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Revisions and Specular Inversions in *The Prelude*

Robert Barth juxtaposes Wordsworth's experience of chronological time and "quasi-eternal [...] spots of time" (1991: 148).[1] However, Wordsworth increasingly doubts the timeless presence of the "spots of time" in memory and in the text. Simpson defines the spots as processes and "monuments of creative instability" (1986: 137), as Wordsworth's *revisions* give ample proof of the fact that these spots are subject to time and change (Arac 1987: 235).

At the origin of Wordsworth's poetical autobiography lies the loss of his creative power.[2] Its end is the recovery of his imagination via the recovery of his past, especially his "spots of time". It is questionable, however, to which extent the retrieval of the past is possible at all and whether the memories themselves depend upon the very imagination they are intended to restore.

Wordsworth also reflects to which extent the visionary quality of his "spots of time" is represented or lost in his autobiographical poem. *The Prelude* exemplifies the ambiguous theory of representation Wordsworth developed in his *Essays Upon Epitaphs* (1974).[3]

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1 Barth remarks that Wordsworth's temporal imagination contains both the temporal and the timeless (1991: 149) but he does not consider that the imagination revises the apparently timeless experience as well.

2 Wordsworth was disappointed and dissatisfied with the slow progress of his great project *The Recluse*, which was to represent the philosophy of his life (J. Wordsworth 1995: xxvi).

3 My reading of Wordsworth's *Prelude* was initially inspired by Paul de Man's reading of the poem in the light of the *Essays upon Epitaphs* (1979). De Man claims that autobiography is a specular figure of reading, in which the writer and the written subject mutually substitute each other, a structure which is repeated between the narrator and the character in the text (1979: 921). De Man alerts us to the fundamental difference between the author's literal self and its figuration as a face and a voice in the text, which is supposed to represent and to restore the self but marks its loss and its absence from the text at the same time (1979: 930). Wordsworth does not question the use of personification as strictly as de Man does, because he only objects to the fiction of making the dead speak words invented by third parties in the first person (1974: 60-61). Wordsworth does not in principle object to the use of the first person by the speaker himself, although he is aware of the difference between the literal and the textual self. My approach parallels that of other critics who work with the revisionary processes of figuration and disfiguration, such as Manning (1983), Wolfson (1984), Bahti (1995), Chase (1986), and Arac (1987). This interpretation, however, emphasizes the specular inversions of literal into figurative elements between versions, and focusses on the gibbet-scene as a central reflection of the revisionary process itself.

The Prelude deals with the development of Wordsworth's subjective consciousness on two levels: the *past* growth of his mind from his childhood to 1798, and the *present* evolvement of his shifting perspectives on his past, which results in a series of major versions and revisions between 1798 and 1839 (Bode 1998: 873-874).[4] My central argument is that Wordsworth's revisions compound the problems of his autobiographical project: his revisions may inversely mirror previous versions as elements of the literal past change into disruptive figures of the present.

Wordsworth's construction of an autobiographical persona can be compared to repeated readings of the self in a mirror: it seems as if Wordsworth knows that the mirror image lacks the third dimension, but is ignorant of the inversion the mirror produces. Wordsworth's reflection on the problems of memory and representation can be compared to his being aware of the lack of the third dimension of the mirror image. The inversion of the mirror is revealed in repetitions with a difference, as the literal is turned into the figural within and between the versions of the self.[5] In addition, Wordsworth's revisionary *reflections on* his autobiographical project display *reflections of* previous versions of the past. The figurative inversions of the past, however, may undermine his present intentions.

The gibbet-mast or Penrith Beacon episode describes a spot of time which epitomizes the problems of memory, representation, and revision. The "spots of time" passage immediately precedes the Penrith Beacon episode in all three major versions of 1799, 1805 and 1850. In the 1799 version, Wordsworth maintains that the "spots of time" regenerate the imaginative mind if it is impaired by "trivial occupations and the round of ordinary intercourse" (I, 291-2).

