June 1992

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Recommended Citation
Colby Quarterly, Volume 28, no.2, June 1992, p. 65-84

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The "Spots of Time": Wordsworth’s Poetic Debt to Coleridge

by JAMES P. DAVIS

In one of the first passages that he wrote for The Prelude, which he eventually placed in Book Eleven of the 1805 version, William Wordsworth discusses the surfacing into present consciousness of memories of significant events he calls "spots of time." Many students of Wordsworth apply the phrase not only to processes of memory, as Wordsworth sees them, but also to the narrative structure he devised to render such moments in his poetry: the frequent retrospective passages in which he recounts a formative event in his life, often without explicitly connecting it to his subject at hand. Taking Wordsworth's cue that "Such moments . . . / Are scattered everywhere" (XI, 273-74), Wordsworth scholars generally agree that many incidents in The Prelude surface and function in Wordsworth’s narrative in the same way as the two explicitly labeled “spots” in Book Eleven. The spot of time is seen as the poem’s primary “structural unit,” as “the nuclear cell of the whole [poem],” as Wordsworth's view of “the structure of imaginative experience” itself. Kenneth Johnston claims that the arrangement of books within the poem (not merely of details within books) repeats the "spot of time" structure. The accumulated discoveries about the spots of time have led to increasingly broader claims of their importance. The spots have come to be viewed as an organizing principle with nearly infinite flexibility, describing and reenacting the most significant moments in The Prelude, providing a macro-structure to connect these moments, and embodying the processes of imagination itself. Wordsworth found the spots of time structure quite congenial to his retrospective habits of mind, the form best suited to conveying emotions recollected in tranquility, and it enabled him to compose what he called his “poem to Coleridge.”

Exploring possible antecedents for Wordsworth’s new genre and the idea of the spots of time, some critics have looked to Rousseau’s Confessions, or to Descartes’ notions of discontinuous time. I propose that to find the antecedent

for Wordsworth’s spots of time structure, we need not look much farther than to some early lyrics by Coleridge that he called “conversation poems.” If we compare the spots of time structure to Coleridge’s conversation poems, especially to one that Wordsworth quotes frequently in the 1805 Prelude, we discover important parallels between Coleridge’s shorter lyrics and Wordsworth’s spots of time. Examining the similarities will help explain Wordsworth’s feelings of indebtedness to Coleridge and the frequency of his addressing and quoting Coleridge in the early books of The Prelude. Examining the differences will reveal the extent of Wordsworth’s modification and expansion of the form. Our first concern will be with the spots of time sequence itself as a structural paradigm. We shall examine the structure in one representative spot of time, and then explore Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight.”

The studies of the shared structure of the spots are in remarkable agreement about most of its features, though they differ in the vocabulary they employ to describe its stages. The first such study, by Jonathan Bishop, is primarily concerned with the sequence of images within the spots. Bishop notes that the spots sequences usually begin in the same way: “the opening lines set the date and the season of adventures many times experienced by the boy Wordsworth.” Usually the protagonist emerges from a crowd, ascends in various ways to an eminence, where he “receives a check, a breaking in of new experience.” Paul Sheats, too, notes a progression toward a boundary and an eventual return: Attention focuses repeatedly upon the point at which his excursive motion outward is halted and transformed into a return homeward, a point of extreme physical exposure, and often a borderline between natural elements, earth, water, or sky. Here he incorporates power within his mind, and his return suggests the appropriation and fixation of such power for future time.

Less concerned with the psychoanalytic import of the images than Bishop and more interested in the idea of “excursion and return,” Sheats also observes that each spot is a “psychological excursion into past time” and a return to the present (the time of composition). John Ogden expands upon this model, noting three, sometimes four, stages in “imaginative experience”:

While the structure never recurs in exactly the same form, the paradigm may be recognized in the progression of mental states. The mind shifts from attention through confusion to illumination; or, as it may also appear, from expectation through frustration to fulfillment. This last state of illumination or fulfillment may be divided into two stages: initial surprise and elation, and ensuing calm and satisfaction.

Johnston accepts Ogden’s paradigm but restates it in the following way:

(1) an original expectation (naive or misguided) is thwarted by (2) surprise or disappointment,

8. My focus on the structural paradigm of the spots does not include two excellent biographical analyses of the spots of time: Richard J. Onorato, The Character of the Poet: Wordsworth in The Prelude (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971); and David Ellis, Wordsworth, Freud and the Spots of Time: Interpretation in The Prelude (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985). In this study I am less concerned with the biographical sources for the incidents presented as spots and with the lasting psychological effects on Wordsworth (as a boy and as an adult) than I am with the spots as a structuring principle in his narrative.


resulting in (3a) a subsequent reinterpretation not only of the original expectation but, more importantly, (3b) of the power of the human mind to form expectations and respond to unexpected variation.12

Even more briefly, he later speaks of “the familiar three-part ‘spot of time’ structure” as “expectation,” “disappointment,” and “revaluation” (p. 174).

