CHAPTER ONE

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND THE LOSS OF COMMUNITY: FROM AUGUSTINE'S *CONFESSIONS* TO WORDSWORTH'S *THE PRELUDE*

Paul de Man in an influential essay on autobiography asserted that "any book with a readable title-page is, to some extent, autobiographical" (de Man 1979, 922). This statement apparently precludes the definition of autobiography in historical terms. Indeed, de Man went on to assert that "autobiography, then, is not a genre or a mode but a figure of reading or understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts" (921). De Man qualified his assertions in both these formulations by his use of "to some extent" and "to some degree," phrases that introduced uncertainties into his argument that he never directly addressed. As I have indicated in the Introduction, I agree with the broad outline of de Man's position that autobiography cannot be defined as a "genre" but only as a "figure of reading or understanding," but I am troubled by his repression of the historical context. In this chapter I will tackle the question that de Man raises and dismisses as impossible to resolve: Are there in fact identifiable differences between first-person texts written before the late eigh-

teenth century, when the term *autobiography* itself was coined, and those written after the Romantic period? I will argue that there are, and that these differences can be expressed in terms of the loss of an image of a community of readers in the autobiographical text.

Many critics feel that there is no reason to distinguish between first-person texts in historical terms, and therefore label any first-person narrative an "autobiography." This was the case, for instance, with the extended letter written in the sixteenth century by Thomas Whythorne, which was published as *The Autobiography of Thomas Whythorne*. Such usage allows critics to refer to Augustine's *Confessions* as the "first autobiography" and to confuse first-person narratives from antiquity with those from the twentieth century. However, de Man's linking of the ideas of autobiography and a title page in the quotations above provides an opening for the definition of the difference between these texts in historical terms.

De Man's formulation, in bringing together autobiography and the ideological codes embodied in a title page, links the category of autobiography to history. Even as he dismisses the possibility of defining autobiography, de Man implicitly raises the possibility of doing so by this reference. Title pages have a history. Like the idea of autobiography, the idea of a title page relies upon a network of philosophical, legal, and social sanctions that have been developed over the last two centuries.

The terrain to which I am referring in invoking legal sanctions in this context was first mapped by Michel Foucault in "What Is an Author?" Foucault's characterization of the "author function" underscores how autobiography as a genre is dependent upon the ideology of individual authorship that defines texts in terms of personal property (Foucault 1977, 124). The link between autobiography and copyright is the desire for possession, the desire that de Man locates as one of the primary motives behind Rousseau's *Confessions*. The ideal of individual possession of a text as a commodity unites authorship and copyright. Foucault locates the emergence of the "author" in the context of the articulation of laws of copyright, in a period that coincides with the emergence of the term *autobiography* in the late eighteenth century:

> Speeches and books were assigned real authors...only when the author became subject to punishment and to the extent his discourse was considered transgressive...it was at the moment when a system of ownership and strict copyright rules were established (toward the end of the eighteenth and

> beginning of the nineteenth century) that the transgressive properties always intrinsic to the act of writing became the forceful imperative of literature. (Foucault 1977, 124–25)

As Foucault emphasizes, the author is an economic category. Foucault in his essay elaborates the ways in which the concept of the author has been used to define "a certain field of conceptual and or theoretical coherence" (120), a description that applies particularly to autobiography. The ideal of the "single" self proposed by Wordsworth in *The Prelude* performs the function of denoting an ideal of coherence and unity across time, as we shall see later in this chapter. Behind the ideal of the single self lies the desire to possess a space of pristine individuality that will belong to the author alone. Like the law governing the absolute possession of property, autobiography defines an inner landscape of experience that belongs to the author alone. Above all, however, the law of copyright serves to limit the cancerous proliferation of texts. Copyright codifies the autobiographical ideals of uniqueness and originality by defining the text as the property of a single, unique and identifiable individual. Copyright creates sanctions to be used against those who commit the impiety of confusing the boundaries between texts, or duplicating another's text as if it were their own.

The definition of the text as the property of a unique individual is alien to Augustine's *Confessions.* I choose Augustine's *Confessions* as my reference point because the text has become the *locus classicus* for many literary histories of the form when they wish to designate the origins of autobiography. William Spengemann's *The Forms of Autobiography*, for example, begins with Augustine's *Confessions.* Spengemann links Wordsworth's *The Prelude* to the "evolutionary line described by Augustinian autobiography" (Spengemann 1980, 72), suggesting a deep continuity between the texts. While it is possible to see superficial similarities between Augustine's and Wordsworth's texts in their uses of "historical self-recollection, philosophical self-exploration and poetic self-expression" (Spengemann, 32), the ideals that inform these strategies are so divergent as to make such comparisons meaningless.

