consciousness or subjective mediations, following blindly and mechanically the unselfconsciously meditated directions of unselfconscious feeling and thought: these are Wordsworth's remarkable procedures. Their object, as he says in various ways, is to avoid the veils of familiarity—the mediations—through which we experience the world.

(243)

Circumventing familiarity and mediation insulates the observer from the ideational and the ideological, coordinating rapprochement not with a world that transcends material, but with a transcendentally material world: “This program, needless to say, is anything but supernaturalist; it is in fact a deeply materialist and mundane program. What it seeks to transcend is not this world or concrete experience but the ideologies of this world and our modes of perceiving it” (243). The visionary moment in Wordsworth seeks not to lift us out of the world of things, but to lift us up to it and into it, and affect is the medium of our deliverance:

At such moments—glimpsing a hedgehog or a flower, observing a peculiar encounter between two people, being wrapped in a specific atmospheric moment, perhaps of wind and humidity—the mind will be led to feel that it suddenly understands, that it has been brought to some moment of ultimate knowledge. In Wordsworth we are gently led on to these moments by the affections; it is not the
conscious will that controls experiences of primary or secondary imagination, it is “habit,” “impulse,” and “feeling.” Consciousness follows experience, not the other way round. (244)

The “ultimate knowledge” McGann locates in Wordsworth sounds suggestively similar to the “very secret core of the entire universe” of Ginsberg’s Blakean prophecy: both are predicated upon the potential for affective experience to impart a knowledge of the world, but not above or beyond it, which cannot be attained by conventional means.

Troublingly, both Wordsworth and Ginsberg find the suggestion of numinousness in the noumena. Both of their secular heavens on earth make immanent the eschaton, but both heavens also seem to bear the stamp of some intelligence, and it is not immediately clear if this intelligence represents an arche pantheistic or demiurgic, or if it is best understood as the imprint or projection of the poet’s mind into the nature it has wed. Most troubling of all is the possibility that the consummation of the marriage of mind to nature is less Wordsworthian than Keatsian: what if the knight-at-arms of the mind, in becoming the consort of the Belle Dame of nature, also becomes her property? This would first make it possible to mistake the presence of the mind in nature for the presence of the mind of nature, or even for the presence of a mind above nature, and would then reveal the first of these mistaken impressions as unmistakable. For if the mind is to reveal’s nature’s true nature by becoming part of nature, then that portion of the mind claimed by nature would suffer a discontinuity and be claimed permanently, rendering it an alien intelligence to the intelligence from out of which it has been harvested. The seemingly benign references in “Tintern Abbey” to

A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things (94-102)

may therefore be references to the mind in its noumenal aspect, revealed by defamiliarization as itself the price of the knowledge it seeks and, consequently, as the permanent possession of that which it would presume to spectate *ab extra*. In a gesture that by now should be familiar, rhetorical Wordsworth mobilizes the prosodic *akedah* of the genitive case to bind the “presence that disturbs” with joy to the domesticating influence of “elevated thoughts,” before binding the “sense sublime” to the implicitly holistic harmony of “something . . . interfused” into both nature and the mind. Radical Wordsworth, in a move that should be equally familiar, wields the knife of prosodic apocalypse and undoes rhetorical Wordsworth’s knots by severing these potentially sublime nouns from the genitive constructions that domesticate them, allowing the joy that disturbs to be truly disturbing and permitting the sense sublime to sensibly retain its sublimity.

Ginsberg, conversely, does little to disguise the horror visited upon him as a consequence of his encounter with Blake’s prophecy and the knowledge it imparts: he wakes into “total consciousness . . . of the complete universe” to find that universe populated with that of which he would rather remain blissfully unaware. The apparently innocuous setting of the Columbia bookstore becomes the space within which the apocalyptic implications of immanentizing the *eschaton* are brought to bear upon several of the definitive processes of our civilization—
namely, commerce and commodification, especially as they come to absorb the products of artistic inspiration, reducing them to mere *product*:

everybody in the bookstore knew, and . . . they were all hiding it! They all had the consciousness, it was like a great unconscious that was running between all of us that everybody was completely conscious, but that the fixed expressions that people have, the habitual expressions, the manners, the mode of talk, are all masks hiding this consciousness. Because almost at that moment it seemed that it would be too terrible if we communicated to each other on a level of total consciousness and awareness each of the other—like it would be too terrible, it would be the end of the bookstore, it would be the end of civ—not civilization, but in other words the position that everybody was in was ridiculous, everybody running around peddling books to each other. Here in the universe! Passing money over the counter, wrapping books in bags and guarding the door, you know, stealing books, and the people sitting up making accountings on the upper floor there, and people worrying about their exams walking through the bookstore, and all the millions of thoughts the people had—you know, that I’m worrying about—whether they’re going to get laid or whether anybody loves them, about their mothers dying of cancer or, you know, the complete death awareness that everybody has continuously with them all the time—all of a sudden revealed to me at once in the faces of the people, and they all looked like horrible grotesque masks, grotesque because *hiding* the knowledge from each other. (‘Art of Poetry’ 42-3)
Ginsberg does not delude himself with the notion that utterly and finally exposing commerce as an illusion of or distraction from the authentically real would inaugurate some easy utopia. It would be, as Ginsberg begins to pronounce before his revisionary faculties intervene, the end of civilization, a revolutionary sublime too vital to have its intensities diverted into a stabilizing construct, and too authentically radical for Ginsberg to fully voice (except, perhaps, in his capacity as an oracle for material counter-rhetoric, which orthographically performs the end of civilization with “civ—” in ways that Ginsberg’s immediate retreat into a milder register of commodity-culture critique cannot fully overwrite).

