The Fall-Redemption Theme and the Function of the “Spots of Time” in Wordsworth’s *Prelude*

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**Abstract**

This paper discusses in detail the fall-redemption theme and the function of the “spots of time” in Wordsworth’s autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*. I argue that, first, the fall-redemption theme found in the spots of time is not confined to Books X and XI of the poem, but extends to the last two books as well. Secondly, the renovating power of the spots of time passages works thematically and structurally on two levels to restore the poet’s own personal spiritual self and to redeem humanity.

**Keywords**  
*The Prelude*, spots of time, spiritual restoration, fall-redemption theme, human redemption

In Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, the “spots of time” passages in Book XI are often read in the context of the fall-redemption theme. For most readers, this theme seems to be confined to Books X and XI where the poet describes his mental crisis in the aftermath of the French Revolution and later recovery. A closer reading of the poem, however, shows that the fall-redemption theme not only extends to the last two books of *The Prelude*, but must be placed in the larger context of *The Recluse* for which *The Prelude* serves as a preparatory work. In this paper, therefore, I would like to examine in detail, first, the fall-redemption theme in the last four books of *The Prelude*, and second, the function of the “spots of time” in relation to this theme.

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1 All references are to the 1805 *Prelude* unless otherwise stated.
I. The Fall-Redemption Structure and Theme

In 1805, Wordsworth expanded the two-part *Prelude* into thirteen books and moved the “spots of time” doctrine and the two examples to Book XI. With this change the “spots of time” passages took on a new structural significance and new meanings. But between the two-part and the full-length versions, there is another stage of composition—the five-book *Prelude*—which, although it does not exist in fair copy, still presents a unified structure and theme (Jonathan Wordsworth, “Five-Book *Prelude*” 1, 20). In this text the “spots of time” passages serve as the coda to the poem in which the theme of crisis first emerged. The cause of the crisis, which concerns the imagination, however, is not clearly given. The manuscript reads thus:

The unremitting warfare from the first
Waged with this faculty, its various foes
Which for the most continues to increase.
With growing life and burthens which it brings
Of petty duties and degrading cares,
Labour and penury, disease, and grief,
Which to one object chain the impoverished mind
Enfeebled and [ ? ], vexing strife
At home, and want of pleasure and repose,
And all that eats away the genial spirits,
May be fit matter for another song;
Nor less the misery brought into the world
By degradation of this power misplaced
And misemployed [? where] [ ? ? ]
Blind [ ? ], ambition obvious,
And all the superstitions of this life
A mournful catalogue.2

The passage presents to two reasons for the impairment of the imagination, yet the

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first—the pettiness and burden of social life—is brushed aside with the excuse that it is “fit matter for another song,” and Wordsworth is not at all specific about the second reason: how is the imagination degraded by having its power “misplaced” and “misemployed”? Commenting on these lines, Jonathan Wordsworth states: “Neither here nor in later versions of The Prelude is [Wordsworth] very clear as to the terms in which he should describe ‘Imagination Impaired.’ He puts his emphasis on no single factor or cause; nor is he content to show the process as of unrelieved deterioration” (“Five-Book Prelude” 18). Despite his vagueness about the cause, the crisis-restoration structure is established, and the “renovating virtue” of the “spots of time” is now overtly aimed at something larger than the “trivial occupations and the round / Of ordinary intercourse” in the 1799 text.

The crisis theme, when re-introduced in the 1805 Prelude, has undergone a change. To begin with, there is an elaboration on the cause of the imagination’s impairment. We now find it to be the influence of Godwinian rationalism and the “infection of the age”—judging nature by the picturesque aesthetic:

There comes a time when reason—not the grand
And simple reason, but that humbler power
Which carries on its no inglorious work
By logic and minute analysis—
Is of all idols that which pleases most
The growing mind [...].

[...]

[...] danger cannot but attend
Upon a function rather proud to be
The enemy of falsehood, than the friend
Of truth—to sit in judgement than to feel.
(XI. 123-36)

O soul of Nature, that dost overflow
With passion and with life, what feeble men
Walk on this earth, how feeble have I been
When thou wert in thy strength! Nor this through stroke
Of human suffering, such as justifies
Remissness and inaptitude of mind,
But through presumption, even in pleasure pleased
Unworthily, disliking here, and there
Liking, by rules of mimic art transferred
To things above all art. But more—for this
Although a strong infection of the age,
Was never much my habit—giving way
To a comparison of scene with scene,
Bent overmuch on superficial things,
Pampering myself with meagre novelties
Of colour and proportion, to the moods
Of Nature, and the spirit of the place,
Less sensible. (XI. 146-63)

Wordsworth goes on to provide another, “more subtle and less easily explained,” reason for the injury of the imagination—the “twofold frame of body and of mind” in which the eye becomes master of the heart.

With a new explanation for the crisis of the imagination, the “spots of time” sequence is now positioned in Book XI, under the rubric “Imagination, How Impaired and Restored,” to redress the problems mentioned above. But before the appearance of the “spots of time,” Wordsworth has already tried to tell us how his imaginative power was restored. First he says that he would gladly “enter upon the abstruser argument” of the means by which nature renders the senses subservient to “the great ends of liberty and power.” As we wait for further elucidation of these rather abstract lines, however, he abandons the subject altogether by repeating what he says in the five-book Prelude: “But this is matter for another song.” Then he takes Mary, whose innocence has exempted her from a rational judgment of the world, as an example of what his younger self was, and tells us that whatever intellectual malady he suffered from was temporary, because

I had felt
Too forcibly, too early in my life,
Visitings of imaginative power
For this to last: I shook the habit off
Entirely and for ever, and again
In Nature’s presence stood, as I stand now,
A sensitive, and a creative soul.

(XI. 250-56)

Kenneth Johnston considers these passages to be “two preparatory steps, neither conclusive but both tending to lessen our sense of the depth of his crisis, thus allowing the spots to work more freely” (196). It is, however, precisely this “cushioning” effect that Jonathan Wordsworth complains against in his reading of the fall-redemption theme in the 1805 Prelude, for it mars the force of the “spots of time,” and he asserts that “[f]inally the poem depends more on Wordsworth’s sense of having been, and stayed, a chosen son, than it does on the Miltonic structure that he tries—sometimes quite hard—to impose” (Jonathan Wordsworth, Borders 276). That the thirteen-book Prelude is based on the Miltonic structure of innocence-fall-redemption has been pointed out by several critics, including Jonathan Wordsworth.3 Described in Book XI, the fall seems to result from what we have pointed out above—Godwinian rationalism and the picturesque. Yet it is more than these.

