

THE CRISIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY:  
AUGUSTINE, ROUSSEAU, AND WORDSWORTH

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A Thesis  
presented to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School  
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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MAY 2008

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THE CRISIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY:

AUGUSTINE, ROUSSEAU, AND WORDSWORTH

presented by Tim Hayes, a candidate for the degree of Master of English Literature, and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Noah Heringman, David Read, Scott Cairns, Ilyana Karthas, and Dennis Trout for their help and encouragement during the long course of this project. It would not have been possible without them.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
INTRODUCTION .....	iv
Chapter	
1. AUGUSTINE.....	1
2. ROUSSEAU.....	25
3. WORDSWORTH.....	51
WORKS CITED.....	84

## INTRODUCTION: THE CRISIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The comparative study of texts that belong to the confessional genre is, I believe, a field of literary studies in which there remains a great deal of work to be done. Despite the contributions of journals like *a/b* and the growing number of volumes published in what is often called “autobiography studies,” there are still notable gaps in the critical literature. This project, which on the broadest level can be defined as a comparative study of Augustine’s *Confessions*, Rousseau’s *Confessions*, and Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, is an attempt to bridge one of those gaps.

I have chosen the authors and texts with which I will engage partly at the prompting of an alarmingly arbitrary critical muse, and partly as a result of some insights gleaned while reading M.H. Abrams’ classic, *Natural Supernaturalism*. It was Abrams who first put these three texts side-by-side under the general heading of “crisis autobiography,” and it is from his work that this project has its genesis (Abrams 87). The engaging second chapter of *Natural Supernaturalism* broaches the notion of “crisis” in autobiographical narrative and provides some intriguing (though brief) commentary on Augustine and Wordsworth, but strikes me as more of a gesture towards a possible area of study than a self-contained, exhaustive analysis. After all, Abrams’ primary interest lay elsewhere. But I see this project as taking up that strand of criticism and weaving it into something new.

During the course of my research, I discovered that there are remarkably few scholarly works that engage with both Augustine, Rousseau, and Wordsworth on a more than superficial level. Indeed, there is only one, full-length scholarly work that engages

with all three of these authors *as* autobiographers: Elizabeth de Mijolla's *Autobiographical Quests*.<sup>1</sup> Partly, it seems, this critical reticence results from the fact that such a project, in spanning some 1500 years, would inevitably defy the impulse to remain within clearly delineated professional specializations. But the number of works that self-consciously deal with the relationship between Rousseau's *Confessions* and Wordsworth's *Prelude* (works that could both be brought together under the imprecise aegis of "Romanticism") is also notably small. Aside from Eugene Stelzig's *The Romantic Subject in Autobiography* (and a few important, though little-read critical articles), the Rousseau-Wordsworth connection – in the context of autographic writing – has not been systematically addressed. Often the names "Augustine," "Rousseau," and "Wordsworth" appear within a single work, but the confessional strands that connect all three (and the inversions/disjunctions that mark them off from one another) have seldom been explored.

In undertaking a project such as this – that is to say, one which concerns itself with writers and texts from across a broad swath of history – I recognize that there are certain risks involved. If one concerns oneself primarily with ideas at the expense of historical context, then one is all too likely to construct an interesting, conceptual *wunderkammer* which is nevertheless a bad piece of criticism. One cannot, after all, treat the history of ideas without having an idea of history. Concomitantly, if the critic allows himself to be sucked entirely into the vortex of historical research, then he is likely not to

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<sup>1</sup> Though this book has been invaluable to my research, I feel that de Mijolla's treatment of Augustine is problematic. She uses Augustine's *Confessions* as a kind of rhetorical strawman. In her account, he stands in for the theistically grounded, classical, "mimetic" form of autographic writing. She opposes Montaigne, Rousseau, and Wordsworth to Augustine by emphasizing their "distinctly modern" explorations of personal "memory." This mimesis/memory antithesis structures her entire argument, but it relies upon an oversimplification of Augustine. This essay will attempt to complicate this treatment of Augustinian confession and, thereby, serve as a corrective to the simplistic binary that governs de Mijolla's study.

emerge (if ever) until years later – and still with a lingering feeling that historical certainty has not been achieved. History is infinitely dense, so one must learn to settle for provisional accounts – hints and guesses though they be. I have attempted to navigate squarely between this theoretical Scylla and Charybdis by focusing upon ideas (namely: autobiography, crisis, memory, authority, supplementation, and hybridity) but contextualizing them to the best of my ability within their specific, historical milieus. For example, I will not speak of Augustine and Wordsworth as contemporaries, though I am willing to trace certain lines of continuity (with an eye to rupture and discontinuity) in the *Confessions* and the *Prelude*.

Let us begin, then, with *crisis*. The word enters the English language in 1543 in the context of medical pathology and signifies “the turning-point of a disease for better or worse” (*OED*). It is instructive to keep this medical layer of meaning in mind in the context of the crisis autobiography, for often the authors with whom I am concerned pathologize past mental states and describe their personal development in terms of key, crisis moments. However, to return to etymology, the term “crisis” becomes more general over time and, by the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, is used indiscriminately to signify any kind of dramatic turning point in the progress of anything (*OED*). This is the passive meaning of crisis: the reaching of a turning point. There is also an active side of crisis; it derives from the original Greek root meaning “decision” or “discrimination.” Thus, one reaches a crisis point and must make a fatal decision which, in the medical (as well as the spiritual) context, could mean the difference between recovery and death. When I use the term crisis in this essay, I mean by it a turning point which necessitates a fatal decision.

What, then, is a “crisis autobiography”? Before leaping ahead, I will first attempt to sketch what I mean by the term “autobiography.” As I am well aware, this is dangerous ground (if, that is, there is any ground upon which to stand); it has been called, “variously, the ‘unruly’ genre, the ‘restless’ genre, ‘the most elusive of literary documents’ (Abbot 598). As James Olney has observed regarding autobiography, “one always feels that there is a great and present danger that the subject will slip away altogether, that it will vanish into thinnest air, leaving behind the perception that there is no such creature as autobiography” (3). Partly, this sense of “elusiveness,” this critical anxiety over the protean subject “slipping away,” derives from the formal multiplicity of autobiographies themselves (consider, for instance, what it means to argue that the *Prelude* belongs to the same literary category as either of the *Confessions*); largely, however, the problematic nature of autobiography is the result of a basic imprecision in the critical language.

In his essay, “Autobiography, Autography, Fiction: Groundwork for a Taxonomy of Textual Categories,” H. Porter Abbot has provided a valuable tool for clarifying the critical discourse on autobiography. His most valuable insight is that autobiography should be treated not as a *genre*, but as a *mode* of narrative (Abbot 611). Within this framework, the genre is the confession, the narrative mode is autobiography, and the textual attitude definitive of such works is described as “autographic.” Abbot contends that “autographical acts are distinguished by a proposed identity of writer and subject. This proposal cancels the fictional act and ties the narrative to time and this life. In this way, autography is immediately contextualized” (Abbot 609). In effect, autographic writing has an ontology different from both fictional and factual writing: the very nature

of the autographic act forbids anything like fictive closure because the author (who is supposed to be identical to the represented self of the autobiography) is still alive, still changing. Any gesture towards closure in autobiography is doomed to failure by the continued existence of the authorial self. The identity which autobiography seeks to express “is always blurred, for the narrative can only bring the autobiographer to that continual ‘passing’ in which he writes” (Abbot 609).

Like Abbot, I conceive of autobiography as a mode of confession defined by the autographic impulse to close the ontological gap between writer and subject. As such, autobiography will always remain incomplete because the disjunction between writer and subject is – in principle – beyond closure. Though an autobiographer may seek to impose a fictive finality onto a life which is still in-the-making (and though some readers may be willing to accept this finality as definitive), we must remember that the autographic project is always incomplete because (unless the author is capable of arresting time) the life escapes each version of the life and the ontological gap remains. But this failure sheds light on one of the most fascinating features of confessional writing: it is a genre defined by an irreducible and inescapable *anxiety*.

By anxiety I mean “uneasiness or trouble of mind before some uncertain event” (*OED*). In the context of confessional writing, the “uncertain event” is the unfolding of future time: the evanescence of the moment of confession, the impossibility of articulating a definitive, totalizing version of the self. The autographic impulse seeks an impossible identity between writer and subject, and the perpetual distance which remains between one and the other is one cause of this confessional anxiety. This anxiety is the motivation for Rousseau’s famous conflation of self and subject: “no one can judge until

after they have *read me*” [italics mine] (5). Another cause of this anxiety arises from the troublesome insufficiency of memory. As Wordsworth famously articulates the problem within the *Prelude*:

Of these and other kindred notices  
I cannot say what portion is in truth  
The naked recollection of that time,  
And what may rather have been called to life  
By after-meditation. (*Prelude* 1805 645-649)

The dilemma here is that, in order to construct a version of the self “in all its truth” (Rousseau 3), one would need access to “the naked recollection” of the past – but memory is notorious for its distortions. Not only is the self unfolding in time (rendering autographic finality impossible), but the memory is limited and prone to distortion (rendering autobiographical authority problematic).

In all three of the texts with which I will engage, memory is a site of both interest and anxiety. In Augustine’s *Confessions*, there is a great deal of space dedicated to the concept of memory; however, his overall account bears at its heart an indissoluble tension. He seems unable to decide whether memory should be conceived of as a “vast storehouse” of passive memory-contents, or a “cloister” in which memories play a more active role. Rousseau, on the other hand, oscillates between a purgative view of memory (in which the traumatic past is inscribed in order to be forgotten) and a compensatory view of memory (in which the romanticized past is inscribed in order to be held before the mind’s eye as a boon). In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth allows the associative and non-linear logic of memory to define the circuitous structure of the poem itself. However, he

too is anxious about the distortions of memory: the way in which “naked recollection” is obscured by “after-meditation.” Despite this anxiety, Wordsworth, through his “Spots of Time” theory, ultimately valorizes memory in a way which is significantly different from either of the other writers. However, none of these writers is entirely at ease with this protean phenomenon, and the need to articulate a “theory of memory” arises from this basic uneasiness.

To complicate matters further, the position of the authorial self in autobiography is always metastable.<sup>2</sup> The self defines itself against both the imagined other as contemporary and the imagined other as tradition. For instance, the Wordsworth of the 1805 *Prelude* defines himself against both proponents of Enlightenment scientism, political conservatives, and the city (conceived as a dark inversion of nature), and against the prominent figures in English poetry: Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton. Of the poets, it is Milton with whom Wordsworth is in closest dialogue throughout the *Prelude*; Milton is the strong poet (to borrow Bloom’s vocabulary), the overbearing other, the angel with whom Wordsworth must wrestle for the bard’s mantle. The process at work in autobiography is a dual-othering: the narrative of the self always implies opposition both to the contemporary scene (as other) and the resident ghosts of tradition (as other). It is this tension that shapes the self-narrative – perhaps even constitutes the self as a figure against a ground of negations. The autobiographer occupies a metastable space between the historical present and the historical past. Unable to give the self over to either without being absorbed, the self-writer is defined by a complex and thoroughgoing

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<sup>2</sup> I borrow this term from Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, where he uses it to discuss the dynamics of a consciousness in bad-faith.

anxiety: “His grief is that his mother should feed on him, himself and what he saw” (Stevens 507).

Thus, the genre of confession is defined by anxiety and its characteristic features (in the context of the autobiographical mode) are a need for external supplementation and a tendency towards both formal and stylistic hybridity. Both tactics are coping strategies which attempt to alleviate the difficulties of the autobiographical project. The three texts with which I am primarily concerned all point towards external supplements in order to address the problem of autobiographical authority. In his *Confessions*, Augustine (who is the only author of the three I will examine who has a completed “holy book” as a supplement) grounds his authority in the Bible – in particular, *Genesis* and *Psalms*. Rousseau, in his *Confessions*, suggests time and again, “recasting this work, or at least adding to it the supplement I feel it so badly needs” (316). Similarly, Wordsworth justifies the *Prelude* in light of his own perpetually deferred, philosophical epic: *The Recluse*. In terms of hybridization, all three authors fuse and confuse both generic categories and stylistic strategies in their respective self-narratives. The impulse towards hybridization, I will contend, is basically alchemical: it is an attempt to create a more authoritative text through the fusion of elements of high and low literature. Augustine combines aspects of pagan “autobiography” (usually mimetic and abstract, rather than rooted in personal memory and idiosyncrasy) with an innovative style of self-revelation (intimate dialogue with God). Rousseau blends both generic categories (confessional, philosophical, historical) and stylistic modes (gothic, picaresque, pastoral) in a text which has often frustrated scholarly taxonomies. Wordsworth, too, blends the genres of poetry and confession, as well as the traditionally antithetical modes of lyric and epic poetry.

We are now in a better position to define the term “crisis autobiography.” The term has a dual meaning: it refers both to the autobiography of crisis (the narrative of a fatal “turning point” and decision) and the crisis of autobiography (the anxiety of a narrative mode which seeks closure and certainty despite the ontological impossibility of either). In this essay, I will use the term to refer to that mode of confessional writing which is concerned both with the narration of personal crisis and the crisis of personal narration.

To employ one of Abbot’s terms, this essay seeks to read Augustine, Rousseau, and Wordsworth both comparatively and *autographically*:

To read autographically is to ask of the text: How does this reveal the author? It is to set oneself analytically apart from the author in a project that often succeeds in spite of him.

Historical truth or falsity are important only insofar as they express the identity of the author. As it is always symptomatic, autography, unlike factual writing, is in this regard always true. (613)

One must be careful, however, to avoid the problematic notion that the critic somehow knows more about the autographic writer than the writer knows about himself. The critic, even as psychoanalyst, does not occupy a privileged position in relation to the text; that is to say, the critic cannot presume to offer an alternative, totalizing account of any autographic project. What the critic can do is to notice those rhetorical gestures within autographic writing which move towards closure and totality and to resist them through skeptical negation and analysis. For instance, an autographic reading of Augustine would resist the Augustinian rhetoric of “disinterested” objectivity through an appeal to the

political motivation of the text within its late-Roman historical context. The autographic reading focuses upon the dynamic relationship between confession and concealment in order to better understand both the motivation for and the meaning of a given, autographic project.

In this context, I will occasionally bring to bear insights drawn from Freud's psychoanalytic method (particularly in relation to his conception of the supplement and surrogate) and Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*. Since it is a complex, psychological anxiety which partly determines the formal characteristics of the crisis autobiography, these Freudian and Bloomian concepts will help to shed light upon the texts as historically and psychologically contextualized documents. Bloom's theory, applied to autographic writing in general (as opposed to poetry in specific) helps to explain the creative appropriations and (mis)readings in which Augustine, Rousseau, and Wordsworth all engage. Indeed, one can trace a genealogy of inversion that runs straight from Augustine to Wordsworth and which further validates the critical project of comparative analysis. Rousseau's project is, in part, as systematic inversion of the Augustinian confessional mode, while Wordsworth appropriates the Rousseauvian project of self-revelation both to critique and distance himself from Rousseau and to trace the progress of the development of the poet's mind.

The primary aim of the essay is to explore the ways in which all three authors cope with both the anxiety of self-definition and the anxiety of self-narrative within the mode of the crisis autobiography. The focus will be both historical and psychological, as the autobiographical act marks the moment of intersection of self and history. Through

this comparative analysis, I hope to contribute to the field of autobiographical studies and to clear up some of the generic and conceptual vagaries which trouble that discourse.

## CHAPTER 1: AUGUSTINE

Charles Taylor argues in *Sources of the Self*, his landmark work on the origin and development of the modern concept of identity, that “it was Augustine who introduced the inwardness of radical reflexivity and bequeathed it to the Western tradition of thought” (131). It is always a bold and dangerous move on a scholar’s part to assert that a given figure in intellectual history is the “origin” of a particular trend, for influence is difficult to measure and our knowledge (especially of the context of Classical literature) is woefully incomplete. One is tempted to ask: do “inwardness” and “radical reflexivity” really begin with Augustine?

Before attempting to address this difficult question, it is worth asking a more basic one: what does Taylor mean by the “inwardness of radical reflexivity?” This term refers primarily to Augustine’s innovative, epistemological method, which, directed towards certain knowledge, turns away from the “outwardness” of the world (the realm of becoming – history and time) towards the “inwardness” of the self (which at its deepest level corresponds to the realm of being – eternity and timelessness). For Augustine, God “is to be found in the intimacy of self-presence” (Taylor 134), so the inward turn is a necessary phase in the lifelong pilgrimage toward redemption and wisdom. In order to understand the workings of the spirit, one must look away from the world and towards the inwardness of the self. In short, Augustine “transfers the locus of the primary concern with evil from the providential history of mankind to the providential history of the individual self (Abrams 95). He concludes his *Confessions* with a clear statement of

this inward method, “we must knock at your door. Only then shall we receive what we ask and find what we seek; only then shall the door be opened to us” (347).