While certainly unsettling, this episode lacks the sense of an “imprint or concretization or living form, of an intelligent hand—the work of an intelligent hand, which still had the intelligence molded into it” that characterized his previous readings of a renovated world. The next—and final—recurrence within that series of prophetic encounters, however, not only reintroduces the intelligence, but attributes to it an unequivocally apocalyptic sublimity:

Next time it happened was about a week later walking along in the evening on a circular path around what’s now, I guess, the garden or field in the middle of Columbia University, by the library. I started invoking the spirit, consciously trying to get another depth perception of cosmos. And suddenly it began occurring again, like a sort of breakthrough again, but this time—this was the last time in that period—it was the same depth of consciousness or the same cosmical awareness but suddenly it was not blissful at all but it was frightening. Some like real serpent-fear entering the sky. The sky was not a blue hand anymore but like a hand of death coming down on me some really scary presence, it was almost as if I saw God again except God was the Devil. The consciousness itself was so vast,
much more vast than any idea of it I’d had or any experience I’d had, that it was not even human anymore—and was in a sense a threat, because I was going to die into that inhuman ultimately. I don’t know what the score was there—I was too cowardly to pursue it. (“Art of Poetry” 44-5)

The earlier personification of the infinite in the figure of Blake has been replaced by an overwhelming, unquantifiable, inhuman vastness that threatens to inevitably absorb the subject entirely. Ginsberg is forced to consider the possibility that achieving unmediated access to the real requires relinquishing the self to nature in a traumatic confrontation with the early stages of the Kantian mathematical sublime, in which the imagination fails to apprehend an enormity and suffers an influx of negative affect.

Like the Boat Thief of *Prelude* Book 1, Ginsberg seeks initially to arrange proximity with the sublime, only to find that the most appropriate response to achieving that proximity is immediate flight. The problem, however, is that traumas cannot be simply outrun or relegated to the custody of memory or the oblivion of forgetfulness. They endure as affective data impossible to fully overwrite, a lesson which The Boat Thief learns in the days after his erotically charged transgression with nature is punished by sublime visitation:

after I had seen

That spectacle, for many days, my brain

Worked with a dim and undetermined sense

Of unknown modes of being; o’er my thoughts

There hung a darkness, call it solitude

Or blank desertion. (1. 390-95)
The speaker of “The Solitary Reaper,” who bears the music of the Reaper’s song in his heart long after he has ceased to hear it, also knows how permanently affect may linger within the subject upon whom it inflicts itself.

The significance of Ginsberg’s notorious experimentation with drugs in this period cannot be fully understood outside of the context of his Blake experience and the presences or intelligences to which he felt those experiences exposed him. Even though he admits to having fled from the sublime inhuman that threatened to absorb him in the last of his Blake episodes, he found himself compelled to recreate these states through chemical means, a practice which places him within a poetic tradition whose practitioners include several key figures from the Lake School: “There are certain moments under laughing gas and ether that the consciousness does intersect with something similar, for me, to my Blake visions. The gas drugs were apparently interesting too to the Lake poets, because there were a lot of experiments done with Sir Humphry Davy in his Pneumatic Institute. I think Coleridge and Southey and other people used to go, and De Quincey. But serious people” (“Art of Poetry” 45-6). Perhaps the appeal is the comparative manageability of the phenomenon when induced chemically rather than aesthetically: instead of waiting patiently, or in terrified anticipation, or a mixture of both, for Blake to pronounce another prophecy, Ginsberg was able to assert a measure of agency over when and under what conditions he would “wake to . . . awakeness.” In any case, he eventually discovers that whatever control drugs permit him to wield over the nature of his transcendence is not complete enough to fully insulate him from the same sublime malevolence he encountered in his final Blake experience. Consequently, he resolved to abandon his research into chemically induced altered states; the sublime wore an aspect too terrible for him to endure, and he once again turned and fled: “Lysergic acid, peyote, mescaline, psilocybin, ayahuasca. But I can’t stand
them anymore, because something happened to me with them very similar to the Blake visions. After about thirty times, thirty-five times, I began getting monster vibrations again. So I couldn’t go any further” (46).

Ginsberg’s antidote to the Blake experience and the similar states encountered under the influence of hallucinogens and other drugs was what he came to call his “Asian experience,” which he claims

kind of got me out of the corner I painted myself in with drugs. That corner being an inhuman corner in the sense that I figured I was expanding my consciousness and I had to go through with it but at the same time I was confronting this serpent monster, so I was getting in a real terrible situation. It finally would get so if I’d take the drugs I’d start vomiting. But I felt that I was duly bound and obliged for the sake of consciousness expansion, and this insight, and breaking down my identity, and seeking more direct contact with primate sensation, nature, to continue. (“Art of Poetry” 47-8)

Consultations with “holy men” in India led Ginsberg to reconsider his self-imposed obligation to continue exploring “loss of identity and confrontation with non-human universe as the main problem, and in a sense whether or not man had to evolve and change, and perhaps become non-human too” (48). That reconsideration approaches a full renunciation of the cosmic inhuman and a reaffirmation of embodied humanity in “The Change,”

[I]t all winds up in the train in Japan, then a year later, the poem The Change, where all of a sudden I renounce drugs, I don’t renounce drugs but I suddenly didn’t want to be dominated by that nonhuman anymore, or even be dominated by the moral obligation to enlarge my consciousness anymore. Or do anything
anymore except be my heart—which just desired to be and be alive now. I had a
very strange ecstatic experience then and there, once I had sort of gotten that
burden off my back, because I was suddenly free to love myself again, and
therefore love the people around me, in the form that they already were. And love
myself in my own form as I am. And look around at the other people and so it was
again the same thing like in the bookstore. Except this time I was completely in
my body and had no more mysterious obligations. And nothing more to fulfill,
except to be willing to die when I am dying, whenever that be. And be willing to
live as a human in this form now. So I started weeping, it was such a happy
moment. Fortunately I was able to write then, too, “So that I do live I will die”—
rather than be cosmic consciousness, immortality, Ancient of Days, perpetual
consciousness existing forever. (49-50)