Augustine's text is a self-duplicating machine intended to produce conversion in its reader and thereby reproduce more conversions and more texts. A vision of a community of texts, and of texts embodying conversion, is built into the narrative of the *Confessions.* In a subtle analysis of the mechanics of conversion in the *Confessions*, Geoffrey Galt Harpham has analyzed the book's "elaborately mimetic form" (Harpham

1986, 43). Harpham himself clearly sees Augustine's *Confessions* as a species of autobiography, but I wish to suggest that in its "elaborately mimetic form" Augustine's text differs significantly from autobiography. Augustine's experience is not only mimetic, it aims to create the reader in its own image. The aim of the text is self-duplication. Augustine's conversion is just one in a series of conversions that Augustine and his friends hear and read about in the course of his narrative. Augustine establishes his conversion as a form of imitation; having read about a conversion, he himself undergoes an identical experience.

As Harpham points out, Augustine's "ambition for his own text is that it take place in the chain of imitable texts, speaking to others as he had been spoken to" (43). The ideal of imitation is the distinguishing characteristic of the conversion narrative and of confessions generally. Augustine situates himself by his act in a line of imitations that stretches back to Christ's "Follow me," and through Christ to God. His experience is by definition communal. It is not distinguished by originality or uniqueness, two of the characteristics claimed for themselves by writers of autobiography. Rather, it takes its place in a constellation of other texts with which it is shown in dialogue. The imperative to distinguish his texts from others, the imperative behind the law of copyright, does not operate in Augustine's text.

Literary precedent for Augustine is thus a source of imitation, and indeed the most important source, since the Bible itself is the authorizing and originating text in this sequence. Augustine does not distinguish between texts and acts, treating textual and hearsay narratives of conversion as equal in authority. Augustine therefore fuses texts and life, whereas the possibility of confusion between textual self-representation and experience was a source of anxiety for the Romantics. He links his own life and other texts by explicating the Book of Genesis as an integral part of his confession, joining his own conversion to the narrative of the Bible. The two dovetail so neatly as to make parts of a single text in what Harpham, following Gadamer, calls "mutual reflexive substitution" (Harpham 1986, 45). Mutual reflexive substitution defines the ideal of imitation as it operates in Augustine's text. It conveys the possibility that conversion narratives are replicas of one another and can be substituted for one another. This idea is anathema to writers of autobiography.

For autobiographers such mutual reflexive substitution is impossible. There must inevitably be for writers of autobiography a surplus of individuality that would make such an equation impossible. This surplus value is the essence of individualism, the sign of the "something" that Wordsworth

referred to in "Tintern Abbey" that must inevitably exceed the capabilities of language and the self-reproductive capacity of the text. This residual something is the ineffable self-consciousness of the autobiographer, the sign of an individualism that denies the possibility of mutual reflexive substitution between subjects who are viewed as autonomous individuals.

De Man himself, despite his contention that autobiography cannot be defined, suggests a way of differentiating autobiographical and preautobiographical texts. In another essay on autobiography, this one on Rousseau's *Confessions*, he uses the terms *substitution* and *displacement* to unlock the structure of desire in the text. He analyzes the different "levels of desire" embodied in Rousseau's confession of the crime of stealing a ribbon and allowing a female servant to whom he was attracted to take the blame for his misdeed (de Man 1977, 21–33). De Man sees in the incident multiple levels of substitution: "We have at least two levels of substitution (or displacement) taking place: the ribbon substitutes for a desire which is itself a desire for substitution" (de Man 1977, 32).

Rousseau, however, finds his desire for substitution blocked. He can never substitute himself for another because, as we shall see, he defines himself in terms of his difference from others. Symbols within the text, such as the ribbon, bespeak a subjectivity that displaces its own search for a confirmatory presence into objects of desire such as other people or the landscape. In his analysis of Rousseau's text, de Man names one of the fundamental differences between autobiography and confession. The idea of displacement distinguishes Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and Rousseau's *Confessions* from confessional narratives. While displacement is the operative method of their texts for Rousseau and Wordsworth, they must deny its operation because of the Romantic ideology of the uniqueness of the individual, especially the individual genius.

As de Man's analysis of the mechanics of displacement makes clear, the dream of possession behind Rousseau's text is impossible to fulfill. He stole the ribbon in order to possess both it and Marion, but his desire is never realized. The mechanics of desire at work here have been summarized by Jacques Lacan in his formulation of the "mirror stage" in the child's development. In his description of the mirror stage, Lacan embodies a prototypical autobiographical narrative, as the writing subject pursues a specular image of unity and self-possession that it can never achieve (Lacan 1977). The subject is constantly thwarted in its search for an unified image of itself by its awareness of the difference between the "I" and the image in the mirror. Confessions, on the other hand, operate in terms of imitation.

The category of imitation continued to be an important one for narratives up until the end of the eighteenth century. Linda H. Peterson has described the essential character of this form in *Victorian Autobiography: The Tradition of Self-Interpretation.* Peterson points out that writers of confessions would fit their own experiences into episodes from the Bible, so that Old Testament figures not only prefigured the coming of Christ but "were also applied to the lives of individual Christians" (Peterson 1986, 7). This method, which Peterson labels "hermeneutic self-interpretation," shows how fundamental the idea of imitation and its complementary idea of prefiguration were for the confession. Peterson, however, goes on from this to argue a continuity between this method of self-interpretation and autobiography. She follows Spengemann and other commentators in arguing for a continuity or "tradition" linking confessions and autobiographies.