But this idea is not so revolutionary. Earlier thinkers had articulated this kind of unworldly self-contemplation long before Augustine. Consider, for instance, Augustine’s great Pagan influences: Plato and Plotinus. The basic, Platonic (and neo-Platonic) dualism between spirit and matter implies its own, requisite inwardness: one must look beyond the vanishing images of the material world (which are nothing but faulty replicas in the first place) and towards the subtle realm of ideal forms. The outward body is a passing thing as well, and only the immortal soul endures. If what Taylor means by “inwardness” is simply this privileging of self-contemplation over world-contemplation, then Plato beats Augustine to the punch by several centuries (and Plato is himself trumped by earlier philosophers).

There is, however, something truly unique about Augustine’s inwardness. One can feel the Platonic and neo-Platonic influences, but there is in the *Confessions* a new chord being struck, and it sounds unlike anything else in the Classical world. As Peter Brown reminds us, “we forget that a Late Roman man who first opened his copy of the *Confessions*, would have found them a startling book: traditional forms of literary expression, that he had taken for granted, would flow into it only to be transformed beyond recognition” (158-9). Biography, though a popular form in Late Antiquity, was a basically prescriptive genre which implied a set of pre-established conventions relating to how one should write a life. In short, recounted lives were expected to be exemplary (that is, simplified and polished so as to be impressive), and biographies were largely didactic. Even works with explicitly “autobiographical” content tended to be more

abstract and philosophical; consider for instance the famous *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius. In Aurelius' *Meditations*, we feel closer to the purified idea of a man than to what Yeats once called the "bundle of contradictions" that sits down at the breakfast table in the morning.

Augustine, for perhaps the first time in Western history, turns back (in text) upon the idiosyncratic self – that "bundle of contradictions" – and opens up the "vast storehouse of memory" to a new kind of analysis. This is the "radical reflexivity" of Augustine's brand of "inwardness," which makes the self (and here, "self" means more than the generalized self of Classical biography) a problem to itself. Where Aurelius offers maxims and pithy fragments of wisdom from an infinitely remote vantage, Augustine takes us into his personal memories – the theft of pears, the arrival in Carthage, the abandonment of Monica – and dares to speak of them, not exclusively as homilies pointing towards the divine will, but also as unique events in a human life which have left enduring traces. He provides not only a historical and allegorical interpretation of his life, but also (a much stranger thing) the outline of his emotional development: what he felt at what he saw. When he confesses that "I was lashed with the cruel, fiery rods of jealousy and suspicion, fear, anger, and quarrels," he is helping to develop a new form of self-narrative. As Peter Brown reminds us, "for a Late Roman man, it is precisely this intense, autobiographical vein in the *Confessions*, that sets it apart from the intellectual tradition to which Augustine belonged" (163).

It is precisely here that Augustine is unique, for he stands at the beginning of what would come to be that radically reflexive genre known as "confession," and also of its most contentious mode, autobiography. He is also the first to face the peculiar problems

which the genre entails: the protean nature of memory, the ontological gap between writer and subject, the dilemma of autographic authority, and the subsequent anxiety of self-narrative. Unlike later inheritors of the autobiographical tradition, however, Augustine stands upon what he considers to be an unassailably authoritative foundation: the Bible. As an authoritative supplement, the Bible helps Augustine to cope with the fundamental anxieties of his autographic project; however, it is important to remember that these problems *do* occur to him *as* problems. Although it is tempting to treat the *Confessions* as an untroubled, Classical forbear to modern autobiography, this is ultimately an oversimplification of both the text and the author. Elizabeth de Mijolla portrays the *Confessions* in this light in her *Autobiographical Quests*, when she asserts, “Truths assured – and the scriptural phrases, figures, and forms found for them – Augustine achieves what few autobiographers attempt: the complete explanation of a life” (45). I would contend, however, that to read the *Confessions* in this manner is to read them fictively rather than autographically: to overlook the gaps, omissions, and silences in favor of a fictive totality.

This is not to say, however, that it is not tempting to read the *Confessions* fictively. One of the most striking aspects of Augustine’s *Confessions*, especially for a modern reader, is the apparent self-assuredness with which the project is executed. Here we seem to find little of the anxiety of authorship that leads Rousseau in his *Confessions* to suggest time and again, “recasting this work, or at least adding to it the supplement I feel it so badly needs” (Rousseau 316). Also lacking is the fragmentariness of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, which is rife with lacunae and moves according to an associative logic that thematizes the troublesome insufficiency of memory. Augustine, on the other

hand, approaches his self-narrative with what seems to be a clear confidence both in the nature of his authority and the accuracy of his memory: the two requisites for the type of superficially unambiguous autobiography that he constructs. While Rousseau's and Wordsworth's narratives are riddled with complexities and silences, Augustine seems to offer a version of himself in full daylight, almost archetypal in the clarity of its outlines.

One might reasonably ask, aside from being separated by some fourteen centuries (a healthy chunk of time, to be certain), what accounts for this apparent difference? In short, it seems, the answer is "God." While Augustine thinks and acts within a Christian context in which God guarantees both the authority of the faithful and the transparency of memory, neither Rousseau nor Wordsworth (at least at the time of the 1799 or 1805 *Prelude*) share his certainty. For Augustine, the existence of God allows him to "act in truth, making my confession both in my heart before you and in this book before the many who will read it" (207), but this apparent simplicity masks a deeper, philosophical complexity (and an autographic anxiety which is deeper still). In order to understand the Apollonian architecture of Augustine's *Confessions*, it is necessary to examine more deeply the relationship between God and memory that makes this form of confessional literature possible.

The primary metaphors that govern Augustine's understanding of memory are spatial. In Book X, he first refers to memory as "a great field or a spacious palace, a storehouse for countless images of all kinds which are conveyed to it by the senses" (214). Clearly, Augustine conceives of memory as a passive "space" to which the fleeting moments of sensation are somehow carried and subsequently organized. What is interesting here is the revisionary element built into the prose: he first compares the

memory to a “great field,” which becomes a “spacious palace” and finally a “storehouse for countless images” (214). The movement is telling. The notion of a “great field” is unsettling because it implies a lack of closure – as if the memory were entirely unbounded and open. Thus, he shifts his metaphor to “a spacious palace,” which captures both the closure and exaltedness that he seeks; however, a palace is an active place whose “contents” (in this case, courtiers, royalty, etc.) are dynamic and self-willed. “A storehouse,” on the other hand, suggests a static space where items are packed away and organized according to some recognizable logic; furthermore, the contents of a storehouse remain in place unless reorganized by a human agent. This notion of a “great storehouse” (215) is probably the most accurate metaphor for Augustine’s version of memory; however, later in Book X, he continues to modify the equation, referring to “the vast cloisters of my memory” (215). Again, this image conveys his sense of the sacredness of memory but loses the essential qualities of passivity and static organization. Though the “great storehouse” model is the most accurate metaphor in terms of Augustine’s later treatment of memory, it is interesting to note his revisionary treatment of the idea. He names and renames memory like a dissatisfied Adam, unable to find the perfect word to represent the idea. Ultimately, the insufficiency of language revealed in this perpetual renaming points towards a distinctly modern insight: memory exceeds – and, in exceeding, deconstructs – our models of memory.

Augustine rejects an indeterminate or relativistic definition of memory because his epistemological model is absolute: “You have walked everywhere at my side, O Truth, teaching me what to seek and what to avoid, whenever I laid before you the things that I was able to see in this world below and asked you to counsel me” (248). In

Augustine's thought, nothing is allowed to remain shadowy or nebulous before the piercing light of divine revelation. Thus, Augustine offers something like a "great storehouse" model of memory:

When I use my memory, I ask it to produce whatever it is that I wish to remember. Some things it produces immediately; some are forthcoming only after a delay, as though they were being brought out from some inner hiding place; others come spilling from the memory, thrusting themselves upon us when what we want is something quite different, as much as to say 'Perhaps we are what you want to remember?' (214)

One would be hard-pressed to find a tidier version of memory in Western literature. In Augustine's model, memory is "a faculty of my soul" (216) which "I use . . . to produce" whatever in the memory is desired. There is occasionally a period of time which elapses between the act of will and the response of the desired memory-content, but there is no notion of resistance (whether it take the form of repression, obsession, neurosis, etc.) of which to speak. In Augustine, the memory is quiescent and transparent. Although some overeager memory-contents might "thrust themselves upon us" at the wrong moment, the mistake is basically good-natured (the inadvertent transgression of the humble servant). It is interesting to note, however, that this notion of memories which "thrust themselves upon us" suggests a "storehouse" whose contents are not quite static. Perhaps this is the reason for the "cloister" metaphor: the "contents" of a cloister (namely, monks) are passive before God's will and eager to please. By analogy, the memory (as cloister) would be the architectural space, and the contents of memory would be the monks who offer their services to the divine will (in this case, the will of each individual agent with a

memory). It is likely in this context that Augustine modifies his metaphor once again: “The power of the memory is prodigious, my God. It is a vast, immeasurable sanctuary” (216). Despite its prodigiousness, memory is obedient before the human will as the human will (when rightly comported) is obedient before the divine.

As Elizabeth de Mijolla contends, “this is an enviable orderliness in remembering. An orderliness to which a post-Freudian autobiographer would not lay claim” (Mijolla 20). In positing the possibility of dynamic psychic contents, Augustine moves in a current of thought that would later be explored more fully by Freud; however, through the metaphor of the cloister/sanctuary, he limits his insight and reduces it to a recognizable (and less problematic) paradigm. Indeed, for Augustine, who posits the absolute freedom of the human will as an answer to the metaphysical problem of the origin of evil in a universe governed by an omnibenevolent, omniscient, omnipotent God, the notion of a memory with a “will of its own” would throw an unwelcome cog in the machinery of agency. However, he is not blind to memory’s complexity:

Who can plumb its depths? And yet it is a faculty of my soul. Although it is part of my nature, I cannot understand all that I am. This means, then, that the mind is too narrow to contain itself entirely. But where is that part of it which it does not itself contain? Is it somewhere outside itself and not within it? How, then can it be part of it, if it is not contained in it?  
(216)

Here, Augustine is confronting problems which would (over a millennium later) lead Freud to posit the existence of the personal unconscious. Like much of his *Confessions*, the language here is considerably ahead of its time: “the mind is too narrow to contain

itself entirely.” This notion of a mind which somehow exceeds itself seems to prefigure the Freudian critique of unitary consciousness:

The unconscious system may . . . be compared to a large ante-room, in which the various mental excitations are crowding upon one another, like individual beings. Adjoining this is a second, smaller apartment, a sort of reception-room, in which consciousness resides. But on the threshold between the two there stands a personage with the office of door-keeper, who examines the various mental excitations, censors them, and denies them admittance to the reception-room when he disapproves of them.

*(General Introduction Freud 305)*

Within the Freudian paradigm, conscious awareness is only a “smaller apartment” attached to the “large ante-room” of the unconscious (which includes memory, the contents of which “are crowding upon one another, like individual beings”). When Augustine asks of memory, “But where is that part of it which it does not itself contain? Is it somewhere outside itself and not within it? How, then can it be part of it, if it is not contained in it?” (216), he is on the verge of a radically new model of consciousness but distrusts the implications of his basic insight. As a result, he falls back on wonderment and mystification: “I am lost in wonder when I consider this problem. It bewilders me” (216).

This bewilderment before a memory which seems to transcend the human capacity to model it, though left unexplored in the *Confessions*, remains present as a kind of seed-thought in Rousseau and Wordsworth for whom the Christian God is not offering such clear mandates. When the accuracy and validity of memory is no longer guaranteed

by an all-powerful, just, and benevolent God, the authority of the autobiographer becomes a problem (as does the basic egocentricity of the autobiographical project). Both Rousseau and Wordsworth attempt to address the problem of autobiographical authority through reference to external supplements (the unwritten *Recluse* for Wordsworth, and the unfinished Supplement of *Rousseau*) and through hybridization (elements of the Gothic, picaresque, pastoral and philosophical are fused – and confused – in Rousseau’s *Confessions*, while Wordsworth’s *Prelude* melds the seemingly mutually exclusive lyric and epic with the confessional tradition). Through fusion, the hybrid text attempts to achieve that of which no single genre seems capable, while the supplemental gesture defers questions of truth and authority to an ambiguous, external text (in short, a Biblical surrogate). What is present in Augustine as a seed blossoms into the mad, tangled tree of modern, confessional literature. Augustine himself is not beyond these problems; in fact, they seem to haunt his self-narrative as a kind of anxious undercurrent.

So what kind of narrative is Augustine’s *Confessions*? The short answer is that it is a narrative of personal and spiritual crisis and conversion which is self-consciously modeled after the Biblical archetype of Fall and Redemption. On a structural level, the first nine books comprise what modern readers would be more likely to identify as the “autobiographical” narrative, while the last four consist of a detailed and highly personalized exegesis of the first book of *Genesis*. Within the first nine books, there is an intricate and intentional symmetry; the narrative develops in a series of concentric rings (Trout 17). The first book treats Augustine’s birth, infancy, and early education, while book nine – its structural antithesis – relates Monica’s death and Augustine’s rebirth through baptism. Books two and eight share a similar, structural relation, as the former

deals with the notorious pear theft that seems to loom so large in Augustine's mind (as first conscious sin and the beginning of the "Fall" narrative), while the latter (and most famous book) details Augustine's famous conversion under the fig tree in Milan. Books three and four are parallel to six and seven: the first two outline Augustine's growing fascination (and eventual disillusionment) with Manicheism, while the later two trace his movement away from that embattled sect and towards Catholicism (via Ambrose, the Neo-Platonists, and Paul). Book five is the structural hinge where Augustine leaves Carthage (and his Manichean past) for Rome and a new life. I lay out this structural survey to emphasize the fact that the *Confessions* are nothing like "raw revelation of self"; the book is very carefully structured and the images/vignettes that Augustine chooses to relate all serve a larger purpose. A more difficult problem is determining exactly what that purpose is.

Part of the answer (and the more obvious part) is that the *Confessions* is a narrative of crisis and transformation. As Peter Brown contends, Augustine wrote the *Confessions* "in the spirit of a doctor committed only recently, and so all the more zealously, to a new form of treatment. In the first nine books, therefore, he will illustrate what happens when this treatment is not applied, how he had come to discover it, and, skipping a decade, he will demonstrate, in Book Ten, its continued application in the present" (170). Augustine himself seems to situate the book in this therapeutic context when he relates Monica's faith in his eventual conversion: "She had no doubt that I must pass through this condition, which would lead me from sickness to health, but not before I had surmounted a still graver danger, much like that which doctors call the crisis" (112). "This condition" is Augustine's youth, defined (in his own terms) as a phase of

delusional belief, violent lust, and sinfulness. The crisis moment, according to this reading, occurs in Book VIII during the famous conversion scene in the Milanese garden. Here, during a moment which Augustine describes as “a great storm [breaking] within me,” he asks of himself: “How long shall I go on saying ‘tomorrow, tomorrow’? Why not now? Why not make an end of my ugly sins at this moment?” (177). After prolonged inner turmoil, he hears what seem to be the voices of ghostly children calling, “Take it and read, take it and read”; at which point, he picks up a copy of *Paul’s Epistles* that has been sitting on his desk, reads the first passage he finds, and interprets the message (which is an exhortation away from worldly lusts and towards Jesus Christ) as a sign of divine grace. If we take this account at face value, this is the point at which the young Augustine knows what he must do, and the baptism in Book IX is the necessary consequence of his mystical insight. In any case, Book VIII is the crisis moment where the old Augustine dies and the new Augustine is born (to be followed shortly by the figurative death and rebirth in baptism). Books X through XIII then shift into a speculative mode of prayer which sheds light on the life of the soul of the new Bishop of Hippo.

That, at least, is how Augustine tells the story. And this is how the majority of Augustine’s biographers over the years have told the story as well. Even Peter Brown, whose landmark *Augustine of Hippo* has been invaluable to this project, seems to buy into this style of reading the *Confessions* – a style which I consider to be basically fictive. To read fictively is to attribute a kind of representational innocence to a text, and this is an especially dangerous decision in relation to autobiography. As H. Porter Abbot contends:

Innocence – in the sense of pure representation, disengaged from a life in progress – is only possible when texts are accorded a purely fictive (or purely factual) response. The autobiography of David Copperfield, for example, can be presumed innocent because David Copperfield did not exist. But all autobiographies, even those aspiring to the Pascal/Buckley ideal of an achieved life story, are corrupted by the present. (602)

Augustine, despite his claims to rebirth and transfiguration, is not exempt from this “corruption by the present” – the original sin of autobiography. What I propose is an autographic, rather than a fictive, reading of the *Confessions*: one which will take into account not only the text as it presents itself, but also the historical and psychological context of its composition. In this reading, I am indebted to the skeptical eye of James J. O’Donnell, whose *Augustine: A New Biography* has informed my interpretation of the *Confessions*.