Just as Wordsworth sought to make “Tintern Abbey” the occasion for exorcising “the
burthen of the mystery” (39), “The Change” functions for Ginsberg as a means of writing his
way out of his perceived responsibility to “that burden,” that set of “mysterious obligations,” that
collectively constitute his Blake experiences. Translated into aesthetic terms, both poets prove
incapable of enduring the sublime realities they sought, and both find themselves retreating back
into the domesticating limitations of the familiar. Wordsworth’s method variously involved
domesticating the solitary experience of the natural sublime by binding it either to a benign
theodicy of aesthetic pedagogy with nature as schoolmistress, or to society, figured in the person
of his sister; Ginsberg’s strategy is to dilute or diffuse the cosmic sublime in the solution of pure
physicality, embodied in the person of his person. Ginsberg repurposes akedah to fulfill the
revisionary needs of a historical and geographical context in which access—or even the illusion
of access—to unspoiled nature would be more difficult to attain than it was in the Lake District of the eighteenth century. The human itself, by virtue of its material body and animal sexuality, comes to serve as a partially natural substitute for unmediated nature, providing a stabilizing anchor to which the poet can rhetorically marry his mind and attempt to quite literally domesticate the sublime inhuman:

Come home: the pink meat image
black yellow image with
ten fingers and two eyes
is gigantic already: the black
curly pubic hair, the
blind hollow stomach,
the silent soft open vagina
rare womb of new birth
cock lone and happy to be home
again
touched by hands by mouths,
by hairy lips— (I.1-5)

To “[c]ome home,” to resituate the self within the rhetoric of the “pink meat image,” is to turn from the mathematically sublime vastness of the inhuman cosmos and re-enter the sphere of the quantifiable, the world of “ten fingers and two eyes.” The image of the body “is gigantic already”: the poet safeguards himself from the incomprehensively expansive cosmic sublime by insisting on the expansiveness of the image he sets between himself and the source of his horror.
Now emboldened by the apparent success of his rhetorical countermeasure, the poet takes the liberty of denying the reality of the Supreme Reality that the Blake episodes revealed to him: he ponders whether it may be necessary to “Close the portals of the festival” and to “Open the portals to what Is” (I.6-7). “What Is” proves again to be the body erotic:

The mattress covered with sheets,
soft pillows of skin,
long soft hair and delicate
palms along the buttocks
timidly touching,
waiting for a sign, a throb
softness of balls, rough
nipples alone in the dark
met by a weird finger[.] (I.8-10)

After the first of the Blake experiences, Ginsberg swore to himself that he would “never forget, never renege, never deny. Never deny the voice no, never forget it, don’t get lost mentally wandering in other spirit worlds or American or job worlds or advertising worlds or war worlds or earth worlds. But the spirit of the universe was what I was born to realize” ("Art of Poetry" 37). “The Change,” however, finds him laboring intensively to manufacture this same forgetfulness, the same denial, the same negation. Erotic embodiment, the world of sheets and pillows and erogenous zones, is “what Is,” and

Closed off from this

The schemes begin, roulette,

brainwaves, bony dice,
Stroboscopic motorcycles
Stereoscopic Scaly
Serpents winding thru
cloud spaces of
what is not—(I.13-14)

With this, the poet’s renunciation of Supreme Reality is complete: he performs a speech act that definitively and categorically relegates his experience to the status of a fiction, of “what is not,” freeing himself from the obligations to which he had formerly been committed, orthographically indicating the reduced ontological status of “what is not” by denying it the majuscule now reserved only for “what Is.”

Where Wordsworth contains the turbulence of aesthetic traumas by revising them into lessons from nature’s sometimes harshly sublime curriculum, Ginsberg redacts them utterly. But Wordsworth seems to have learned or intuited that traumatic data proves so frustratingly resistant to deletion that more subtle and sophisticated methods of containment must be attempted. Because trauma does not suffer the indignity of total erasure, it must be rhetorically bound to that which might make it more tolerable. That which can neither be confronted authentically nor dispensed with entirely must be managed, and the tension between a radically inappropriable trauma’s unmanageability and the poet’s doomed efforts to manage it emerges as the source of much of the characteristically tragic theatricality of Wordsworth’s verse.

Ginsberg, conversely, gambled everything on his faith in the rhetoric of negation, even going so far as to subordinate the binding potential of his repurposed akedah to the status of means to a more definitively nugatory end. Consequently, his efforts to write his way out of his obligation to trauma write their way out of their obligations to him. The image to which he binds
himself in his reimagining of *akedah* announces itself as an image, acknowledging, and even accentuating, its own rhetoricity, constructedness, and contingency. He does not “come home” to “the pink meat,” but to “the pink meat image,” meaning that the concrete, material quantifiability that permits the “ten fingers” and “two eyes” to serve as a refuge from the mathematical sublime is contaminated by an abstraction that compromises their apparent materiality. This self-conscious concession to artifice appears in the poem’s first line, literally making the execution of the poem’s revisionary agenda flawed from its inception.

The play of the line gives rise to the next instance of trauma’s subversion of its own subversion. The “pink meat image,” explicitly sexualized through references to “the black / curly pubic hair” can only remain stalwart against the void because it is “gigantic already”: the erotically charged body is reimagined as a Blakean Giant Form immense enough to shield the poet from the “hand of death.” The lineation, however, situates the gigantism—initially meant to empower the body—next to the void: “is gigantic already: the black[.]” This new arrangement facilitates the line’s assertion of its prosodic sovereignty, freeing it from the surrounding syntactical tissue, disentangling it from its attachment to redemptive sexuality, and infusing the modifier “black” with sufficient autonomy to achieve self-nominalization and co-opt the verb, subject complement, and adverb with which it shares its line. “The black” has appropriated that which made its subversion a rhetorically viable potentiality, and the void is loosed within the poem to systematically dismantle its systemic rhetoric.