Of course the more we simplify the structural scheme the more universal it appears. Ogden notes the parallels between this sequence and Wordsworth’s theory of poetic composition (“emotion recollected in tranquility”) as well as “the conventional plot-structure of most drama and narrative,” the processes of scientific problem solving, and Gestalt theories of perception. The seeming ubiquity of this process, to Ogden, suggests “a universal law by which the human mind operates.”13 But “common” need not imply “commonplace,” and if Wordsworth has discovered mental processes universal to man, he has not diminished the importance of his discovery; he has accomplished exactly what he set out to do. The spots of time structure may in fact resemble the conventional plot structure of action narratives (exposition, complication, climax, resolution), but Wordsworth’s tale is a mental one, and the form he adapted from Coleridge’s conversation poems to represent it has become a standard way to represent consciousness in stream-of-consciousness works. Obviously, Wordsworth did not invent the structures by which the mind processes experience, but he did help design the rhetorical forms commonly used to simulate such processes.

One sample passage from The Prelude will illustrate the main features of the spots of time structure. In this discussion I assume that most readers of The Prelude recognize the existence of the spots throughout the poem and that I need not repeat the extensive work others have done to document the presence of this structural unit. While I would not go so far as to agree with Herbert Lindenberger that the various spots are “saying essentially the same thing again and again,”14 I think it is possible to find a sample that is representative of the narrative technique of the other spots. The first of Wordsworth’s two explicitly named spots of time in Book Eleven will suffice:

At a time
When scarcely (I was then not six years old)
My hand could hold a bridle, with proud hopes
I mounted, and we rode towards the hills:
We were a pair of horsemen—honest James
Was with me, my encourager and guide.
We had not travelled long ere some mischance
Disjoined me from my comrade, and, through fear
Dismounting, down the rough and stony moor
I led my horse, and stumbling on, at length
Came to a bottom where in former times
A murderer had been hung in iron chains.
The gibbet-mast was mouldered down, the bones

13. Ogden, pp. 296-397.
14. Lindenberger, p. 188.
And iron case were gone, but on the turf
Hard by, soon after that fell deed was wrought,
Some unknown hand had carved the murderer's name.
The monumental writing was engraven
In times long past, and still from year to year
By superstition of the neighbourhood
The grass is cleared away; and to this hour
The letters are all fresh and visible.
Faltering, and ignorant where I was, at length
I chanced to espy those characters inscribed
On the green sod: forthwith I left the spot,
And, reascending the bare common, saw
A naked pool that lay beneath the hills,
The beacon on the summit, and more near,
A girl who bore a pitcher on her head
And seemed with difficult steps to force her way
Against the blowing wind. It was, in truth,
An ordinary sight, but I should need
Colours and words that are unknown to man
To paint the visionary dreariness
Which, while I looked all round for my lost guide,
Did at that time invest the naked pool,
The beacon on the lonely eminence,
The woman, and her garments vexed and tossed
By the strong wind. When, in blessed season,
When, in the blessed time of early love,
Long afterwards I roamed about
In daily presence of this very scene,
Upon the naked pool and dreary crags,
And on the melancholy beacon, fell
The spirit of pleasure and youth's golden gleam—
And think ye not with radiance more divine
From these remembrances, and from the power
They left behind? So feeling comes in aid
Of feeling, and diversity of strength
Attends us, if but once we have been strong. (278-327)

The passage opens by naming a particular time (before Wordsworth was six) and by giving us details of the outer scene or landscape in which the event occurs. Wordsworth and James must cross a stony valley before coming to a hill. Wordsworth claims to have had “proud hopes,” presumably boyhood excitement as he anticipates one of his earliest independent trips on horseback. His expectations need not be anything more than this simply mingled fear and joy as he undergoes an early rite of passage. Most of the details set the concrete scene, as exposition for the brief event that follows.