Though a purely fictive reading is likely to interpret the *Confessions* as a narrative of personal crisis and transformation, an autographic reading would tend to see it also as a work of self-definition, self-defense, and self-promotion. One must first remember that, when Augustine began writing the *Confessions* in 396, he was not so far removed from his experience as an auditor among the Manichees. His authority was tenuous at best, and he was aware of the need to distance himself from his prior association with that sect (which had by then fallen into disfavor in the Roman world). One must also consider the fact that he was the new bishop of a minority, Catholic church in Hippo, a city in North Africa where the Donatists were the dominant Christian denomination. As O’Donnell contends,

We do not understand Augustine at this crucial point in his life unless we see that the central preoccupations of the *Confessions* are the Manichees, whom he seeks to dismiss before the work is one-third complete – and the Donatists, whom he never mentions. Between them he sets his own performance, an artful confession, exculpatory in the way public confession exculpates and justifies at the same time. (53)

In the *Confessions*, Augustine is engaged in that process of dual-othering which is the hallmark of autographic writing: he defines himself both against the Manichees (and by implication, his past life) and against the Donatists (the dominant representatives of religious life in Hippo). For the Manichees, Augustine reserves some of his most bitter invective; he refers to their religious tenets as “superstitious, soul-destroying fallacies” (75) and “the blasphemy of . . . false beliefs” (68). For the Donatists, he reserves an especially icy silence; he would take aim at Donatism once firmly established as bishop. It is against the ground of these negations that Augustine seeks to define his own identity; however, this desire leads to a kind of narrative distortion which a purely fictive reading would fail to catch.

The first, necessary distortion (at least in terms of Augustine’s project of self-definition) relates to his portrait of himself as a lascivious youth. Consider, for instance, the famous passage on his first trip to Carthage: “I went to Carthage, where I found myself in the midst of a hissing cauldron of lusts” (55). A little further on, he confesses to have “muddied the stream of friendship with the filth of lewdness and clouded its clear waters with hell’s black river of lust” (55). This rhetoric, while both lyrical and intense, must strike the skeptical ear as hyperbolic. Indeed, some of Augustine’s contemporaries

from this period paint a considerably different picture than that of a sensualist, driven by an almost pathological lust. Vicentius, a friend of Augustine's during his time at Carthage, recalls in an epistle a very different figure from the one Augustine presents in the *Confessions*: "When I knew you, you were far from being a Christian. Given over to your literary studies, you were steadfast in your pursuit of good behavior and high principles" (O'Donnell 46). Similarly, Secundius, an auditor of the Manichees with whom Augustine had associated in Rome, depicts (in a letter addressed to Augustine which attempts to persuade him to rejoin the Manichees) a temperate and austere youth: "You were a chaste man, pure and poor, but you went over to the barbarous tribes of the Jews and you fill your teaching with their silly fables" (O'Donnell 46). These competing versions of the young Augustine should at least render his self-representation in the *Confessions* suspect (though we must be careful not to give more weight to these perhaps equally fictive, ideologically motivated interpretations).

Why, though, does Augustine feel the need to cast himself in the role of the youthful hedonist? The answer is twofold: to reinforce the archetypal structure of the narrative he is weaving (a narrative grounded in the Biblical model of the Prodigal Son), and to attach the notion of *cupiditas*, or "inordinate desire," (which for Augustine is at the heart of all sin) to his Manichean period and, by implication, to the Manichees themselves. Both of these goals are essential to Augustine's project: the first answers to the Bloomian anxiety of influence, while the second serves his polemical impulse to define the self against a radicalized and debased other.

First, Augustine must define himself as a fallen sensualist in order for the Prodigal Son archetype to come through clearly. One must keep in mind that, in the Roman world

at the time of the *Confessions*' composition, a literary audience would have been more likely to recognize the Pagan archetype of Aeneas (that other famous voyage of return) than the Hebrew pattern of the Prodigal Son. Indeed, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Vergil's *Aeneid* is both a school text (Augustine himself admits to having studied it) and a repository of cultural traditions that predate primitive Christianity. Since a large part of Augustine's project consists of intentional, Christian self-definition, Aeneas (though common cultural property at the time) is the wrong archetype: he is a pagan icon who represents a set of values largely antithetical to those of incipient Catholicism. In Bloomian terms, Vergil is the great, classical forbear whom Augustine must supersede in order to progress (in this case, not as a poet, but as a Christian).

The authorial anxiety which results from the threatening gravity of the Vergilian epic leads Augustine to perform an act of *kenosis* in relation to the *Aeneid*. In the *Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom defines *kenosis* as "a breaking-device similar to the defense mechanisms our psyches employ against repetition compulsions . . . [it is] a movement towards discontinuity with the precursor" (14). In the *Confessions*, this act of self-differentiation takes the form of a revisionary critique of Augustine's own classical education which specifically targets the *Aeneid*. This is how Augustine introduces his childhood study of Vergil's classic:

Let me tell you, my God, how I squandered my brains you gave me on foolish delusions. I was set a task which troubled me greatly, for if I were successful, I might win some praise: if not, I was afraid of disgrace or a beating. I had to recite the speech of Juno, who was pained and angry because she could not prevent Aeneas from sailing to Italy. (37)

This outright dismissal of a text almost universally renowned in the Roman world is provocative to say the least; however, it becomes even more striking when one considers the fact that Augustine borrows this same archetype to narrate his departure for Rome (and his suggestive parting from Monica): “she would not go home without me and it was all I could do to persuade her to stay that night in a shrine dedicated to Saint Cyprian, not far from the ship. During the night, secretly, I sailed away, leaving her alone to her tears and prayers” (101). Surely Juno’s lines to Aeneas mean more to him than “a worthless crop of fruit, fit only for the birds to peck at” (38). Both Augustine’s departure from Carthage for Rome and his emotional parting from the reluctant beloved (in this case, a mother rather than a lover) parallel the famous plot of Vergil’s epic. How could a sensitive, classically literate author ask of the Juno passage in the *Aeneid*, one which bears such a striking resemblance to events in his own life: “What did all this matter to me, my God, my true Life? . . . Surely it was all so much smoke without fire?” (38).

This tension is the hallmark of *kenosis*, for the self-differentiating act, which casts the work of the great forebear in a negative light, never escapes the basic anxiety which renders it necessary. In Augustine’s eyes, this emptying out of classical authority is a necessary stage in elevating the Hebraic tradition (which was looked upon by the average, 4<sup>th</sup> century Roman as a slave tradition: sickly, strange, plebeian). Thus, if Augustine wants his Roman audience to accept his *Confessions* as a serious, literary work, to escape the Aenean paradigm in favor of that of the Prodigal Son, and to justify his own authority, he must first perform a work of interpretive sabotage (in short, *kenosis*). As Peter Brown observes,

It is not surprising that the *Confessions*, suffused as they are with a dramatic sense of God's interventions in Augustine's life, are studded with the language of the *Psalms*. This was, in itself, a startling literary innovation: for the first time, a work of self-conscious literary art had incorporated, (and most beautifully), the exotic jargon of the Christian communities." (168)

In order to supersede the classical forbear, Augustine must first draw into question the value of the Vergilian project, and then invert the classical hierarchy between the Pagan and Hebraic traditions. The first act is achieved through Bloomian *kenosis*, while the second is a stunning example of Nietzschean *ressentiment*. Ultimately, Augustine grafts this critique of his classical education onto the larger critique of his younger self: "But was it surprising that I was lured into these fruitless pastimes and wandered away from you, my God?" (38). The implication is that even his early scholarship is merely a part of the larger, Prodigal Son metanarrative; pagan Aeneas is superseded by the Judeo-Christian paradigm.

After this subtle work of revisionary criticism, Augustine links his early (mis)education to his experiences as an auditor among the Manichees. This portion of the *Confessions* marks the second notable instance of textual distortion; as O'Donnell contends, "Augustine in 397, telling the story of his Manichee years, had reason to minimize" (49). In order for the Prodigal Son narrative to remain true to itself (and to be sure that his claims to full Christian conversion are taken seriously), Augustine must retroactively interpret each earlier belief system as a more-or-less-exotic form of error. In relation to his Manichean stage, Augustine frequently depicts himself as a beast

consumed by some horrible desire (*cupiditas*, in his own language): “I did not blush to declare my blasphemies aloud and snarl at you like a dog. What, then, was the value to me of my intelligence . . . when in the doctrine of your love I was lost in the most hideous error and the vilest sacrilege?” (89). Elsewhere, he asks, “Was it any wonder that I, the unhappy sheep who strayed from your flock, impatient of your shepherding, became infected with a loathsome mange?” (57). If one were to take Augustine’s representation of his Manichean days at face value, they would seem like a youthful form of madness – serious, as any illness is, but relative to the larger narrative of his conversion, short-lived. As O’Donnell contends, “His narrative in the *Confessions* would have us believe that he quickly saw through the intellectual shallowness of the cult and lingered passively and curiously, finally drifting away to wait for something else to turn up” (48). One must struggle to recall that the sect which Augustine so thoroughly repudiates dominated his religious life and beliefs for nearly twelve years (from the age of nineteen until his appointment at Milan).

As the new bishop of an embattled, minority church in Hippo, this is probably not the story he would want to emphasize. In fact, it is exactly this Manichean narrative which returns to haunt him in later life when Julian of Eclanum, his great Pelagian nemesis, seizes upon it and claims that “Augustine, in ‘bellowing’ the doctrine of original sin in all its fantastic and disgusting ramifications, was merely recalling from memory the teachings he had imbibed from Mani” (Brown 386). Indeed, for most of his life, “Augustine would be surrounded by suspicions that he was still more or less a Manichee” (O’Donnell 49). The similarities between Augustine’s contentious doctrine of original sin and the Manichean theory of the origin of evil are undeniable. In this light, it only

makes sense that the *Confessions* could rightly be considered as an elaborate form of self-definition, self-defense, and self-promotion. By mitigating the significance of the Manichees through a structural condensation (which reduces twelve years of intimate engagement to two books), and through a rhetoric which constantly couches Manichean philosophy in terms of error, inordinate desire, and bestiality, Augustine attempts to put his own youth within parentheses as a mere vignette in the larger Christian narrative of conversion. Politically speaking, he does this both to clearly delineate his character and authority as bishop and to lay the groundwork for his attack on the Donatist Church, which (like Manichean philosophy) he considers to be “yet another aberration of ‘mere human custom’” (Brown 203). His icy silence towards Donatism in the *Confessions* is the eerie quiet before a siege.

But, as these revisionary tactics reveal, “for all that [the *Confessions*] is a testimony of faith and confidence, it is permeated with anxiety” (O’Donnell 36). As a young bishop in an ideologically embattled city in North Africa, a classically trained rhetorician seeking to underplay his own rootedness in pagan tradition, a long-time devotee of Mani not far removed from those beliefs and practices, and a Christian convert seeking to render his life intelligible both to himself, his congregation, and his enemies, Augustine (at the time of the *Confessions*) is an author with every right to be anxious. In addition to the revisionary self-history detailed above, Augustine also employs a kind of structural and stylistic hybridity that continues to baffle literary taxonomists to this day. As I have argued suggested, hybridization is a tactic used by authors of autographic texts to attain, through an alchemical fusion of literary genres and styles, the pure gold of authority.

From the very start, the *Confessions* is, by classical standards, a “startling book” (Brown 158). The first stylistic innovation takes the form of a notable absence: the book begins without preamble or explanation, and with a rhetorical question (which is actually an appropriation of *Psalms 144*): “Can any praise be worthy of the Lord’s majesty” (Augustine 21). This is idiosyncratic for several reasons. As James O’Donnell observes, “The book does not behave like well-mannered ancient prose. To do that, it should have a preface, it should tell us what it is about, it should tell us where it is going, and it does none of these things” (64). As a student of Cicero’s rhetoric and a contemporary, Roman man of letters, Augustine would have been well aware of the formal expectations of a scholarly, literary work. Thus, one can safely assume that he has chosen to eschew the conventional, Roman mode of exposition in favor of something radically different. What this “something” is becomes apparent from the content of that first sentence: an excerpt from the Old Testament of the Hebrews. At the time, this material would have been considered as a form of “low” literature (Augustine himself dismisses the Book of Isaiah, after first reading it, as muddled and incomprehensible), as opposed to the “high” philosophical and literary works of “legitimate,” Roman authors like Vergil and Cicero. By incorporating what Brown calls “the exotic jargon of the Christian communities” into a self-consciously literary work, Augustine enacts – from the very beginning – a stylistic coup that inverts the traditional, Hebrew/Roman value hierarchy and throws off the formal constraints of the Ciceronian prose essay.

Despite the lack of preface, one discovers, soon enough, that the book appears to be structured as an extended prayer – a sort of monologue addressing God, overheard by the reader. Around Chapter 7 of Book I, however, the mode changes from conventional

(though philosophically probing) prayer to a strange, speculative mode of autographic writing: “What sins, then, did I commit when I was a baby myself?” (27). Prayer was not an unprecedented structural form for a text at this time; in fact, it “was a recognized vehicle for speculative enquiry . . . The *Confessions* were to be read right through in this spirit. They were a prolonged exploration of the nature of God, written in the form of a prayer, to ‘stir up towards Him the intellect and feelings of men’” (Brown 159).

However, this interjection of the personal narrative, which develops into an intimate exploration of some representative “sins,” from childhood, adolescence and eventually adulthood, is unprecedented. Although it is intermittently interrupted by effusive moments of prayer, the personal narrative of development and conversion dominates the first nine books of the *Confessions*. Tellingly, the life seems to grow out of the prayer almost organically (as if the new life of the author necessitated a new form to do it justice). Though there had been works composed as philosophical prayers, and though some examples of Pagan autobiography exist, never had the two been wedded before in the same text – a text made even stranger by its idiosyncratic structure and “exotic jargon.”

The *Confessions* becomes even stranger when one considers the last four books. Despite the opening prayer, and the interspersed moments of Divine contemplation, the first nine books hold together as, more-or-less, the story of a life from infancy to a crisis point. Books IX to XIII, however, take the form of an unusual and in-depth exegesis of the first book of Genesis. It is, of course, appropriate that Augustine, the new bishop of Hippo, should turn his gaze to that book of beginnings (both to emphasize what the life of a converted Christian should look like – i.e. contemplation and praise – and to reinforce

his authority as a scholar of Biblical tradition). One gets the sense, reading those final four books, that Augustine is attempting to represent himself as somehow transformed, perhaps even transubstantiated. The picaresque, wandering, carnal Augustine of the first nine books is replaced by a disembodied, focused, and austere figure who feels confident enough in his own (God-given) intellectual prowess to conquer the problems of memory, space, time, and eternity. In these books, he is nowhere and everywhere: present as the voice of God in the garden. These final four books are an enactment of the transformation that has been prefigured since Book I, and which reaches its crisis point in Book VIII. There seems to be an inevitability to the structure, though it flies in the face of classical taste.

By the time one has finished the *Confessions*, the meaning of the text's strange hybridity comes into view. Augustine, that canny rhetorician, has melded prayer and autobiography, Christian jargon and classical technique, in order to create a text that is both familiar enough to be readable and unusual enough to be striking. The strangeness of the prefaceless first chapter would have forced the Roman reader to keep reading in search of an explanation (he would already have been implicated by the time of his discovery); the autobiographical section begins just soon enough (and seems familiar enough in terms of its narrativity and classical grounding) to appeal to a literate Roman; the personal narrative carries the reader along (through a mannered and strategic self-revelation) to the moment of crisis; then, the four books on Genesis reveal the transfigured soul on the other side of the "infinite Yes" of conversion. Thus, the hybridity of the text serves both to guarantee Augustine the authority of the Divine elect (by revealing his personal transformation and his exegetical powers), to silence those

who would accuse him of remaining a “closet-Manichee,” and to create an intoxicating literary concoction that might appeal to the Pagan and Christian alike. The *Confessions* is a work of self-definition, self-defense, and self-promotion, as well as a powerful tool for “winning souls” to the young Catholic church.