As I have argued elsewhere (Danahay 1986) it is impossible to describe a "tradition" of autobiography. The word *antitradition* might better capture the spirit of autobiography, because the premise of texts written by Wordsworth, Rousseau, and later writers was that the authors were unique and that their life histories fit into no recognizable pattern. Rather than look for biblical prefigurations of their own condition, autobiographers reject out of hand the idea that they imitate previous models. As Peterson herself admits, the "hermeneutic" method fell out of favor when the writer of autobiography felt he or she "needed to produce a work fully original rather than obviously dependent or imitative of other autobiographies" (Peterson 1986, 16). This describes the ideal behind all the texts in this study, and shows how far the model of "hermeneutic self-interpretation" she proposes in her book had been rejected by writers of autobiography.

An index of how far the ideal of imitation had fallen into disrepute is to be found in Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* (1982), when Gosse laments the degree to which even children were pushed to be "original." Gosse says that his intellectual activity as a child manifested itself in "direct imitation," a form of activity he views as healthy even if it contravenes the drive for originality.

> The rage for what is called "originality" is pushed to such a length these days that even children are not considered promising, unless they attempt things preposterous and unparalleled. From his earliest hour the ambitious person is told that to make a road where none has walked before...to

> create new forms of thought and expression, are the only recipes for genius; and in trying to escape on all sides from every resemblance to his predecessors, he adopts at once an air of eccentricity and pretentiousness. (117–18)

Gosse's strict religious upbringing gives him a greater appreciation for the forms of imitation than many of his contemporaries have, but he is aware that in this he is an anomaly. The motive behind most autobiography is precisely to define how the writer differs from his predecessors and expresses a desire to "escape resemblance," as Gosse says. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for instance, in his preface to the *Confessions* explicitly rejects the possibility of his life's being modeled on a previous text, and the possibility of the reader emulating his life:

> I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator....I am unlike any one I have ever met; I will venture to say that I am like no one in the whole world. (Rousseau 1959, 17)

Rousseau breaks the chain of imitation that marked Augustine's text. He explicitly rejects imitation as the basis of his text, and furthermore disrupts the possibility of his text reproducing itself. Rousseau claims that nature "broke the mould" after producing him, so that Rousseau's reproduction in other texts is blocked. Rousseau here expresses the ideal of copyright through his image of the unreproducible and unprecedented text.

The attempt to imagine a narrative for the self that relies upon no previous models sets autobiography apart from the confession. Jerome H. Buckley in *The Turning Key* isolates the distinguishing characteristic of Wordsworth's poetical project in *The Prelude* in the idea of its being unprecedented. Buckley quotes Wordsworth's letter to Sir George Beaumont in which he boasted that it was "a thing unprecedented in literary history that a man should talk so much about himself" (Buckley 1984, 1). Wordsworth therefore claims that his text is a break with the past rather than an imitation of previous examples. Like Jean-Jacques Rousseau before him, Wordsworth bases his justification for writing and publishing the text on his individuality, on the fact that there exists for his self no precedent, and that nobody can imitate his life. Both Rousseau and Wordsworth present themselves as unprecedented and unreproducible.

Where Augustine wrote a text intended to reproduce itself and pro-

liferate, Wordsworth and Rousseau produce texts intended to preclude the possibility of imitation. They implicitly accept the idea codified in copyright that their texts are their unique property. For another to imitate them would be to transgress this boundary. Similarly, for them to imitate another would be a transgression. The definition of the writing subject's boundaries thus becomes an overriding concern of the text. As I argue in the next chapter, the definition of boundaries was an enterprise fraught with uncertainty for many Romantic writers. Wordsworth possessed a faith in the "singleness" of his self that few of his contemporaries could match.

The link with previous texts is disrupted for the autobiographer by the unprecedented writing subject. The existence of previous models becomes a threat in the way that Harold Bloom has described in *The Anxiety of Influence*. The individual is defined in terms of his "swerve" or deviance from other people, just as his text is defined by the degree to which it differs from all other texts. The self thus becomes an isolated entity, and the task of the autobiographer, as opposed to the writer of the confession, is to reassert some sense of community in the face of this rupture.

This, then, is the most important and fundamental distinction between confession and autobiography. Where a sense of community was built into the ideal of the confession, the autobiographer must discover, or perhaps create, his or her own social context. The motives behind autobiography are akin to those attributed to authors of the social novel by Philip Fisher in *Making Up Society*. The autobiographer and the novelist have both lost the community as a premise and must reconstruct or recreate it on the basis of individual experience. Like the social novel, autobiographies register "the change from the representation of individuals within a community to the descriptions of selves surrounded by collections of unrelated others" (Fisher 1981, 4). Autobiography is founded on the basis of the redefinition of community as society and the creation of a space for the autonomous individual.