Now at the mercy of an apocalyptic agency, the poem’s *akedot* begin to struggle to maintain the integrity of the bonds they have tied. The “cock lone and happy to be home” is “touched . . . / by hairy lips—[.]” but any comfort that the poet takes in the tangibility of this image becomes complicated when the influence of the void underscores the image’s ambiguity.
Does the image refer to the bearded mouth of a man, as Ginsberg’s own sexual preference would seem to suggest, or does it refer to a woman’s vulva, perhaps to the “silent soft open vagina” meant to figure the poet’s rebirth into blissfully erotic embodiment, but here lent the suggestion of a character more sexual than maternal? The intended impression of real bodies engaging in the redemptive passion of actual sexual acts has been replaced by the polymorphous liquidity of bodies in phantasmagorically metamorphic flux. Not only do these bodies seem to morph into other bodies, but, in the reference to “soft pillows of skin,” they even appear to melt into the substance of the bed upon which they conduct their rites. What were meant to function as concrete images have become aporetic; the crisis of referentiality frustrates the poet’s efforts to write his way out of his own very personal crisis; what posed as a material respite from the void has come to look increasingly like an immaterial surrender to it.

The play of orthography follows: what we first interpret as a dash indicating the connection between a reassuringly material sexuality and the possibility of closing “the portals of the festival” becomes a sigil that materially reveals—by comparison—the immateriality of that troped sexuality, forecloses on the possibility that the portals could be closed, and becomes an actual portal through which the festival may pour. Part I of the poem ends as “what is not” begins to drown “what Is,” interrogating the hemorrhaging stability of the ontological status conferred upon both categories by the speech acts that have denominated them as such.

III.

Until now, the model of Romantic poetry I have adopted for this project, that of a poetry bifurcated into an intellecutive voice that speaks in tropes and figures to the higher faculties of cognition and an affective voice that speaks in material accidents to the other faculties, has been
applicable—without, I hope, also being unforgivably reductive—to Ginsberg’s efforts in “The Change” to unburden himself of his aesthetic traumas. In this respect, Romantic poems and postmodern poems appear to operate so similarly (at least as far as the matter of affective data transmission is concerned) that there seems little need to categorically distinguish the two periods and their concomitant poetics within the context of this project. In Part II of the poem, however, a series of events occurs that complicates my model and demands the qualifications and adjustments that until now I have been able to delay. I intend to continue tracing the progress of affect’s disruptive intervention into the poem’s own account of progressive recovery from sublime encounters until that intervention has achieved a totality undocumented in any Romantic texts of which I am aware, and in which the figurative regime, hitherto interrupted, but never fully colonized, by the voice of affect, comes temporarily under the direct authority of the sublime, essentially becoming its mouthpiece. As a consequence of this visionary reclamation of the poem’s revisionary apparatus, the voice of the revisionary intellect finds itself in the position of having to make do with the suggestive potential of the material accidents that this project has come to associate exclusively with the voice of affect (although, it must be said, its efforts to do so fail to attain the compelling force of affect’s own use of the medium).

Much of what makes a continued adherence to an uncomplicated version of my model untenable is a function of the theoretical conundrum posed by Ginsberg’s use of what he called the strophe. The long, resplendently Whitmanian line so often employed by Ginsberg is too expansive to be accommodated by the dimensions of the conventionally printed page. Not content to compromise his line length and the impression it establishes of pure thought and feeling unconstrained by the physical limitations of lung capacity or page width, Ginsberg orthographically represents these lines’ spillage over and beyond the right-hand margin with
what appears to be a hard carriage return and line feed followed by a jump to a tabulator stop that roughly corresponds to the position of a paragraph indentation, with all subsequent carriage returns beginning at the tabulator stop until the “line” is complete. This technique contains elements of both intent and accident. Consider the latter: short of counting out the number of typographical characters in each line, there would be no way for Ginsberg to precisely predict when he needs to perform the carriage return, and, therefore, impossible to know at what point his efforts to visually preserve the integrity of a long line becomes subject to the arbitrary influence of materiality, effectively breaking a strophe into a series of shorter lines that may be, and, I would presume, often are, both thought of and read as if they were not one line but many, because, materially speaking, this is precisely what they are. Apparently intended to represent the physicality of a “sigh in words” that “begins somewhere in the pit of the stomach and rises up forward in the breast and then comes out through the mouth and ears,” the strophe actually seems to yearn for some almost Platonic realm of pure, ideal expression, liberated from the limitations of the very body whose feeling it claims to articulate and from the page upon which it depends to convey itself to the overwhelming majority of its potential audience. Nowhere is this made clearer than in recordings of Ginsberg’s public recitals of the poem, which often begin deliberately paced, but eventually become desperate affairs of syncopated breathlessness, the arresting theatre of a body failing, as it must, to keep pace with the disembodied thought that presumes to speak for it. Consider also the former: Ginsberg still observes those conventions that preserve readability, such as hyphenating words that must be distributed between the end of one line and the beginning of the next without breaking them mid-syllable, instead of simply typing until he runs out of space and picking up with the next letter immediately after the carriage return, line feed, and, if applicable, the tabulator stop, as he would if he were truly
committed to relinquishing control over line length to the horizontal measurement of the page itself.

The implications are clear: when it is no longer possible to definitively differentiate between intended form and the accidental form that arises when intended form suffers deformation, there may be a cross-contamination between the two forms and the voices for which they serve as media. It may therefore be necessary to consider the possibility that, at least under certain conditions, which I have described above and which I shall explore in greater depth momentarily, the play of materiality may be more closely associated with revision than vision, more aligned with rhetoric than with counter-rhetoric, and the visionary revision of revision may occur not in the fragmentation of tropes and figures enforced by the play of the letter, but in the tropes and figures themselves.

Although in Part I it is the play of letter and line that restores the voice of the discontinued, in Part II, the usurpation of the poem’s narrative of redemptive embodiment begins to be more explicitly undone, as the tropes and images are more fully remade in the image of the horrors they were meant to resist. The body as the domesticated site of a tender sexuality has been replaced by a vision of the body as the house of

Shit! Intestines boiling in sand fire

creep yellow brain cold sweat

earth unbalanced vomit thru

tears, snot ganglia buzzing

the Electric Snake rising hypnotic

shuffling metal-eyed coils

whirling rings within wheels
from asshole up the spine
Acid in the throat the chest
a knot trembling Swallow back
the black furry ball of the great
Fear (II.1)

What was once sexual is now excremental. “Tears allright, and laughter” (I.16) have been
replaced by “Shit,” by “vomit thru tears,” by “snot ganglia,” and by “Acid.” The “serpent-fear”
that “enter[ed] the sky” in the final and most traumatic of the Blake experiences returns as a
Blakean Giant Form: the “Electric Snake” whose influence penetrates Ginsberg’s paean to
redemptive homoeroticism, transforming it into a grisly parasitic invasion as it “ris[es] hypnotic
. . . from asshole up the spine.”