To consider the book in merely one or two of these contexts is to lose track of its complexity; the most common error (and the most tempting) is to read the book as “pure” autobiography (i.e. to read it fictively), but this approach is ultimately unsatisfying. To read it autographically, on the other hand, is to keep all of these contexts in mind, to open up the possible meanings of the text in its various contexts, rather than to demand a tidy (though false) totality. The *Confessions* is a difficult work by a complex author, and one must be careful not to simplify that which can only be damaged by simplification. To read autographically is to preserve that difficulty and complexity: not to judge or condemn the author for what is concealed or left unsaid in a given, autographic project, but to keep open the ontological gap between author and subject in order to see (though through a glass darkly) that elusive self which both composes and conceals.

## CHAPTER 2: ROUSSEAU

Like Augustine's *Confessions*, Rousseau's *Confessions* is a challenging and multivalent, autographic project that defies the critical impulse toward simplification and totality. As Leo Damrosch contends, "The *Confessions* are at once the record of a life, a recreation of its meaning, and an imaginative space in which the author found relief by recovering what it felt like to be his earlier self (Damrosch 434). But they are more than that. Like Augustine's *Confessions*, Rousseau's project is also an elaborate act of self-justification, self-defense, and self-promotion, embedded in a specific, historical context.

The crisis which inspires Rousseau's confessional project is essentially political, rather than spiritual. When, in 1764, Rousseau publishes his *Letters Written from the Mountain*, a biting critique of the political scene in contemporary Geneva, he draws down upon himself the wrath of conservatives all across Europe. The publication of *Julie* (1761), *The Social Contract* (1762) and *Emile* (1762) had already established his reputation as a contentious and incendiary intellectual celebrity, and he had made some powerful enemies – most significantly, Voltaire (who saw him as little more than a self-taught nuisance). Voltaire seized upon the resistance to *Letters Written from the Mountain* and published "a little eight-page pamphlet . . . that staggered Rousseau as nothing had ever done before" (Damrosch 390). Penned under a fictitious identity, the pamphlet was called *Sentiment of the Citizens*, and it revealed (though with a great deal of hyperbole and outright falsehood, calculated for rhetorical effect) a troubling truth: that Rousseau had given up all of his children by Therese (his life partner) into the care of the state. For an author who had presented himself both as a moral authority and an

expert on child-rearing, this was a damning revelation. As a result, a group of prominent, Protestant ministers organized a plot against Rousseau, which resulted in his expulsion from Motiers (in fact, he was chased from his home by an angry, stone-throwing mob). It is in this context that (after a brief stay at the Ile de Saint-Pierre) he flees with David Hume to England and eventually settles with Therese at Wootton, where he begins work on his *Confessions*.

Rousseau envisions the *Confessions* as a way of responding to his critics (both real and imagined); “to establish his integrity even while admitting his faults was now the motivating principle behind the autobiography he was planning to write” (Damrosch 392). One can discern from the very first page that he imagines the project as a kind of cosmic self-justification:

Assemble about me, Eternal Being, the numberless host of my fellow-men; let them hear my confessions, let them groan at my unworthiness, let them blush at my wretchedness. Let each of them, here on the steps of your throne, in turn reveal his heart with the same sincerity; and then let one of them say to you, if he dares: ‘*I was better than that man.*’

(Rousseau 5).

The high rhetoric and invocation of the “Eternal Being” (a rarity in Rousseau’s *Confessions*) are reminiscent of Augustine, whose primary mode of self-revelation is the extended prayer. But this does not feel like Christian prayer; indeed, one gets the sense that Rousseau is commanding the “Eternal Being” to do his bidding. The Baroque excessiveness of the self-representation calls Augustine to mind, but the focus of the confession is upon human witness (“let *them* hear . . . let *them* blush . . . let *them* groan”)

rather than divine witness. Also, the final judgment (i.e. the one that matters) is human rather than divine: “let one of them say to you, if he dares: ‘*I was better than that man.*’” Why, at the outset of a work that is conceived as a response to contemporary critics, would Rousseau focus his energies on troubling the Augustinian confessional discourse? I would argue that the choice is necessary in terms of his larger project which entails more than mere apologetics. As I will argue, Rousseau appropriates the Augustinian confessional tradition in order to invert its basic architecture and thereby invent a new form of confession, a new language of the self. In a canny act of revisionary, critical history, Rousseau – by insisting upon the radical innocence of human nature – both revises Augustine’s *Confessions* and moves the course of autographic writing in a new direction.

Before proceeding, it is necessary first to establish that Rousseau understands himself to be in critical dialogue with Augustine. In addition to the more complicated, tacit appropriations and revisions that this essay will explore, there is clear evidence that Rousseau continued, throughout the course of his autographic projects, to oppose himself explicitly to the Augustinian tradition. For instance, in his *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* – an autographic work which begins with a declaration of absolute, existential solitude: “I am now alone on earth, no longer having any brother, neighbor, friend, or society other than myself” (3) – Rousseau has not yet abandoned the ghost of Augustine. In what appears to be a monological passage in the “Second Walk,” Rousseau offers one of his many unambiguous indictments of the *ancien regime* that he believes to have conspired against him:

The accumulation of so many fortuitous circumstances, the elevation of all my cruelest enemies favored, so to speak, by fortune; all those who govern the State, all those who direct public opinion, all the people in official positions, all the men of influence, picked and culled as it were from among those who have some secret animosity against me in order to concur in the common plot; this universal agreement is too extraordinary to be purely fortuitous. (Rousseau 15)

However, after this sweeping (and notably paranoid) declaration, which seems at first like a monologue uttered in vacuum, it becomes clear that Rousseau has actually been engaging in a kind of dialogue: “This idea [the “fact” of the conspiracy], far from being cruel and rending to me, consoles me, calms me, and helps me to resign myself. I do not go as far as St. Augustine who would have consoled himself to be damned if such had been the will of his God” (15-16). Here, even after his abandonment of human society, Rousseau still self-consciously opposes himself to Augustine. In fact, he not only defines himself against Augustine, but he also claims to surpass him: “My resignation comes, it is true, from a less disinterested source, but one no less pure and to my mind, *more worthy* of the perfect Being whom I adore” [italics mine] (16). This project of self-distancing and revisionary critique of Augustinian confession undergirds Rousseau’s larger autographic project and informs the structure and argument of his *Confessions*.

Curiously, in Rousseau’s *Confessions*, a work which self-consciously appropriates Augustine’s title, Augustine himself is mentioned only once – and even that reference seems, at first glance, merely incidental (a kind of anecdotal afterthought). During his time as a (compulsory) neophyte at a Catholic church in Turin, the young Rousseau is

exposed to several of the Catholic church fathers by “a younger priest, who spoke with great eloquence, which is to say in very long sentences, and was as pleased with himself as any learned doctor could be” (Rousseau 64). The young priest attempts to overwhelm him with a dazzling array of “learned” references and elaborate casuistry, but Rousseau manages to hold his own because of his familiarity with Le Suer’s critical, Protestant work, *The History of Church and Empire*, which he “had almost learnt by heart” (63) when living with his father. It is in the context of this debate that Rousseau names Augustine:

He tried to demolish me with St. Augustine, St. Gregory, and the other Church Fathers, but discovered, to his amazement, that I handled them almost as deftly as he did himself; it was not that I had ever read them, nor perhaps had he; but I had retained many of the passages included in my Le Suer, and, as soon as he quoted one at me, rather than contesting his quotation, I would retaliate with another from the same Father, which often perplexed him greatly (64).

From the beginning, then, Rousseau encounters Augustine as an antagonistic authority; in this case, his words are wielded like a sword by a representative of civilization’s religious power structure (how fitting, then, that in an imposed-exile spurred on by Christian ministers, he should use his *Confessions* as a tool to subvert the authority of a prominent church father). Rousseau admits that he eventually loses the debate: the priest “prevailed in the end . . . because he was in a stronger position,” and “had been trained” in theological argument (64). However, this encounter with Augustine leaves a mark;

Rousseau sees him as a great forbear who must be overcome in order to avoid his own “demolition.”

Like Augustine’s account of Vergil in his *Confessions*, Rousseau’s version of Augustine takes the form of an anecdote of adolescent (mis)education. This is an attempt to appropriate the work of the great forbear in order to supersede him. Rousseau’s *Confessions* can be seen, at least in part, as a Bloomian act of *misprision*: a creative misreading, which suggests that Augustine’s *Confessions* “went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction” that the new work moves (Bloom 14). Indeed, while Rousseau appropriates many of Augustine’s famous tropes, themes, and ideas, he does so in order to offer a version of confession which is actually a radical inversion of its predecessor. This inversion proceeds on three levels: the biographical (dynamics of family drama), the tropical (conversion, prodigal son, expulsion from the garden), and the philosophical (two versions of confession, memory, and original sin/innocence).

The first aspect of this inversion relates to the basic dynamics of the family drama that structure the two *Confessions*. While Augustine’s narrative is dominated by an absent father (consider his gravitational attraction to various, male authority figures from Faustus the Manichee to Ambrose the Bishop and ultimately to God the Father), Rousseau’s autobiography centers around an absent mother, proceeds through a sequence of insufficient surrogates, and culminates in the rapturous embrace of “Mother Nature.”<sup>3</sup> This desire for a return to the “divine feminine” in Rousseau also informs the narrative structure of the *Confessions*, which, despite its apparently linear plot of decline, is

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<sup>3</sup> This “culmination,” however, is problematic. Rousseau’s narrative continues through its denouement and returns cyclically to the same thematic concerns (namely, the “conspiracy”) that dominate Part II.

complexly cyclical. While the narrative of the present seems to move continuously into darker territory, the work is also marked by an antithetical impulse to return to an imagined, paradisaical past. Unlike Augustine's strictly linear (masculine/phallogocentric) narrative of error, repentance, and conversion, Rousseau's narrative recalls the pattern of cyclical returning that Fitzgerald articulates at the end of the *Great Gatsby*: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (189). This being "borne back" takes the form of an intense nostalgia in Rousseau. While Augustine's narrative culminates in an unshakeable satisfaction (the attainment of the "divine supplement"), Rousseau's is a story of unfulfilled desire.

Rousseau's life, as he presents it in the *Confessions*, is inextricably tied up with the notion of the supplement. Indeed, one could argue that his *Confessions* reveal a man who has, from his earliest childhood, already defined himself in terms of lack and absence (that which requires supplementation). As he famously asserts, "I was born, weak and sickly; I cost my mother her life, and my birth was the first of my misfortunes" (Rousseau 7). In this brief phrase lie the kernels of Rousseau's self-narrative: the feelings of insurmountable weakness, unpayable debt, and unavoidable misfortune. These are the dark sisters who attend his cradle and who will later weave what he understands to be his destiny. What is striking about all three of these categories (weakness, debt, misfortune) is that they all imply a lack of something (strength, money, fortune); Rousseau understands himself as *that-which-requires-supplementation*: a song with lyrics missing. In the context of Freudian theory, this negative definition of self relates directly to the absence of the mother, for this absence constitutes the most primordial trauma of Rousseau's life and exerts an influence over all his future

relationships. Through an analysis of Rousseau's relationships with women, it becomes clear that his often baffling behavior is the manifestation of a subconscious masochism (which is itself the result of the guilt and shame associated with the death of his mother). *The Confessions* progress through supplementation, as Rousseau seeks to complete himself (to supplement the deeply felt lack) via one mother-figure after another.

As Freud asserts, "hardly anything is harder for a man than to give up a pleasure which he has once experienced. Actually, we can never give anything up: we only exchange one thing for another" ("Creative Writers" Freud 750). In other words, the long narrative of human existence unfolds according to the dialectic of loss and supplementation: "what appears to be a renunciation is really the formation of a substitute or surrogate" ("Creative Writers" Freud 750). In Rousseau's case, this dialectic is set in motion at the moment of birth; the death of his mother opens up a void that he will attempt (unsuccessfully) to fill for the rest of his life. Unlike Augustine, who in his *Confessions* never names a single woman other than Monica (even the mother of his child remains anonymous), Rousseau focuses explicitly upon his personal relationships with women (and spares very few details). The first female figure in Rousseau's life to play the role of mother is Mlle Lambercier, his tutor and caretaker at Bossey (where he is sent after his father's flight from Geneva). Rousseau states of her that she "felt for us the affection of a mother, so too she had a mother's authority, which she sometimes exerted to the point of inflicting common childhood punishments on us" (14). Thus, in Mlle Lambercier, Rousseau finds the fateful conjunction of his early impressions: a maternal female, who is both teacher and disciplinarian. In short, she is the perfect object for the young Rousseau's projections, and their relationship leaves

lasting marks on his psyche. The spankings that Mlle Lambercier seem to make the biggest impression: “Who would have believed that this ordinary form of childhood punishment, meted out to a boy of eight years by a young woman of thirty, should have decided my tastes, my desires, my passions, my whole self, for the rest of my life . . . ?” (Rousseau 15). Lambercier promises a kind of completion that the young Rousseau has never known. She is at once the supplement for the absent mother, the teacher (a role that had before been reserved for the father), and the punisher (who supplements his sense of guilt and allows for a kind of atonement, at once punitive and sensual). The combination is intoxicating, and seems to hint at the possibility of finding the perfect supplement. Rousseau himself confesses that “I devoured with ardent gaze all the beautiful women I encountered. My imagination returned to them again and again, but only to deploy them in its own way, and to make of each of them another Mlle de Lambercier” (Rousseau 15). But Lambercier herself is merely the first in a string of supplemental females who, despite Rousseau’s projections, fail to supplement.

After Rousseau’s departure from Bossey, his life is largely defined by a series of females: Mme de Warens, Zulietta, Therese, Mme d’Epinay, and the Comtesse d’Houdetot. A thorough analysis of each of these relationships would require a sizeable book in itself, so a summary will have to suffice. Of Mme de Warens, Rousseau asserts, “from her first word, her first look . . . [she] inspired in me not only the most tender attachment but the most perfect trust” (50). This immediate trust is largely a function of Rousseau’s projection; he needs a trustworthy, maternal figure and therefore he expects to find one wherever he looks. As he articulates it, “the most inextinguishable of my needs was . . . for an intimate companionship . . . The singular need was such that it could

not be satisfied by even the closest bodily union; what I needed were two souls in one body” (405). It is worth noting that “two souls in one body” is another way of describing the relationship between mother and child prior to birth. What Rousseau seeks, by this logic, is a return to the womb of absolute union, and he seeks this return in nearly every woman he encounters. This tendency becomes the most apparent when the objects of Rousseau’s projections deviate most dramatically from what he is seeking. For instance, in Venice he pursues a relationship with an eccentric courtesan named Zuletta. Just as he is about to physically “consummate” the relationship, he explains, “I felt a mortal chill course through my veins, my legs gave way, and, on the point of fainting, I sat down and wept like a child” (311). What he seeks is not the union of bodies but that of “souls,” and the intimate encounter with the physicality of the other only serves to remind him of separateness. Later, he projects his desires onto a young servant girl named Therese Le Vasseur, of whom he states, “In Therese I discovered the substitute I needed” (322). Though she remains his lifelong companion, his experience proves this statement untrue. When he is living alone with Therese at the Hermitage, he admits that “half disappointed in my expectations, and although I was leading a life that was to my taste, in a place of my choice, with a woman who was dear to me, I nevertheless started to feel almost lonely” (412). His quest for the perfect supplement always fails in the end; the absence he is trying to fill is too primordial.

While Augustine would have us believe that his conversion in Milan reunites him with the ultimate supplement (God the Father), Rousseau continues to carry around his loss like a cumbersome load of which he is only half aware. He stumbles again and again into the same types of relationships in search of the one ideal form that will complete the

self he perceives to be lacking. Tending to gravitate toward domineering (d'Epina) and distant (d'Houdetot) women, he searches in vain for the perfect supplement and ultimately, through his own conflicted desires, brings misery upon himself. After these numerous failures, while living at the Ile de Saint-Pierre with Therese, he finds a different kind of supplement: "At times, filled with emotion, I would cry aloud: 'O nature! O my mother! Here at least I am under your guardianship alone; no cunning or treacherous man can come between us here'" (630). In nature he finds something like the stable supplement that he has sought without success; alone in the presence of the "ravishing spectacle of nature" (629), he finds a measure of the solace that has eluded him for his whole life. This passage also constitutes a cunning inversion of Augustine's model of redemption. Whereas in Augustine, the essentially sinful creature must first confess his sins (though they are already known), be judged, and then forgiven by a transcendent, masculine God, Rousseau presents a narrative in which the essentially innocent (though socially corrupted) creature must confess his sins against his own nature (which is originally pure) in order to purge them (for no forgiveness is necessary) and be welcomed into the arms of an imminent Mother Nature. Ultimately, however, he is driven from the Ile de Saint-Pierre, and even this rapturous *unio-mystica* is revealed to be temporary. His need is more permanent than what assuages it.