The loss of community initiates what Charles Rzepka in *The Self as Mind* has characterized as "the quest for an intimate yet authoritative audience" that would help validate an "ideal, interiorized self-image that the poet fears the world will otherwise deny or deface" (Rzepka 1986, 27). Rzepka echoes Lacan here in locating the Romantic quest within the context of a search for an idealized and unobtainable self-image. What he is also describing here, although he does not make this explicit, is the loss of the assumed basis of a community of readers, and the corresponding

need of the author to create the sense of intimacy and audience that the word connotes. As Rzepka's comments indicate, this search for an intimate audience is a disguised quest for an other that would confirm the author's sense of self. Community is employed in the service of the self.

The idea of the autobiographical text as a self-duplicating machine by the Romantic period had literally become horrific. Conversion in Augustine's *Confessions* reproduces itself in the world, each text causing the generation of other acts and texts in a proliferation of records of the act of conversion. This attitude toward self-reproduction differs strikingly from the attitude toward autobiography I describe in chapter 3 in relation to *Frankenstein*, in which an act of literary self-creation is represented as a horrifying abomination that must not be allowed to reproduce itself. Informed by a Romantic ideology of uniqueness and originality, and by a revulsion against the productive capabilities of industrialization, *Frankenstein* betrays both an "anxiety of influence" and an "anxiety of influencing" (Bloom, 1973). There is no such anxiety in Augustine's *Confessions*, but rather its opposite, the acceptance of influence and the desire to influence in turn.

For the writer of the confession the existence of death was made far less traumatic and final than for the autobiographer. God guaranteed the existence of some form of afterlife for the soul in the confession. For the autobiographer, there is no such guarantee. Burton Pike maintains in "Time in Autobiography" that "post-Renaissance emphasis on the primacy and uniqueness of the individual has made his personal death...a much more emphatic event than it was in God-oriented times" (Pike 1976, 328). For Wordsworth and Coleridge it becomes part of their poetic mission to imagine an existence for the self beyond death. The figures of deceased loved ones come to stand for the possibility of a life beyond the limit of death, and as a vicarious symbol for community.

Pike characterizes Romantic autobiography as a reaction to the shift in view from a religious to a secular ideology. He argues that "some new cultural force...something pseudodivine" was needed to relieve the individual of the burden of what he calls "temporal linearity" (330). A striking difference between Augustine's *Confessions* and the autobiographical texts discussed in this study is the loss of direct address to God. Where Augustine carries on a dialogue with God in his text, the divine becomes an amorphous and indistinct presence in autobiography. In order to rescue an attenuated form of the Christian promise of immortality, nineteenth-century authors had to invent some inner force strong enough to overcome death. The "new cultural force" that was created to combat

intimations of mortality was the idea of an inward realm that escaped the contingent forces of the social and historical. As Pike suggests, Romantic authors sought to transcend both time and space:

> The Romantics suggested solutions [to the burden of temporal linearity] in two directions: on the one hand, to anchor eternity in the individual consciousness, as in Wordsworth's "spots of time" (itself a contradiction in terms), or on the other hand to attempt to transcend time and space altogether as categories of consciousness. (Pike 1976, 330)

Both these "solutions" to the problem of individual mortality appear in the nineteenth-century autobiographies in this study. The autobiographer solves the problem of death as the ultimate human boundary by escaping time altogether. This is a familiar move in Romantic poetry, and one that has been described well by previous critics. I wish to emphasize here the dark underside to these moments of transcendence in Wordsworth's poetry, those moments when he comes to a realization that thanks to his position he cannot address the social context in which he moves—in short, those moments when he registers the loss of community attendant upon transcending time and space.

There are moments in *The Prelude* where Wordsworth finds that his self does indeed have limits or boundaries. Whereas in solitary contemplation of nature he experiences his self as transcendent, when face to face with other people he becomes aware of the limits both of his knowledge of them and of his self-knowledge. An example of such a moment is the "spot of time" Wordsworth describes in book 12, when he sees a lone Cumberland girl walking through a desolate landscape. Jerome Buckley in *The Turning Key* makes a suggestive comment about this "spot of time." He contrasts it with Wordsworth's description of the French peasant girl leading a heifer, who symbolized for Wordsworth the hopes of the French Revolution. The Cumberland girl symbolizes the opposite of the experience of the French Revolution, a loss of the vision and sense of social purpose that Wordsworth describes in books 10 and 11. The sight of the Cumberland girl is, as Buckley says, "an image of 'visionary dreariness' in itself and of no political or social consequence" (Buckley 1984, 59). In the interim between these two moments Wordsworth has lost the desire to see things in political and social terms, casting them instead as purely personal symbols. The Cumberland girl therefore attests to Wordsworth's loss of faith in the ability of a large-scale social movement

to create a more just society, and his retreat into a private vision that entails no "political or social consequence."

Jerome J. McGann has analyzed the "displacement" of the social into private and personal concerns in Romantic poetry in *The Romantic Ideology*. Analyzing Wordsworth's "The Ruined Cottage," McGann notes how an eighteenth-century commentator would have seen the poem's events "in social and economic terms, but Wordsworth is precisely interested in preventing—in actively countering—such a focus of concentration" (McGann 1983, 84). As McGann points out, this move is particularly noticeable in "Tintern Abbey," a poem in which the events of the French Revolution are subsumed under a meditation upon the landscape.