The subsequent example of the Penrith Beacon episode is about loss and recovery in a literal and in a figurative sense. During an outing on horseback as a small boy, Wordsworth loses his guide and his way. He comes to a place where a murderer was hanged. Time has obliterated all the traces of that event, but the fearful boy imaginatively apprehends the traces of a grave in the turf (J. Wordsworth 1995: 546): "Only a long green ridge of turf remained / Whose shape was like a grave" (1799: I, 311-12). Leaving that scene at the bottom of the hills, the boy invests an ordinary sight with "the visionary dreariness" (1799: I, 322) of loss, even if by now he seems to know where he is but still misses his "lost guide" to take him home (1799: I, 323). The lost boy gains visionary power.[6] The structure of this memory reflects Wordsworth's present desire to recover his lost imagination. His return to memory is to revive his imagination and to show him the way to poetic creation: the memorized events and the present situation seem to be specular reflections of each other. We cannot decide whether Wordsworth's present loss prompts his *recollection* of a past scene *associated* with loss or whether

4 Duncan Wu (1991: 8) maintains that it is difficult, if not impossible to ascertain Wordsworth's authorial intentions in the sixteen different versions of *The Prelude* up to 1832. Jonathan Wordsworth (1992: 20) even mentions seventeen distinct versions in the manuscripts, but limits his Penguin edition to the four versions of 1798, 1799, 1805, and 1850.

5 Simpson (1982: 142) correctly claims that Wordsworth's "figurings of the moment are always displaced, often painfully, into subsequent and ongoing refigurings."

6 Wolfson (1984: 922) writes that surprises and chances defy the boy's rational control but trigger his imaginative vision.

imagination creates the past as a parallel to the present: the past as a figurative mirror of the present is inseparably connected to the onlooker's gaze.

However, Wordsworth concedes that words cannot express his past visionary spirit, whereas the boy could imagine the past even if the literal traces of the dead were absent. Wordsworth's text can only trace the absence of the past living spirit and thus inverts the boy's living spirit in the face of absent traces of the past. Therefore, the Penrith Beacon episode illustrates Wordsworth's *Essays upon Epitaphs,* which are concerned with the writer's expression of deep emotions and his keeping the memory of the deceased alive in the "epitomized biography" (1974: 89) of the epitaph. The autobiographer traces in present letters his past self, which is literally absent. As the epitaph reminds us both of the mortality and the immortality of the deceased (Wordsworth 1974: 53), the autobiographical poem recalls both the absence of the past self and its presence in the autobiographer's mind. The *Essays Upon Epitaphs* juxtapose two models of representation: the vital embodiment of the writer's mind in the text and the deadening disconnection between ideas and words (ib. 84-85). The arbitrary working of words may evoke a "counter-spirit" (ib. 85), which subverts intended meanings. *The Prelude* illustrates this ambivalent theory of the text as a dis/embodiment of the mind because the subsequent revisions reveal inverse mirrorings of elements contained in previous versions.

In the 1805 version, Wordsworth anticipates the successful regeneration of his transitorily impaired mind immediately before the revised "spots of time" passage. He claims that due to the rejection of custom and due to the evidence of his past imaginative power, the transitory "degradation" (1805: XI, 242) of his mind had been overcome and that he was then as he is now "A sensitive, and a *creative* soul" (1805: XI, 256). Wordsworth expands the role of the creative mind in the "spots of time" passage and maintains his deepest feeling that the mind is "lord and master" over "outward sense" (1805: XI, 271). The revival of the imagination precedes and conceives the following description of the "spot of time" at the Penrith Beacon, which is supposed to achieve the restoration – a circular argument which was not so obvious in the 1799 version.[7]

In the 1805 revision of the "spots of time" passage, the *reflexive discourse on* the "spots of time" *reflects elements of* the Penrith Beacon episode in 1799. The literal mounting of the horse and the obliterated death of the murderer reappear as metaphors on the level of discourse: the "spots of time" relieve the *deadly* weight of customs and enable the self to *mount* (1805: XI, 259-67). These linguistic echoes point to the specular relationship between the previous story and the present discourse because they are repeated with an inverse meaning: the murderer's customary punishment by death is transformed into the revival of the self which is threatened by deadening customs.

The revision adds the monumental inscription of the murderer's name on the turf.

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7 Stoddard (1985: 18) realizes that the 1799 version of the "spots of time" passage stresses the impression on the passive senses, whereas the 1805 version constructs a receptive and creative self in Book XI. However, she is oblivious to the circularity of Wordsworth's argument. Whereas Brinkley (1981: 122) asserts that Wordsworth "was lost in imagination" as he composed the Simplon Pass scene in 1804, he neglects the loss *of* imagination indicated in the reflection after the Penrith Beacon episode.