As many critics have noted, this sense of existential lack and privation also informs Rousseau's notion of writing. Indeed, it is here that the language of supplementation becomes most intriguing. As Jacques Derrida has famously noted in *Of Grammatology*, Rousseau uses the same language to discuss both writing and masturbation. In his "Essay on the Origin of Language," Rousseau characterizes writing

as a kind of fallen speech; the history of script is a history of decline: “It becomes more regular and less passionate. It substitutes ideas for feelings. It no longer speaks to the heart but to reason” (Rousseau 16). In short, writing is cast as a “dangerous supplement.” In the *Confessions*, Rousseau uses the same language to discuss masturbation: “I had learned to use that dangerous substitution which defrauds nature and saves young men of my temperament from many disorders, but at the expense of their health, their strength, and sometimes their life itself” (106). In both cases, the “dangerous supplement” initiates a fall out of naturalness: “The supplement that ‘cheats’ maternal ‘nature’ operates as writing, and as writing it is dangerous to life . . . Just as writing opens the crisis of living speech in terms of its ‘image,’ its painting or its representation, so onanism announces the ruin of vitality in terms of imaginary seductions (Derrida 151). The project of writing, then, is always already a fall out of “maternal nature,” an unnatural supplement which “adds only to replace” (Derrida 145). This explains, in part, why the rapturous reunion marked by the exclamation, “O Nature! O my Mother!,” is short-lived (perhaps even illusory). The project of atonement through self-inscription is doomed to failure because writing is always already a falling away from the maternal nature that Rousseau seeks. Unlike Augustine, for whom writing is a divine tool allowing for both self-exploration, extended prayer, and the spread of the Christian religion, Rousseau is clearly ambivalent about his autographic project. Ironically, as Eugene Stelzig notes, “The dangerous supplement of the hyperactive erotic imagination that has undermined his natural self . . . has helped to make Rousseau the writer he is” (56).

This discussion of the “perpetual fall” that structures the *Confessions* leads into the second level of Rousseau’s revisionary critique of Augustine. This consists in his

appropriation of the inherited metanarratives that structure Augustine's work: the fall narrative, the prodigal son narrative, and the conversion narrative.

Although there is an always-already-fallenness implicit in Augustine's notion of original sin (wherein the fallen state is inherited through the blood of Adam and Eve), the first conscious sin depicted in his *Confessions* constitutes a willful fall and structures the narrative up until the moment of conversion in Milan. This "first fall," which takes place during Augustine's early adolescence, is commonly referred to as "the theft of pears": "I only picked them so that I might steal. For no sooner had I picked them than I threw them away, and tasted nothing in them but my own sin, which I relished and enjoyed" (Augustine 49). While Augustine confesses other sins during the course of his confession, he focuses upon none at greater length than this first; one gets the sense that, in Augustine's view, all later sins were implicit in this one (and even this first sin was implicit in his being a Son of Adam). For Augustine, there is only one Fall, and it has always already occurred. Rousseau, on the other hand, depicts his first "fall" as being the result of social injustice. He is *accused* of having stolen a comb by M. and Mlle.

Lamercier, but insists upon his innocence. No one believes him. As a result, he claims:

This is where the serene days of my childhood ended. Never again did I enjoy pure happiness, and even today I sense that my memories of childhood enchantment stop short at this moment. We lived there as we are told the first man did, when he was still in his earthly paradise but had ceased to enjoy it. (20)

But this early fall, despite (and partly because of) its inflated, Biblical rhetoric, proves unconvincing; Rousseau seems to fall perpetually. Rousseau's sexual encounter with

Mlle. Lambercier, the aqueduct fiasco, the theft of an asparagus and an apple, and the closing of the gates of Geneva “are each described as if they were the prime cause that led to his eviction from Eden” (Wright). Each of his failed, romantic relationships is couched in similar terms. Indeed, Rousseau continues to announce the inception of a fall as if he has forgotten that he has already announced it. Even at the start of Book XII (the final book) of his *Confessions*, Rousseau asserts, “This is where the works of darkness begin” (576). Though Rousseau narrates a multitude of falls, he always insists upon his essential innocence; Augustine, on the other hand, asserts that there was only one, primordial Fall, and that humans are always already guilty as a result.

The next phase of Rousseau’s tropical inversion consists in his reversal of the Prodigal Son narrative, which is essential to Augustine’s *Confessions*. As has already been discussed in the first chapter, Augustine puts a great deal of effort into reevaluating the Hebraic literary tradition and trying to make it palatable to the Roman intelligentsia of the late 4<sup>th</sup> century. In an attempt to render this “esoteric” discourse more familiar, he draws heavily upon the Prodigal Son archetype in the structure of his *Confessions*. The father from whom Augustine has strayed, of course, is God, while the gift that he has been given (and has subsequently squandered) is life itself (the opportunity for confession, repentance, and divine grace). In Rousseau’s *Confessions*, God is primarily a figure of speech used to rhetorical effect, so the only father is human – Genevese to be exact – and has not given the son (Rousseau) terribly much to begin with. Nevertheless, Rousseau admits to his “prodigality”; of money, he confesses, “what happens if a convenient and agreeable opportunity to spend it does arise? I take such full advantage of it that, before I know where I am, my purse is empty” (36-37). However, this

“prodigal” is not particularly concerned with his “vice”; he claims to be basically “disinterested” in money: “my prodigality . . . is mere indolence” (37). Indeed, Rousseau thinks that obsession with money is a kind of civilized pathology. Thus, in this version of the prodigal son narrative, the father has little to offer, the son is not concerned about his “sin,” and the son’s departure results in neither repentance nor cathartic return (in fact, Rousseau’s flight from his unpleasant apprenticeship is validated as a kind of necessity – his nature, he contends, cannot tolerate tyranny). Rousseau, the prodigal son, justifies both his “prodigality” and his departure in terms of social and psychological necessity. He does not feel that he has sinned; whereas Augustine, on the other hand, feels that, until his conversion (the prodigal’s return), his whole life has been constituted by nothing but sin.

The third phase of Rousseau’s tropical inversion lies in his ironic parody of Augustine’s conversion narrative itself. The crisis moment in Augustine’s *Confessions* occurs under a fig tree in Milan. In a state of internal turmoil which he describes as “a great storm,” Augustine, “utterly bewildered,” throws himself down, tears streaming from his eyes, and cries, “How long shall I go on saying ‘tomorrow, tomorrow’? Why not now? Why not make an end of my ugly sins at this moment?” (177). Famously, at that moment, he hears the voices of children singing “Take it and read,” interprets this as divine providence, opens the Bible and reads a passage which (in his version of the story) changes his life. He experiences a moment of illumination: “For an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled” (178). He confides in his friend Alypius, who is likewise moved to convert to Christianity. As Augustine tells the story, this is the

conversion moment at which his life changes forever for the better. Rousseau, on the other hand, narrates a kind of conversion fiasco. In the summer of 1749, he is walking to Vincennes to visit his friend, Diderot, who had recently been imprisoned for his *Letters on the Blind*. On the way, “overcome by heat and fatigue,” he would stretch out under the inadequate shade of the roadside trees and read from a copy of the *Mercure de France* (a French magazine) which he had brought with him. During one of his “rests,” Rousseau reads an ad for an essay contest sponsored by the Academy of Dijon; the theme question asks: “Has the progress of the sciences and the arts contributed to the corruption or the purification of morals?” (342). Here, under a tree, like Augustine, Rousseau experiences a kind of illumination (which would lead to his prize-winning *Discourse*): “The moment I read these words I saw another universe and became another man” (342). Interestingly, though, the vision brings on “a great storm” rather than curing it; Rousseau claims, “when I arrived in Vincennes I was in a state of agitation bordering on delirium” (342). He confides his revelation in Diderot (a poor Alypius, indeed), who urges him to enter the competition. As a result of this vision and Diderot’s subsequent advice, Rousseau achieves intellectual notoriety, a measure of status, and – later on – a lifetime of trouble. As he puts it: “The whole of the rest of my life and all my misfortunes were the inevitable effect of this moment of aberration” (342). In short, Augustine presents his conversion moment as the turning point in a divine comedy, while Rousseau presents his as the turning point in a secular tragedy.

The final level of Rousseau’s sweeping revision of Augustine is philosophical; he offers new concepts of confession, sin, and memory that simultaneously critique basic,

establishment ideologies and justify his own past to a public that had literally hounded him from his home.

If, as Peter Brown argues, “*Confessio* meant, for Augustine, ‘accusation of oneself; praise of God’” (169), then, for Rousseau, it means something like “accusation of others; praise of oneself.” This is not an exaggeration. In Rousseau’s *Confessions*, even the most apparently heinous actions are justified, and the veil of guilt which darkens Augustine’s outlook is lifted. Instead of damning his past mistakes in light of a blanket concept like “Original Sin,” Rousseau contextualizes his questionable behavior and attempts to justify it in social and psychological terms. When this fails, he appeals to his own bafflement: the opacity of himself to himself. His inimitable refrain runs, “there are times when I am so unlike myself that you might take me for another man with a character quite contrary to my own” (125). The implication is always that, though he might appear at times to be morally perverse, his “true nature” (126) remains essentially pure and self-consistent. Even of his decision to abandon his children to state care, he reasons: “since I had not the means to bring them up myself, in ensuring that they became labourers and peasants rather than adventurers, I believed that I was acting as a true citizen and father, and I looked upon myself as a member of Plato’s republic” (348). This, essentially, is his direct response to Voltaire’s polemic: he claims to have genuinely believed that his choice(s) were for the best, given his situation. The implication is that society made his decision necessary and then condemned him, unjustly, for acting out of that necessity. This is a standard move in Rousseau: the burden of guilt is shifted from the self and either placed onto others or onto an abstract, impersonal social order.

This move makes sense in terms of Rousseau's skepticism towards the Augustinian notion of Original Sin. In his *Confessions*, Rousseau applies a metaphysical principle which he states most clearly in *Emile*:

God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil. He forces one soil to yield the products of another, one tree to bear another's fruit. He confuses and confounds time, place, and natural conditions. He mutilates his dog, his horse, and his slave. He destroys and defaces all things; he loves all that is deformed and monstrous; he will have nothing as nature made it, not even man himself, who must learn his paces like a saddle-horse, and be shaped by his master's taste like trees in his garden. (*Em.* 5)

In short, Rousseau asserts that all things are essentially good insofar as they are made by "nature," which he tellingly conflates with "God." The essence of reality is pure, but human artifice has corrupted this original purity. However, in Rousseau's view, this inauthentic mode of human existence (in which man "destroys and defaces all things") is not the result of some primordial, extratemporal fall, the consequences of which are passed down from generation to generation in the blood. This inauthenticity cannot be characterized as "divine punishment"; in Rousseau's philosophy, it has come about through historical, all-too-human decisions and is sustained by a kind of institutionalized inertia. Unlike Augustine, who claims that "no man is free from sin, not even a child who has lived only one day on earth" (27), Rousseau asserts of his own childhood, "never was it necessary either to discourage in me or to indulge any of those fanciful whims which are generally attributed to nature, and which are entirely the product of

upbringing” (10). Equally the “product of upbringing” is the enforced sense of guilt which Augustine finds “natural” and believes to be sent from God. Rousseau, when writing of his failed apprenticeship, details the brutal process of acculturation by which society attempts to propagate guilt-consciousness: “I had soon had so many beatings that I became less fearful: I saw them in the end as a sort of compensation for what I stole, which gave me the right to go on doing it . . . I decided that stealing and being beaten went together and constituted in some sense a contract” (33). Institutionalized religions use the notion of hell and “eternal torment” much like the master uses physical beatings: to control human behavior through fear. In Rousseau’s thought, it is this attempt to control wild nature which brings evil into the world. Nature is good (this includes original, human nature), and all of its products are equally good; society (as it is currently constituted) is evil and its baleful influence corrupts everything it touches. This is the essential insight which Rousseau experienced on the road to Vincennes, and, despite the trouble it causes him, he stays true to it (in principle, if not in fact) until his death.

The project of confession entails, for Rousseau, an attempt to regain that lost, originary “nature” by pressing memory to its breaking point. Rousseau claims, “This is one of those singular aspects of my memory which it is worth recording here . . . as soon as I consign its contents to paper, it fails me; and once I have written something down, I no longer remember it at all” (342). Thus, according to a kind of Platonic logic, to remember and to inscribe is to forget. This is a basically cathartic model of memory, and, though it seems unlikely at the factual level, one must consider the fact that this is

how Rousseau *chooses* to depict the process.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, his method of confession requires a capacious and systematic memory:

the undertaking I have embarked on, to reveal myself to [the reader] in my entirety, requires that nothing about me should remain hidden or obscure; I must be continually present to his gaze; he must follow me into all the aberrations of my heart, into every recess of my life; he must not lose sight of me for a moment, for fear that, finding in my story the least lacuna, the least void, and wondering to himself what I did during that time, he should accuse me of not wanting to reveal everything. (58)

The memory must, therefore, open up “every recess” of his life so as to leave not “the least lacuna, the least void.” The project, then, by Rousseau’s strange logic is to remember his life down to its smallest detail, to inscribe it, and therefore to forget it. An autobiography of this kind, “that contained the completed story of its author, would be accompanied by a spectral and solipsistic narrator confined entirely to the present—an amnesiac with no clear connection to the life that has just been told” (Wright). There is a kind of millennial impulse in this project: “To undo the damage brought about by an unmerited fall, to rid himself of a false and duplicitous history, Rousseau writes himself *out of his life*” (Wright). In so doing, he hopes to provide an indisputable, public record which both redeems his reputation and alleviates his own, remembered burden of unnatural and inauthentic behavior. He hopes, only after this purgative, confessional practice, to emerge into a new and radical innocence.

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<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note, here, that Rousseau’s version of self-writing implies a temporary self-forgetting which is, perhaps, dangerously similar to the *petit mal* resulting from that other “dangerous supplement.”

On some level, however, Rousseau seems to understand that this project is destined to fail. As a result, the *Confessions* is defined by a thoroughgoing sense of anxiety. On the one hand, he is extremely self-conscious about the insufficiency of his memory to the task at hand; on the other hand, he appeals constantly to an external supplement that would guarantee his autographic authority.

As Rousseau admits near the start of Part II, “My first part was written entirely from memory and so is no doubt full of mistakes. Since I am forced to write the second from memory too, I will probably make many more” (269). If the goal of the project is complete, mnemonic catharsis via systematic recollection and inscription, then the problem of the unremembered looms large. One cannot forget, in the purgative sense, what one cannot recall. This is, in short, the basic problem of Freudian repression – and the root of what he calls neurotic complexes (which, in Rousseau’s terms, would be the products of society rather than nature – Freud himself asserts that society makes individuals neurotic). In relation to traumatic memories, Rousseau contradicts his cathartic model of memory by arguing that “To remember them is to renew their bitterness . . . I avoid them as far as is possible, and I often succeed in this to the point of not being able to find them again when I need them” (269). Again, if to remember and inscribe is to forget, then to avoid remembering implies the preservation of the inauthentic self that is to-be-disposed-of. It is even more confusing, then, when Rousseau argues that this latter type of forgetfulness (which is really a mode of avoidance and denial) is “a consolation vouchsafed me by heaven in the midst of . . . woes” (269). Just after this assertion, he claims that pleasant memories are “the blessed counterweight to my terrified imagination” (269). The implication here is that to remember is to preserve

(in which case it seems unlikely that he would ever have written any of his pleasant memories down). This vacillation between two contradictory versions of memory is the hallmark of bad faith and rationalization. Perhaps Rousseau recognizes that his cathartic model of memory is flawed but is still unwilling to sacrifice the possibility of a rebirth into radical innocence through systematic, confessional writing.

In any case, Rousseau is obviously anxious about memory, and since his confessional project hinges on accurate recall, he feels that he needs some form of external supplementation to bolster his error-prone faculties. As a result, he refers incessantly to a “supplement” – a collection of corroborating documents both legal and personal – which he always names hypothetically: “if I ever compile one” (333). Rousseau intends for this “supplement” to prove the veracity of his self-narrative; it is a sort of Biblical surrogate: a secular, documentary record which bears witness and validates authority. While Augustine is able to ground his authority in the musical language of the *Psalms*, Rousseau (aware of his own incompleteness but lacking the theistic metanarrative) falls back on a text which does not exist (and is, therefore, irrefutable). Instead of appealing to the ineffable, he appeals to the non-existent. Both can ultimately be seen as rhetorical strategies which serve to simultaneously defer and offer a pseudo-answer to the question of authority.