In his discussion of the five-book Prelude, Jonathan Wordsworth notes: “In order to lead up to its conclusion in the restorative ‘spots of time’ the five-book Prelude had made a not altogether convincing attempt to portray ‘Imagination Impaired’; the lines in question lack credibility because of their failure to relate the faltering of imaginative power to the external events, social and political, which had in fact been its cause” (“Five-Book Prelude” 24). Exactly why Wordsworth decided to expand the five-book Prelude we do not know, but in the expansion the incredibility that Jonathan Wordsworth points out is obviously dealt with, for whereas the five-book text includes only Wordsworth’s trip to France in 1790 with very slight political implications, the 1805 poem now gives a full account, in Books IX and X, of his involvement in the

3 See, for example, Abrams’s Natural Supernaturalism, and Lindenberger’s On Wordsworth’s Prelude.
“external events”—the French Revolution. While the reasons given for the impairment of the imagination in Book XI are valid and genuine, in Books IX and X, we find that Wordsworth’s intellectual fall stems from his inordinate hopes in the French Revolution, which led him to a blind acceptance of Godwinian doctrines of reason, resulting in a “misplacement” of the imagination. A passage in Book X further illustrates the Godwinian influence:

This was the time when, all things tending fast
To depravation, the philosophy
That promised to abstract the hopes of man
Out of his feelings, to be fixed thenceforth
For ever in a purer element,
Found ready welcome. Tempting region that
For zeal to enter and refresh herself,
Where passions had the privilege to work,
And never hear the sound of their own names […].
(X. 805-13)

In such a frame of mind, Wordsworth attaches his “noble aspiration” towards human reformation to Godwin’s philosophy, which causes him to deviate from the right path:

[…] I was perplexed and sought
To accomplish the transition by such means
As did not lie in nature, sacrificed
The exactness of a comprehensive mind
To scrupulous and microscopic views
That furnished out materials for a work
Of false imagination, placed beyond
The limits of experience and of truth.
(X. 841-48)

This perhaps explains the difficult lines in the five-book Prelude—“[…] the misery brought into the world / By degradation of this power misplaced / And
misemployed.”

The title of Book XI suggests that the restoration theme begins with this book, yet Wordsworth in the last part of Book X already tells us that with the help of Coleridge, Dorothy and nature, he finally recovers from his disillusionment with the French Revolution. This kind of treatment baffles Jonathan Wordsworth. Added to his puzzle here is Wordsworth’s presentation of the cause of the fall and the delayed appearance of the “spots of time” passages. He thus asks a series of questions related to the fall-redemption theme: “If the crisis of spring 1796 is the central Fall of the full-length Prelude, and if the poet’s imagination [...] recovers so fully through the ministrations of Dorothy and nature that we are told at this stage in the poem that he has been given ‘knowledge full of peace [...] never to be disturbed,’ what is to be the function of the ‘spots of time’” (Borders 270-71)? He also wonders “why after trying so hard to manufacture a Fall in the five-Book poem Wordsworth should have made so little of it in 1805 when he had one ready to hand” (Borders 276). Various evidence leads Jonathan Wordsworth to conclude that “the paradise-lost-and-regained structure of The Prelude is never very marked” (Borders 276). He then asks why “aside from the vying with Milton, [Wordsworth] wanted to impose on his work a pattern of Fall and redemption” (Borders 277). One of the reasons, he suggests, “may be that he was acting out his wish that present loss too should lead to renewal” (Borders 277), for in 1804 to 1805, Wordsworth was suffering the losses described in the “Immortality Ode” and in the passage inserted between the two “spots of time” examples:

[...] the hiding places of my power
Seem open, I approach, and then they close;
I see by glimpses now, when age comes on
May scarcely see at all; and I would give
While yet we may, as far as words can give,
A substance and a life to what I feel:
I would enshrine the spirit of the past
For future restoration. (XI. 335-42)

Another reason for Wordsworth’s imposing the fall-redemption structure on The
Jonathan Wordsworth finds in “Tintern Abbey” in which Wordsworth works out just such a pattern of innocence, loss and higher vision. Yet in 1804, five years after Wordsworth had written “Tintern Abbey,” his situation changed and the pattern was no longer relevant. However, the poem had become “a standard against which new positions had to be measured,” and Jonathan Wordsworth concludes that “it is not surprising that Wordsworth should wish to impose its no longer relevant structure upon his life,” and that he should fail to do so (Borders 277).

Such biographical explanations are reasonable. Yet we would like to suggest another reason for Wordsworth’s choice of the fall-redemption structure, which has to do with the relationship between The Prelude and The Recluse. Jonathan Wordsworth is certainly right in saying that this structure is somewhat contrived, and he also attributes it to the tension between Wordsworth’s “sense of loss and his obstinate sense of the elect” (Borders 277). No doubt both of these sentiments are involved, yet we would like to argue that the tension stems from a larger cause—the conflict between Wordsworth’s egotistical tendencies and his social conscience.

In my article on the traveller motif in Wordsworth’s poems, I have discussed the conflict between Wordsworth’s penchant towards meditative and lyrical verse and his sense of social responsibility (Yu, “Walking” 129). In many of Wordsworth’s poems—The Prelude, for instance, we see an internalisation, which signifies the spirituality that Wordsworth endeavours to achieve through the imagination. This internalisation, along with the sense of solipsism found in most of his visionary experiences in nature, illustrates Wordsworth’s tendency towards the “egotistical sublime.” Nevertheless, many of his poems also demonstrate a transition from potential solipsism to the communal and the public spheres, and even to nation-building. This transition exemplifies the poet’s attempt to resolve the conflict between the egotistical and the social in The Prelude (Yu, “Walking” 129). The question that pertains to our study here, however, is how this transition is represented in the fall-redemption theme? And how do the “spots of time” relate to either the conflict or its solution?

During the composition of The Recluse, Wordsworth several times experienced
frustration in proceeding with the poem, which generated a need in him to establish his poetic identity, and hence the 1799 Prelude is permeated with both a sense of place and a sense of election. When this early version was extended, new motifs and themes emerged, yet the “chosen son” motif remained and was incorporated into the new structure. In addition to this sense of election, the opening book of the 1805 Prelude shows Wordsworth’s intention to compete with his literary predecessors. At the very beginning of the poem Wordsworth not only alludes to Paradise lost—“The earth is all before me”—but also tries to set up the prophet-poet image which becomes increasingly important in the poem:

To the open fields I told  
A prophecy: poetic numbers came  
Spontaneously, and clothed in priestly robe  
My spirit, thus singled out, as it might seem,  
For holy services. (I. 59-63)

He then searches for a suitable topic for his “glorious” poetic task, and finally rests with “some philosophic song,” referring, surely, to The Recluse:

My last and favorite aspiration—then  
I yearn towards some philosophic song  
Of truth that cherishes our daily life,  
With meditations passionate from deep  
Recesses in man’s heart, immortal verse  
Thoughtfully fitted to the Orphean lyre [...].  
(I. 229-34)

