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## Authority of Poetic Voices in *The Prelude*: Wordsworth's Re-writing of Revolutionary Experiences

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### ABSTRACT

Central to the compositional history of William Wordsworth's writing is the concept of poetic authority, as that has been reflected through his lifelong act of manuscript revising. This article traces the development of Wordsworth's formation of poetic authority in the composition of *The Prelude* and observes how he, in the wake of the French Revolution, engages with further doubts over the poem's worth as a shared experience with the social community. This study conducts a contextualized research on Wordsworth's thought upon the "authority" of the poet as the one who conveys his messages—to Coleridge particularly. The complex feelings caused by this particular experience of the Revolution perplex his thinking about his self—a self trapped in opposing and even incompatible feelings. Further complications arise from the conflict between the objective Coleridge sets forth for him and Wordsworth's private aim to be a poet fostered by nature. My article argues that the inherent contradictions involved in Wordsworth's ever-shifting conception of his role and authority as a writer force him to situate his poetic voices between self-assertion and self-repression. The article also unravels some of the mysteries surrounding *The Prelude*'s compositional history by investigating not only the 1799, 1805, and 1850 versions of the work but also the unpublished drafts, so as to bring these writings into dialogue with one another within a historical framework.

**KEYWORDS** *The Prelude*, Wordsworth, Coleridge, the French Revolution, poetic voice, revision

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## Introduction

Central to the compositional history of William Wordsworth's writing is the concept of poetic authority—the establishment of an identity as a poet—as that has been reflected through his lifelong act of manuscript revising and continual examination of his life story. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth incessantly engages with his introspective project of self-formation in the wake of the French Revolution and questions his work's worth as a shared and communicable experience with the social community. Wordsworth's sociohistorical views greatly influenced his thoughts on his role and authority as a writer, an influence which manifests itself in his particular use of language. When he first learned of the French Revolution, Wordsworth saw the hope of universal change for humankind, particularly in its creed of freedom. The poet, “who had been form'd / To thought and moral feeling” by “God and Nature's single sovereignty,” “should . . . hail / As best the government of equal rights / And individual worth” (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 238).<sup>1</sup> At first, he was fascinated with the perfectibility of “human Reason's naked self,” aspiring to “the proud workings of the soul, / And mountain liberty” (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 289, 238), which he believed would be fulfilled by the Revolution. As Wordsworth describes it, “the Plain of Liberty” (268) unfolded in front of him at the beginning of the Revolution. “From his Throne / The King had fallen”; “Robespierre was dead”—revolutionary idealism “should see the People having a strong hand / In making their own Laws, whence better days / To all mankind” (268, 245). The prospect of liberty and equality, which his “philosophic Song” glorified, would bring hope (“better days”) to all human beings. As the Revolution progressed, nevertheless, “the crimes of few / Spread into madness of the many, blasts / From hell came sanctified like airs from heaven” (275). Here, an intense sense of conflict exists between “few” and “many,” “hell” and “heaven,” consecrating criminal deeds and fallacious justice. As a result, Wordsworth sadly finds his earlier idealist vision of the Revolution to be “juvenile errors” (244). The promising revolution becomes tyranny and violent invasion, trespassing on rather than fighting for the welfare of humankind.

Stephen Gill claims that *The Prelude* takes on a guiding role in European literature primarily because it presents the formation of “an individual consciousness” that took place just at the time when the European world was tormented into “extreme self-consciousness,” resulting from the disorienting commotion of the French Revolution and the subsequent wars led by Napoleon (Introduction 3).

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<sup>1</sup> Wordsworth, *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, Vol. I, hereafter *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*.

This article seeks to examine the way Wordsworth shapes his “individual consciousness” in *The Prelude* when he represents such a moment of political upheaval and radical social change. Wordsworth’s ongoing formation of his poetic self is closely related to his textual dialogue with Coleridge in *The Prelude*. My article asks, in particular, how Wordsworth develops his identity as a “[prophet] of Nature” by addressing his “philosophic Song” to Coleridge (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 324, 112). This “Song” was composed for the redemption of all humankind in the wake of the failure of the French Revolution, and it was Coleridge who played an important role in Wordsworth’s decision to develop and expand his two-part *Prelude* in 1799. Coleridge wrote to Wordsworth on September 10, 1799:

I am anxiously eager to have you steadily employed on “The Recluse.” . . . My dear friend, I do entreat you go on with “The Recluse”; and I wish you would write a poem, in blank verse, addressed to those, who, in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution, have thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind, and are sinking into an almost epicurean selfishness, disguising the same under the soft titles of domestic attachment and contempt for visionary philosophes. It would do great good, and might form a part of “The Recluse,” for in my present mood I am wholly against the publication of any small poems. (qtd. in Matlak 190)

This appeal for a poem of redemption for the public in the aftermath of political turmoil triggered Wordsworth’s expansion of his 1799 two-book *Prelude* to the thirteen-book version in 1805 and then to the fourteen-book version in 1850, but also set an agenda for that expansion. In comparison with the two later versions, the two-part *Prelude* has “a much more unified theme and a much stronger sense of formal structure” chiefly because this version merely encompasses the formative moments of childhood and school days (MacGillivray 236) and the collective theme is “the awakening of the imagination” that leads forward to “a period of fuller awareness” (J. Wordsworth 235). These observations point out the continuous and steady “growth” of the poet’s mind from his childhood to adolescence, in which there is visionary imagination wakened to a more thorough consciousness of its own power. The inclusion of Wordsworth’s adulthood experience of the Revolution, however, relentlessly disrupts the two-part *Prelude*’s sense of continuity and spurs ongoing reflections on, and revisions of, his poetic self in the face of such a fracture between past and present—reflections and revisions that go on right through to the 1850 version of the poem.