What begins as a nervously cheerful outing quickly changes its course because of several unforeseen circumstances: “mischance” separates Wordsworth from his companion; he passes through a fearful setting that is charged with local superstitions about the grave of a murderer; he ascends a hill, sees “a naked pool,” and witnesses a girl’s carrying a pitcher and struggling against the wind. However “renovating” this experience may be in retrospect to the adult, the boy
Wordsworth experiences several kinds of terror at once—fear of riding the horse "When scarcely... / [His] hand could hold a bridle," fear of being isolated from a protective adult companion, fear of both the dead murderer and those who hanged him and treat the locale as a haunted place, and fear of the "visionary deariness" that he both feels himself as he tries to find his way and that he witnesses as he watches the woman's garments "vexed and tossed / By the strong wind."

Wordsworth does not tell us the mundane particulars of his return home. Instead, he departs from the scene temporally, bringing us gradually back to the present and leaving us with the static images of the woman, the naked pool, and the "beacon on the lonely eminence" as almost photographic emblems of his fear and melancholy. Viewed again by the adult, the melancholy scene is revalued as one showing "The spirit of pleasure and youth's golden gleam," as Wordsworth remembers his triumph over the adverse circumstances and, more important, as he recognizes that the power of the scene was his own imaginative power, "hiding" until by "glimpses" the adult discovers it in retrospect. The glimpse, recorded in the heightened, visionary rhetoric of similar moments in conversation poems, becomes a scene or moment removed from linear time. Wordsworth experiences the event again each time it surfaces in his memory, just as one might occasionally encounter an old, favorite photograph and be reminded of the whole complex of feelings at the time the photo was taken, mingled with the present joys of rediscovery. The spot of time freezes a moment of insight for eventual comfort and calm. Just as Virginia Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway retrospectively seizes the instant when she was kissed by Sally Seton, and just as Faulkner's narrator in "A Rose for Emily" pictures Emily and her family only in rare, delightful, and retrospective still lifes, so too does Wordsworth draw into his mind (and his narrative) "glimpses" of transcendent moments. Wordsworth explores the subsequent psychological value of such memories in ways Coleridge only rarely does in his conversation poems. And what many commentators have observed as a layering of times, the present self revealed in its account of the past, seems wholly Wordsworth's creation. But the expectation-disappointment-revaluation structure and the occasional glimpses into eternity closely resemble what we will find in Coleridge's early lyrics.

Ogden and Johnston's paradigm for the spots sequence resembles the features of the "earliest Romantic formal invention," as M.H. Abrams has described the "greater Romantic lyric." Although he does not identify the spots of time structure as one of the original forms of the "greater Romantic lyric," Abrams' paradigm closely resembles the expectation-disappointment-revaluation structure:

[The poems] present a determinate speaker in a particularized, and usually a localized, outdoor setting, whom we overhear as he carries on, in a fluent vernacular which rises easily to a more formal speech, a sustained colloquy, sometimes with himself or with the outer scene, but more frequently with a silent human auditor, present or absent. The speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene. In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a
moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where
it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result
of the intervening meditation. 15

Abrams credits Coleridge with inaugurating the form in his conversation poems
and Wordsworth with refining it in “Tintern Abbey” (p. 80). He briefly mentions
The Prelude as an “epic expansion of the mode of ‘Tintern Abbey,’ both in
overall design and local tactics” (p. 79). But, to date, no one has explicitly traced
Wordsworth’s inheritance of the primary structural unit of The Prelude—the
spots of time—from Coleridge’s conversation poems. The studies focusing on
Wordsworth’s spots do not explore their placement in a poem specifically
addressed to Coleridge, an omission that has obscured what appears to be a
clearer relationship between the works of the two poets than has been previously
observed. Although some studies rightly acknowledge that the two-part Prelude
of 1798–99 is an extended conversation poem, 16 they point to its features as a
private verse-epistle and stop short of discovering more important structural
similarities between Coleridge’s early lyrics and Wordsworth’s spots of time not
just in the 1799 Prelude but in the 1805 version as well.

When Wordsworth began composing what eventually came to be known as
The Prelude in Spring 1798, Coleridge had already written such conversation
poems as “The Eolian Harp” and “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” two
poems structurally similar to the individual spots of time. It is likely that
Wordsworth incorporates in the opening lines of The Prelude the symbols of
both the harp and the creative breeze partly to acknowledge respect for a fellow
poet and friend, and partly to imply that Wordsworth’s Prelude should be read
in the manner in which one reads “The Eolian Harp.” 17 But it is to Coleridge’s
“Frost at Midnight” that Wordsworth turned, in February 1798, for the structure
he developed into his spots of time. The two-part 1799 Prelude begins and ends
with quotations from the poem, suggesting that Coleridge’s short lyric was
important to Wordsworth’s conception of The Prelude from the start. 18 Coleridge’s
formal experiments with shifts in time are not nearly so extensive as Wordsworth’s
in The Prelude, but they are crucial to the movement of the poem, to the way that
Coleridge finds relief from his frustration in the poem. The second sentence of
the original version of The Prelude asks:

For this didst thou,
O Derwent, travelling over the green plains
Near my “sweet birthplace”, didst thou, beauteous stream,
Make ceaseless music through the night and day,
Which with its steady cadence tempering
Our human waywardness, composed my thoughts

16. See, for example, Jonathan Wordsworth and Stephen Gill, “The Two-Part Prelude of 1798-99,” JEGP, 72 (1973), 518, in which they see Wordsworth’s quotations from “Frost at Midnight” as his acknowledging that “this too had been a Conversation Poem.”
Wordsworth quotes the phrase "sweet birthplace" from the retrospective section of "Frost at Midnight," when Coleridge thinks back to his days in school and the dreams he had at that time of his "sweet birthplace." In both the 1799 and 1805 versions, this is Wordsworth's first glance back to his own childhood; that he quotes Coleridge's lyric at this point might indicate his debt to Coleridge for the structure he adapts for *The Prelude*.

Wordsworth's final verse-paragraph in the 1799 *Prelude* also quotes "Frost at Midnight": "Thou, my friend, wast reared / In the great city, 'mid far other scenes" (1799, II, 495-96; 1805, II, 466-67). The corresponding lines in "Frost at Midnight" accompany Coleridge's first meditation on the future as he visualizes how much better his son Hartley's life will be than his own:

it fills my heart
With tender gladness, thus to look at thee,
And think that thou shalt learn far other lore,
And in far other scenes! For I was reared
In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,
And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.
But thou, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain. . . .

Wordsworth's two verbatim quotations of "Frost at Midnight" are from two structurally important moments in the poem, the former from Coleridge's first shift to a previous time, the latter from his first vision of the future. Examining "Frost at Midnight" (as it appeared in a quarto pamphlet in 1798) will reveal both a more subtle application of the expectation-surprise-revaluation structure than we find in "The Eolian Harp" and Coleridge's incorporation within this structure of movements backward and forward in time. The movement within Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" is structurally the closest approximation to Wordsworth's spots of time sequence that we find among Coleridge's conversation poems.

The beginning lines of "Frost at Midnight" present concrete details about the time, place, and situation that occasion Coleridge's reverie:

The Frost performs its secret ministry,
Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry
Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before.
The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
Have left me to that solitude, which suits
Abstruser musings: save that at my side
My cradled infant slumbers peacefully. (1-7)

The exposition is subjective, the details themselves implying the narrator Coleridge’s mood. The frost, wind, and owl are independent of one another, as isolated within the natural world as Coleridge himself, who is alone, separate from nature, his family, and the nearby village. The frost’s “secret ministry” is “unhelped” by the wind; the owl’s cry seems only a loud intrusion into a bleakly silent world. Coleridge’s family, described as “inmates,” have all gone to sleep, leaving him to “solitude” and to his own “abstruser musings.” The silence of the scene and the absence of wind suggest an emotional state devoid of the melodies, murmurs, and inspiring breezes that characterize his mood in “The Eolian Harp.” At the start of “Frost at Midnight,” Coleridge confronts a disjointed world, one in which the natural objects and people are completely uninvolved with each other and with him.

Such isolation brings despair, but Coleridge tries to summon more harmonious visions by thinking of larger spaces. He does not find any respite from the silence until he gazes at the only thing moving in the room—a flap of ash fluttering on the grate in his fireplace:

"Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs And vexes meditation with its strange And extreme silence. Sea, hill, and wood, This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood, With all the numberless goings-on of life, Inaudible as dreams! the thin blue flame Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not; Only that film, which fluttered on the grate, Stills flutters there, the sole unquiet thing, Methinks its motion in this hush of nature Gives it dim sympathies with me who live, Making it a companionable form, With which I can hold commune. Idle thought! But still the living spirit in our frame, That loves not to behold a lifeless thing, Transfuses into all its own delights, Its own volition, sometimes with deep faith And sometimes with fantastic playfulness. (8-25)