Kenneth Johnston notices that the list of heroic figures Wordsworth considers for the topic of his epic before he decides on the “philosophic song” are all “single, solitary avengers of justice returning from exile to alter the course of decadent history” (178). These figures imply the nature of the task Wordsworth has in mind—a philosophical poem which would bring substantial changes to human society and
However, Wordsworth soon finds himself failing in this task: “But from this awful burden I full soon / Take refuge, and beguile myself with trust / That mellower years will bring a riper mind / And clearer insight” (Prelude I. 235-38). After lines of self-reproach and despondency, the poem is grafted onto the 1799 Prelude and the sequence of Wordsworth’s childhood memories. What is paradoxical is that when Wordsworth turns from the “philosophic poem” to the narrative of the self to either escape from the failure of proceeding with The Recluse, or wait for a “riper mind,” he has actually found a heroic argument—the autonomy of the imaginative mind—comparable to the accomplishment of both his poetic predecessors and the historical figures he summons. The triumph of the mind is at the same time an affirmation of Wordsworth’s poetic identity, which is proclaimed with bold words in the concluding lines of the poem:

Prophets of Nature, we to them will speak
A lasting inspiration, sanctified
By reason and by truth; what we have loved
Others will love, and we may teach them how:
Instruct them how the mind of man becomes
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth
On which he dwells, above this frame of things
[...]
In beauty exalted, as it is itself
Of substance and of fabric more divine.

(XIII. 442-52)

The association between the heroic figures Wordsworth lists and his final choice of a philosophic song suggests that he regards the poet as a hero whose enterprise is the redemption of mankind by means of poetry. Although The Prelude is not the intended epic, this heroic sense of salvation can be found in the later books of the poem, and it is reinforced by the “chosen son” motif. This probably explains why the motif remained significant when Wordsworth expanded the two-part Prelude into
thirteen books. The sense of election not only predominates in the opening book of the 1805 *Prelude*, but also becomes what Wordsworth in Book XI claims, a major factor that contributes to the poet’s restoration from his intellectual disease: “I had felt / Too forcibly, too early in my life, / Visitings of imaginative power / For this to last” (XI. 250-53). And this is what leads to Jonathan Wordsworth’s remark about the poet’s “obstinate sense of the elect.” Now we can see that there is a reason for such obstinacy, for the sense of the elect is closely related to Wordsworth’s poetic identity, and this identity, seen in the poem’s development, becomes increasingly aligned with the poet’s moral and social responsibility after the French Revolution. In Book X, it is precisely by reminding her brother of his poetic identity that Dorothy helps him recover from his mental crisis: “She, in the midst of all, preserved me still / A poet, made me seek beneath that name / My office upon earth, and nowhere else” (X. 918-20). It is also worth noticing that in the same book, his account of how he learns about Robespierre’s death is preceded by a chance visit to the grave of William Taylor, headmaster of Hawkshead Grammar School where Wordsworth attended. The inscription on the tombstone is the last stanza of the epitaph that closes Thomas Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. Upon reading these lines, Wordsworth reflects:

> He loved the poets, and if now alive  
> Would have loved me, as one not destitute  
> Of promise, nor belying the kind hope  
> Which he had formed when I at his command  
> Began to spin at first, my toilsome songs.  
>  
> (X. 510-14)

These thoughts reveal not only his teacher’s confidence in his poetic talent, but also his own aspiration, which servers as a contrast to the anonymity of the youth described in Gray’s epitaph: “Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth / A youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown” (127-28). And they remind us, too, of his early sense of election and the dedication passage in Book IV. Placed just before the news of
Robespierre’s death, the visit to Taylor’s grave implies that the Revolution that has ended in bloody terror and dictatorship shall be replaced by a different means of reformation, and it is the philosophic poetry represented by *The Recluse*.

Wordsworth’s poetic identity, therefore, is inseparable from the author of *The Recluse*. The kind of poet he aspires to be is nothing less than what Coleridge dubs him, a “philosopher-poet.” Now we remember that *The Prelude* is a preparation for *The Recluse*. Yet in what sense is *The Prelude* a prefatory work? In the Preface to the 1814 *Excursion*, Wordsworth tells us that before he proceeded to compose *The Recluse*, he wished to “take a review of his own mind, and examine how far Nature and Education had qualified him for such an employment,” and that *The Prelude* was undertaken as “subsidiary” to this preparation (*The Poems* II, 36). Of course Wordsworth’s remark was uttered in hindsight, yet the fact that *The Prelude* owes its inception to the frustration of composing *The Recluse*, and that there are frequent allusions to this work in *The Prelude*, suggests that an intricate relationship exists between the two works. The dynamics between the two are fully reflected in the compositional history of *The Recluse* with a “three-part pattern”—when Wordsworth found it difficult to get on with *The Recluse*, he turned towards the poem on his own life; working on the autobiographic poem then revived him and enabled him to resume *The Recluse* (Johnston xiv). Such a pattern was repeated three times in the compositional history of this philosophical poem. That Wordsworth should have wanted to turn toward himself in the face of the compositional crises of *The Recluse* is certainly understandable. But why was the writing of *The Prelude* an impetus for him to carry on with the other poem? Other than the reason that *The Prelude* confirmed his poetic talent and poetic identity, is it possible that working on *The Prelude* temporarily removed part of the burden that *The Recluse* placed on him? And if so, how?

We have just said that *The Prelude* was written to testify that Wordsworth was qualified for the task of composing *The Recluse*. Now we shall try to find out what was required of him in undertaking this task. Wordsworth himself gives us some clue at the beginning of the 1805 *Prelude*:
When, as becomes a man who would prepare
For such a glorious work, I through myself
Make rigorous inquisition, the report
Is often chearing, for I neither seem
To lack that first great gift, the vital soul,
Nor general truths which are themselves a sort
Of elements and agents, under-powers,
Subordinate helpers of the living mind.
Nor am I naked in external things,
Forms, images, nor numerous other aids
Of less regard, though won perhaps with toil,
And needful to build up a poet’s praise.

(I. 157-68)

Yet these qualities are somewhat abstract. When Wordsworth began the 1799 Prelude, the scheme for The Recluse had already been sketched out. In 1804, hearing that Coleridge was ill, Wordsworth twice, in desperate words, implored Coleridge to send him the notes for The Recluse, suggesting that certain ideas had been formed, although it probably also means that Wordsworth relied much on his friend for philosophising.