One significant revision after the inclusion of the post-revolutionary subject

matter is the moving of the opening question in Book I, *The Prelude* of 1799—“Was it for this?”—to latter parts of Book I, *The Prelude* of 1805. This question fundamentally addresses the poet’s anxiety about his identity/identification throughout *The Prelude*, and it is a question he can never answer—a question he returns to again and again in subsequent revisions of the poem. For Stephen Gill, this question is “a self-admonition and self-reproach”—“an astonishingly hesitant opening to a poem of epic scale” (*William Wordsworth* 58). Following the ecstatic embrace of freedom and hope at the beginning of the 1805 version of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth soon withdraws into doubts about his identity. In the text, Wordsworth does not give a specific idea of *what* “it” “was” “for.” “Was it for this?”—was his childhood “fair seed-time” for “high objects” and “enduring things” (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 114, 118)? Do the past experiences exist only “for” his present identity? Gill points out that this question focuses on the role of the poet as a man who is independent and imaginative; the very idea that he owns these distinct talents inspires with awe but at the same time frightens him with the obligations these powers involve. “This is a poem about being, or becoming, a poet” (Gill, *William Wordsworth* 58). But this “becoming” is much in doubt for Wordsworth, and Gill has not offered an adequate explanation for the association between the “being” and “becoming” of a poet. In his more thorough study of the poet’s continual self-questioning, Andrew Bennett suggests that Wordsworth’s interrogative voice should be better read as follows: “Was it for this compositional moment, this moment of compositional and inspirational failure, this writing now, was it for this composition, this composition of the poet, that the River Derwent (and Nature) composed me (as Poet), ‘composed my thoughts?’” (157). Bennett connects the idea of “this” to “this compositional moment” and even to “this composition of the poet.” With this series of words, “composition,” “compositional,” “composed,” Bennett draws our attention to Wordsworth’s main concern with the self being formed in the very act of writing. The key point does not lie in the poet’s relationship with the past but in his textual composition and rewriting of the past; it is exactly this link between his sense of self and his writing about the past that is dubious. With this question, “Was it for this,” Wordsworth not only interrogates his self-identification but also makes a strategic suspension of that decision about identity. This self-interrogation intensifies and manipulates a sense of uncertainty in the poet’s relation to the past and his ongoing composition of an identity for himself.

Wordsworth’s response to the anxieties generated by the Revolution also involves re-writing his revolutionary experience. Book X is the pivot of *The Prelude* (1805) upon which the whole development of the poem turns. Here “the feelings

of my earlier life" (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 291), as well as the "impaired" and "restored" imagination, return, but these manifest themselves in very different ways than before, creating a rather distinct sense of identity for the poet. The poet "start[s] fresh" (232) the writing of his self from his present, post-Revolution perspective. With the decision to write about the Revolution, he comes to realize that all that he has experienced is "truth painful to record!" (274). This dismay is further intensified in the 1850 version with the addition of the word "most": "truth most painful to record!" (*The Prelude* 1799, 1805, 1850 373). When the "voice of Freedom" has faded, Wordsworth says that he is much "confounded" by the drastic change from hope to fear. He states: "It was a grief, / Grief call it not, 'twas anything but that, / A conflict and sensations without name" (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 274).<sup>2</sup> By refraining from giving a specific "name" to his "sensations," Wordsworth is rhetorically hiding his awareness of a self hanging on a precarious edge of "waning" (291).

With the ambition to write a poem on an epic scale, Wordsworth confesses to James Tobin in a letter in 1798: "I contrive to convey most of the knowledge of which I am possessed. My object is to give pictures of Nature, Man, and Society" (*Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth* 212). If we approach this "knowledge" with a more historically informed perspective, we find that it can be productive to investigate Wordsworth's changing thoughts about these "pictures of Nature, Man, and Society" in the development of his poetic career, especially in his post-revolutionary vision of the societal transition. In addition, an emerging conflict between "the knowledge of which I am possessed" and "pictures of Nature, Man, and Society" is palpable with the word "contrive," which indicates the poet's baffled awareness of the incongruity between his own inner thoughts and their accessibility to his potential readers. This study aims to conduct a contextualized research on Wordsworth's thought upon the "authority" of a poet as the one who conveys his messages—to Coleridge particularly. My study firstly looks at Wordsworth's self-doubt in the aftermath of the French Revolution, which has relentlessly undermined his bond with nature, and then explores how he establishes a continuity of private and public experience across the Revolution by

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<sup>2</sup> An example of this "conflict of sensations" is the change from Wordsworth's Jacobin ideology of his early radical fervor ("Yet would I willingly have taken up / A service at this time for cause so great / However dangerous") to his later "solitary shades" of detachment ("Should to the breast of Nature have gone back / With all my resolutions, all my hopes") (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 271, 273). As Nicholas Roe points out, "These were turbulent, unsettled, exciting times in Britain when the threat of revolution and a French invasion seemed likely to provoke the violent reaction of a 'British Terror.' And Wordsworth was at the heart of it all, keeping company with the most controversial radical thinkers and 'Jacobin' activists of the day" ("Politics" 198-99).

aligning both his early support for the Revolution and his reflections on its failure to the lessons taught by nature. Wordsworth sees a connection between the might of nature and revolutionary fervor. However, here the challenge of being a poet becomes that of giving his writing of personal life a social scope, which nevertheless leads to his sense of fragmented selfhood. In these conflicting ideas, Wordsworth rethinks his understanding of language for a poetic project that develops into a continual formation of self. One of the identifications reaching beyond textuality that Wordsworth seeks to recognize in *The Prelude* is his relation to Coleridge. The following section will examine the way in which Coleridge's influence on Wordsworth's identity formation changes as the poem progresses. Wordsworth tries to translate Coleridge's doctrines into his own terms in order to stabilize his voice of poetic authority in *The Prelude*. Through his textual negotiations of and with Coleridge, Wordsworth realizes that a self is built on changeable relationships rooted in time, and that his project involves the constant rewriting of self not just for himself but for others. This is, ultimately, Coleridge's role in Wordsworth's re-creation of himself as a public poet. My argument is that the inherent contradictions involved in Wordsworth's ever-shifting conception of his role and authority as a writer at a time of drastic historical transition in the early nineteenth century result in a poetic voice situated between self-assertion and self-repression. The primary concern here is about the creation of a Wordsworthian project at different points in the process of his autobiographical writing. This creation is presented and represented to Coleridge as Wordsworth's response to the objective Coleridge sets forth for him, and revised again and again to accommodate and reconcile with Wordsworth's determination to write a poem about his own private communion with nature as well as a philosophical poem of redemption for society. In the Wordsworthian project, the voices of other people, especially that of Coleridge, are pre-empted, manipulated, and reinvented into the poetic utterances that come to form the Wordsworth of *The Prelude*.

My article also attempts to unravel some of the mysteries surrounding the work's compositional history—primarily concerning how Wordsworth records his reflections upon poetic voices—by investigating not only the 1799, 1805, and 1850 versions of *The Prelude* but also the unpublished draft materials. The point is to bring these writings into dialogue with one another within a historical framework.<sup>3</sup> In other words, my article hopes to give a fuller examination of the way

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<sup>3</sup> While focusing on the internal dynamics of the 1805 version of the poem because it is in this version that Wordsworth most prominently makes this concern with poetic communication a central thematic rubric, my article also looks at the 1799 and 1850 versions, and engages with Wordsworth's manuscripts at other stages of his writing of the poem.