The repeated retracing of the letters in the turf keeps them "fresh and visible" (1805: XI, 298). Wordsworth foregrounds the physical appearance of the letters since the author of the inscription remains as anonymous as the murderer, whose name and identity he does not reveal. As a figure of Wordsworth's revision, the repetition of the inscription suggests that he retraces the visible letters but cannot represent his invisible spirit. As the boy gazes without understanding at the writing, readers of Wordsworth's poem may not be able to understand the poetical autobiography.[8] Next to relating how the boy noticed the inscription on the turf without reading its meaning (Haney 1990: 539), Wordsworth repeats his suggestion that the writing of his memory lacks the visionary quality of the past, so that only he but nobody else can read the vision obliterated by the words. The words and their living spirit fall apart. Wordsworth's visionary imagination remains enclosed in his mind because it is inexpressible and so inaccessible to other readers.[9] In 1805, he can only repeat the 1799 statement of the absence of the vision from the poem. Wordsworth's gaze into the mirror, the self-reflexive reading of the text constitutes the autobiographical subject, whereas the text yields a different subject to other readers.

In 1805, Wordsworth adds a reference to his return to Penrith Beacon as a young man in love, which he first described in chronological order in the Book on Cambridge and the Alps (VI, 239-245). His happiness changes the aspect of the beacon. The present juxtaposition of the two memories enhances their difference: the "beacon on the lonely eminence" of 1799 (I, 325), and the "Border Beacon" of Book VI (242) are turned into "the melancholy beacon" (1805: XI, 321). The youth's happiness increases the impression of the child's sadness in the present memory of the adult: the present determines the quality of the vision of the past. Wordsworth claims that the different visionary perceptions of the place compound their power and strengthen his present imagination. Lindenberger asserts that we have to take into account "a mysterious and complex transfer of power" (1976, 154) between past and present experiences, but Wordsworth's following reflection on his present situation contradicts an empowerment by the past: in contrast to his self-confidence about the successful regeneration dis-

8 Anne Mellor pointed out to me that Wordsworth omits the murderer in the 1805 version, as the murderer effaced his wife; the murderer's body is in turn effaced by female nature, which even encroaches upon the epitaph; finally, Wordsworth displaces the epitaph and female nature by his poem. Critics ignore the specular function of the retraced letters, which mirror the process of revision and indicate the loss of its referential dimension. Jonathan Wordsworth (1979: 568) criticizes the added letters as distraction from what he calls the central aspect of that spot, the hopeful vision of the girl. McGhee stresses that Wordsworth omits the fact that the criminal murdered his wife in the versions of 1805 and 1850. He analyzes the scene in terms of Wordsworth's Oedipus complex: Accordingly, in his revisions Wordsworth represses his desire for his mother, which has been thwarted "by the threat of the execution and redirected onto a new object" (1986: 47), the girl with the pitcher. Chase also comments on the series of effacements of the murderer by the execution and of the execution by erosion (1986: 19). When she states that the ridge of turf and the epitaphic writing are the same residues of an effacement (1986: 20), she misses out the difference between the boy's imaginative reading of the ridge and his mere perception of the letters.

9 Rzepka (1986: 9) remarks that Wordsworth's desire for recognition by his readers complements his visionary solipsism.

played before the "spots of time" passage in the 1805 version, Wordsworth confesses that he is now lost, echoing the boy's loss of his guide. However, whereas the boy's loss induced his imaginative vision, the present feeling of loss impedes the recovery of his imaginative power.

In the version of 1799, Wordsworth's memory seemed unimpaired. He begins the Penrith Beacon episode with: "I remember well" (1799: I, 296), a statement cancelled in 1805. In the later version, Wordsworth hopes that *the text* makes up for his failing memory. But how could that be possible if the 1799 version already claims, and the 1805 version repeats, that the representation is deficient in visionary quality? Wordsworth rather stresses the improbability of restoration than its possibility. The "fountains" (Reed 1991: Ms. W, II, 303) of his power in childhood are changed into the much more pessimistic "hiding-places" (1805: XI, 345) of his power, which only *seem* to be accessible but disappear when he approaches: The regeneration of the lost self depends upon the re-vision of the past, but the recovery depends upon the strength of the present self, which is impaired: "from thyself it is that thou must give, / Else never canst receive" (1805: XI, 332-33). Wordsworth applies this rule of exchange to his own writing, stressing the aspect of giving by repeating the word twice: "I would give / While yet we may (as far as words can give) / A substance and a life to what I feel – / I would enshrine the spirit of the past / For future restoration" (1805, XI, 338-343). Thus, the recovery of the present self depends upon its ability to conceive the past in the first place. The modals "would", "may", "can" and again "would" reveal the desire for the self-reflexive constitution of subjectivity and the fear of its futility. The desire to give "a" substance and "a" life to his emotions through writing parallels the demand of the *Essays upon Epitaphs* to embody thought in language, but the indefinite articles also imply that the feelings are of a different quality outside of language, that they take on a different substance and life in language. In addition, Wordsworth's fading memory and imagination impede the *imaginative reading* of the text, which seemed to have made up for the *deficient writing* in 1799.