Concerning The Recluse, the most detailed outline for the work appears in a letter from Coleridge to Wordsworth, which was written in response to The Excursion after its publication in 1814. The outline is too long to be quoted in full, so I will try to paraphrase it. Coleridge says that he has expected the philosophical poem to consist of three parts; it would open with a meditation on “the faculties of Man in the abstract” with a view to repudiate the associationist theories of Locke and “the Mechanic Dogmatists,” and to demonstrate that the mind holds sway over the senses and not vice versa. In the next stage of the poem’s development, Wordsworth is to concentrate on

4 6 March 1804 and 29 March 1804, Wordsworth’s Letters, Early Years, 452, 464. In the first letter, Wordsworth writes: “I am very anxious to have your notes for the Recluse. I cannot say how much importance I attach to this [...]” And in the second letter he says that when he heard the news of Coleridge’s illness, he had, among other thoughts, thought that “I would gladly have given 3 fourths of my possessions for your letter on the Recluse at that time.”
“the Human Race in the concrete,” exposing the fallen state of man throughout civilisation, and pointing out a manifest scheme for the redemption of mankind, as well as for a reconciliation between man and nature. The poem is finally to conclude “by a grand didactic swell on the necessary identity of a true Philosophy with true Religion” (Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, IV, 574-75). Of course we cannot be sure whether Coleridge’s outline is exactly the same as what the two friends drew up for *The Recluse* in 1797 to 1798, but the difference, if any, cannot have been substantial. This can be attested by the Prospectus to *The Recluse* and the only complete part of *The Recluse—The Excursion*. *The Excursion* obviously did not live up to Coleridge’s expectation; nevertheless, we do find it conforming more or less to the outline Coleridge finally provided his friend with, except that the poem was written in a style and towards a direction that were certainly Wordsworth’s own. In the Prospectus to *The Recluse*, we find that the three-part argument brought forth in Coleridge’s outline corresponds roughly to the three subjects *The Recluse* purports to dwell on: Man, Nature and Human Life. In it Wordsworth proclaims that he is not only to look into the mind of man and to sing a spousal song for the consummation of mind and nature, but also to turn his eye on

the tribes
And fellowships of man, and see ill-sights
Of madding passions mutually inflamed;
[To] hear Humanity in fields and groves
Pipe solitary anguish; or [to] hang
Brooding above the fierce confederate storm
Of sorrow, barricadoed evermore
Within the walls of cities [...]. (73-80)

Thomas McFarland also points out that

Wordsworth’s “On Man” corresponds to Coleridge’s “first to have meditated the faculties of Man in the abstract.” The third part of Wordsworth’s equation, “On Human Life” corresponds to Coleridge’s understanding that “you would take the Human Race in
the concrete.” And the middle term of Wordsworth’s progression, “On Nature,” is rendered by Coleridge’s plan for “Reconciliation from this Enmity with Nature.” (609)

Johnston has remarked that the lines about “Human Life” are “unremittingly negative,” just as “the the Mind of Man section is too expansively grandiose, and the natural beauty section too confidently tempting” (97). And he sees such imbalance as resulting from a “representation of general human experience in the terms of Wordsworth’s own individual experiences” (98). We would like to add, however, that such imbalance is perhaps also due to Wordsworth’s tendency to see the triad of man, nature and society in a fall-redemption relationship; that is, after the French Revolution, it is perhaps impossible to treat the three aspects on equal terms, and Wordsworth inevitably sees the mind of man (imagination) and nature as the solution to a “fallen” society.

Coleridge’s plan put down in the letter also roughly corresponds to what is recorded in Table Talk (31 July 1832). The aspects that the two share are, firstly, the denunciation of Lockean empiricism’s placing the senses over the mind; secondly, the description of human society and civilisation; and lastly, the process of redemption. All these Wordsworth seems to have kept in mind throughout the career of The Recluse. Commenting on Coleridge’s 1832 outline, Mary Moorman states that except for the part about Wordsworth’s delivering “upon authority a system of philosophy,” the outline does show what Wordsworth has achieved: “Parts of The Prelude and The Excursion do reveal a ‘Juvenalian spirit,’ and in The Ruined Cottage Wordsworth had taught something like a doctrine of redemption through the quiet acceptance of suffering” (364). What Wordsworth has done, however, is more than what Moorman notices.

But let us first return to our question of exactly how Wordsworth would see himself as qualified to write The Recluse. Most likely, he would expect himself to deal with the aforementioned issues outlined by his friend. In her comment, Moorman also points out that “the field of [Wordsworth’s] vision was primarily his own mental experience, with whatever understanding of ‘Nature, Man and Society’ arose out of that” (364). This view is shared by Stephen Gill, who remarks that
Wordsworth had no “system of philosophy” to deliver, and that his poetry is “exploratory of what he does know and can trust” (145–46). Coleridge also once wrote to Wordsworth, saying: “You were a great Poet by inspirations, & in the Moments of revelation, but [...] you were a thinking feeling Philosopher habitually— [...] your Poetry was your Philosophy under the action of strong winds of Feeling—a sea rolling high” (28 July 1803, *Collected Letters*, II, 957). His discerning words not merely explain why Wordsworth was unable to accomplish *The Recluse*, but also suggest that a personal context would probably be more congenial to Wordsworth’s expression of philosophical ideas pertaining to “Man, Nature and Human Life.” As Wordsworth floundered with *The Recluse*, he three times stopped working on the poem and turned to the poem on himself. We have earlier entertained the possibility that such diversions might have relieved part of the burden of writing *The Recluse*. Could it be because he had transferred some of the issues he was to address in *The Recluse* to *The Prelude*? Taking up *The Prelude*, Wordsworth was not entirely shunning the difficulties *The Recluse* posed. He was in effect shifting the problem to a context more immediate and personal than that of *The Recluse*.

It is worth noticing that in both of Coleridge’s outlines for *The Recluse* previously mentioned, human redemption is a major theme. One of the purposes of *The Recluse*, we remember, is to address those who, “in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution, have thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind” (Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, I, 527). These words are reminiscent of the Solitary’s despondency in *The Excursion*, as well as Wordsworth’s own experience in the aftermath of the Revolution depicted in Book X of *The Prelude*, which is vividly presented by the “court” metaphor:

Thus I fared,
Dragging all passions, notions, shapes of faith,
Like culprits to the bar, suspiciously
Calling the mind to establish in plain day
Her titles and her honours, now believing,
Now disbelieving, endlessly perplexed
With impulse, motive, right and wrong, the ground

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Of moral obligation—what the rule
And what the sanction—till, demanding proof,
And seeking it in everything, I lost
All feeling of conviction, and, in fine,
Sick, wearied out with contrarieties,
Yielded up moral questions in despair,
And for my future studies, as the sole
Employment of the inquiring faculty,
Turned towards mathematics, and their clear
And solid evidence. (X. 888-904)