Wordsworth registers his baffled thoughts about, and implicit resistance to, language during his incessant revision and reworking of *The Prelude*. Through the act of writing, Wordsworth exhibits his inner vexation at the working of language. Critics have offered accounts on Wordsworth's presentation of poetic voice. While Susan Wolfson reads Wordsworth's "voice of heroic argument" as "a voice of interpretation" that has been "motivated by an urge to answer the more troubled voices in the self to which he is also audience" (165), Thomas Pfau is much more concerned with the poem's "cultural labor expended on [sociocultural motives'] realization" (121). Pfau asserts that Wordsworth elaborates on his "profession" as a poet in response to his social concerns. On the issue of Wordsworth's audience, Mary Jacobus takes up a different stand from that of Pfau. Instead of focusing on Wordsworth's performative "profession" as a poet addressing and "fashion[ing]" his "intended readers, the middle-class community," Jacobus turns to the role Coleridge plays in *The Prelude* and points out that Wordsworth's address to Coleridge is actually the reproduction of his own voice. That is, Wordsworth himself is his own "intended audience," and his act of apostrophe is to invoke Coleridge as "calming agenc[y]" for his own salvation from the crisis of identity in his post-revolutionary disillusion (Jacobus 180). Another prominent Wordsworth scholar, Lucy Newlyn, questions the extent to which the invocation of Coleridge can stabilize Wordsworth's increasing sense of confusion in the pursuit of his own "profession." Newlyn argues that *The Prelude* is "of a particularly divided kind: on the one hand logically moving toward assertions of self-sufficiency and independence; on the other withdrawing guiltily, as though the quest for origins can be valid only if shared, and life without Coleridge would be unthinkable" ("A Strong Confusion" 148). Behind Wordsworth's "assertions" of self lies Coleridge's request that the "Tale" of the spiritual communion with nature "be the tail-piece of 'The Recluse'" (qtd. in Matlak 191), and the whole poem shows Wordsworth in conversation with Coleridge, composing his autobiographical writing in the face of a baffling dilemma between the pressure to write a philosophy for human life and the compulsion to write a poem of private self-formation in spiritual correspondence with nature. These scholarly readings of the poet's self-conscious performance in the act of writing and of his "intended" readers are revealing; however, the relationship between the poet's more private self-constituting address and publicly involved speech, as exhibited in both the published versions and unpublished manuscripts of *The Prelude*, has not been given enough attention in these studies. The examination of Wordsworth's compositional drafts shows how the poet progresses and pauses intermittently in the writing process. As Sally Bushell claims, "The process of composition itself, within, between and across the

'complete' *Prelude* stages is largely ignored" ("Wordsworthian Composition" 411). My study seeks to engage with this compositional history so as to explore how Wordsworth's continual revisionary practices resist confining the poem to any of its different versions. The objective of this article is to offer a more thorough understanding of the transitional complexity imbedded in this poetic act of addressing.

### Wordsworth's Self-Doubt in the Aftermath of the French Revolution

The retrospective view of the nightmarish political event intensifies Wordsworth's doubts about his vocation as a poet and haunts his writing of *The Prelude* almost to the end of the whole compositional history. Marilyn Butler says, "Though [Romantic] writers are gifted with tongues to articulate the Spirit of the Age, they are also moulded by the age" (8). Wordsworth's autobiographical writing is closely related to his hope for, experience of, and response to the Revolution. Wordsworth, looking back to his pre-revolutionary self, claims, "How glorious! . . . with a resolute mastery shaking off / The accidents of nature, time, and place, / That make up the weak being of the past, / Build social freedom on its only basis, / The freedom of the individual mind" (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 289). However, his "faith" in "the revolutionary promise" is ultimately, as he admits, "given to vanity and emptiness" (236), and relentlessly subverted by the tyrannical practices of the radical revolutionaries. In the aftermath of the Revolution, nothing is left but "the utter hollowness of what we name / The wealth of Nations" that hush "the voice of Freedom" and unsettle "public hope" (306, 266). Wordsworth tries to create a new identity as a poet of nature in response to the challenge posed by the Revolution.

In Book X of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth discusses his "confounded" "heart" which "had been turn'd aside / From Nature by external accidents" (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 291). This turning away from nature perplexes Wordsworth's vision of his childhood and gives him a sense of guilt. As David Bromwich points out, Wordsworth "himself has turned about twice: once in going to France and once in coming back" (88). Of particular concern here is Wordsworth's guilt of being unfaithful to nature even in "going to France." He knows that he has played "an ingrate's part" (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 166) when he first involves himself in the Revolution ("the blame is ours not Nature's" [*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 278]). For Wordsworth, nature "early tutor'd [him] / To look with feelings of fraternal love," so that he, as a Jacobin, has "felt / Distinctly manifested at this time / A dawning . . . A human-heartedness about my love" (306, 156). As he says it, "first I

look'd / At Man through objects that were great and fair, / . . . And thus / Was founded a sure safeguard and defence / Against the weight of meanness, selfish cares" (222; emphasis added). By going to France, Wordsworth entrusts his hope to "the proud workings of the soul" and thought of the mind as "the very faculty of truth" (158). After the Revolution, his previous visions of man as "great frame of breathing elements" and of "the heart of Man" as "a district on all sides / The fragrance breathing of humanity" all become a disappointment with man as "a senseless Idol" (158, 215, 158).<sup>4</sup> Wordsworth confesses: "being brought more near / As I was *now*, to guilt and wretchedness, / I trembled, thought of human life at times / With an indefinite terror and dismay" (227; emphasis added). The lasting sense of radical disparity between past and present keeps haunting Wordsworth's re-writing of his revolutionary experience. The "confession of man's weakness" puts Wordsworth's heart in "entire decay" (200, 293).

With the decision to write about his revolutionary experience at Coleridge's request, Wordsworth states in Book III:

Enough: for now into a populous Plain  
We must descend.—A Traveler I am  
And all my Tale is of myself; even so,  
So be it, if the pure in heart delight  
To follow me; and Thou, O honor'd Friend! (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 140)

The transition from his "self-sufficing power of solitude" to "a populous Plain" is a route that he "must" take if he is to write such a "philosophic Song" for humankind assigned by Coleridge. At the same time, ambiguously, Wordsworth also shows his preference for individuality by stating that "all my Tale is of myself." While staying in densely populated areas, he still records the "Tale" of his previous self. This is also why he names himself "a Traveler" when he "descend[s]" "into a populous Plain." The social community can never be his permanent abode. With "fainting steps" (140) into the social world, a world that is unfamiliar to him, Wordsworth appeals to Coleridge ("O honor'd Friend!") for his support. He hopes that Coleridge, "who in my thoughts art ever at my side," can assist him as "Brother" (140). What we are seeing here is an early stage of a transfer of authority from Coleridge to nature that is made explicit, and completed, when Wordsworth points out that "My present Theme / Is to retrace the way that led me on /

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<sup>4</sup> It is noticeable that the lines "the heart of Man, a district on all sides / The fragrance breathing of humanity" are removed from the 1850 version.