What unfolds over the course of the next two stanzas I can only describe as a sublime
visitation so acutely affecting that all of Ginsberg’s rhetorical evasions and insulations—the
body, sex, even Blake himself—become contaminated by it so fully that they are remade in its
image, repurposed to fit its agenda, leaving the desperate poet bereft of anything resembling
sanctuary from the affective data he once swore never to forget and from which he now seeks to
manufacture forgetfulness:

The serpent in my bed pitiful
crawling unwanted babes of
snake covered with veins and pores
breathing heavy frightened love
metallic Bethlehem out the window
the lost, the lost hungry
ghosts here alive trapped
in carpet rooms How can I
be sent to Hell
with my skin and blood (II.3)

The figure of the serpent, the “Electric Snake” whose aggressively parasitic sexual penetration of
the poet has extended “up the spine,”—perhaps even unto his “yellow brain,” where it may
assume an even more absolute control over the very faculties through which the poet fabricates
the tropes and figures that, under normal conditions, may remain safely removed from the
influence of affect—disfigures the figurations that Ginsberg has set against it. The “cock lone
and happy” has morphed into a “serpent in my bed,” and, in a horrifyingly ironic mockery of the
“new birth” of Part I, has spawned a phallic litter of “babes of / snake covered with veins and
pores.” A note of Yeatsian apocalypse attends the mention of “metallic Bethlehem out the
window,” but the Bethlehem towards which Ginsberg’s rough beasts slouch to be born is the
poet’s own body, and the apocalypse whose encroachment he seeks to divert is not a cultural
phenomenon that can be viewed through a window by a spectator ab extra, but a personal
apocalypse that seeks the poet out, wherever he may hide. The poignancy of the poet’s
interrogative complaint “How can I / be sent to Hell / with my skin and blood” may be traced to
the comprehensiveness with which the sublime has dismantled the categories through which the
poet’s universe may retain its comprehensibility. Like Milton’s Satan, who laments “Which way
I fly is Hell; myself am Hell” (Paradise Lost 4.75), Ginsberg discovers Hell to be a status rather
than a locus, and he endures the intimate attentions of an apocalypse less interested in
eschatologically vitiating catachrestic abstractions like “culture” or “society” than in inflicting an
immanent damnation upon an individual suffering subject. That which knows you best knows
how best to hurt you, and the distant, deferrable, impersonal, Modernist apocalypse of Yeats, which is global and therefore incapable of devoting its full attention to any one person, is rendered almost tame and obsolete by comparison to a secular apocalypse that may impose itself, in its totality, upon anybody’s body at any time.

With his model of erotic embodiment as a refuge from the sublime proving less and less tenable, Ginsberg disguises as a declarative utterance the speech act that facilitates his relegation of the horrors that have begun to populate his poem to the territory of memory, of traumas already endured and, ostensibly, distant enough to be recovered from: “Oh I remember myself so” (II.4). What follows, however, suggests that these traumas have not faded into memory, but endure as an eroticized perpetual presence pronounced enough to fully recast Blakean affective prophecy as a sexual possession:

Gasping, staring at dawn over

lower Manhattan the bridges
covered with rust, the slime
in my mouth & ass, sucking
his cock like a baby crying Fuck
me in my asshole Make love
to this rotten slave (II.5)

In something resembling a distorted apophasis, that which the poet represents as safely housed within the memory, and, therefore, as not fully present, is made manifest in material marks that preclude its internment in the memory and lend it the presence that the rhetoric of remembrance would deny it: “what is not,” or what once was but supposedly is no longer, has intruded once again into “what Is,” and this time the intrusion sweeps away any residual hope that the sexuality
or new birth of Part I may offer escape from apocalypse. Now, in an amplified and more explicit version of the sexual humiliation suffered by the young Boat Thief in Book 1 of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, sex and the newly born have achieved a disturbing proximity to one another, and sexuality becomes the very means by which apocalypse damns the self-infantilized subject, who appears not to have anticipated that the potential for new life provided by the infantilizing operation of the rebirth trope comes at the cost of increased vulnerability. The syntactic doubling occasioned by the strophe’s inconsistent punctuation enables a disturbing ambiguity that illustrates the monstrous infantile sexuality that is the product of Ginsberg’s rhetoric of rebirth: when, with “the slime / in [his] mouth and ass,” the poet falls to “sucking / his cock like a baby crying Fuck / me in my asshole,” does the participial phrase that begins with “crying” modify the poet, the noun “baby,” or, most disturbingly of all, does it render the distinction meaningless? Is the poet “sucking his cock like a baby[,] crying [‘]Fuck me in my asshole[‘]”; is he “sucking his cock like a baby crying [‘]Fuck me in my asshole[‘]”; or is he trapped so completely within the rhetoric of infantilism, which seemed viable at the outset but has become fully subservient to the negative affect against which it was intended to defend, that the poet has become indistinguishable from the devices that have betrayed his efforts to betray his past and consequently made himself a catamite to the agent of his damnation?