_The Prelude_, of course, is an autobiography, and it is addressed to Coleridge rather than to disillusioned intellectuals, yet the thematic parallel between certain parts of both _The Prelude_ and _The Excursion_ and the outline for _The Recluse_ indicates that although Wordsworth was not the philosopher-poet Coleridge had imagined, and was not able to carry through the project they had conceived together, he did make an effort to steer his poetry in that direction, and this is reflected not just in the _Recluse_ fragments, but also in _The Prelude_. Johnston certainly shows his insight when he remarks that

[I]t is neither accurate nor useful [...] to say that Wordsworth created _The Prelude_, the quintessentially Romantic master-piece of self-reflection, accidentally while in pursuit of a goal somehow unsuited to his talents or less typically Romantic in its representation of imagination in social forms. Without the ideal of _The Recluse_, there was no need for _The Prelude_. (Johnston xvi)

Going back to Jonathan Wordsworth’s observation that the fall-redemption theme in _The Prelude_ is contrived and forced upon the poem’s structure, we can now see that this is due partly to its intriguing relation to the scheme for _The Recluse_, which Wordsworth tries to translate into personal terms. In other words, part of the themes and motifs intended for _The Recluse_ might very well have been transferred to the poem on himself and defined by his own experiences.

Before we further discuss how Wordsworth blends the agenda for _The Recluse_
with his autobiography, let us first re-examine the structure of *The Prelude*. There is no doubt that the overarching organising principle is based on the cycle of vision-loss-restoration. Roughly speaking, the opening two books give an account of childhood visions and the guiding influence of nature, which are followed by eight books describing how, in the course of his residence\(^5\) at Cambridge (education), London (civilisation), and France (French Revolution), his early visionary power has gradually been impaired. The last part of the poem focuses on the theme of restoration, which formally comprises the last three books of the poem, although the theme is also briefly taken up in the last section of Book X. Compared with the two-part or the five-book versions, the full-length *Prelude* is certainly much broader in its scope; it is no longer simply a quest for poetic origin (1799 version) or a presentation of his poetic education received from nature and books (five-book version). As Wordsworth launches his poetry into human civilisation represented by London and the Revolution, he is raising the poem above personal loss and gain to social and historical levels, and the innocence-fall-redemption structure is imposed upon the poem with as much regard for social considerations as personal ones. Wordsworth’s communion with nature now has a philanthropic meaning—Love of Nature Leading to Love of Man—as the title of Book VIII indicates. The inclusion of the Revolution also brings in the topic of human suffering and the boundless hope raised by revolutionary enthusiasms exquisitely represented by the sight of a hunger-stricken girl Wordsworth and Beaupuy meet on the road:

And when we chanced  
One day to meet a hunger-bitten girl  
Who crept along fitting her languid self  
Unto a heifer’s motion—by a cord  
Tied to her arm, and picking thus from the lane  
Its sustenance, while the girl with her two hands  
Was busy knitting in a heartless mood  
Of solitude—and at the sight my friend

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\(^5\) Johnston has pointed out that the structuring unit of *The Prelude* is “residence.” See *Wordsworth and The Recluse*, passim.
In agitation said, “’Tis against that
Which we are fighting,” I with him believed
Devoutly that a spirit was abroad
Which could not be withstood, that poverty,
At least like this, would in a little time
Be found no more[...]. (IX. 511-24)

And Wordsworth goes on to envision a future without suffering and injustice. The fall depicted in the poem thus not only involves that of the autobiographic hero, but also the whole disillusionment of the Revolutionary generation, and the restoration is one aimed at all men alike. The scope of the 1805 Prelude now comes much closer than those of its prior versions to the scheme for The Recluse as Wordsworth makes an attempt to present his life in relation to the three topics broached in the Prospectus to The Recluse—“Man, Nature, and Human Life.”

Earlier we pointed out that Wordsworth’s recovery from his mental crisis is at the same time a reaffirmation of his poetic identity. With this reaffirmation Wordsworth launches into the enterprise of human redemption through the imaginative power, which is described in the last three books of The Prelude. This adequately explains Jonathan Wordsworth’s perplexity as to why Wordsworth would want to have “a statement 350 lines [before the “spots of time” passages] that Dorothy and nature have between them already given the poet strength that has lasted till the time of writing” (Borders 271). What Jonathan Wordsworth has not noticed is that although the statement in Book X and the “spots of time” in Book XI are both about restoration, they are placed in different contexts and serve different purposes. Johnston has observed that there are three stages in Wordsworth’s restoration, which correspond to the last books of The Prelude. The first stage, Book XI, is his restoration in the context of his love for nature, the second, Book XII, is that concerning his relations to society or human life, and the final stage, Book XIII, is seen in “his understanding of Mind’s action upon reality” (Johnston 194). His reading relates the restoration theme to Wordsworth’s social responsibility and places them within the context of The Recluse, thus showing that Wordsworth attempts to raise individual mental recovery to
the level of human redemption. Earlier we have quoted lines from Book I of *The Prelude* on how Wordsworth judges himself as both internally and externally equipped to write an epic poem. Among the criteria are “general truths which are themselves a sort / Of elements and agents, under-powers, / Subordinate helpers of the living mind” (I. 162-64), and these he juxtaposes with “the vital soul” and “external things.” Wordsworth is not specific about these “general truths”; however, in view of *The Prelude*’s being a preparation for *The Recluse*, the autobiographic work would certainly present the poet in relation to these criteria. So what can the “general truths” be in the context of *The Prelude*?

Reading *The Prelude*, one is sometimes struck by the large amount of “philosophizing” which contrasts with, yet also complements, the narrative of personal visionary experiences of the “spots of time.” Very often they serve as an explanation or an elaboration on personal experiences. What is also noticeable is the plural form of the pronoun in many of these passages. One thinks of, for example, the lines that follow the apostrophe to the imagination:

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[...] when the light of sense
Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us
The invisible world, doth greatness make abode,
There harbours whether we be young or old.
Our destiny, our nature, and our home,
Is with infinitude [...]. (VI. 534-39)
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Or lines in the “spots of time” doctrine: “There are in our existence spots of time,” “our minds / Are nourished and invisibly repaired,” and “This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks / Among those passages of life in which / We have had deepest feeling that the mind / Is lord and master.” The use of the plural “we” seems to suggest that Wordsworth is trying to formulate his visionary experiences into general truths applicable to all human beings. One can of course take this as another glaring instance of the poet’s egotism, yet when we see it in light of Wordsworth’s social responsibility, it may imply his wish to enlarge the scope of personal visions to
accommodate the higher theme of human redemption. The “general truths” in Book I may thus refer to philosophical truths Wordsworth achieves through his visionary experiences. These philosophical truths will form the basis of that great philosophical poem Wordsworth aspires towards in two ways. First of all, they demonstrate that the imaginative mind has reached maturity and that the poet is now fully prepared, both as a “poet” and a “philosopher,” for the composition of The Recluse. Secondly, they will lead to the system of philosophy that Wordsworth is to expound in The Recluse, since for Wordsworth, as we have earlier said, these philosophical doctrines are always first reflected and attested in a personal context. What Wordsworth does, in short, is to qualify himself for the composition of the magnum opus by translating his own experience into broader terms, and thereby offers his own spiritual growth as a possible model for the restoration of man and society.