If memory, imagination and representation are defective, Wordsworth cannot retain the past and seems to be left with simply retracing his previous text, an echo of the retraced inscriptions on the turf. In retrospect, the scene of the inscription provides a mirror image of the worst case: Only the repeated words remain fresh, not their meanings or their spirit. Writer, reader and text become disconnected. If Wordsworth can no longer read the living spirit in his words, the gap between his present and his past self, the real and the represented self widens. Wordsworth's scepticism contradicts Lindenberger's optimistic claim that the repetition of visions "re-create and restore, by verbal means, a past order which can give substance to the future" (1976: 197). Hartman is nearer to the truth when he claims that Wordsworth's position hovers between doubt and hope of future restoration (1971: 218), although in this passage doubt predominates.

Echoes of the story in the discourse contradict Wordsworth's desire "to enshrine the spirit of the past for future restoration" (1805: XI, 341-42) because he can hardly recall, reimagine and represent his past visions.[10] The metaphor of the shrine for the

10 Bloom seems to misread Wordsworth when he attributes the function "to enshrine the spirit of the past / For future restoration" (1805: XI, 341-42) to the "spots of time", not to the text (1986: 21), since Wordsworth mentions the problems of representing the past in words.

spirit evokes associations to both the lost gibbet and the lost and inexpressible visionary quality: Shrines contain bone fragments of saints or splinters from the holy cross, physical remnants that are clearly obliterated in the case of the gibbet and the hanged murderer. The saint and cross invert the murderer and the gibbet, a fact which reveals the paradox that Wordsworth's attempts at secular salvation often focus on memories concerning loss and death.[11] The alleged traces of the past in shrines are of rather doubtful origin, but those believers are edified who attribute spiritual power to these remnants: they receive what they give. Echoes of the literal story invade the revisionary reflection. Superstitious as the villagers are who retrace the name of the murderer, Wordsworth retraces the words of his earlier inscription of the past in hope for secular salvation. If superstition keeps the spirit of the words alive, and Wordsworth has to give something before he can receive anything, then the meaning of the enshrined traces as well as the spiritual restoration become a matter of faith, or a mere figment of the reader's imagination: the restoration is a circular and self-referential movement.

Elements of discourse and story merge in the revision of 1805, which becomes more complex because its opposites of death and life, loss and restoration are less clearly separated but rather intertwined. The 1805 version inverts the movement from loss to restoration in the 1799 version. Wordsworth displays confidence in his present creativity before this "spot of time" but reverses his judgement after its description: Instead of reviving the self, the revision of the spot of time increases the awareness of the problems, complexities and the circularity (the giving and receiving) involved in the restoration of the self by re-writing the past. The 1805 version subverts its trust in the creative mind as lord and master over the senses. Instead, the apprehension of decay counteracts the hope for restoration.

The last revisions, published in 1850, create new problems in some cases where the old Wordsworth repeats passages written in his mid-thirties: Repetitions, which seem to assert identity, may stress the rift between the real and the textual self. The mutual specular substitution of the living autobiographer and his textual self (de Man 1979: 921) seems to be subverted. Wordsworth initially reasserts memory because he repeats the passage "I remember well" (1850: XII, 225) which had been cancelled in 1805, but omits the 1805 claim that his memory revealed a life full of beneficial visionary moments (1805: XI, 278). The last version suggests that the old Wordsworth does not remember as many visionary moments as before, but that he still recollects some of them distinctly.[12] However, the repetition of "I see by glimpses now; when age comes on, / May scarcely see at all" (1850, XII, 281-82) unsettles the reader's trust in referentiality, because now the old writer should be able to tell us whether he does or does not have visions any more: in this case, intratextual repetition suspends extra-textual reference.

Repetition is no longer a guarantee of stability but compounds the problem of representation and restoration. Wordsworth repeats that he can only receive what he has

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11 Wordsworth's repetitions of these memories could signify his inability to cope with the irrecoverable loss and absence of the dead and of the past.