What are perhaps the darkest implications of Ginsberg’s model of poetic prophecy become explicit when the body compromised by sexual possession appears to become wholly appropriated—possessed in the demonic sense—by the sublime with whom the poet coupled. Having usurped the body of the poet, the sublime is free to fully usurp the products of the poet’s aesthetic impulses, and the poem becomes, if only temporarily, a direct oracle for the voice of
the inhuman, who uses its momentary command over the conventional channels of signification in verse to confirm that the poet is its property, and that it intends to use this property roughly:

Give me the

power to whip & eat your heart
I own your belly & your eyes
I speak thru your screaming
mouth Black Mantra Fuck you
Fuck me Mother Brother Friend
old white haired creep shuddering in
the toilet slum bath floorboards— (II.5)

In the aftermath of this passage, Ginsberg’s speculation that Blake had learned to use poetry as “a kind of time machine through which he could transmit . . . his basic consciousness and communicate it to somebody else after he was dead” appears to be in dire need of careful amendments. Firstly, even if the affective data conveyed by the poem may be classified as part of Blake’s “basic consciousness,” it seems clear that these data are not delivered uncorrupted. They are contaminated by the inhuman, intermingled with the terrifying quality and character of the mathematically sublime infinity into which Blake passed upon his death. Therefore “Blake,” as he manifests in Ginsberg’s anomalous experiences, is never uncomplicatedly Blake, but a hybrid thing that represents to Ginsberg the monstrous miscegenation between the finite and the infinite, between the human and the non-human, that the possessed Ginsberg feels embodied in himself. Secondly, because “Blake” returns to Ginsberg from the inhuman infinite altered or infected by his time there, the act of “communicating” the corrupted data of his “basic consciousness” is nothing so innocuous as simple data transmission: it is communication through infliction,
possession, consumption. Blake cannot simply speak to Ginsberg, so he must speak “thru [his] screaming / mouth,” or, affectively and apocalyptically, “thru his screaming.” If, then, poetry can be thought of as a time machine, it is a machine whose function is contingent upon the availability of the human bodies and human emotions whose pain it requires to fuel its strange engines.

Ginsberg’s mortification at the hands of the sublime continues, leading the poet to self-identify as tormented figures from the hells of Eastern mythologies:

Yes I am that worm soul under
the heel of the daemon horses
I am that man trembling to die
in vomit & trance in bamboo
eternities belly ripped by
red hands of courteous chinamen kids—[..] (II.14)

It is at this point, with no recourse to uncompromised sexuality or uncontaminated embodiment remaining to him, that the desperate Ginsberg invokes the Romantic abstraction of the Self: “Come sweetly / now back to my Self as I was” (II.14). However, as the poet soon concedes, it is difficult to see how this abstraction may assist him, for what is a Self if not a name and a body?

Allen Ginsberg says this: I am
a mass of sores and worms
& baldness & belly & smell
I am false Name the prey of
Yamantaka Devourer of
Strange dreams, the prey of
radiation & Police Hells of Law (II.15)

Tantalizingly, Ginsberg is able to anchor a fragment of his unappropriated self in his name just long enough to counter-rhetorically assert an impression of stabilized ontological status: “Allen Ginsberg says this: I am,” but the sublime, which has already gained traction within the poem’s syntactic and semantic dimensions, immediately negates that vision of stability by binding it to the litany of horrors that follows. Ginsberg may say “I am,” but the sublime repurposes Ginsberg’s repurposed akedah to bind that speech act to the subject complements that negate its protective potential. To be Allen Ginsberg and to say it is not simply or safely to be, but to be “sores and worms,” putrescence and decay, vulnerable to the sublime powers of this world (radiation, police) and, apparently, to those of other worlds (Yamantaka).

At this point, Ginsberg appears to acknowledge—for the moment—the futility of his efforts to differentiate between himself and the influences to whom he has made himself accessible, and for several strophes the poem becomes a document of a mind newly infused with enough affective data from another mind to initiate a state of near-total confusion. The speaker, now both Ginsberg and Blake (or the sublime inhuman that, in its early interactions with Ginsberg, wore the aspect of Blake), asserts his divinity with a biblical allusion and, counter-rhetorically, asserts his humanity: “I am that I am I am the / man” (II.16). Relentlessly, the sublime component of his confused voice sets him “against what is my / own nature for now” (II.16) by reminding him with another ironically inverted akedah that the humanity he asserts is indistinguishable from the body that he has come to recognize as contaminated by the sublime infinite:
Who would deny his own shape’s
loveliness in his
dream moment of bed
Who sees his desire to be
horrible instead of Him (II.17)

Under the sway of the sublimely appropriated rhetoric of binding, the “desire to be,” understood in this context as the desire to be safely embodied, becomes the “desire to be horrible,” and the sublime again proves itself capable of countering whatever desperate gambit the poet may play.

In the subsequent strophe, the voice of the human and the voice of the sublime begin to settle back into their accustomed roles and territories, and the rebirth trope recurs in the image of being “reborn a red Screaming / baby” (II.18). But the sublime has not simply left the figurative regime; it has left it pregnant, and the image of being “reborn a red Screaming / baby” is counter-rhetorically revised into the vision of being “reborn a red Screaming.” In the context of the sublime’s earlier, prosodically apocalyptic revelation “I speak thru your screaming,” that which is reborn in the “meaty shape” of a “red Screaming” is the sublime’s capacity to reassume its ownership over the body that it has claimed.

Finally, in desperation, the poet performs an illocutionary speech act that he hopes will free him from the sublime burden that has insinuated its way deep into his thoughts, feelings, and sense of self: “In my train seat I renounce / my power, so that I do / live I will die” (II.25). It is difficult to read these lines without thinking of Wordsworth’s famously poignant lament in “Elegaic Stanzas”: “A power is gone which nothing can restore; / A deep distress hath humanized my soul” (35-6). It is as if, in his eagerness to unburden himself and resituate himself within the sphere of the knowable, Ginsberg happily welcomes the fate that Wordsworth
painfully suffered: the humanization of the soul that accompanies the renouncement of the faculty through which the Wordsworth of “Tintern Abbey” insists “we see into the life of things” (49). Ginsberg, too, has seen into the life of things, but the life he saw there was too threatening, too immense, too sublime, to be endured.