II. The Function of the “Spots of Time”

Before we examine the function of the “spots of time,” it is necessary for us to point out that by the “spots of time” we mean (1) the “spots of time” sequence in Book XI, (2) the “spots of time” in general, that is, the many visionary experiences dispersed in The Prelude, and (3) the thematic and temporal pattern derived from the “spots of time.” The first two are self-evident; it is the third that bears clarification here. To find out what this pattern is, let us first re-examine Wordsworth’s definition of the “spots of time”:

There are in our existence spots of time,
Which with distinct preeminence retain
A renovating virtue, whence, depressed
[...]
[...], our minds
Are nourished and invisibly repaired—
[...]

Yu: Wordsworth’s Prelude
This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks
Among those passages of life in which
We have had deepest feeling that the mind
Is lord and master, and that outward sense
Is but the obedient servant of her will.
Such moments, worthy of all gratitude,
Are scattered everywhere, taking their date
From our first childhood—in our childhood even
Perhaps are most conspicuous. Life with me
As far as memory can look back, is full
Of this beneficent influence. (XI. 257-78)

The gist of the passage is that, firstly, certain moments in the past have a spiritually restoring power; secondly, at such moments the mind is “lord and master” of the senses, which is in effect another way of describing the imaginative power at work, and lastly, such moments can be found in all stages of life, yet are most conspicuous in childhood. These three elements are clearly aimed at Wordsworth’s mental crisis described earlier in the book; the emphasis on the autonomy of the imaginative power is meant to correct the picturesque aesthetic, in which the senses are placed over the mind, as well as to correct Godwinian rationalism that teaches one rather to “sit in judgment than to feel.” The significance of memory is that it enables Wordsworth to revisit the “hiding places” of his imaginative power and revive his sense of election, thus repairing the degenerated mind. It is also worth pointing out that the “renovating virtue” of the “spots of time” works in a temporal structure similar to that of “Tintern Abbey”—a projection of past into present and future—since the restoring power of the “spots of time” is not just for the present, but also for the future: “I would enshrine the spirit of the past / For future restoration.” In short, the thematic pattern of the “spots of time” is that when depressed, the poet is revived by past visionary experiences which signify the source and power of his imaginative mind, and the temporal structure is the alleviation of present and future suffering through retrospection.

Now we shall look at the role each of the three forms of “spots of time” just mentioned plays in The Prelude, especially in the context of the restoration theme.
We will begin with the “spots of time” sequence in Book XI. The sequence is preceded by the lines, “I had felt / Too forcibly, too early in my life, / Visitings of imaginative power / For this to last” and so on, which prepare us for the emphasis on the imaginative power in the “spots of time” definition, as well as for the return to past memories. In the 1799 Prelude, these past experiences refer only to childhood experiences: “Such moments chiefly seem to have their date / In our first childhood” (I, 295-96), and in these experiences, which are mostly recorded in Book I, the mind is seen to assume a passive role. Later revisions to the “spots of time” definition suggest a recognition of the dominance of the mind (the mind is lord and master of the senses), thus compelling us to re-define the childhood episodes related in Book I. Concomitant with the recognition is the added claim that although the visionary experiences are most conspicuous in childhood, they are not confined to this period of life, thus extending the range of the “spots” to incidents such as the “Crossing of the Alps.” In this way, the “spots of time” passage in Book XI not only echoes the other “spots” in the previous books and brings us back to the “visitings of imaginative power,” but also anticipate the later “spots” of Snowdon and the less characteristic Salisbury Plain visions.6 The sequence thus serves as a link between the early and the later books.

All these “spots” stand out in The Prelude and form a configuration that contributes to the myth-making of the imaginative mind, and help define the “spirit of the past.” Philip Shaw, in his article on Romantic space, gives an example of organising one’s life according to a spatial representation that implies fragmentation and discontinuity, rather than according to sequence and the sense of a continuous subjectivity—Walter Benjamin’s collected essays, Reflections. “Unlike traditional modes of autobiographical narrative,” Shaw explains, “Benjamin’s fragments cannot be arranged in any kind of sequence or logical order. The product of the “Chronicle”

6 John Ogden argues that the emotional structure of the “spots of time” is a progression “from attention through confusion to illumination,” or “from expectation through frustration to fulfillment.” He identifies over 20 “spots of time” in The Prelude on the basis of these paradigms, and regards the Salisbury Plain visions as one of them. Adopting Ogden’s paradigms, Kenneth Johnston also considers the visions as one of the “spots of time.” See Ogden’s “The Structure of the Imaginative Experience in Wordsworth’s Prelude,” 292-93; 298, n5; Kenneth Johnston, Wordsworth and The Recluse, 203.
[one of the essays collected in Reflections] is a collocation of movements and memories” (66). He then brings in Wordsworth and remarks that “If Wordsworth could have read Benjamin’s text he would probably have dismissed it as an exercise in fancy […]. The chance juxtaposition of mental topoi is a procedure that seems alien to the general chronological approach of The Prelude” (66). While I agree that The Prelude is basically chronological and therefore temporal, I must take issue with Shaw’s argument that the poem lacks a spatial structure. In The Prelude, the spatial structure can be found in the notion of the “spots of time.” Of course Wordsworth’s use of a spatial structure can hardly be described as a “chance juxtaposition” of past memories, yet the basic concept underlying the recurrence of the “spots of time” is similar to Benjamin’s attempt to capture the essence of one’s life with places and memories.7 The various “spots” are scattered in the poem not according to chronology, but according to “motifs.” The incidents recorded in Book I, for example, are placed where they are not simply because they all belong to childhood, but because they exemplify the formative influence of nature and the poet’s sense of election. The “Drowned Man” passage and “There Was a Boy” belong to childhood, yet appear in Book V because they both concern Wordsworth’s idea of education; the former illustrates the power of books, and the latter condemns the monstrosity in a contemporary education system by contrasting it with the effect of a “natural” education8 on the imagination. And Wordsworth positions the “Ascent of Snowdon” at the end of the poem not out of chronological considerations, but because of the incident’s significance in terms of the parallel between mind and nature. This spatial concept indicates that whether we look at the poem from a temporal or a spatial perspective, Wordsworth’s final concern is with the “essence” of his life, and the notion of the “spots of time” helps Wordsworth capture this essence.