In "Tintern Abbey" and the "spots of time," Wordsworth embodies what Charles Rzepka has suggestively termed "visionary solipsism." In his analysis of visionary solipsism, Rzepka fills out in detail the broad outlines sketched by Raymond Williams and M. M. Bakhtin in their descriptions of the way in which nature came to be seen as the backdrop for the individuated consciousness. Romantic poetry records the "transformation of something outside the mind into something inside" (Rzepka 1986, 3). Rzepka's use of the opposition of inside and outside is problematic here, as it subscribes to one of the fundamental Romantic dichotomies, but his characterization of the dark side of this process raises important questions for this study:

> Feelings of emptiness and insubstantiality, and the corresponding derealization of the embodied self, both one's own and others'; this is the negative moment in the dialectic of visionary solipsism, the price that must be paid for identifying the self wholly with a mind that imaginatively appropriates the world as its own and transforms it so as to reflect the contours of its own inchoate being.(26)

Rzepka's description of visionary solipsism and McGann's description of the role of mind in "Tintern Abbey" show how this "imaginative appropriation" works. McGann points out how, in "Tintern Abbey," "what might have been a picture *in* the mind" is replaced with a "picture *of* the mind" (McGann 1983, 87). As both critics suggest, the landscape itself comes to speak indirectly of Wordsworth's autobiographical project. A meditation on the abbey becomes a meditation on the workings of the individual's mind in contemplation of its object. The landscape, the abbey, and his sister bespeak Wordsworth's own "inchoate being."

Developing McGann's and Rzepka's analyses further, I would underscore the social cost of Wordsworth's inward turn in "Tintern Abbey." Wordsworth excludes the social and historical context of his writing and makes all phenomena, his sister included, dependent upon his presence as the perceiving subject. The turn inward inherent in autobiography displaces the social and political content of poetry into a purely self-referential meditation. The cost of this move inward is a sense of radical alienation and isolation. Wordsworth escapes such feelings in "Tintern Abbey" by introducing his sister Dorothy as an "intimate and authoritative audience." Dorothy comes to stand for the community Wordsworth excluded in his solipsistic endeavor. Her presence helps rescue Wordsworth from the antisocial effects of visionary solipsism. She is identified with community and intimacy, just as the communal and the feminine were equated in Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*. However, far from representing community here, Wordsworth is in fact representing himself as a community of one. It is Dorothy Wordsworth who is the recorder of the community in her journals; William Wordsworth uses the community, and his sister Dorothy, as screens onto which to project his own desires.

The dynamics of his self-representation are the same as those analyzed by Mary Jacobus in the context of the story of Vaudracour and Julia, where the narrative is "a way of constituting Wordsworth himself as an autobiographical subject" (Jacobus 1984, 52). The emphasis in "Tintern Abbey" is upon the identity between Wordsworth and all he sees, not upon difference; the result is that "gender establishes identity by means of a difference that is fully excised. What we end up with is not difference...but the same: man to man" (Jacobus 1984, 53). In microcosm in "Tintern Abbey," and on a larger scale in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth finds his identity as a masculine, autonomous self confirmed by nature and by the feminine. Both the landscape and Dorothy function as mirrors for his construction of himself as an autobiographical subject.

Wordsworth thus uses Dorothy, just as he uses landscape, to stand for ideals of community and human intimacy that he himself values but that are undercut by his allegiance to individualism and by social change. At another level, however, Wordsworth is aware that these are threatened values. Michael Friedman has pointed out that at the time Wordsworth was writing, "modern capitalism was eroding traditional affective relationships" and replacing them with relations defined by the marketplace (Friedman 1979, 11). Wordsworth's "strong need for an enclosing, supporting community" as represented by rural villages in the Lake District,

or in his sister Dorothy, was a reaction against the kind of social transformation to which Friedman refers (1).

Wordsworth's representation of community is also bound up with his experiences during the French Revolution. Wordsworth here represents in his turn inward a reaction against the French Revolution that is typical of nineteenth-century British autobiographies. The social turmoil of the French Revolution engendered a profound mistrust of broad social movements and their consequent upheaval and made writers fearful of the attempt to imagine a more just order for society. Writers attempted an individual, instead of a collective, salvation through the writing of autobiography. This reaction to the French Revolution intensified the sense of isolation and estrangement already implicit in the idea of the unique individual, making it even more difficult for English autobiographers to represent political or social consequences in autobiography.

Wordsworth claimed that *The Prelude* was based upon himself alone. It is the idea of himself as an unprecedented, unique, and single self that provides both the subject and the justification for his autobiography, but it is also this idea that limits his work in damaging ways. Briefly stated, the ambition of representing himself as a unique, single individual makes it difficult for Wordsworth to assert a connection to any wider sense of human community. It is this limitation that underlies the "visionary dreariness" of the sight of the Cumberland girl. This is also a limitation implicit in the blind beggar episode, as we shall see later.