In Chapter 1 of this project, I argued that in “Tintern Abbey” Wordsworth turned to the performative power of the speech act in an ultimately unconvincing attempt to relieve “the burthen of the mystery” and “the heavy and the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world” by performatively asserting that all of it “Is lighten’d” (38-41). The palpable sense of weight established by the lines that enumerate the burdens proved, in my reading, too heavy to be dispelled, and the burdens subverted the rhetoric that threatened their entrenchment within the poet’s personal history. I observe a similar dynamic operating in the strophes of “The Change” that follow Ginsberg’s illocutionary renouncement of his power, and, ostensibly by extension, his relationship with the sublime. We are meant to believe, for example, that as a consequence of having said “I renounce / my power,” Ginsberg may report the following:

   Over for now the Vomit, cut

   up & pincers in the skull,

   fear of bones, grasp

   against man woman & babe. (II.26)

I emerge from these claims as unconvinced by them as I was by Wordsworth’s claims of lightened burdens in “Tintern Abbey.” The accumulated material presence of strophe after strophe, each testifying in harrowing fashion to the tenacity of the sublime presence—the affective data that the “time machine” of Blake’s verse made manifest in Ginsberg’s mind and body, and which Ginsberg’s verse makes manifest in the reader’s—has lent the burdens too great
an affective mass to permit this reader to feel that they could have been displaced by the performance meant to exorcise them.

The remainder of the poem endeavors to relegate the sublime to a safely distant future, but in its material praxis this endeavor feels devoted to a continued trembling in vatic transport before the powers from which it claims to have been liberated:

Let the dragon of Death

come forth from his

picture in the whirling

white clouds’ darkness

And suck dream brains &

claim these lambs for his

meat, and let him feed

and be other than I

Till my turn comes and I

enter that maw and change

to a blind rock covered

with misty ferns . . . (II.27-9)

These strophes want to delay any further confrontations with the inhuman, infinite sublime until the moment of death: they want immanent, secular, personal apocalypse to be as deferrable as the pre-Romantic, cultural, religious model; however, they cannot say their effort to defer the sublime without unsaying the sublime’s deferability. In order to perform deferral, it is necessary
to name that which is to be deferred, and, in the case of written verse, this naming can only occur by lending the denominated the undeniable, undeferrable presence of material script, a presence to which the rhetoric of deferability must ultimately defer. What could have been left unnamed, and therefore made the burden of some future iteration of Ginsberg’s subjectivity, is denominated, summoned, and loosed to do violence to the poem’s rhetoric of post-traumatic convalescence. The time machine of the poem, it seems, may receive and transmit affective data from the future as well as the past, but instead of representing this capacity as a reassuring source of personal continuity, as Wordsworth attempts to do in the final stanza of “The Solitary Reaper,” the closing strophes of “The Change” reveal this technology as more likely to reintroduce the sublime trauma, the “other than I” that refutes the holistic rhetoric of the continuum, than to effectively police its unenforceable exile.

As a precautionary redundancy, Ginsberg seems also to have incorporated a contingency plan, clearly derivative of Wordsworth, into his rhetorical countermeasures. He tropes the absorption into the infinite—an eventuality that has been the source of such acute anxiety for him for so long—into a benign passage into and identification with nature that would not seem out of place in *Lyrical Ballads*, and seems especially indebted to the Lucy Poems, at least as they function in an uncritically rhetorical capacity. Just as the auditorial Wordsworth of “A slumber did my spirit seal” tropes the unknowability of Lucy’s death into being “Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course, / With rocks, and stones, and trees” (7-8), Ginsberg revises “enter[ing] that maw” into a “change / to a blind rock covered / with ferns.” Faced once again with the unknowable infinity which he has failed to domesticate, and which has utilized sexual humiliation to domesticate him, Ginsberg, like the Boy of Winander and the speaker of “The Solitary Reaper” before him, faces what Hartman calls a “crossroads in human life” (21). As with all who find
themselves at this crossroads, Ginsberg must choose between “waking” into an apocalyptic “consciousness of self” and “fall[ing] like Sleeping Beauty into the gentler continuum and quasi immortality of nature.” The voice of revisionary Ginsberg, the Ginsberg who characterizes “The Change” as the means by which to attain salvation through renunciation, wrests enough temporary control over akedah to represent the titular transformation as a “change to a blind rock covered with ferns”: a revision of death’s unknowability not only into the knowable, but the known. The sublime, however, has other plans. By prosodically apocalyptic fiat, it revises Ginsberg’s tranquilizing revision of death into an awful commandment: “enter that maw and change.” Not even the comfort of a merciful discontinuity is left to the poet: his fate shall not be the knowable fate of the newborn subject who inherits the body and history of the discontinued iteration of himself, but the fate of the discontinued, of those who fall through the fissures in the poem into territories that neither the intellect nor the imagination may penetrate, into a future beyond anyone’s ken.

The penultimate strophe offers a vision of

. . . the dreaming Me full

of physical rays tender

red moons in my belly &

Stars in my eyes circling[,] (II.32)

but whatever redemptive potentialities these images may contain are unlikely to convince. The belly and eyes that now offer a somehow “tender” inhuman universe ingress into the poet are the same organs over which the sublime has already laid incontrovertible claim: “I own your belly & your eyes.” The final stanza also invokes the celestial:

And the Sun the Sun the
Sun my visible father
making my body visible
thru my eyes! (II.33)

As strenuously as the poet may strive to forget it, the body that the sun makes visible remains the property of a sublime that has already laid sexual claim over it, and which waits to lay the even more complete claim that none of us may contest. Try as he might to renounce his power and the aesthetic trauma to which that power has made him vulnerable, the poet cannot prevent the play of material from drowning out his revisionary efforts with visionary echoes of his earlier promise: “‘never forget, never renege, never deny.”

IV.

I want to close these proceedings, in an indulgence I hope the reader may forgive, by proposing a thought experiment, which is also perhaps a kind of fable in the tradition of Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *Postmodern Fables*, and which I hope shall offer a means of both figuring and disfiguring the convergence between Romanticism and postmodernism as I understand both categories and the traffic that may take place between them.