The “spots” scattered in the poem thus free Wordsworth from a chronological representation of his life, and the use of the “spots of time” not only gives him the

7 Kenneth Johnston’s observation that Wordsworth organises the poem according to various “residences” also adumbrates a spatial concept in the poem’s structuring principle. See Johnston, Wordsworth and The Recluse, passim.
8 In the 1815 Preface, Wordsworth says that “There Was a Boy” “was one of the earliest processes of Nature in the development of [the imagination].”
flexibility to move between present and past, but also allows him to shift between the motifs of personal restoration and human redemption. As James P. Davis asserts, when Wordsworth expands the two-part *Prelude* into thirteen books, “he discovers that the spots sequence is equally suited to treating public topics of political or historical importance,” and the poet “continues to employ the structure even in the books concerned with the broader topics [he] originally planned to save for *The Recluse*” (80). Davis then illustrates his point with lines from Book IX of *The Prelude* in which Wordsworth and Beaupuy searched in history and “summoned up the honorable deeds / Of ancient story, thought of each bright spot / That could be found in all recorded time” (IX. 372-74). The way collective human memory invigorates these two friends is similar to the “renovating virtue” of the “spots of time,” Davis notes, and the fact that Wordsworth uses the word “spot” for historical moments indicates a parallel between personal and human histories (82). Indeed, the use of the “spots of time” allows Wordsworth to shape both the thematic and the temporal structures of *The Prelude*. With the “spots of time,” Wordsworth can move freely between the mundane everyday life and the world of vision to present the progress of the maturing imaginative power within the framework of a chronological autobiography. Such a progress can best be represented by the river motif in Book XIII:

[...] we have traced the stream  
From darkness, and the very place of birth  
In its blind cavern, whence is faintly heard  
The sound of waters; followed it to light  
And open day, accompanied its course  
Among the ways of Nature, afterwards  
Lost sight of it bewildered and engulfed,  
Then given it greetings as it rose once more  
With strength, reflecting in its solemn breast  
The works of man, and face of human life;  
And lastly, from its progress have we drawn  
The feeling of life endless, the one thought  
By which we live, infinity and God.  

(XIII. 172-84)
This metaphor of the stream not only presents the progress of the imagination, but also summarises what Wordsworth has attempted in the poem—the search for poetic origin, the presentation of the formative influence of nature, and the aspiration towards transcendence. What has often been neglected in this passage, however, is the line that contains two no less important motifs in the poem—“the works of man, and face of human life.” We have previously argued that the philosophical parts in the poem show Wordsworth’s intention to generalise his own visionary experiences, and that a socio-political agenda is woven into the text through Wordsworth’s translating personal fall and restoration into the social realm. And it is precisely the “spots of time” structure that helps Wordsworth achieve these two purposes.

Earlier we mentioned Jonathan Wordsworth’s question concerning the function of the “spots of time” in relation to the fall-redemption theme, and we have remarked that although Wordsworth in Book X has already told us that with the help of Dorothy and nature he soon recovers from his trauma after the French Revolution, the restorations described in Books X and XI respectively are in different contexts and serve different purposes. Now we can further explicate our point. In Book X, Wordsworth is trying to give an account of biographical facts. The “spots of time” in Book XI, however, are certainly more than this; they are part of the restoration process represented in the last three books which together form a unit. Mary Moorman has shrewdly pointed out that these three books are “given up almost entirely to ‘reflections on the French Revolution,’ [...] or to reflections on [Wordsworth’s] own reactions to the political events, [...] and on the inward condition of his mind and spirit which were thrown by these events into a severe and prolonged state of crisis and suffering” (220). As we have demonstrated in our discussion of *The Prelude*’s fall-redemption theme, in the poem there are two levels of redemption—the redemption of the poet and that of mankind. The restoration that begins with Book XI is aimed at both levels, and must be read against the larger thematic and structural development of the poem, whereas the restoration in Book X is much smaller in scope and aimed at the poet’s own personal recovery. In a sense, the latter half of Book X is both a conclusion to the
theme of the fall, and a lead into the redemption theme. The “spots of time” sequence is only part of the development of this theme, yet its conclusive and powerful expressions render the impression that it serves as a conclusion to the restoration of the imagination. And indeed it did at one stage during the poem’s compositional career serve as its coda; in the five-book Prelude, it is the “spots of time” sequence rather than the Ascent of Snowdon that closes the poem, and as Jonathan Wordsworth notes, there it shows Wordsworth’s effort in giving an explanation to the many “spots” that stand out in his life, and is thus “a culmination, a pulling-together and placing in a new light, of all that has gone before” (“Five-Book Prelude” 21). Now placed in Book XI of the 1805 Prelude, the “spots of time,” as we have illustrated, retain the power to shed new light on previous “spots,” yet they no longer function as a conclusion to the whole poem; rather, they are now placed at the beginning of the restorative process that ends on top of Snowdon.

Nonetheless, we would like to claim that the “spots of time” are the crux of the redemption theme, and that they epitomise the redemptive process. Read in the context of the whole Prelude, the restorative power of the “spots of time” sequence should extend to Wordsworth’s crisis in relation to the French Revolution, and this is one of the reasons Jonathan Wordsworth states that in the 1805 Prelude, although the “spots of time” are “highly impressive,” they have to take “a structural weight [they] cannot easily bear” (Borders 54). Indeed, in Book XI we are not told exactly how the “renovating virtue” of the “spots of time” applies to the disillusionment with the French Revolution. Now we can see that it is not the “spots of time” sequence, but the thematic and temporal pattern based on it, that takes on the structural weight. As we have pointed out, restoration in The Prelude is presented the last three books. What is intriguing is that while biographical events are recorded up to the time Wordsworth heard the news of Robespierre’s death in 1794, the thematic development of the poem, however, does not stop there. Instead, three more books are added on the restoration of the imagination. Moorman has chosen a most appropriate word to describe what Wordsworth does in these three books—“reflection”—for there is no action whatsoever that contributes to the forward movement of the poem, only
ideological contemplation. Whatever incidents are described in these books have all happened prior to Robespierre’s death—the two examples of the “spots of time” belong to childhood, the journey across Salisbury Plain took place in 1793, the ascent of Snowdon occurred in 1791, and the arguments developed from the public road motif in Book XII are also based on previous observations. The progression of the poem, therefore, is paradoxically a forward movement based mainly on retrospection, and this is precisely the temporal structure of the “spots of time” mentioned above—returning to the past for alleviation of present suffering. Wordsworth’s spiritual growth is in truth a returning to his former self, a resumption of his communion with nature and what this communion leads to—love of man. This is especially evident in his use of visionary experiences which took place “before” his crisis to define and conclude his restoration “after” the crisis. A close study shows that all his arguments in the last three books of the poem are directed back to earlier visions. In Book XI, his re-emergence as “a sensitive, and a creative soul” is followed by the “spots of time” passages. The revival of the sense of election in Book XII takes him back to the Salisbury Plain trip:

If I [...] had hope
That unto me had also been vouchsafed
An influx, that in some sort I possessed
A privilege, and that a work of mine,
Proceeding from the depth of untaught things,
Enduring and creative, might become
A power like one of Nature’s.