Wordsworth invokes the unity of his self, a self "single and of determined bounds" (7.640), at the beginning of *The Prelude* as a way of limiting a subject that threatens to stretch to infinity. He falls back upon the ideal of the autonomous and single self of the individual as a way of controlling the potential proliferation of subjects. In the same way Edmund Burke uses the individual as a fundamental principle in *A Philosophical Enquiry Concerning the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful.* Having admitted that his enquiry runs the danger of becoming a limitless quest, Burke says that his own individuality will provide a boundary for the otherwise formless subject.

> The matter might be pursued much further; but it is not the extent of the subject which must prescribe our bounds, for what subject does not branch out to infinity? It is in the nature of our particular scheme, and the single point of view in which we consider it, which ought to put a stop to our researches. (Burke 1958, 27)

For Burke, like Wordsworth, the unity embodied in the "single point of view" makes for a work that is itself "of determined bounds" and thus much more manageable than a purely philosophical and abstract topic that threatens to "branch out to infinity." Burke names here the fear that underlies visionary solipsism, the fear that subjectivity will erase all boundaries and stretch out to infinity. Wordsworth and Burke invoke the idea enshrined in copyright, the ideal of the author as a property of determined boundaries, as an antidote to visionary solipsism. Burke and Wordsworth seek a commanding presence in nature that would legislate their boundaries for them.

Both Wordsworth and Burke demonstrate great interest in the sublime, and this is because, as Frances Ferguson argues, "the sublime object is particularly important in attaching one to consciousness of oneself because...it gets defined, most notably by Kant, as what cannot stand alone without a supplementary human consciousness" (Ferguson 1977, 8). Thus the sublime landscape comes indirectly to confirm the presence of the human consciousness that gives it life. The sublime is an individualist category in that it defines the viewer as a supplement or surplus that cannot be encompassed. The role of the sublime or of landscape in *The Prelude* is to confirm the presence of Wordsworth as an individual, speaking indirectly of his own self. Wordsworth's single, unique self is the implied basis for the unity of *The Prelude*, just as it was for Burke's philosophical work.

There is, however, an implicit contradiction here in Burke's simultaneous claim to be considering the sublime from a "particular" and "single" point of view, and his ability to make generalizations about "our" ideas on the sublime on that basis. The ideal of uniqueness imperils the interchangeability of experience implied in the collective "we." The communal or social is in fact threatened by the premises of this individualist argument. Wordsworth shares with Burke a faith in his ability to generalize about human experience based upon his own experience, but as in Burke's case we can see a latent contradiction in his terms in *The Prelude*:

> Points have we all of us within our souls
> Where all stand single; this I feel, and make
> Breathings for incommunicable powers;
> But is not each man a memory to himself? (3.185–88)

The collective "we all" contrasts oddly with the claim that everyone is "single" in sharing the attribute of uniqueness. It is not quite clear how we can reconcile the singular individual and the plural collective.

Wordsworth's own uneasiness on this point is marked by two things. Firstly, Wordsworth feels he cannot embody what he is saying in language. His subject here "in the main / Lies far hidden from the reach of words" and so represents a purely subjective reality that cannot be embodied in public language. Defined as a surplus or surfeit, his individuality cannot be represented in a public vocabulary. He is forced therefore to "make breathings," not being able to speak articulately about the subject. He also ends this meditation with a question, a sign of his own uncertainty. He does not answer his own question, and turns away from such speculation back to his own autobiography, saying, "A Traveller I am / Whose tale is only of himself" (3.194–95). His subject here threatens to lead him to areas of unbounded speculation, so he returns to the certainty of his own single self. In the final analysis, Wordsworth is here only sure of the singleness of his own self, not of other people's selves.

The final question in these lines is, however, an odd and disturbing one. The image of each man being a "memory to himself" turns the exercise of writing autobiography into a self-reflexive exercise. The question mark turns what in other contexts is an affirmation of faith into a moment of doubt. This line raises the spectral image of an isolation that is made explicit in other places in *The Prelude*.

In the final book of *The Prelude* Wordsworth links the idea of singleness with the faculty of imagination and explicitly expresses the isolation that such a view implies.

> Here must though be, O Man!
> Power to thyself; no helper hast thou here;
> Here keepest thou in singleness thy state:
> No other can divide with thee thy work:
> No secondary hand can intervene
> To fashion this ability; 'tis thine,
> The prime and vital principle is thine
> In the recesses of thy nature, far
> From any reach of outward fellowship
> Else is not thine at all. (14.209–18)

The reference here to "the recesses of thy nature" recalls the feeling that Wordsworth had of his subject lying "far hidden from the reach of words." The idea of singleness for Wordsworth connotes a laudable individuality that lies beyond the reach of language. This quotation, however, underlines that not only does each person's singleness make it impossible

to convey subjective experience in language, it also cuts the individual off from other people, as one is "far / From the reach of outward fellowship." This phrase reworks the phrase *far hidden from the reach of words,* substituting the idea of "fellowship" or community for language.