Through nature to the love of human Kind” in Book VIII, refraining here from acknowledging any guidance from Coleridge. The impetus behind Wordsworth’s “love of human Kind,” as he makes it clear, comes first and foremost from or through “nature,” not the promptings of his friend. If Coleridge’s expectation means that Wordsworth “must” “descend into a populous Plain,” then Wordsworth is indicating that the works he writes after stepping into populated places cannot be what has been “appointed” by Coleridge; rather, it must be what is dictated by his own love of nature. As he puts it in Book VIII: “I already had been taught to love / My Fellow-beings, to such habits train’d / Among the woods and mountains” (213); and in Book XII: “the genius of the Poet . . . / May boldly take his way among mankind / Wherever Nature leads” (201). Even as he travels into the “populous Plain,” Wordsworth is turning from Coleridge and toward nature, which, by Book VIII, has replaced Coleridge as the poem’s silent auditor and as the poet’s “Guide” in relation to humanity: “I found / In thee a gracious Guide, to lead me forth / . . . ’Twas thy power / That rais’d the first complacency in me, / And noticeable kindness of heart” (213).

Wordsworth, in recalling the French Revolution, comes to the next stage of his autobiographical writing. He exclaims:

now we start afresh; I feel  
An impulse to precipitate my Verse;  
Fair greetings to this shapeless eagerness,  
Whene’er it comes! needful in works so long,  
Thrice needful to the argument which now  
Awaits us; Oh! How much unlike the past!  
One which though bright the promise, will be found  
Ere far we shall advance, ungenial, hard  
To treat of, and forbidding in itself. (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 232)

He has an “eagerness” to write, “to tread an onward road” forward past memories of the revolutionary times (when he was facing “change and subversion” [274]). In his mind, there is suddenly a wish urging him to “precipitate [his] Verse”—“with courage, and new hope risen on our toil” (*The Prelude* 1799, 1805, 1850 313). His composition of poetry is accelerated for “the argument which now / Awaits us”—the “argument” for the “great ends of Liberty and Power” (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 299). However, Wordsworth also points out that “The argument which now / Awaits us, . . . though bright the promise, will be found / . . . ungenial, hard / To treat of, and forbidding in itself” (232). This stage of writing wears a

stern and frightening appearance. Although he has the “eagerness” to deal with “the argument,” the “eagerness” is “shapeless.” The particular use of the word “shapeless” obscures his idea of what to write about in dealing with the “argument.” The writing of the revolutionary experience, for Wordsworth, is a welcome but doubtful and painful process. This ambiguous view of his writing is far more noticeable in a later revision to this passage (MS. A [207 r]):<sup>5</sup>

the  
an impulse to precipitate ~~my~~ Verse (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, Vol. II 782)

The replacement of “my” with “the” suggests the poet’s recognition of a widening distance between his own inner mind and the “Verse” through which he seeks to express his feelings.

Incessantly troubled by his problematic vision of the French Revolution and even of his own poetic voice as a poet, Wordsworth remarks, “I lost / All feeling of conviction, and, in fine, / Sick, wearied out with contrarities, / Yield up moral questions in despair” (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 291). His belief in the inherent moral nature of human beings is much diminished; “despair” replaces “conviction” and passion gives place to “sick[ness].”<sup>6</sup> Perplexed by his aspiration to “Liberty” and disappointed by his view of “the individual mind” (and its “blind desires” [241]), Wordsworth tries to understand the errors of the Revolution when he looks back to his revolutionary experience. He spots the problem not in the Revolution itself but in the way mankind makes it go wrong. In Wordsworth’s view, aggressive individualism separates man from nature. As we can see in Wordsworth’s later revisions (MS. A [251r]):

. . . with desires heroic and firm sense,  
A spirit thoroughly faithful to itself,  
Unquenchable, unsleeping, undismay’d,

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<sup>5</sup> “MS. A (DC MS. 52) was transcribed by Dorothy Wordsworth, as were many family fair-copy transcripts . . .” (Wordsworth, *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, Vol. II 471). MS. A, treated by Wordsworth as the authoritative manuscript, is generally read as the base text for *The Prelude* of 1805. Wordsworth used this manuscript as “the depository for revisions that he intended to remain a permanent part of the poem”; and it has been suggested that it is “from MS. A or B that Wordsworth in early January 1807 read the poem to his family and to Coleridge, inspiring Coleridge’s own great poem ‘To William Wordsworth’ . . .” (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 78, 61).

<sup>6</sup> In retrospect, Wordsworth calls “the immediate proof of principles” “wild theories” (288). This refers to his former belief in and subjection to Godwinian principles. For a discussion of Wordsworth’s Godwinism, see the note on “wild theories” in Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, edited by Ernest de Selincourt and Stephen Gill, 305-08.

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Unquenchable, unsleeping, undismay'd,  
Was as an instinct among men (X. 145-49) (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, Vol. II 845)

This act of obliteration intensifies Wordsworth's baffled thoughts about the human spirit. He is not presenting a resolution so much as revealing his anxiety about the sustainability of human nature in facing these "worst trials" (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 280). In the 1850 version, he even thinks of man as "born / Of dust and Kindred to the worm" (*The Prelude* 1799, 1805, 1850 301). He is uncertain about the unquenchable nature of our mind, although he attempts to claim this in the representation of such social turmoil that challenges his trust in the human mind.

Wordsworth thus states that "From these bitter truths I must return / To my own History" (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 284). He believes that a cure for this wretched society can be sought in his own "History," or, to be more precise, in his writing of this "History" that results in Wordsworth "the poet." Jerome McGann claims that Wordsworth, in seeking to retreat, has "the feeling that the condition of harmony has to be *returned to*, that the idea of *unity* has to be recovered or reborn" (40). But, as I have been trying to show, this return to his "own History" is by no means a return to his past. As Wordsworth says, "my likings and my loves / Ran in new channels, leaving old ones dry" (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 288). Witnessing the revolutionaries' radical change from "self-defense" to "conquest," Wordsworth states:

juvenile errors are my theme,  
What in those days thro' Britain was perform'd  
To turn all judgments out of their right course;  
But this is passion over-near ourselves,  
Reality too close and too intense,  
And mingled up with something in my mind,  
Of scorn and condemnation personal,  
That would profane the sanctity of verse. (283-84)

It seems on the surface that Wordsworth seeks to leave the revolutionary "passion" and "reality" of that time out of his poem in case they "profane the sanctity of verse." In other words, he attempts to keep the thoughts that only baffle—"scorn and condemnation personal"—away from his writing. However, Wordsworth's language intricately problematizes the relationship between "reality" and "my mind" with the word "something." As the poet puts it, there is "something" "in [his] mind," "mingled up with" "passion over-near ourselves" and "reality too close and too

intense.” Entrapped between an attitude of “condemnation” and the desire to escape from it, Wordsworth intentionally uses the word “something” to hold “condemnation” at bay without diminishing that “reality.” In this way, he could also safeguard “the sanctity of verse” from being “profane[d]” by habits of mind that are “out of their right course”—by being deliberately vague about them. And, in doing so, Wordsworth tries to establish an identity as a poet when he decides to write about “reality too close and too intense”—by creating a sanctuary away from such reality.