12 Wordsworth now qualifies the assertion that the mind is the master over the senses: the "spots of time" only provide knowledge "to what point, and how, / The mind is lord and master" (1805: XI, 221-22) over mere sense impressions.

given. But how much could he or can he give? "I would give, / While yet we may, as far as words can give, / Substance and life to what I feel" (1850: XII, 282-4). The repetition of the modals in 1850 suggests that the desire to express his feelings has not yet been fulfilled, and since the considerable age of the writer gives more weight to the "While yet we may", the realization of his intent seems improbable. The 1839 addition of the "hope" (1850: XII, 285) to enshrine "the spirit of the Past / For future restoration" (285-6) unwittingly admits the failure of representation and of restoration, because if what Wordsworth hoped for in 1805 has not taken place by 1839, there is not much of a future left for him.[13] Instead of foreshadowing "another / Of these to me affecting incidents" (XI, 343) in 1805 after the Penrith Beacon episode, now Wordsworth promises "another of these memorials" (XII, 286-87). He turns his living memory into an epitaphic inscription, stressing the death of the past.

Wordsworth repeatedly conjoins the representation of his memory with different forms of memorials and echoes his *Essays upon Epitaphs*. These essays first juxtapose and then conflate the presence and the absence of the past in memory and representation: "qualities pass insensibly into their contraries, and things revolve upon each other" (Wordsworth 1974: 53). If we see Wordsworth's revisions of the Penrith Beacon episode in terms of the cognitive reflection *on* and inverse reflections *of* previous versions of his story, we can account for the complications and the contradictions of his versions. Inverse mirrorings transgress previously established oppositions and boundaries. Initially, Wordsworth establishes a contrast between the loss and the recovery of the past imagination, as well as the want of and the hope for a recovery of the present imagination by the past. These opposites become interdependent as the recovery of past visions seems to depend upon the recovery of the present imagination, and *vice versa*. Repetition with inversion turns *idem et alter*, present self and past self, spectator and mirror-image, into *idem in alter*.

Since both the successful recall of past visions and their adequate representation are called into question, the mutual substitution of the autobiographical self and its textual subject becomes problematic. Wordsworth becomes more sceptical about representation and foregrounds the dissociation of text and mind, so that his metaphor of the memorial in the last version suggests a desperate attempt to petrify memories against their inevitable loss. The epitaph in turn inversely echoes the transitory inscription on the turf, representing the revision, which unsettles the idea of a permanent monumental representation.

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13 The last version further questions the representation of the past. The boy's reaction to the inscription is changed: In 1805, the inscription indicated the place and gave a sense of direction to the boy, in 1839, the boy flees at seeing the letters, "Faltering and faint, and ignorant of the road" (XII, 246-7). On the level of the story, the sublime vision now includes the letters as well, increasing the boy's fear and motivating additionally his dreary vision of the pool. If we read the passage as a *mise en scène* of the present Wordsworth's situation, we could argue that his rereading and rewriting of the *Prelude* does not yield the meaning hoped for but reasserts his present loss. Parallel to the extension of the boy's sublime experience, the "radiance more divine" (1805: XI, 323) past memories give to new imaginative experiences, is now turned into a "radiance more sublime" (XII: 277) in 1839, withdrawing Christian associations and stressing the subjectivity of the experience.

The autobiographical substitution depends upon the interrelationship of the autobiographer's reflective gaze and his mirror-image, but it has to be qualified: The textual mirror reveals more than Wordsworth's cognitive gaze because the text, which cannot represent past visions, parallels the impaired imagination of the present writer, and because textual echoes subvert intentional statements. On the other hand, the introspective autobiographer's gaze recovers more than the deficient text can reveal because Wordsworth claims that he can re-envision the past at times. The image of the autobiographer is displayed and suspended within and between the versions, so that *The Prelude* can be read as a deficient and therefore adequate representation of the sublime mind, generating itself in an endless process of self-reflexive revisions, the origins of which, both in the past and in the present self, remain obscure: "we have traced the stream / From darkness and the very place of birth / In its blind cavern [...] from its progress have we drawn / The feeling of life endless, the great thought / By which we live, infinity and God" (1805: XIII, 172-184). Whereas Wordsworth is the only one who may fully recover the visions of his past, the imaginative readers of *The Prelude* may sense "the sublimity of intellectual power" (Wordsworth 1974: 61), which, according to the *Essays upon Epitaphs*, great literature is supposed to convey even after the death of their authors.

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