To such mood,
Once above all—a traveller at that time
Upon the plain of Sarum—was I raised [...].

(XII. 306-14)

In the closing book, it is also an earlier tour that leads to the revelation of the divinity of man’s mind, which evokes his prophetic proclamation that rounds off the poem.
The restoration of the imagination, therefore, is truly a restoration in every sense of the word; it is not only a recovery from mental crisis, but also, paradoxically, a returning of the poet to his former self—that is, the self before the crisis. What ties his present self to his former self is the “spots of time,” and this can be seen in both the “spots of time” sequence and the “spots of time” pattern. The more readily discernible is the arrangement of the “spots of time” sequence in Book XI where we are thematically ushered into a new stage in Wordsworth’s life, yet temporally brought back to his early years. This kind of temporality is also applied on a larger scale and reflected in the whole process of restoration described in the concluding books—at the end of each book the poet invariably circles back to early periods of life to attest to his spiritual recovery.

Johnston has given a systematic analysis of the “restoration” books in *The Prelude* and avers that “Snowdon’s ‘perfect image of a mighty Mind’ gives evidence of Wordsworth’s specifically mental recovery from revolutionary impairment, whereas the ‘spots of time’ evinced his imagination’s recovery of its relation with nature, and the Salisbury Plain visions, its restoration to human life” (207). Johnston’s argument is persuasive. What he has not been able to fully explicate is the Salisbury Plain visions at the closing of Book XII. In the visions Wordsworth represents the “barbaric majesty” of ancient warring Britons and the savage human sacrifice of the Druids. In the third vision, however, the same barbarous savages become sagacious “bearded Teachers” who possess the knowledge and wisdom of the heavens. These visions Johnston sees, firstly, as “an example of Romantic primitivism”; secondly, as “*The Prelude*’s associations of Imagination with eternity via the intermediation of death,” and lastly, as “possible connections between finite and infinite human nature” (204). These are valid interpretations, yet they do not provide a satisfactory answer to the question of how these visions tie in with the restoration theme. We suggest that the answer lies in the significance of these visions in the context of the poem *Salisbury Plain*, from which these lines originate. In the “Advertisement” to the 1842 edition of *Guilt and Sorrow*, the revised version of *Salisbury Plain*, Wordsworth provides a gloss on the poem:
The monuments and traces of antiquity, scattered in abundance over that region [Salisbury Plain], lead me unavoidably to compare what we know or guess of those remote times with certain aspects of modern society, and with calamities, principally those consequent upon war, to which, more than any other classes of men, the poor are subject. In those reflections, joined with particular facts that had come to my knowledge, the following stanzas originated. (Poetical Works, I, 95)

Paul D. Sheats asserts that the “complementary visions of Druidic barbarity and enlightenment [...] embody the violence and hopes of the French Revolution” (85). Enid Welsford also maintains that Wordsworth “makes no attempt to reconcile [the] ‘opposite and discordant qualities’” in the visions, and that the Druids “finally became for [Wordsworth] a symbol of the sinister ambiguity of human authority and human justice, and of the barbarism surviving in contemporary society” (11). It is true that Wordsworth makes no such attempts regarding the visions themselves. What we would like to draw attention to, however, is Wordsworth’s emphasis on poetic genius and his poetic aspiration in lines that precede and follow the visions, which I have discussed in detail in my essay on the “walking” and the “traveler” motifs in Wordsworth’s poetry. In the essay she contends that in Book XII of The Prelude, Wordsworth is seeking to integrate self- and poetry-making with nation-building (the enterprise of the spiritual education of a people) (Yu 129). The latter—nation-building—apparently has a direct bearing upon his meditations during the journey across the Plain described in the “Advertisement” to Guilt and Sorrow. The visions evoked are thus both a reminder of his social responsibility and an impetus for him to fulfil his aspiration towards social and human reformation. What Wordsworth tries to do in Book XII, therefore, is not simply to reconcile the opposite qualities in human nature represented by the visions, but also to harmonise imaginative energy with social conscience in his poetic aspirations.

These aspirations lead us to another, higher level at which the “spots of time” pattern works. We have previously contended that Wordsworth’s poetic identity finally has to be combined with his moral and social responsibility, and that the
imagination is redemptive not just at a personal level, but also in the context of a degenerated post-Revolution society. We have also pointed out that what Dorothy does to cure Wordsworth of his malady is to remind him of his poetic identity. With this identity confirmed, what is left for Wordsworth to do is to write The Recluse. After the description of his recovery in Book X, therefore, Wordsworth should have launched himself on this poetic project. And indeed Wordsworth does thematically proceed to The Recluse as he dwells, first, upon the mind’s mastery over the senses, and then upon the “divinity” of the imaginative mind (we are reminded of what he says in the Prospectus to The Recluse: “the Mind of Man— / My haunt, and the main region of my song”), and he goes on to describe the restoration of his imagination in terms of its relation to the three Recluse subjects of nature, human life, and man’s mind. In this sense The Recluse can be seen as a continuation of the last three books of The Prelude. Johnston has remarked that “The Recluse could begin any time The Prelude could be considered finished. This is the essential reason The Prelude never was completed, or never left alone as complete” (62). Yet with the last three books of The Prelude Wordsworth, in a sense, has begun The Recluse. Read in this light, these books can be seen as where the two poems overlap. What makes possible such an overlap is the restoration theme; as Wordsworth depicts his own restoration, he is at the same time offering a solution for human redemption. And as we have argued, this solution, the quintessence of which is certainly the imagination, is both thematically and structurally related to the “spots of time” pattern. Tying all these threads together, we find that with their emphasis on the imaginative power, the “spots of time,” whether the sequence in Book XI or those in general, are not merely representative of Wordsworth’s own spiritual renovation, but they also correspond to the larger theme of human redemption.

From the two-part Prelude to the full-length thirteen-book Prelude, the “spots of time” sequence has undergone different stages of revision. Each revision places it in a larger context, and pushes it towards a greater renovating function. Seen in the context of the growth of the poet’s mind, the “spots of time” not only serve as a gloss on all the visionary experiences that represent the core of The Prelude—the
imaginative power—but also exert a gravity-like force that holds together these experiences. Read in the light of the fall-redemption theme, they contribute, both thematically and structurally, to the convergence of personal and human redemption, and to the meeting of The Prelude and The Recluse.

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About the Author


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