### **The Challenge of Being a Poet as “a man speaking to men”**

In the shift from writing “my Verse” to composing a “philosophic Song” for humankind, Wordsworth’s struggle to textually establish authority for himself as “a man speaking to men” manifests itself at the level of his use of language. In Book I of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth declares with confidence that he “will forthwith bring down . . . the story of [his] life”; “[it is] a theme / Single and of determined bounds” (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 124). Nevertheless, in Book X Wordsworth calls this story of his life “my toilsome songs” (280); the road of “single and of determined bounds” he chooses is actually an “intricate and difficult path,” as written in the 1850 text (*The Prelude* 1799, 1805, 1850 477). The poet shows his doubt about his childhood vision of his chosen path in the aftermath of the Revolution, but as his sense of the poetic project changes in response to what has happened in France, he shows how he rethinks his own understanding of the language any poetic project relies upon. The verse “one tutored thus, who had been formed / To thought and moral feeling in the way / This story hath described” (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 238) is removed from the 1850 text. This removal expressly suggests that Wordsworth comes to doubt whether his poem has actually “described” the growth of his mind along this “difficult path.” And he begins to feel he needs “colours and words that are unknown to man” to “paint” the fostering history of his life (302).

As we can see in the 1799 version of *The Prelude*, very early on Wordsworth is expressing his “fears / Of breaking in upon the unity / Of this my argument” (*The Prelude* 1799, 1805, 1850 7). That “unity” of “argument” is relentlessly subverted by his writing of the revolutionary experience: in the 1850 text, for example, Wordsworth simply erases the phrase “the life / Of all things and the mighty unity” (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 319) that can still be found in the 1805 version. Having experienced social turmoil and political upheavals, Wordsworth loses his belief in language’s capacity to “describe” to others his experience of the “one life.”

Wordsworth aspires to the creation of a poetic “sanctuary” (285), but recognizes that this is merely idealism: such a task would require “words . . . unknown to man.” In the act of writing, Wordsworth is trapped in a conflicting tension between “my Verse” (which articulates his spiritual bond with nature) and “the Verse” (which involves the other changeable and unpredictable accidents in adulthood) (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, Vol. II 782). He recognizes that the “Verse” he composes represents a conflicted self torn between social harshness and his aspiration to an inward spiritual communion with nature. It is also noteworthy that the phrase “the heart in such entire decay” is erased in MS. A [287r] (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, Vol. II 902), which tellingly reveals his reluctance to acknowledge and specify his state of mind at that time. Wordsworth’s use of language deliberately confuses matters to the point that we are left with uncertainty as to whether or not the poet at this point has entirely lost his faith in the human mind. In the act of writing, he is holding back from deciding on a role for himself as a writer.

“From my pleasant station [I] was cut off, / And toss’d about in whirlwinds” (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 274). He recalls how he was relentlessly separated from his past self in “a confused and tumultuous process” through his revolutionary experience.<sup>7</sup> This transition is so abrupt and disorienting that even he cannot control his own self, which seems to be “toss’d about in whirlwinds.” The word “whirlwinds” is central to our understanding of this moment of transition. As Kenneth R. Johnston puts it, “‘whirlwind’ is a naturalistic word weighted with political significance for Wordsworth” (*The Hidden Wordsworth* 393). With this word, Wordsworth skillfully aligns the force of the Revolution with the power of nature in order to suggest that redemptive possibilities (“vernal promises” [*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 108]) are still operative. The power of nature, as the poet endeavors to insist, is at work in “whirlwinds” and “a long-lived storm of great events” (*The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850* 411). Nature does not work only as a transcendental power but exerts its might within the revolutionary fervor—even when everything is out of its “certain course” (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 238). Under chaos, imagination is still at work, and the connection with nature still active, if buried or obscured. A connection and continuity exist, despite everything.

“Remembrances and dim admonishments” (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 269) ensue following the Revolution. The word “admonishments” relates directly back to the “admonitions” from nature. Wordsworth thinks that, in his childhood, nature admonished him for his mischievous behavior, which is connected to the potential for wickedness in human beings. In the stolen boat episode, for example,

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<sup>7</sup> OED’s definition of “whirlwind.”

Wordsworth thus describes it: “a strong desire / O’erpower’d my better reason” (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 115). This experience was “an act of stealth / And troubled pleasure” (116). And the French Revolution is the same human wickedness on a larger scale. The writing poet, now looking back on the time when he was haunted by “a living thing” striding after him, realizes how nature “interwine[s] for [him] / The passions that build up our human Soul” (116). Writing with a vision of humanity in adulthood, Wordsworth claims to envisage in nature the “Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe” that “sanctif[ies]” our human nature by “*such discipline, / Both pain and fear*”—“until we recognize / A grandeur in the beatings of the heart” (117-18; emphasis added). Now he sees that “beauty . . . / Hath terror in it” (319). The interfusing power reconnects everything—beauty and fear—to its origin; Wordsworth knows and claims that receiving “reproaches” for his own past behavior “may spur [him] on” not only to recover but also to develop his sense of being made a poet (for humankind) by nature “in manhood now mature” (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 124). Nature continues, at all times, to redeem. By thus aligning lessons learnt from the Revolution to those taught by nature, Wordsworth can glorify the “grandeur” of the human mind that is receptive to these lessons while maintaining, but also evolving, his “prophetic” role as a poet of nature. The experience of revolutionary terror relinks him back to the admonishing and fostering power of nature. And Wordsworth takes on the role of a Prophet of Nature, writing in the service of nature’s power. The poet once again finds in nature a never-failing hope and establishes a more secure identity for himself as a poet of nature—now as one that writes for humankind.

Writing a poem of redemption for humankind, Wordsworth thinks of himself “as becom[ing] a man who would prepare / For such a glorious work” “beneath / The breath of great events” (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 110, 292). Inventing a new identity for himself as a prophetic poet of nature, he intends to build a link between nature and society by identifying the objects of nature as “a genuine counterpart” and “softening mirror” of “the moral world” (315). The natural world is considered to be interrelated with the human society precisely through this reflection of “the moral world” which, as Wordsworth suggests, will “[soften]” the harsh reality of the human life.<sup>8</sup> However, Wordsworth’s choice of words constantly reveals an uneasy sense of the hope he claims to be feeling. He wonders whether “such bold word accord / With any promises of human life” or whether he can only speak to Coleridge “in private talk” (107, 277). Ian Baucom points out that “the use of the

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<sup>8</sup> See Hanley. Hanley remarks that “nature . . . will always prevail over the necessary crises of differentiated subjectivity—political disillusionment and private guilt” (55).