As Rousseau’s paranoid anxiety increases, he associates the completion of this hypothetical “supplement” with a paradisiacal future in which his reputation is secure:

But time presses hard on my heels, my spies are all around me; I am forced to perform in haste and badly a task that demands the leisure and the tranquility I lack. If ever providence, turning its eyes in my direction,

should at last procure me calmer days, I will devote them, if I can, to recasting this work, or at least to adding to it the supplement I feel it so badly needs. (316)

The phrase “recasting this work” is particularly telling because it suggests the discourse of sculpture – the vital clarity of carefully hewn stone. He seeks a fictive finality in which his entire life is laid bare, a monumental text accompanied by irrefutable footnotes and voluminous, documentary evidence; however, he recognizes the impossibility of this desire. He confesses in a footnote that this is “A project I have abandoned” (316). He eulogizes his failure obsessively: “I am in no position to trace these things back to the hand that set them in motion and, while stating facts, to assign causes” (576). And again: “it is impossible for me to introduce any order into the events of my narrative; I will henceforward be forced to arrange them haphazardly and as they occur to me” (586). And yet again: “it is impossible for me to introduce any order or continuity into such ideas . . . I can therefore only record separately and in isolation, as they present themselves to my mind” (614). The insufficiency of memory and the failure of the “supplement” combine with Rousseau’s political and personal trials to create an overwhelming anxiety which defines Book II of the *Confessions*. In the absence of any more effective alternative, he resorts (like Augustine, though with a greater desperation than Augustine) to an eccentric, stylistic hybridity in an attempt to achieve the “pure gold” of authority through experimental fusion.

Because the text is stylistically hybridized through and through, a couple, clear examples will have to stand in for the larger trend (a larger and more systematic study of hybridity in the *Confessions* would be an interesting and valuable project in itself).

Consider, first, the gothic style of the opening of Book XII: “This is where the work of darkness begins, in which for eight years I have found myself entombed without it being possible for me, however, I have gone about it, to penetrate their terrifying obscurity” (576). The language of the “tomb” and labyrinth dominate this autographic act; he casts himself as a lone wanderer in a vast, epistemological darkness. He pushes the gothic obsession with the tomb and ruin to a strange apotheosis: “the authors of *my ruin* have discovered the unimaginable art of making the public an accomplice to their plot” (576). Through an “unimaginable art,” the mysterious figures behind this (highly dubious) conspiracy have reduced Rousseau to a “ruin”: he is himself the trace, the decaying monument, the resonant signifier. He continues to sample the discourse of the gothic throughout Book XII because it lends rhetorical weight to what might otherwise be construed as “the air of someone who complains without reason” (576). There is an impressive gravitas to the gothic which Rousseau requires to lend authority to his own, elaborate complaints. However, he seems to be aware that the intensity of this form of self-description easily veers into absurd hyperbole, so he employs it only intermittently (and almost always when speaking of “the hidden machinations of [his] unseen persecutors” (637).

Rousseau employs the pastoral as a strategic, rhetorical counterbalance to this gothic gloom. Just prior to narrating his expulsion from the Ile de Saint-Pierre (one of the darker transitions in this hyperbolic narrative of “darkness”), he employs the pastoral discourse to balance his rhetorical excess:

I have always loved water passionately; the sight of it plunges me into a delicious reverie, which often, however, has no determinate object. I

never failed on rising, if the weather was fine, to hurry out on to the terrace and to breathe in the fresh and healthy morning air, and to scan with my eyes the horizon of that lovely lake whose shores, with the mountains that border it, enchanted my gaze. (628)

Here, Rousseau paints himself as the “happy shepherd” in a paradise of water, rock and air. This “delicious reverie” is the rhetorical antithesis of “the work of darkness” which begins the chapter and serves to reinforce Rousseau’s autographic project. The passage seems to ask a leading question: one capable of such joy and simplicity must surely be a child of nature, betrayed by the machinations of an evil society, no? This moving (though strategically rhetorical) passage then opens out into yet another stylistic permutation: prayer. Unlike Augustine, who derides the merely natural in favor of the supernatural, Rousseau finds in the vision of “nature” an inspiration to praise: “I find no homage worthier of the deity than the mute admiration which the contemplation of His works excites . . . Confined to my room, I pray less often and less fervently; but at the sight of a fine landscape, I feel moved without being able to say what by” (628-629). Here, Rousseau reveals what he thinks of as the essential joy of his “true nature,” and opposes it to the “confinement” of his room (also his “tomb” and “ruin”). Through this fusion of pastoral and prayer, Rousseau reveals the other, positive pole of his nature and attains a kind of authority through rhetorical balance and stylistic fusion.

This is the closest Rousseau comes to attaining the textual “supplement” which he requires. Ultimately, a sense of existential lack determines the very structure of the *Confessions*. The scope of the project is so vast because, as Rousseau himself admits, “To say what I have to say would require me to invent a new language as new as my

project; for what tone, what style could I adopt that would disentangle this vast chaos of sentiments, so diverse, so contradictory . . . ?” (647). One senses that he is never satisfied with the merely rhetorical authority which derives from hybridization; indeed, the book seems to explode into a plethora of styles, ranging from the picaresque to the philosophical and polemical. He attempts to fuse as many varying strands of discourse as he can into his one, larger autographic project (perhaps this is an attempt to supplement the lack of causal understanding which haunts him in Book II). The compulsion to repeat is telling here; it reveals a basic belief in the insufficiency of hybridity in establishing authority. He senses that what he wishes to express is unspeakable – that his language is insufficient to the task. In other words, for Rousseau, language itself needs a supplement, but he is unable to provide it. Rousseau’s life, defined by the dialectic of loss and an endless quest for an unobtainable supplement, is reflected in his *Confessions* as an almost pathological need for supplementation (both in terms of language and documentary proof). Perhaps this is part of the reason that Rousseau considered this work to be “the most secret history of [his] soul” (648).

### CHAPTER 3: WORDSWORTH

Although Harold Bloom has famously argued that Wordsworth's *Prelude* should be considered "an internalized epic written in creative competition to Milton" (*The Epic* 110), it is more fruitful in the context of autographic writing to situate the poem in "creative competition" with Rousseau. Indeed, as W.J.T. Mitchell asserts, the "comparative and antithetical" method of reading the *Confessions* and *The Prelude* "can proceed indefinitely, since there is no doubt that Wordsworth and Rousseau were writing within a common psychological vocabulary of sensation, feeling, memory, and imagination, and there is an endless supply of thematic and structural parallelism to be elaborated" (646). Out of this inexhaustible supply of potential, comparative points, I will focus primarily upon those aspects of Wordsworth's *Prelude* which reveal most clearly his creative (mis)reading of Rousseau (and for the purposes of this argument I will rely primarily upon the 1805 text, while referring on occasion to the 1850 revision). Unlike Rousseau's appropriation of Augustine's *Confessions*, Wordsworth's reading of Rousseau results in something closer to revision than inversion. While the two share a similar "psychological vocabulary" and engage with traditional, Augustinian confessional tropes, Wordsworth's *Prelude* redefines key terms in that vocabulary and revises those familiar tropes in an attempt to supersede the Rousseauvian method of self-narrative and assert a kind of autographic autonomy.

However, this dialogue with Rousseau's *Confessions* is submerged; it is a subtext which remains beneath the *Prelude*'s surface as a generative principle. Before exploring Wordsworth's revision of Rousseau, it is necessary to establish the stated purpose of the

project. The overt purpose of *The Prelude* is to present an autographic history of the “discipline / And consummation of the poet’s mind” (*Book XIII*, 270-271). In *Natural Supernaturalism*, M.H. Abrams has noted that the structure of *The Prelude* is essentially tripartite:

There is a process of mental development which, although at times suspended, remains a continuum; this process is violently broken by a crisis of apathy and despair; but the mind then recovers an integrity which, despite admitted losses, is represented as a level higher than the initial unity. (Abrams 77)

The initial “process of mental development” corresponds to the first eight books which “form a single movement, summed up in the title of Book Eight”: “Retrospect: Love of Nature Leading to Love of Mankind” (*The Epic Bloom* 119). The subsequent “crisis of apathy and despair” comes about due to Wordsworth’s involvement in the French Revolution and the eventual disappointment of his revolutionary hopes (this process is narrated in Books 9 and 10). Books 11 and 12 deal with the movement from the crisis of revolutionary failure (resulting in an “impairment” of imagination) to the restoration on a higher level of imaginative vitality. But to read *The Prelude* purely in this vein would be to read it fictively. The autographic reading I propose is more concerned with the inarticulate anxieties that drive the project and shape it (like Augustine’s and Rousseau’s *Confessions*) into an elaborate act of (anticipatory) self-justification, self-defense, and self-promotion.

The origin of *The Prelude* is essentially tied up with Wordsworth’s never-completed philosophical poem, *The Recluse*, and both owe a debt to Coleridge. As early

as 1798, Wordsworth had announced in a letter to James Tobin: “I have written 1300 lines of a poem in which I contrive to convey most of the knowledge of which I am possessed” (Gill 144). Five days later, Wordsworth had given the project a name: “*The Recluse: or, Views of Nature, Man, and Society*” (Gill 144). In an attempt to live up to the title of “philosopher-poet” that Coleridge had conferred upon him, Wordsworth set out “to synthesize humankind's philosophical, scientific, historical, and political knowledge and experience in poetry that would move people to realize on earth the Utopian vision confined for centuries to their hopes and dreams” (Darlington 4). As Wordsworth’s biographer, Stephen Gill notes, “The philosophical-poetical ambition so unguardedly disclosed affected Wordsworth’s sense of his identity as an artist” (Gill 144). Indeed, in 1798, with only the relatively unknown “Descriptive Sketches,” “An Evening Walk,” and *Lyrical Ballads* to his name, Wordsworth could only justify his poetic ambitions in light of a momentous, future work. However, in the face of the daunting task he had set for himself in *The Recluse*, he would retreat continually, unable to achieve his desired end.

This tension between the high ambition of Wordsworth’s announced project and his minimal progress towards its completion would eventually produce the crisis that inspired *The Prelude*. In 1799, Coleridge declared in a letter to Wordsworth,

I am anxiously eager to have you steadily employed on ‘The Recluse’ . . . .

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.'" (STC to WW, Sept. 1799)

This letter connects the crisis of the *Recluse* project to Wordsworth's earlier, revolutionary crisis; the poem which grows out of this connection is *The Prelude*, which begins in an attempt to resolve and integrate both crises simultaneously. The 1799 version of *The Prelude*, an extended, lyrical meditation upon the poet's development, is the result of this initial attempt; however, this early draft fails to tackle the failure of the Revolution. The 1805 revision of this early work is inspired, in part, by Coleridge's continued confidence:

I dare affirm that he [WW] will hereafter be admitted as the first & greatest philosophical Poet--the only man who has effected a compleat and constant synthesis of Thought & Feeling and combined them with Poetic Forms, with the music of pleasurable passion and with Imagination. . . . and I prophesy immortality to his *Recluse*, as the first & finest philosophical Poem, if only it be (as it undoubtedly will be) a Faithful Transcript of his own most august & innocent Life. (STC to Richard Sharp, 15 January 1804)

As Wordsworth continues to struggle with *The Recluse*, he finds himself thrown back again and again upon *The Prelude*. As a result, he comes to see the two as essentially related: "the two Works have the same kind of relation to each other . . . as the Anti-chapel has to the body of a gothic church" (*Preface to the Excursion*, 1814 pg. 535). He believes, however, that the basic egotism of *The Prelude* could never be justified "till

another work [*The Recluse*] has been written and published, of sufficient importance to justify me in giving my own history of the world” (WW to Sharp, 29 April 1804). This basic anxiety of authorship runs through *The Prelude* and explains, in part, the project of self-justification which runs through the poem.

Crucial to this project of self-justification is the self-distancing which Wordsworth enacts in relation to Rousseau. He boldly announces in *The Prelude*:

That poets, even as prophets, each with each  
Connected in a mighty scheme of truth,  
Have each for his peculiar dower a sense  
By which he is enabled to perceive  
Something unseen before. (Book XII 301-305)

The implication of this remarkable passage is that each poet (if he truly *is* a poet) has access to something entirely original, “Something unseen before.” Indeed, in Wordsworth’s eyes, this is the litmus test of the strong poet. It is in this context that he duels overtly with Milton, whom he identifies as the great forbear throughout the poem; however, the more intense (and therefore *muted*) rivalry is between Wordsworth and Rousseau. As W.J.T. Mitchell notes,

“Monuments in memory," "spots of time," the "sentiment of being," the recovery of childhood, the reverence for nature, the quest for moral perfection of the self, the love of simplicity, the vocation of retirement, the analysis of sensation and emotion, the love of walking, or reverie, idleness, and solitude, the love of love itself as a theme for elaboration, the egotism that turns the writer to autobiography, and the elaboration of

autobiography as a story of repeated "falls" into error, perplexity, and madness followed by redemptive states of calm assurance and transcendence – all these themes identify the *Confessions* with *The Prelude* (645-646).

It seems, then, that Rousseau has beaten Wordsworth to the punch – that his “Something unseen before” has not only been seen already, but documented (and well). How, then, does a poet who emphasizes the necessity of absolute originality address this difficulty? The answer seems to be this: through an elaborate revisionary project which appropriates and alters Rousseau’s basic tropes and key terms in order to recast them in an original form.

The most obvious act of appropriation relates to Wordsworth’s treatment of error: “All of the ‘errors’ Wordsworth confesses to are part of a providential pattern that brings him back to his true self, and all of them are meliorated versions of the notorious crimes of Rousseau” (Mitchell 657). While Rousseau confesses (without repentance) to multiple, seemingly random thefts (not only as a child or adolescent, but as a grown man), Wordsworth employs the theft-trope in order to reveal the intricate interplay between mind and nature. Consider, for instance, Rousseau’s glib confession: “No doubt I stole fruit, sweets, things to eat; but I never, just for the fun of it, did any harm or damage” (*Conf.* 10); this is a considerably different tone than Wordsworth adopts. In the justly famous “stolen-boat” sequence in Book I, Wordsworth narrates his temporary theft of a “shepherd’s boat”: “It was an act of stealth / And troubled pleasure. Nor without the voice / Of mountain-echoes did my boat move on” (388-390). However, instead of

justifying his “crime” in the style of Rousseau, he reveals the strange way in which nature seems to reprimand and correct him:

the huge cliff

Rose up between me and the stars, and still

With measured motion, like a living thing

Strode after me. With trembling hands I turned

And through the silent water stole my way

Back to the cavern of the willow-tree. (409-414).

Here, the “huge cliff,” like a monumental father, awakens his conscience and inspires a meek repentance. He confesses to carrying his guilt with him for days after the event: “In my thoughts there was a darkness” (420-421). More like Augustine in this instance than Rousseau, Wordsworth uses youthful error as an opportunity to reveal his ethical sensibility and to elaborate upon his theory of natural morality (as Augustine uses the “theft of pears” as an opportunity for a sermon on the vacuity of sin). This is an attempt to situate himself as a more authoritative, moralistic writer than Rousseau, whose reputation as a moral debaucher (though exaggerated) provides Wordsworth with a critical, rhetorical opening. This sequence also helps to establish Wordsworth as a “poet of Nature,” for his affinity with the “huge cliff” is what makes him sensitive to the mute reprimand.

Wordsworth enacts a comparable self-distancing in relation to Rousseau through his narrative of early, intellectual “apprenticeship” at Cambridge. Rousseau’s first apprenticeship as a watchmaker turns out rather badly: “Such was the tyranny of my master that, in the end, work I would otherwise have liked became intolerable, and I

acquired vices I would otherwise have hated, such as lying, laziness, and stealing” (*Conf.* 30). In short, Rousseau blames his vices on social circumstances and eventually flees without a reasonable alternative:

I was deserting a half-finished apprenticeship without knowing my craft well enough to earn my living; I was abandoning myself to the horrors of destitution without any means of escape from it; I was exposing myself, while still at the age of innocence and frailty, to all the temptations of vice and despair. (*Conf.* 44)

If one is not sympathetic to Rousseau’s justificatory narrative, then this episode seems to reveal a rather bad character who, out of a combination of laziness, incompetence, and irresponsibility, manages to squander his first and best opportunity to participate actively in human society (and perhaps earn a living for himself). On the other hand, Wordsworth paints a different image of his first apprenticeship; though he casts Cambridge as an inhospitable environment for one of his temperament, he manages to finish what he starts. Of Cambridge he writes:

Alas, such high commotion touched not me;  
No look was in these walls to put to shame  
My easy spirits, and discountenance  
Their light composure – far less to instil  
A calm resolve of mind, firmly addressed  
To puissant efforts. (Book III 349-354)

Like Rousseau, he seems at odds with his environment and unfitted to the type of labor he is expected to pursue. Unlike Rousseau, however, he continues,

Nor was this the blame  
Of others, but my own; I should in truth,  
As far as doth concern my single self,  
Misdeem most widely, lodging it elsewhere.  
For I, bred up in Nature's lap, was even  
As a spoiled child. (Book III 354-359)

There is a sense of guilt and self-reprimand here which is entirely foreign to Rousseau's self-conception. Indeed, Wordsworth, though not perhaps an exemplary student at Cambridge, finishes his intellectual apprenticeship, while Rousseau flees from his. Here, the rhetorical gesture distances Wordsworth from Rousseau, reveals a difference in temperament and a willingness, on Wordsworth's part, to claim responsibility for his own actions (rather than to project his own guilt onto others, or onto society in general, in the style of Rousseau).