Wordsworth's term for community, *fellowship,* invokes a range of connotations, from the religious associations of communion and holy orders to secular images of intimacy. Wordsworth invokes fellowship at the same time as he undermines its possibility in the face of singleness or individuality and suggests that his singleness makes fellowship an unobtainable ideal. He is experiencing the impossibility of representing community when one accepts the premise of the autonomous individual.

Wordsworth acknowledges in these lines how the ideal of the autonomous individual, who is "a power to himself" without reference to values of reciprocity or interdependence, threatens community. The celebration of isolate individualism can modulate very easily, as it did in the Victorian period, into laments for the alienation and isolation of the individual. Matthew Arnold's poetry, for instance, reworks such themes in ways that underscore their social cost. In later autobiographical writings, the double loss here of the presence of God and human fellowship is seen as cause for lament rather than celebration.

The idea that the individual has "recesses" into which he or she can retire from society is important for Wordsworth. The term indicates to what extent experiences of nature for Wordsworth are at base a retreat into secure recesses that ultimately turn experiences of nature into experiences of his self. Renato Poggioli has termed this Romantic form of pastoral "a new Narcissus" in which the "pastoral becomes the vehicle for solipsism" (Poggioli, 30). Despite his love of humanity, celebrated in book 8, one of his most frequent comments is how he left the noisy companionship of his peers to retire into the solitude of nature. For instance, Wordsworth says that when he was an undergraduate at Cambridge he often left the town to escape into solitude:

> Oft when the dazzling show no longer new
> Had ceased to dazzle, ofttimes did I quit
> My comrades, leave the crowd, buildings and groves
> And as I paced alone the level fields
> Far from those lovely sights and sounds sublime
> With which I had been conversant, the mind
> Drooped not; but there into herself returning,
> With prompt rebound seemed fresh as heretofore. (3.90–97)

Wordsworth's move away from "the crowd" is double here. He literally leaves the town of Cambridge, but this literal movement also stands for a more figurative retirement into his own mind. He returns in memory to the landscapes of his childhood, retiring into his own mind as an escape from the "dazzle" of urban life. The contrast between his solitude and the noise of the crowd, and the contrast between "the level fields" and the mountainous landscapes of the Lake District, help both reinforce Wordsworth's sense of his difference from his setting and reinforce his individuality.

Such passages as this help underscore how *The Prelude* is framed as an anti-urban retreat into an idealized memory of the landscape and corroborate Williams's account in *The Country and the City* of the inward turn of representations of nature. *The Prelude* begins as an escape from "the vast city" (1.7) and the "unnatural self" (1.21), casting the city as an antinatural, anti-individual force. Given England's increasing urbanization in the nineteenth century, such a frame places Wordsworth at odds with the major social developments of his time. Images of the landscape in *The Prelude* thus represent a deliberate turn away from England's rapid industrialization and urbanization, and make nature the site of nostalgia for a threatened sense of community or, in Wordsworth's terms, fellowship. Despite Jonathan Bate's recent attempt to rehabilitate Wordsworth for the ecological movement in *Romantic Ecology*, this is not a very promising basis for social criticism. Bate argues that Wordsworth's poetry embodies an anti-utilitarian vision of "human community" (Bate 1992, 29). Wordsworth's experience of nature, far from reinforcing community, seems more to emphasize his own singleness and isolation.

Wordsworth experiences the contrast between his singleness and the crowd as an affirmation of his self, as he does in the blind beggar episode in book 7. Just as his mind turned round "with the might of waters" in that episode, here he "returns into himself," experiencing his individuality in opposition to the "dazzle" of the crowd. Wordsworth's sense of himself, then, depends upon a contrast between his consciousness and its social setting. His individuality is asserted by a deliberate rejection of the social context and a rechanneling of his energies into internal meditation. Wordsworth here enacts the displacement of the social to which McGann has referred.

I wish here to examine the movement of thought in the blind beggar episode in some detail, as it will serve as a model for the larger pattern behind *The Prelude*, a model that pits Wordsworth's sense of himself as a single individual against the noise and dazzle of the crowd. Wordsworth

opens the episode with an explicit contrast between himself, the solitary individual, and the crowd:

> How oft, amid those overflowing streets,
> Have I gone forward with the crowd, and said
> Unto myself, "The face of every one
> That passes by me is a mystery!"
> Thus have I looked, nor ceased to look, oppressed
> By thoughts of what and whither, when and how
> Until the shapes before my eyes became
> A second-sight procession, such as glides
> over still mountains, or appears in dreams;
> And once, far-travelled in such a mood, beyond
> The realm of common indication, lost
> Amid the moving pageant, I was smitten
> Abruptly, with the view (a sight not rare)
> Of a blind Beggar who, with upright face,
> Stood, propped against a wall, upon his chest
> Wearing a written paper, to explain
> His story, whence he came, and who he was.
> Caught by the spectacle my mind turned round
> As with the might of waters; an apt type
> This label seemed of the utmost we can know
> Both of ourselves and of the universe;
> And on the shape of that unmoving man,
> His steadfast face and sightless eyes, I gazed
> As if admonished from another world. (7.626–49)