word ‘our’ (in ‘our degeneracy’) and ‘this age’ (rather than ‘my age’)” demonstrates how Wordsworth attempts to make his autobiographical accounts more widely applicable—not only by deprivation of individuality but also through teaching his readers how “they might collectively survive the ‘degeneracy’ of ‘this age’”—while he is retracing the moments of his own calamity and restoration (32). Can nature enlighten human beings and be universally applicable as “things common to all” (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 227)? More importantly, Wordsworth is disappointed to find that his vision of hope for humankind may, after all, be nothing but private things inscribed on “a written paper” (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 208). In Book VII he witnesses a single blind Beggar, “upon [whose] Chest / Wearing a written paper, to explain / The story of the Man, and who he was” (208). This paper represents the man and, furthermore, “the utmost that we know, / Both of ourselves and of the universe” (208). In this sense, the paper is echoing Wordsworth’s own “philosophic Song / Of truth,” which not only concerns the “growth” of his mind but also advances to “highest truth” for humankind. Even though the poet endeavors to insert the spirit of human life into his “written paper,” his writing (about “Nature, Man, and Society”) might communicate no more of his own internal experience than the beggar’s note does his, an internal experience that remains lifeless, unsharable, and incommunicable. Wordsworth’s identity formation engages with the problem of how one writes the self—its change and growth—into “a written paper” produced in response to the instructions and prescriptions of a close friend. Furthermore, the poet incessantly doubts his claimed identity as “a moral agent” and even the ability of his words to “give relief” (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 227). In the end, Wordsworth inscribes in his writing a profound sense of the division between nature and humanity. It is such divisions and contradictions that keep Wordsworth’s writing moving forward, by giving it a challenge which it can never overcome but which it insists on taking on—as a worthy, perhaps the worthiest, challenge to any poet.

### **Formation of Poetic Voice between Self-Assertion and Self-Repression**

Further complications in Wordsworth’s identity formation arise from the conflict between what Coleridge expects of him and what Wordsworth aspires to be. This is made more problematic by Wordsworth’s ambiguous attitude toward language when he seeks to narrate a self that lives up to but implicitly resists Coleridge’s expectations. Though Coleridge praises Wordsworth as one likely to write “THE FIRST GENUINE PHILOSOPHICAL POEM” (*Biographia Literaria* 129), an intense sense of complexity runs through Wordsworth’s interactions with

Coleridge in *The Prelude*—between Wordsworth’s private aim as a poet (self-formation), his identification with Coleridge through their shared attributes, and the goal Coleridge sets up for him (as a poet for humankind). No matter how much contradiction this conflict may cause, Wordsworth’s poem remains a work written to and for Coleridge and derives a great part of its vitality from its problematic relation with Coleridge. It is by testing himself against the ambitions Coleridge sets forth for him that Wordsworth eventually comes to see even these ambitions as part of his own poetic project. Coleridge confesses: “I feel myself a better Poet, in knowing how to honour *him*, than in all my own poetic compositions, all I have done or hope to do—and I prophesy immortality to his *Recluse*, as the first and finest philosophical Poet” (qtd. in Sisman 369n84). Coleridge finds in Wordsworth “those *profound* touches of the human heart,” and feels himself “*a little man* by his side” (qtd. in Sisman 177n3). Here Coleridge has much to offer his fellow poet, but this is also to inhibit Wordsworth’s composition of an autobiographical poem.

Wordsworth himself acknowledges that “throughout this narrative, / Else sooner ended, I have known full well / For whom I thus record the birth and growth / Of gentleness, simplicity, and truth, / And joyous loves that hallow innocent days / Of peace and self-command” (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 184). In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth sets out to trace the “birth and growth” of the mind of that “thinker” Coleridge so admires, a “birth and growth” that consecrates his childhood (“innocent days / Of peace and self-command”). But he also recognizes that this writing is composed “for” Coleridge (“I speak to thee my Friend” [184]), who has much influenced his later mental growth though not having participated in his childhood experience. In other words, Wordsworth acknowledges here the difference between what he is writing about (the fostering power of nature in his own childhood) and what Coleridge is expecting him to write (a poem prophesying redemption for humankind), a difference that Wordsworth becomes increasingly conscious of, and feels increasingly compelled to justify. His poem is “a story,” as he tells Coleridge, “destined for thy ear” (292). Wordsworth inscribes the tension between writing about his own memory of the past and his constant awareness of the auditor—Coleridge—who expects something rather more public in the composition of *The Prelude*.

Scholarship on *The Prelude* is extensive and focuses particularly on the ways Wordsworth addresses Coleridge in the poem. *The Prelude* is Wordsworth’s letter to Coleridge and *Biographia Literaria* is Coleridge’s reply.<sup>9</sup> Stephen Gill points out

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<sup>9</sup> “Wordsworth stood at the centre of Coleridge’s greatest single piece of criticism (*Biographia Literaria*),” and

that Coleridge is “continuously invoked,” by “words of endearment” in Wordsworth’s writing of *The Prelude* (*Wordsworth: The Prelude* 15).<sup>10</sup> The continuous “invocation” of Coleridge in the 1805 *Prelude* points to the strong, ongoing presence of Coleridge’s influence and expectation in the composition of the poem at this particular time. Sally Bushell offers a cogent account of this invocation: “Coleridge and Wordsworth’s personal relationship is bound up with the development of ‘The Recluse,’ and there is a strong (and unusual) sense of shared programmatic intention that creates difficulties in terms of distinguishing between Coleridgean intention on Wordsworth’s behalf and either Wordsworth’s understating of this, or his own intentions” (*Text as Process* 81). Similarly, Nicholas Roe suggests that the “immediate challenge of France” for both poets is “the possibility of realizing self-commitment as action” (*Wordsworth and Coleridge* 39). In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth seeks to define his poetic vocation, that of a “Prophet of Nature,” as his response to that shared challenge, a response to a place alongside Coleridge’s. In the 1805 version of Book IX, Wordsworth states:

If Nature then be standing on the brink  
Of some great trial, and we hear the voice  
Of One devoted, One whom circumstance  
Hath call’d upon to embody his deep sense  
In action, give it outwardly a shape,  
And that of benediction to the world:  
Then doubt is not, and truth is more than truth . . . (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 242)

The “One” mentioned here is Wordsworth, who is to “realiz[e]” his “self-commitment as action” through the composition of *The Prelude*. Coleridge encouraged him to “write a poem, in blank verse, addressed to those who, in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution, had given up hope for the amelioration of mankind,” and Wordsworth implicitly suggests that he is “tak[ing] up / A service at this time for cause so great” (271). Like Coleridge, Wordsworth is facing the challenge of “this time”; he too feels “call’d upon” by “circumstance” to respond with “action.”

Wordsworth creates an identification between “Thou” (Coleridge as his addressee) and “I” by saying that “Thou has sought / The truth in solitude”

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“Coleridge was the addressee of Wordsworth’s greatest poem (*The Prelude*)” (Perry 162). Also see Don H. Bialostosky’s *Wordsworth, Dialogics, and the Practice of Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) 28.