These subtle, tropical revisions are too numerous to exhaust in an essay of this scope; however, there is one which cannot go unmentioned. Wordsworth believes that his role as poet is to serve as a kind of moral beacon in a benighted world, a prophet speaking out in the wilderness,

Of a new world – a world, too, that was fit  
To be transmitted and made visible  
To other eyes, as having for its base  
That whence our dignity originates,  
That which both gives it being, and maintains  
A balance, an ennobling interchange

Of action from within and from without:

The excellence, pure spirit, and best power,

Both of the object seen, and eye that sees. (Book XII 371-379)

His project of self-distancing and self-authorizing, then, is absolutely essential to his larger project, for only a moral authority could be taken seriously as a prophetic poet. Indeed, it is Rousseau's perceived immorality which, in part, leads to his disgrace; his greatest offense in the public mind consisted of "abandoning" his children to state care while, at the same time, holding forth in *Emile* and *The Social Contract* as an authority on early education, child-rearing, and social justice. If Wordsworth is to be taken seriously, and his vision of "a new world" is to be received with gratitude rather than skepticism, then he has to make sure his self-narrative is morally pristine. This means that he must find a way either to explain or to conceal both his involvement in the French Revolution and his relationship with Annette Vallon.

As Stephen Gill rightly asserts regarding Wordsworth, "his strongest instinct was to search for the continuity between past and present selves, to demonstrate an essential wholeness of being" (234). As such, he requires some method of integrating the dangerously disjunctive past (both political and personal) into a present scheme which both explains and edifies. For Wordsworth, the initial agent of self-integration is memory. He first engages with the notion of memory in relation to psychological integration in Book II of *The Prelude* while discussing his younger self:

A tranquilizing spirit presses now

On my corporeal frame, so wide appears

The vacancy between me and those days,

Which have yet such self-presence in my mind  
That sometimes when I think of them I seem  
Two consciousnesses – conscious of myself,  
And of some other being. (Book II 27-33)

In this passage, memory makes possible an association between “two consciousnesses” – one past, and one present. As David Bromwich argues, “the work of memory is to associate virtually separate selves and not to recollect the shadows of a self already unified” (Bromwich 149). Since human reality is always already temporal (and temporary), the self is always passing away and, to be integrated, moments of that past must be “recalled.” Memory makes this recollection possible and so allows the present mind to engage with its own past. However, it is significant, here, that Wordsworth experiences this encounter with his past self as a startling lacuna: “so wide appears / The vacancy between me and those days.” Memory alone cannot bridge the gap between self and self; however, in Wordsworth’s view, poetry (that text closest to textiles) can weave those divided but “self-present” strands into a single, continuous whole. While Rousseau despairs of this kind of self-integration, Wordsworth pursues it throughout the course of *The Prelude* – even, and especially, when the events recalled seem most discontinuous and problematic.

As Bloom argues, “Dominating *The Prelude* is the natural miracle of memory as an instrumentality by which the self is saved” (*The Epic* 121). This “natural miracle of memory” seems particularly miraculous in relation to Wordsworth’s integration of his French Revolution experience into the larger narrative of personal and poetic development. What is remarkable about Wordsworth’s version of the Revolution is that

he manages to convey the youthful spirit of revolution which inspired him in the early 1790s, but, at the same time, to modify his earlier view without the conventional bad-faith rationalization of the disillusioned idealist. To understand Wordsworth's complete dedication to the early ideals of the Revolution, one need only turn to his 1793 letter to Bishop Llandaff – a letter written, tellingly, after the execution of Louis XVI (a point at which many advocates began to doubt the direction of movement). Rebuffing Llandaff with all the vehemence of a young polemicist, Wordsworth writes:

You say: 'I fly with terror and abhorrence even from the altar of Liberty, when I see it stained with the blood of the aged, the innocent, the defenceless sex, of the ministers of religion, and of the faithful adherents of a fallen monarch.' What! have you so little knowledge of the nature of man as to be ignorant that a time of revolution is not the season of true Liberty? Alas, the obstinacy and perversion of man is such that she is too often obliged to borrow the very arms of Despotism to overthrow him.  
*(Apology 6).*

It is an impressive bit of self-narration and integration, then, when Wordsworth is able to transition from this Paineite view of the Revolution to its Burkean antithesis in 1805:

In France, the men who for their desperate ends  
Had plucked up mercy by the roots were glad  
Of this new enemy. Tyrants, strong before  
In devilish pleas, were ten times stronger now,

And thus beset with foes on every side,  
The goaded land waxed mad; the crimes of few  
Spread into madness of the many; blasts  
From hell came sanctified like airs from heaven. (Book X 306-314).

He writes this passage of 1793 (the year during which the British navy was readied for war with France) – the same year he had sent his vehemently pro-revolution letter to Llandaff. This change seems to be total, perhaps irreconcilable, but Wordsworth maintains his dedication to self-consistent self-narrative by treating (in the 1805 *Prelude*) his revolutionary period as a time of crisis and transformation.

Like Augustine and Rousseau, Wordsworth narrates this transitional period by employing the discourse of personal crisis. After the failure of the Revolution and Wordsworth's compensatory movement towards Godwinism, he confesses:

I lost  
All feeling of conviction, and, in fine,  
Sick, wearied out with contrarities,  
Yielded up moral questions in despair. (Book X 897-900)

This moment of “despair” is at odds with Wordsworth's habitually hopeful temperament and so stands out with particular vividness in the structure of the narrative. However, unlike Augustine (who negates the “sinful” self and turns to God) or Rousseau (who yields up causality and coherence in despair), Wordsworth turns to memory for salvation. Wordsworth revision of Rousseauvian memory is perhaps his most dramatic revisionary

movement in *The Prelude*. While Rousseau (as I have argued in the previous chapter) remembers in order to forget (the purgative model of memory), Wordsworth contends that memory can, on its own, heal and renovate the wounded self:

There are in our existence spots of time,  
Which with distinct preeminence retain  
A renovating virtue, whence, depressed  
By false opinion and contentious thought,  
Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight  
In trivial occupations and the round  
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds  
Are nourished and invisibly repaired. (Book XI 429-436)

This implies a kind of transpersonal aspect of memory, a deep well of being which flows up from its unknown source to “nourish” and “repair” the fragmented self. This model of memory makes salvation a function of recollection, remembering (in the literal sense of “a putting-back-together”). As Bromwich argues,

The discontinuity of self and world, for the political reasons here suggested, was bound to be felt with particular pathos by Wordsworth as the opportunities for juncture with his earlier aims were closed. The disruption could be partly healed by a growing sense of the continuity between moments linked in the history of a self – moments that, to a sympathetic mind, could seem to take on a substantial unity. (143)

*The Prelude* as a whole can be seen as an attempt to weave the apparently discordant elements of a life into such a “substantial unity” by fusing them with vividly remembered and vitally restorative “spots of time.”

However, there is at least one instance in *The Prelude* where the narrative becomes particularly “spotty,” and the integrating powers of poetry are put to the test. As Fitzgerald famously observes in *The Great Gatsby*, “The intimate revelations of young men, or at least the terms in which they express them, are usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions.” (Fitzgerald 6). This is perhaps even more accurate when the “young man” in question is particularly brilliant and sensitive, and when the “intimate revelation” involves psychic material of a highly volatile nature (for sensitivity opens one to deeper wounds, while brilliance permits the cleverest evasions). In this context, Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, a book which claims to be an autobiographical “history” of the “discipline / And consummation of the poet’s mind” (Book XIII, 270-271), remains suspiciously silent regarding certain incidents that could not justly be omitted from any *kunsterroman*.

This essay will focus more upon “obvious suppressions” than “plagiarism,” though one could certainly argue that Wordsworth’s frequent appropriations of Milton, Shakespeare and Spenser sometimes verge on the plagiaristic. In particular, it must strike any modern reader as strange that Wordsworth would remove all but the slightest trace of his love affair with Annette Vallon (an affair which resulted in the birth of his first daughter, Caroline) from the book which sets out to trace the development “of the poet’s mind.” As Mitchell notes, “Wordsworth says nothing about his abandonment of Annette Vallon and his daughter in *The Prelude* . . . [but] it has frequently been suggested that the

awkward and recalcitrant Vaudracour and Julia episode in *The Prelude* is a highly indirect ‘confession’ of this crime” (657). In the context of “obvious suppressions,” this “episode” seems to call out for a deeper, psychological interpretation. With the aid of Freud’s theory of “dream-displacement,” the significance of the Vaudracour and Julia narrative to Wordsworth’s greater project – the crisis autobiography – becomes clear.

Before proceeding, however, I must first attempt to justify this apparently eccentric application of Freudian dream interpretation to a narrative which Wordsworth claims to have “heard . . . related by my patriot friend / And others who had borne a part therein” (Book IX, 553-555). The obvious objection is this: If the Vaudracour and Julia story is simply Wordsworth’s recounting of a “tragic tale” told by others, then it should not be analyzed as if it were a personal dream narrative. To do so would be to arbitrarily project the Freudian paradigm onto a text that escapes its proper domain. There is some merit to this criticism; however, Wordsworth has doubtlessly appropriated and altered the narrative in his poetic retelling of the story – this fact alone “personalizes” the narrative to a large degree. Furthermore, both the temporal placement of the narrative in the larger structure of *The Prelude* and certain striking parallels within the text itself suggest that Vaudracour and Julia stand as a romantic analogue to the story he cannot tell: that of his relationship with Annette Vallon. First, structurally speaking, the tale of Vaudracour and Julia – one of young love baffled by external circumstances – appears in *The Prelude* at exactly the moment when some account of William’s relationship with could reasonably have been expected to appear. The combination of Wordsworth’s silence regarding Annette with an otherwise tangential, romantic interlude invites a more *personalized*, psychological reading of the narrative. Furthermore, the specifics of the narrative seem to

parallel (to a large degree) the actual events of Wordsworth's life; the differences between the two lovers, the obstacles put in the way of their marriage, and the birth of Julia's baby are all quite similar to the actual events of William's and Annette's affair. Taking all of this into consideration, it seems at the very least plausible that Vaudracour and Julia is more than a simple digression from the greater "current" of *The Prelude* (or as Wordsworth refers to it disdainfully in the 1850 version: loitering "wilfully within a creek") (Book IX 562). The next obvious objection to a personalized, Freudian reading of Vaudracour and Julia is that the events of the narrative, though remarkably similar at some points to Wordsworth's life, ultimately deviate in dramatic ways from his personal history. For instance, when the authorities arrive to arrest Vaudracour,

#### The youth

in the first impulse of his rage laid one  
Dead at his feet, and to the second gave  
A perilous wound – which done, at sight  
Of the dead man, he peacefully resigned  
His person to the law, was lodged in prison,  
And wore the fetters of a criminal. (Book IX 678-684)

Obviously, nothing like this actually transpires in Wordsworth's life; in fact, "Annette urged him to leave her, agreeing that he should go back to England to get some money . . . and then return when it was safe" (Davies 58). While Vaudracour, the victim of an unjust aristocracy bent on keeping him from his love, resists violently and is imprisoned, Wordsworth, low on funds, leaves his love voluntarily (and at her behest) only to be

subsequently prevented from returning by the outbreak of war between England and France. From this point in the narrative onward, the stories diverge in even more significant ways: Julia joins a convent; Vaudracour takes responsibility for the child; the child dies; and Vaudracour, stricken with grief, loses his mind. Needless to say, this is a far cry from literal biography. These simple narrative facts seem to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of the argument that this story is somehow autobiographical – or even personal – in any serious way. But this is where Freud’s dream theories become particularly instructive.

In Freudian theory, dream-displacement is understood as the process by which the mind “strips the elements which have a high psychical value of their intensity, and . . . creates from elements of low psychical value new values, which afterwards find their way into the dream content” (*IoD* Freud 342-343). In other words, those psychic elements (wishes, desires, etc.) which are most powerful (traumatic, disturbing, etc.) are stripped of their “intensity” in order to be reconstituted in the dream in different forms. For instance, a man who has suffered the loss of his lover might dream of a different pair of lovers (perhaps a pair from a popular story) whose struggle both mirrors and distorts his own repressed desires. Through this process of displacement, particularly volatile psychic material disguises itself in order to escape the notice of the dream “censor,” which otherwise would prevent it from manifesting in the dream. It is through displacement that “the difference between the text of the dream-content and that of the dream-thoughts comes about, [and] . . . the dream gives no more than a distortion of the dream-wish which exists in the unconscious” (*IoD* Freud 343). This is all to say that, in dreams, traumatic psychic contents are repressed, distorted, and given new shapes so as

to escape the watchful eye of the dream censor and convey to the conscious ego the urgent messages of the unconscious mind. These messages are the “dream-thoughts” or “dream-wishes” which constitute the latent meaning of the dream. The dream itself is but a messenger of these hidden thoughts and wishes. Might what is true of dreams also be true of poems, which are themselves so often like conscious dreams?

In the context of *The Prelude*, the idea of dream-displacement opens up an intriguing avenue of textual analysis. First, one must consider Wordsworth’s obvious repression of his affair with Annette . In the 1805 version of the poem, we find only the episode of Vaudracour and Julia; in the 1850 version, even this has been removed. As Mitchell argues,

Wordsworth must have felt his share of guilt as the letters from pleading for his return came to him across the channel. He had good excuses for not returning to France, for not bringing Annette to England, perhaps even for not agreeing to a proxy marriage that would have legitimized his daughter. Unfortunately, his excuses (political necessity and poverty) were uncannily similar to those Burke denounced in Rousseau's *Confessions*.

(658)

Indeed, these are almost exactly the reasons that Rousseau cites for abandoning his children: “I will only say that this error was such that in handing over my children to be raised at public expense, since I had not the means to bring them up myself . . . I believed that I was acting as a true citizen and father” (*Conf.* 348). Given the thesis that a large part of Wordsworth’s project consists both in an appropriation of Rousseauvian tropes

and a moralistic self-distancing, this unfortunate overlap threatens the authority of the whole project. On another level, if *The Prelude* is conceived as an act of self-integration (the therapeutic model), then this period in Wordsworth's life, must appear to the poet in 1805 across an uncannily "wide vacancy." It is fair to say that, in Freudian terms, this qualifies as a traumatic memory with "high psychical value."

Unable to confess to his relationship with Annette, since such a choice would be an invitation to public scandal, and yet unwilling to give up the project of poetic self-integration, Wordsworth engages with this period in his life through a strange, coded narrative digression. At exactly the moment in his autobiographical poem when this memory should have manifested, Wordsworth consciously censors himself, omitting it entirely, and includes instead a dream-like, romantic narrative which both mirrors and distorts the history of the affair. In the poem, this is the movement that is essentially equivalent to dream-displacement, for the "hot" psychic content is transformed and distorted, "cooled off," then reconstituted in a different form: that of Vaudracour and Julia. This movement of displacement makes sense in the context of *The Prelude*, which mirrors in its temporal fragmentation, its associative logic, and its privileged access to visions of early childhood, the distinctive structure of dreams. The notion of displacement also explains why the events of the Vaudracour and Julia saga diverge significantly from those of Wordsworth's life, for "the dream gives no more than a distortion of the dream-wish which exists in the unconscious" (*IoD* Freud 343). What we have, then, in the narrative of Vaudracour and Julia, is – rather than a "tedious" and unwarranted digression from the central theme – a distorted dream-thought that, as any Freudian knows, must be decoded to reveal its latent meaning.