Just as Wordsworth finds in the figure of the blind beggar an "apt type" for the human condition, so for the purposes of this study the interaction between Wordsworth and his subject here will stand as a typical moment in nineteenth-century autobiography. Wordsworth in this episode reaches a limit that informs all the autobiographical narratives I will analyze in this study, as he tries to come to terms with the presence of a larger society but is forced to generalize about the human condition instead in terms of individual figures with whom he can sympathize on a personal level. We can see in Wordsworth's reactions to the mass of humanity an implicit difficulty that will become crucial to Victorian autobiography. Stated bluntly, the problem is that Wordsworth, as a solitary individual, can sympathize only with other individuals, not with large

groups of people, who must be dehumanized under terms such as *crowd* or *mass*.

It is the single figure of the beggar who attracts his attention in this episode, a figure who in his affliction is a more obvious candidate for sympathy than the crowd passing him by. Wordsworth experiences the crowd only as an "oppression" and sees the faces he meets as a "mystery" rather than as a "volume" telling its own story, as did the faces of his neighbors at home (5.67). The crowd loses its tangibility for Wordsworth, becoming a product of the imagination like a "second sight procession" seen in a dream. In this state of mind Wordsworth loses any sense of connection with the people he sees, being "beyond the reach" of the usual human pathos that engages his imagination.

In his description Wordsworth's actual movement through the London streets becomes a metaphor for how far he has "travelled" from the love of humanity that he celebrates in the next book, book 8. In this frame of mind he is "smitten" by the beggar like a physical blow, an abrupt admonition for his lack of humanity. However, as Wordsworth makes clear in the lines that precede this episode, the crowd is in some ways essential for his appreciation of the single figure of the beggar, acting as it does as a contrasting background.

> As the black storm upon the mountaintop
> Sets off the sunbeam in the valley, so
> That huge fermenting mass of humankind
> Serves as a solemn background, or relief,
> To single forms and objects, whence they draw,
> For feeling and contemplative regard,
> More inherent liveliness and power. (7.619–25)

The "single" figure of the beggar is in Wordsworth's account in a parasitic relationship with the crowd, drawing "liveliness and power" from the contrast between his individuality and the "fermenting mass." If it were not for the presence of the crowd, the beggar would not stand out so clearly. However, it is not the beggar in fact who is feeding off the contrast here, but Wordsworth, whose presence is all but excised by the anonymity of the phrase on how the "huge and fermenting mass" serves as a background "for feeling and contemplative regard." The presence of a viewer is introduced parenthetically and barely interrupts the flow of the verse, but it signals the all but invisible presence of Wordsworth as the third term in this relationship. It is Wordsworth himself, the only other

single figure in this scene, who derives "liveliness and power" from the contrast between the beggar and the crowd. However, Wordsworth does not name himself as the beneficiary of this contrast, because he himself feels guilty about the use to which he is putting the crowd.

Wordsworth uses the words *smitten* and *admonished* to describe the effect of this scene upon him, words that suggest retribution for a guilty act. Wordsworth feels himself to have done violence to the humanity of the crowd, and experiences the sight of the beggar as a return upon himself of his own thoughtlessness. Wordsworth obviously feels uneasy with his lack of sympathy for the crowd that passes him by, and he is distressed that with their faces, unlike the faces he knows in his home district, he can connect no story. The beggar strikes him with particular force because, unlike the "mysterious" faces passing him by, he wears his autobiography upon his chest for all to see. However, the beggar does not here act as a bridge between Wordsworth and the crowd, but rather reminds him of "another world" quite apart from the London streets through which he is walking. Rather than make Wordsworth realize the humanity of the crowd, the sight of the beggar reinforces his sense of separation from the world of the city.

Wordsworth's primary experience in this episode is one of limitation. In this I agree with Paul Jay's analysis of this moment in *Being in the Text*. Jay points out that "Wordsworth inscribes his sense of the limits of his autobiographical project in the 'emblem' which is the Beggar's note" (Jay 1984, 90–91), so that the beggar becomes an external representation of an internal limitation. However, I would amend Jay's further comments, as he links the idea of limitation with his argument that Wordsworth in *The Prelude* is engaged in a process of limitless self-analysis. Jay says that the "limitations serve less to cut off the project than to interminably extend it" (64). I disagree fundamentally with this point. It is difficult to see how a limitation could serve to "interminably extend" an analysis. Rather, such a moment as this shows the outer limit of Wordsworth's self, and thus of his autobiography. It is my argument that Wordsworth at this moment experiences here as a limitation precisely the aspect of his subject that he elsewhere celebrates, that his "project" concerns only himself.

Far from seeing his self-analysis as limitless, Wordsworth invokes the unity and boundedness of his self as a way of defining his subject and setting limits on the scope of his project. Wordsworth chooses to write about himself because he feels therein lies a certain and definite subject that will allow him to hone his own poetic powers before moving on to