Picture, if you will, all of the graphemes that the English alphabet comprises, sculpted in stone, or carved out of wood, or cast in iron. Next, imagine one of Wordsworth’s iconic haunted landscapes: a field of grain, a still lake at night in the Northern moors, or an abandoned stretch of coast from a troubled dream. Then, picture a solitary figure, wandering this landscape with bent posture, surveying the earth or grass or sand where he treads, and finding upon its face collections of these crafted graphemes, arranged into half-familiar articulate syllables, then into signs or strings of signs, then into sentences, lines, stanzas, poems. Lost in contemplation, this
figure reads silently to himself for a time, then arranges a few letters into a poem of his own, and nods in approval before reluctantly moving onwards and outwards, in the direction of what he tells himself is his home.

At the edge of the field of letters, however, his motion is arrested when he discovers at his feet, surrounded by bootprints he feels he should recognize, the following solitary arrangement of graphemes: “rea er.” He flinches exaggeratedly, as if from a blow that lands unexpectedly or with greater than anticipated force. Now visibly agitated, he turns back to the poetry of the landscape, walking rapidly towards the piece whose composition he had only just completed. Upon locating it, he bends to it, plucks a grapheme from the final word of its title, tucks it into a pocket, and returns to the anomaly at the periphery. He reaches into his pocket, retrieves the character, opens his hand, and finds that he bears a strange sigil upon his palm. He remains there, a mute figure populating the landscape with his singularity, staring downwards in horror at what letters have done to him. What unlucky hap, what accident of matter on matter, turned the letter in his pocket so that it emerged inverted? The motion of his hip in its socket, perhaps, or the cadence of his gait? What fell upon him as he looked, and what may fall upon us as we look into our minds looking?

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He has been interpellated, hailed, indicted by a *casus fortuitus*, a blind *force majeure* that performs the generative dimension of poetic composition not as *creatio ex nihilo*, but as a procedure that may only unfold once the poet has read and reaped the poems of a past over which he may no longer lay fully legitimate claim. But in reading and reaping those monuments to the discontinued, he leaves them riddled with the fissures and apertures through which history,
prophecy, and the voices of the discontinued may spill to disfigure his figures, mischaracterize his characters, warp his signs into sigils, and deliver his belles lettres into the sway of the Belle Dame.

This is where and how we must leave him. But I do not want to leave this figure frozen. I prefer to believe that what appears, to the spectator ab extra, to be stasis and silence actually obscures a dynamic, turbulent inner world in equal measures stirring and tragic. I prefer to behold him, single in a field of signal, awash in the elementary particles of a language that divides itself when joined and joins itself when divided, reaping and singing, eternally cutting and binding the grain of his verse, and, by extension, of himself.

Stop here. Or gently pass.

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1 The irruption into the linguistic plane of an affect with roots in experiential trauma, whether aesthetic or historical, may be one of the means by which “the other of language,” towards which deconstruction always yearns, may be approached or apprehended, if only temporarily.
2 This is the same paradox that Coleridge finds so consternating in Chapter XII of Biographia Literaria.
3 According to Tony Trigilio, “for Ginsberg . . . prophecy is a conjunction of biblical vision and the Bodhisattva ideal of altruism crucial to all Buddhisms” (291). While Trigilio’s account lends crucial cultural context to the disciplinary understanding of how prophecy functions for Ginsberg as an enabling theoretical construct, my own account offers a tentative vision of poetic prophecy as affective praxis, which may be articulated much more simply (and without the invocation of any specific spiritual traditions), as a techne involving the encoding of affective data in verse structures that may preserve and transmit it.
4 Trigilio has uncovered evidence which suggests that Ginsberg’s renunciation of the visionary had begun well before “The Change,” with Howl. Trigilio notes that the iconic trio of modifiers with which Ginsberg describes “the best minds of [his] generation”—“starving, hysterical, naked”—was, in earlier drafts, “starving, mystical, naked.” As Trigilio reports, Ginsberg explained the revision as an effort to shift from idealism to what Trigilio calls “material representation,” and this shift apparently eventuates for Trigilio in a “blurring of the boundary between the visionary and the material” (284). Within the context of this project’s aggressive insistence on understanding “material” materially, it is difficult to see “material representation” as much more than an oxymoronic rhetorical evasion. Consequently, the revision of the opening strophe of Howl comes to seem less like a convergence between vision and material than an effort to erect an idealistic simulacrum of materiality between the poet and his visionary burden. What looks to Trigilio like an “antipsychiatric” appropriation of the argot of “adaptive psychoanalysis” (258) seems to me an effort to domesticate a sublime that Trigilio, following R.D. Laing, might call “demonological” by grounding it within the “clinical” assumptions of normative twentieth-century psychological discourses (274). Trigilio himself seems eager to indulge Ginsberg’s speculation that an “electrochemical reaction” could explain the Blake episodes, arguing that “the Blake vision would be an example of transcendentental consciousness produced at the immanent level of texts and audiences rather than created mystically by an external voice, a lineage of conformity and rupture” (304). Trigilio mobilizes a binary (textual / mystical) to contextualize Ginsberg’s visionary phenomena within the normalizing boundaries of a conventionally materialist worldview; my own suspicion is that the aesthetic, as one manifestation of what Derrida defines as “the other of language” (qtd. in Kearney 123), may be conceived of as both a material phenomenon and an “external voice” that may emerge through ruptures in rhetoric to interrogate the relationship between “texts and audiences” as Trigilio understands it, calling into question the legitimacy of the binary upon which Trigilio’s reading depends. In the moment of
prophetic, poetic praxis, what matters is not the presence or absence of an “electrochemical reaction” that gives rise to the “voice,” but the affective timbre of the “voice” and the effects of its speech upon the auditor.

5 In deference to convention, I shall refer to excerpts from Ginsberg’s verse by strophe number, but, as shall become clear, I consider it important to acknowledge the ways that each strophe functions as a material phenomenon as a set of shorter poetic lines.

6 Several audio recordings of Ginsberg performing Howl may be found at this archive: <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Ginsberg.php>.
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