The first notable passage in this context relates to Julia's birth, where she is described as "a bright maid from parents sprung / Not mean in their condition" (Book IX 565-566). What is striking in this passage is its sexlessness. Julia is, from the first, characterized in terms of light as "a bright maid," and she seems almost to leap full-grown into existence like Athena: "from parents sprung" (Book IX 565). Thus, Julia appears on the scene as a luminous, immaterial creature who seems to have been immaculately conceived. Wordsworth's "sanctifying" vision transforms her very house into "a sainted shrine," in which "Her chamber-window did surpass in glory / The portals of the east, all paradise" (Book IX 589-591). The result of this conceptual transformation is that Julia feels more like an angel or saint than a woman of flesh, blood and human desire. Wordsworth goes as far as to describe her as "divinely beautiful" (Book IX 608). Furthermore, though the story centers around a sexual transgression (Vaudracour must have gotten Julia pregnant somehow), only the subtlest hint of their passion betrays itself in the poem. Indeed, we only discover Julia's pregnancy in a round about, almost euphemistic manner: "[I] reluctantly must add / That Julia, yet without the name of wife, Carried about her for a secret grief / The promise of a mother" (Book IX 609-612). While this passage does manage to convey the essential information, one could argue that it almost turns the blame around by making Julia the subject of the sentence. It is "Julia" who "carries" this "secret grief," but there is no mention of Vaudracour – its effective cause. Striking, too, is the line break which follows "The promise of a mother," for the next line, set off by itself, is the infinitive "To conceal" (Book IX 613). The weight that accrues to a broken, three-syllable line in a poem composed almost exclusively of solid,

pentameter lines is considerable. What, then, is being concealed in this strangely sexless narrative of sexual transgression?

Through the Freudian lens, the answer to this question seems rather obvious. Wordsworth is attempting, in the guise of romance, to make sense of his affair with Annette Vallon. Vaudracour and Julia can be understood as an attempt, perhaps not wholly conscious, to integrate the first true disappointment of his life into the greater fabric of his autobiographical project. However, the events themselves are too volatile to address directly, so he proceeds in the form of a dream-distorted anecdote – “a tragic tale” (Book IX 551) overheard rather than experienced. In this “tale,” Julia (Annette’s double) must be stripped of her physicality; the love affair must be stripped of sexuality; and the blame must be subtly shifted onto Julia/Annette. These are the psychological adjustments of a guilty conscience attempting to rewrite a personal tragedy in a more palatable form.

In other words, the poem enacts at least three conflicting desires: first, to have been able to return to Annette; next, to transform her into something immaterial and sanctified; and finally, to blame and punish her for tempting him from a state of relative “moral innocence.” The first of these desires (which make up the latent content of the dream vision) is the desire to return to the beloved. In this narrative, Vaudracour’s attempts to resist “ruffian power” (Book IX 678) is rewarded with exquisite suffering. He laments to Julia afterwards that “All right is gone, / Gone from me. Thou no longer now art mine, / I thine. A murderer, Julia, cannot love / An innocent woman” (Book IX 707-710). This is a dream-distortion of Wordsworth’s actual decision, for he leaves

Annette voluntarily and never risks returning during the war. Ultimately, Vaudracour resigns himself to life without Julia, and “perform[s] / The office of a nurse to his young child”(Book IX 905-906). Despite his best efforts, however, the child “after a short time, by some mistake / Or indiscretion of the father, died” (Book IX 907-908). This passage reflects an even greater distortion of reality, for Annette, not Wordsworth, is the one who ultimately takes care of their child, Caroline. Again, the hidden meaning here is that Julia/ abandons the child, and Vaudracour/Wordsworth takes over as the responsible parent. What is notable about the instances discussed above is that they both involve a direct inversion of personal history in favor of wish-fulfillment. At the same time, Vaudracour fairs badly as a result of both choices; he is imprisoned for resisting authority and, for attempting to raise a child who ultimately dies, he is rewarded with the guilt of parental negligence. Here, a counter-wish is manifesting, for Wordsworth is attempting to justify to himself the decisions that he has made.

The second and third latent dream-thoughts (wishes) are closely intertwined, and we have already begun to explore his desire to transform Julia/ into a “divine” being (Wordsworth’s transformative, etherealizing gaze). On one hand, to render Julia/ immaterial or “divinely beautiful” (though apparently flattering) is to strip her of her sexuality. On the other, such a transformation is a violent act on the part an ascetic male gaze, which is completed by the literal change of Julia/ from sexual woman to asexual nun: “she must retire / Into a convent and be there immured” (Book IX 839-840). This is where the two, subterranean wishes of the dream-vision converge, for Julia/ is both “unsexed,” sanctified, and locked away. Wordsworth’s desire to blame and punish further reveals itself after the death of the child, for he protests (perhaps *too much*) that

“Theirs be the blame who caused the woe, not mine” (Book IX 911). If Wordsworth himself does not feel some personal involvement in the tale, then what possible purpose could this passage serve? This line once again implicates Julia in the guilt (“*Theirs* be the blame”), though the fault seems to be largely Vaudracour’s (after all, he allowed the child to die, not her).

Ultimately, the Vaudracour and Julia romance is an attempt to articulate and make sense of an impossibly complicated personal history. The narrative proceeds according to the conflicted logic of dream-displacement and enacts the poet’s repressed desires in order to justify the decisions that he has made. One could argue that this is a necessary phase of Wordsworth’s development, for, along with the failure of the French Revolution, his affair with Julia is one of the earliest and deepest disappointments of his life. If *The Prelude* is to be a poem of personal development, then this personal crisis must either be integrated into the fabric of the whole (or wholly repressed). The young Wordsworth seems to have attempted to process the crisis through a romantic dream-vision, while the older Wordsworth opts for the latter option and excises all trace of Julia from *The Prelude*. Neither option seems particularly satisfactory, and both are ultimately forms of violence (one of distortion, the other of omission), but the attempt in the 1805 version is at least notable for its psychological complexity.

The Vaudracour and Julia narrative stands out as a notable “gap” largely because Wordsworth is so successful in the rest of *The Prelude* at weaving personal memory into a unified, meaningful whole. This is, perhaps, the most significant difference between Wordsworth and Rousseau: Wordsworth believes in the capacity of memory to provide a

coherent and continuous narrative of selfhood, while Rousseau in the second half of his *Confessions* gives up on this possibility. As David Bromwich argues in *Disowned by Memory*, “The longer poems of 1797-1800 mean to invent a new sympathy between moments in the experience of a single self” (149), and this project culminates in the vast, sympathetic memory-network of the 1805 *Prelude*. The project, despite its failure in relation to the Annette Vallon episode, is remarkably successful at connecting the pre- and post-Revolutionary Wordsworth through a narrative of crisis which resists both the temptation to negate the younger self (as Augustine does in his *Confessions*) and the alternative temptation to forfeit any notion of causality and coherent development (as Rousseau does toward the end of his *Confessions*). However, the concealment of the Annette Vallon episode prevents this “substantial unity” from reaching its apotheosis. This story of development is haunted by that notable lack. One could argue that Wordsworth’s use of radical hybridization is an attempt to compensate for this perceived discontinuity. Like Augustine (who fuses Classical rhetoric with the poetry of *Psalms*) and Rousseau (who blends numerous, antithetical narrative modes from the gothic to the pastoral), Wordsworth utilizes hybridization in his self-narrative in order to attain the level of autographic authority that he desires. Wordsworth’s hybridization occurs at the level of genre: he takes both the great epic poet (Milton) and the great philosopher of the Revolution (Rousseau) and, through a radical act of hybridization, fuses them together in order to surpass them both. The authorial choice to write an autobiography “as an impersonal epic that would erase almost all ‘personal matters,’ refusing to name names, give dates, or identify particular, definite influences, was itself an act of critical revision directed at Rousseau's *Confessions*, the great prototype of autobiography centered on

‘personal matters’ (Mitchell 660). At the same time, the infusion of the radically personal, the subjective (i.e. the matter of lyric poetry) into the genre of the Miltonic epic is a direct challenge to *Paradise Lost*. Wordsworth sets his great poetic and autobiographical precursors against one another in order to approach the rhetorical authority he needs to overcome the factual omission which haunts both his narrative and his memory.

Wordsworth’s hybridization is not limited to this mix of autobiography and epic; he also blends aspects of the pastoral, gothic, picaresque, and romantic with high philosophy, aesthetics, political theory, and theology. Like Rousseau’s *Confessions*, *The Prelude* is hybridized through and through. However, one particularly telling moment of genre fusion occurs at that crucial juncture between the French Revolution narrative and the coded tale of Vaudracour and Julia. While the subject matter of the French Revolution books is closer to the traditional content of epic poetry, Wordsworth self-consciously interrupts his own narrative in order to introduce a tale which is closer to the “low” genre of popular romance:

Having touched this argument  
I shall not, as my purpose was, take note  
Of other matters which detained us oft  
In thoughts or conversation – public acts,  
And public persons, and emotions wrought  
Within our minds by the ever-varying wind  
Of record and report – *but I will instead*

Draw from obscurity a tragic tale,  
Not in its spirit singular indeed,  
But haply worth memorial. [*italics mine*] (Book IX 544-553)

Here, the impact of the hybridization of epic and romance is twofold: the Vaudracour and Julia romance is elevated by its proximity to the epic, while the conventional impersonality of the epic is ruptured temporarily by the intensely personal romance. Rhetorically, this lends a great deal of weight to the Vaudracour and Julia narrative – a weight which it could never achieve on its own. Simultaneously, the romance serves as a kind of interlude, which interrupts the epic mode and, as an opposite in close proximity, helps to define it. The gesture seems at once to elevate the Vaudracour and Julia narrative (and by implication, the whole episode) by fusing it with the epic and to diminish it by treating it as a digressive romance, a mere “instead.” This ambivalence reflects the larger tension between revelation and concealment which runs through Books IX and X; however, the self-consciousness of the gesture earns Wordsworth a rhetorical authority which helps to mitigate the eccentricity of the choice. This capacity for rhetorical flare is the allure of the hybrid text. Tellingly, the conspicuous gesture towards rhetorical authority appears at the most uncertain and indeterminate moment of *The Prelude*.

However, it seems that Wordsworth himself was never satisfied with this merely rhetorical self-authorization: he never published *The Prelude* during his lifetime. As Stephen Gill asserts, “it remained in manuscript to the end of his life. Into old age Wordsworth was oppressed by a sense of failure” (145). Perhaps, like Rousseau, he was

haunted by the spectre of a non-existent but necessary text: the unwritable *Recluse* to which *The Prelude* was to serve as preface. Indeed, even in the final book of the 1805 (and 1850) *Prelude* manuscripts, it is apparent that Wordsworth still justifies the project referentially:

Having now  
Told what best merits mention, further pains  
Our present labour seems not to require,  
And I have other tasks. (Book XIII 369-370)

The largest of these “other tasks” is the perpetually deferred philosophical section of *The Recluse*, which Wordsworth never completes. Like Rousseau’s references to his never-completed supplement, this gesture towards an external, justifying text reveals a fundamental, authorial anxiety. Elsewhere in that final book, Wordsworth addresses Coleridge directly and intimates that the whole of *The Prelude* is merely a preamble to *The Reculse*:

And now, O Friend; this history is brought  
To its appointed close: the discipline  
And consummation of the Poet’s mind.  
. . . we have reach’d  
The time (which was our object from the first)  
When we may, not presumptuously, I hope,  
Suppose my powers so far confirmed, and such

My knowledge, as to make me capable

Of building up a work that should endure. (Book XIII 261-278)

Built into *The Prelude* is this constant pointing-away; the work outlines the “consummation of the Poet’s mind” only to suggest that true “confirmation” of poetic “power” lies ahead in an indefinite future. Ironically, the “work that should endure” is never completed, and so *The Prelude* remains “an involuted poem which is about its own genesis – a prelude to itself” (Abrams 79).

While one could argue that this combination of rhetorical self-justification and deferral of publication merely point toward the anxiety of a young author who fears that his autobiography (in the absence of a larger oeuvre) would be “presumptuous.” But this does not explain why the older Wordsworth, perhaps the most influential poet of his generation, would withhold the publication of his masterpiece. Another possible explanation for this choice might be that his omission of the true Annette Vallon narrative prevented him from making the definitive decision to publish the work (indeed, he would have known the danger of exposure: the goad of public ridicule that tormented Rousseau). In any case, there is some truth to Bloom’s conclusion that, though *The Prelude* was to be only a portico to the Gothic church of *The Recluse*, it may be (aside from Blake’s *Jerusalem*) “the finest long poem of the nineteenth century” (*RiT* Bloom 29). But its “substantial unity” is always already ruptured by the impossible narrative which it defines as its perpetual outside. There are, perhaps, some wounds that memory cannot reach, and some gaps that poetry cannot bridge.

## Conclusion

Despite the vastly different historical contexts in which Augustine, Rousseau, and Wordsworth composed their autographic works, it is clear that there are many significant points of connection between them. All three offer distinct versions of memory and consider explicitly the relationship between memory and autographic writing. Augustine, despite his ambivalence in choosing a metaphor for memory, emphasizes the “great storehouse” model in which memories are conceived as passive contents that can be accessed at will by the conscious agent. For him, clear recollection is requisite for true confession, and such confession leads to atonement with God. Rousseau desires a systematic memory in order to bring his past into “full view” so as to understand it completely. On the one hand, he seeks a scientific objectivity in relation to his own being; on the other, he seems to desire to forget himself. Interestingly, the relationship between memory and autographic writing is conceived as purgative: to recall and to inscribe is to forget. Rousseau seems to desire this self-forgetting as a way of returning to radical innocence. Wordsworth, on the other hand, has a multi-level conception of memory. For him, ordinary memory is fallible insofar as it alters that which is recalled; however, on a deeper level, memory allows access to a deep core of self in which keenly remembered “spots of time” remain present as a source of healing and revitalization. For Wordsworth, unlike Augustine and Rousseau, memory itself is potentially therapeutic.

Further, all three authors are self-conscious about the nature of and justification for their authority. Augustine, as a young bishop and ex-Manichee, constructs his *Confessions* as a kind of anticipatory self-justification in which he attempts to reconcile

his earlier self (a potential source of controversy) with his Christian identity. He grounds his authority largely in the word of the Bible (specifically the music of *Psalms*).

Rousseau, in exile and on the defensive, conceives of his *Confessions* as an opportunity to set the public record straight by offering a full and true account of his actions from childhood to the time of composition. He attempts to ground his authority in complete transparency of self-revelation; however, he fears that he will not be believed and so refers constantly to a never-completed, external “supplement.” Wordsworth, on the other hand, sees *The Prelude* as an opportunity both to integrate his earlier, revolutionary identity with his new worldview and to announce himself as England’s next great, epic poet (thereby setting the stage for *The Recluse*). However, as a relatively unknown, young poet, and as a man whose outspoken political views had changed significantly within a short timeframe, Wordsworth is, to say the least, uneasy about the project of autographic writing. He justifies the act in terms of *The Recluse*, which he never completes.

Though the causes of this authorial anxiety vary depending upon the historical and cultural circumstances in which each author is writing, all three engage in a kind of generic and stylistic hybridization in an attempt to achieve a compensatory, rhetorical authority. Augustine blends aspects of classical rhetoric and biography with the poetry of *Psalms* and allusions to the Hebrew Bible. Rousseau fuses antithetical styles – like the pastoral and gothic – into an idiosyncratic literary hodgepodge that is (in its strange diversity) more capable of accurately representing the protean self. Wordsworth melds the antithetical modes of epic and lyric poetry into a historically resonant self-narrative;

furthermore, like Rousseau, he mixes styles and genres in an attempt to articulate the history of his own development.

In addition to these points of comparison, one can trace a clear lineage that runs directly from Augustine to Rousseau to Wordsworth. This line of influence can best be explained in the terms of Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*, which provides the relevant concept of "revisionary ratios."<sup>5</sup> Though Bloom applies his concepts exclusively to poetry, I believe that they can be applied in a similar manner to confessional works (indeed, wherever there is a tradition, one will discover such creative appropriations). Rousseau's project can, in part, be understood as a subterranean critique and inversion of Augustine's *Confessions*, while Wordsworth engages in a similar act of autographic appropriation in relation to Rousseau. To articulate these lines of influence in relation to the larger genre of confession would help to solidify the critical study of that genre, just as Bloom's genealogies of poetic influence have helped to clarify the contours of Romantic poetry.

Ultimately, this analysis suggests that the comparative study of confessional texts reveals complex relationships that are similar in kind (though different in nature) to those revealed through comparative studies of novels and poetry. By examining such definitive, recurrent themes as the role of memory, the nature of authority, hybridity, and supplementation in autographic texts, we will come closer to articulating a clear, critical economy of terms – perhaps even a more rigorous critical discourse comparable to that which already exists for other genres. Within this discourse, the notion of "autographic reading" would figure prominently as a method of approaching such texts. Because the

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<sup>5</sup> For a lucid synopsis of these Bloomian concepts, see *The Anxiety of Influence*, pgs. 14-16.

method of autographic reading refuses the closure of fictive finality, it opens up the possibility of a critical discourse sensitive both to craft and to historical context. I conceive of this essay as a gesture toward that discourse.

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