<sup>10</sup> Coleridge’s influence on Wordsworth is immense. Wordsworth once stated: “[Coleridge’s] mind has been habitually present with me” (qtd. in Moorman 520).

(corresponding to his “self-sufficing power of solitude”) and that “Thou art one, / The most intense of Nature’s worshippers” (“with the soul / Which Nature gives to Poets”) (135, 126, 135, 293). With these shared attributes, Coleridge comes to be known as Wordsworth’s “Brother” “in many things,” although they were born and reared in different areas (135). During the writing process, nevertheless, Wordsworth is aware that he is doing something different from Coleridge’s earlier request. Knowing that they both have gone different ways, Wordsworth seeks to reinterpret what he is doing in his poem in a Coleridgean way and to re-create Coleridge in his own image by telling Coleridge that we “have gain’d / The self-same bourne” (135). They are moving forward in the same direction (based on “shared programmatic intention”) and ultimately to an identical destination. Wordsworth goes further to assert in Book VI that “breathing / As if in different elements, we were framed / To bend at last to the same discipline, / Predestin’d, if two beings ever were, / To seek the same delights, and have one health, / One happiness” (157). Throughout the compositional process of the 1805 text, one of the ways in which Wordsworth seeks to escape the possible contradiction between his own aim and those of Coleridge is by using the creative powers of language to reinvent Coleridge in the image of the Wordsworth created in *The Prelude*. Reading the continual invocation of Coleridge in *The Prelude* through this mutual objective on a larger scale (the completion of *The Recluse*), Bushell maintains, “Coleridge’s involvement in Wordsworth’s programmatic intention for ‘The Recluse’ gives him enormous critical power because his opinion has the remarkable status of a kind of external, subjective judgment for the poet” (*Text as Process* 81). Beneath their “shared programmatic intention,” Newlyn observes, lurks “the obvious contradiction between *The Prelude*’s design and Coleridge’s role”; Newlyn also suggests that “there is also a struggle between Wordsworth’s personal quest and the wish to pay homage to his friend” (148). These scholarly discussions all point to an intricate link between self-assertion and repression in the text. In Book VII Wordsworth by necessity moves away from the role of a philosophic poet: “Beloved Friend, / The assurances then given unto myself, / Which did beguile me of some heavy thoughts / At thy departure to a foreign Land, / Have fail’d” (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 194). Instead, he sees in his “favorite Grove” “something that fits [him] for the Poet’s task” (195). Here his poem is based upon his intimate communion with nature, through which the “growth” of his mind is formed. However, Wordsworth states near the end of *The Prelude*, “now, O Friend! this History is brought / To its appointed close”; “much hath been omitted, as need was; / . . . even of the other wealth / Which is collected among woods and fields / Far more” (320, 315; emphasis added). Is the poem an attempt at self-utterance



189). Wordsworth, in anticipation, revises the phrase “a history of love” [MS. W, 47r] to “intellectual power” (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 296) in the 1805 text. However, this “intellectual power,” corresponding to Coleridge’s “intelligent Powers,” is associated with the power of imagination, not the power of fixed “Theory” and “Laws.” As Wordsworth states:

This History, my Friend, hath chiefly told  
Of intellectual power, from stage to stage  
Advancing, hand in hand with love and joy,  
And of imagination teaching truth. (296)

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Wordsworth tells Coleridge that, in the progress toward the “consummation of the Poet’s mind,” there are transitions between different “stage[s],” which gradually develop, form, and “[advance]” his “intellectual power.” Moreover, Wordsworth points out that it is “imagination” that “teach[es] truth” in the evolution of this “intellectual power.” In other words, for Wordsworth, “truth” is to be established by “imagination” rather than by any set of philosophical doctrines. In a letter to Coleridge in 1809, Wordsworth clearly remarks, “This class of poem I suppose to consist chiefly of objects most interesting to . . . the imagination through the understanding, and not to the understanding through the imagination” (*The Letters of William Wordsworth* 123). He intends rather “to remind men of their knowledge, as it lurks inoperative and unvalued in their own minds, than to attempt to convey recondite or refined truths” (182). Imagination, originating from “the first / Poetic spirit of our human life,” evolves through “stage[s]” of life, “im-pregnate[s] knowledge,” and ultimately gives him “elevating thoughts / Of human Nature” (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 230). This is Wordsworth’s version of Coleridge’s “general revolution in the modes of developing and disciplining the human mind.” Wordsworth’s writing shows that Coleridge’s criteria of “refined truth” are what he defines his own thoughts against.<sup>12</sup>

While Wordsworth does continue to draw Coleridge into his own poetic project, he increasingly finds ways to write Coleridge out of it. Yet Wordsworth remains always aware of the “determin’d bounds” (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 124) set by Coleridge. He might be talking about his own life (“to give the *accidents* of *individual life*” [Coleridge, “To William Wordsworth” 186]), but at the same time he also feels the pressure to speak for humankind, which is what Coleridge wants

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<sup>12</sup> Simon Jarvis points out that Wordsworth’s definition of imagination shows that “imagination cannot possibly be a philosophical name for a clearly defined faculty, power or ontological region.” Jarvis goes on to suggest that “what the imagination describes” is “a kind of experience” (222).

him to do. And Wordsworth remains anxious about persuading Coleridge that he is living up to his expectations. As Nicholas Roe reminds us, “*The Prelude* does not recall the coincidence of two like minds, but the dynamic potential released through disparity” (*Wordsworth and Coleridge* 10). The correspondence between the two poets after the completion of the *1805 Prelude* helps us see the difference in their thoughts. For Coleridge, Wordsworth’s fascination with “feeling” in describing the history of his life lacks the philosophical sophistication that he desires to see in Wordsworth’s writing. Coleridge writes to Wordsworth: “In order . . . to explain the disappointment I must recall to your mind what my expectations were . . . the Poem on the growth of your own mind was as the ground-plan and the Roots, out of which *the Recluse* was to have sprung up as the Tree . . .” (“To William Wordsworth” 186). Nevertheless, Wordsworth once explains to Coleridge: “Feeling consecrating form, and form ennobling feeling. This may have sufficed to give you a notion of my views” (*The Letters of William Wordsworth* 123). Bennett’s observation that “*The Prelude* acts as an antidote to or a displacement of that impossible philosophical project projected on to Wordsworth by Coleridge” (16) fails to give enough attention to the various attempts that Wordsworth has made in his writing process. These attempts show how Wordsworth comes to see Coleridge’s expectations of him as part of his own poetic project. In other words, Coleridge motivates Wordsworth to be a poet but also offers a poetic identity that Wordsworth can—indeed feels he must—define himself against. Two examples from the manuscripts of *The Prelude* testify to the poet’s perplexed awareness of Coleridge’s “external, subjective judgment.” He appeals to Coleridge:

[?And now] vouchsafe thine ear O  
friend  
honoured  
While with a winding but no devious  
course  
Through Nature process I make  
my [?way]  
I [?track my] [?]  
By tender links of thought. My present  
[?task]  
[?Is] to  
{[? ? ]} [?contemplate] for a needful [?]  
[?Would set in] view  
[?]

[?Would shew] the manner in which  
[?shew]

Nature  
works . . . [MS. WW, 21<sup>v</sup>]<sup>13</sup> (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, Vol. II 249)

In another later manuscript, Wordsworth revises this passage as follows:

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Even yet Thou wilt vouchsafe an ear  
O Friend  
As to this prelude thou I know hast done  
And something too of a submissive mind  
As in thy mildness Thou I know hast done  
While with a winding but no devious song  
Through process I make my  
Way

By links of tender thought. My present aim  
Is to contemplate for a nedful while,

Following a track which [?would] in season  
(passage which will conduct in seas  
On due

Conduct  
{[?Lead] us b hath been  
We

Back to the tale which { I have left behind)  
The diverse manner in which Nature works

Ofte ntimes  
{Upo upon the outward face of  
Things

As if with an imaginative Power . . . [MS. W, 37<sup>v</sup>]  
(*The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, Vol. II 286-87)

In these two drafts, Wordsworth asks Coleridge to listen to the way he follows  
“Nature process” and the way nature works upon “the outward face of things” with

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<sup>13</sup> MS. WW (DC MS.43), comprising “the disjointed members of a pocket note-book,” contains Wordsworth’s own original drafts of many important passages of *The Prelude*. The content of MS. WW also contains materials not incorporated into the finished version of the poem. Both MS. WW and W were drafted before the 1805 version.



But as this meditative history  
                   to ~~work~~ far different  
                   a                                  work  
 Was calling me to ~~an ungracious task~~  
 — Which  
~~{[?] must be undertaken now I mean~~  
       Which lies before us hitherto untouch'd  
 To speak of an abasement in my mind  
 Not altogether wrough without the  
   help  
                                   I was ~~[? ?] loth~~  
                   I was loth to think  
 Of Books ill chosen ~~^ I shrank back~~  
                   [?I w]          [?] loth to  
                                   from thought  
                   this  
 Of entering on {such Labour, without  
   first  
 Forth breathing these devout acknowledgment  
                   such  
 Of ~~that~~ ungracious office at a time  
 When these acknowledgement were

yet unpaid. [MS. W, 33<sup>r</sup>]  
 (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, Vol. II 282-83)

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Wordsworth, knowing that he has to bring “this meditative history” to “a work,” as Coleridge encourages him to do, first describes this work as “ungracious” and then as “far different” from the narrative of his early life. At the same time, he reveals his unwillingness to carry out this task by replacing the phrase “must be undertaken now I mean” with “which lies before us hitherto untouch’d.” In this sense, the work may be still “untouch’d” hereafter. He is “loth” to “[enter] on such Labour” not only because it “speak[s] of an abasement in [his] mind” but also because that “devout acknowledgment” of “what [he] owed to Book[s]” is “yet unpaid.” These ongoing reconsiderations of the relationship between Wordsworth’s own poetic “self-tasking” (a “favour’d Being” “not uselessly employ’d” by nature) and his consciousness of “being tasked” by Coleridge result in Wordsworth’s “obsessive awareness that making sense of the past calls for a lifetime’s revisiting, open to the possibility of and recognizing the necessity for reinterpretation” (Gill, Introduction 4).

Wordsworth tells Coleridge: “I speak bare truth, / As if to thee alone in private talk” (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 277). And he believes that Coleridge, “Friend / Then passionately lov’d: with heart how full,” will “peruse these lines” which are “perhaps / A blank to other men!” (132). This line (“as if to thee alone in private talk”) is nevertheless removed from the 1850 text, showing how far Wordsworth has moved away from his former belief that they are “twins almost in genius and mind” (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 183). As Jonathan Wordsworth puts it well, “Wordsworth’s faith in Coleridge is touching, but hopeless” (363). Keeping the task Coleridge assigned him in mind, Wordsworth reinvents his past selves as these were directly related to Coleridge and the “appointed project.” However, this constant act of reinterpretation generates further doubts about the poem’s worth as a shared message with the social community. As Bennett notes, “Wordsworth’s dejection on completing the poem in 1805—and his inability to stop revising the poem over the next thirty-five years—indicates his discomposure, indicates the destabilizing or discomposing qualities of such writing” (162). Wordsworth’s insistence on his personal experience is inevitably unsettled and “discompos[ed]” through the textual representation of it, and of its meaning, as a shared experience. Wordsworth’s composition of a poem for the reading public is always trapped in a tension between the social world and private experiences.

## Conclusion

This article is ultimately suggesting that, continually questioning the very purpose and value of his own project, Wordsworth keeps rewriting and revising his sense of both within the poem, as well as his sense of the poet he feels himself to be, wants to be, and fears he might not be. In the end, such rewriting becomes the point of the poem and its greatest imaginative achievement. Looking into the complex relation between Wordsworth’s career and its context, John Rieder argues that the “climax” of Wordsworth’s revolution experience is “the poem’s oscillation between epic ambitions and lyrical self-construction on the one hand, and between progressively wider, more threatening social contexts and recuperative, private meditations on the other” (19). This transition made through Wordsworth’s writing of the French Revolution fundamentally changes and baffles his use of language. Here the poet’s “recuperative, private meditations”—his “confessional self-understanding” (Rieder 19)—are in constant interaction with “social contexts.” At the end of *The Prelude* Wordsworth confesses, “Whether to me shall be allotted life, / And with life power to accomplish aught of worth / Sufficient to excuse me in men’s sight / For having given this Record of myself, /

Is *all uncertain*" (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 322). This statement ostensibly contradicts Gill's assertion that "What *The Prelude* actually demonstrates is that Wordsworth's powers [are] never in doubt, and that he has completed the most arduous, and the most exciting work he [is] ever to undertake—an account of the Growth of a Poet's Mind, his own" (Gill, *Wordsworth: The Prelude* 93). "Having given this Record of [him]self" offers no relief from fear and doubt, nor does it offer stability of self, poetic or otherwise. Such things are not, in the end, what the poem is about. Moving from "the story of my life" to a prophecy of "lasting inspiration" to humankind, from being "a wanderer among the woods and fields" (*The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 176) to being a "[Prophet] of Nature," Wordsworth's textual self is constantly under review. It is the poem's handling of these problems that qualify Wordsworth as "the greatest, most inaugurative, and most representative poet of his time," as well as "the most written-about Romantic writer of our times" (Chandler 106; Johnston, "A Tale of Two Titles" 48).

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