Coleridge seemingly tries to compel his mood to improve by marshalling into one sentence the sea, hill, wood, and village, as if appealing to the connections of syntax itself to unify the world. His repetition of the list shows his mounting frustration; the added “and” furthers our sense of these as separate entities. Coleridge feels estranged from nature, family, and society, “the numberless goings-on of life.” So pronounced is his melancholy brooding that he mocks himself and his gift of seeing into the life of things. A mere piece of soot is the only “companionable form,” and he calls this notion an “Idle thought.” In this early edition of the poem he distinguishes between visions attained “with deep faith” and those “toys / Of the . . . mind” that are merely “fantastic playfulness.” His “dim sympathies” with the flap of ash are of the latter variety, contrivances of fancy, not of imagination. His emotional state in the first section of the poem resembles Wordsworth’s view of Coleridge in the city, “in endless dreams / Of
sickness, disjoining, joining things” (VIII, 608-09). Yet noticing the film of soot does provide a kind of relief for Coleridge, but the relief steals upon him unawares, only after he ceases trying to force it. Wordsworth, too, found “energy” in Nature, “his best and purest friend,” only during “that happy stillness of the mind / Which fits him to receive it when unsought” (XII, 10-14). To both poets, struggle and conscious intention are powerless to invoke the happiness born of tranquility.

The relief comes in the form of a rejuvenating memory, and the transition to the next section with its exclamation “Ah me!” suggests his surprise as the poem changes its direction:

Ah me! amus’d by no such curious toys
Of the self-watching subtilizing mind,
How often in my early school-boy days
With most believing superstitious wish,
Presageful, have I gazed upon the bars,
To watch the stranger there! and oft belike
With unclosed lids, already had I dreamt
Of my sweet birthplace, and the old church tower.
Whose bells, the poor man’s only music, rang
From morn to evening, all the hot Fair-day,
So sweetly, that they stirred and haunted me
With a wild pleasure, falling on mine ear
Most like articulate sounds of things to come!
So gazed I, till the soothing things, I dreamt,
Lulled me to sleep, and sleep prolonged my dreams!
And so I brooded all the following morn,
Awed by the stern preceptor’s face, mine eye
Fixed with mock study on my swimming book:
Save if the door half opened, and I snatched
A hasty glance, and still my heart leaped up,
For still I hoped to see the stranger’s face,
Townsmen, or aunt, or sister more beloved,
My play-mate when we both were clothed alike! (26-48)

Coleridge later revised these lines in ways that stress even more the spontaneity of his relief: he divided the verse-paragraphs mid-line with an apparently illogical “But O!” (like the “But Oh! that deep romantic chasm” in “Kubla Khan”), which begins the longest sentence of the poem. But the movement to a new mood is evident even in this earliest published text of the poem, and the bells, music, and sound contrast with the silence of the first paragraph. The origin of this pleasure is not his contrived camaraderie with soot or even his notice of Hartley’s sleeping peacefully beside him, although his happiness eventually increases when he thinks of his son. Coleridge is restored by a memory, a spot of time delivered to him from his own mind. As he recalls a similar moment of desperate loneliness during his schooldays, he remembers remembering an even earlier time in a process he likens to dreaming “with unclosed lids.” Most of the experience itself, to Coleridge the boy, must have been unpleasant indeed. Though he thought of “soothing things” the night before, he awakened to the ongoing irritant of loneliness, pretending to study but hopefully glancing to the
door for the arrival of some companion, portended by the superstition of the “stranger.” The memory of the event, however, effects a joyous change in the tone of the poem, and the final sections present the images of reciprocity we have come to associate with transcendental vision.

The second section of the poem telescopes back through time; the third section, via Hartley, presents a vision of the future and of eternity:

Dear Babe, that sleepest cradled by my side,
Whose gentle breathings, heard in this dead calm,
Fill up the interspersed vacancies
And momentary pauses of the thought!
My babe so beautiful! it fills my heart
With tender gladness, thus to look at thee
And think that thou shalt learn far other lore,
And in far other scenes! For I was reared
In the great city, pent ’mid cloisters dim,
And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.
But thou, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself.
Great universal Teacher! he shall mould
Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask. (49-69)

Hartley’s breathing fills the “vacancies” in silence and thought. Coleridge unites with Hartley, the clouds “image” the lakes, shores, and mountains, and Coleridge’s language becomes predictably abstract, as it does in other poems at the height of his visions. He feels again the one life that travels through all things, irrespective of spatial boundaries, expressed in such abstractions as “shapes,” “sounds,” “language,” “all,” and “all things.” Unlike the similar moment in “The Eolian Harp,” this one blurs distinctions in time as well as space. Triggered by his recollection in the second paragraph, his vision embraces Hartley’s future, “eternal language,” and “eternity.” For the moment, Coleridge embarks on a temporal excursion to spiritual relief, made possible, in part, by his meditative departure from chronological time.

The final verse-paragraph completes the structure by placing Coleridge back in the concrete setting where the poem began and by revaluing what is originally an image of silent loneliness—the frost:

Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
Whether the summer clothe the general earth
With greenness, or the redbreasts sit and sing
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
Of mossy apple-tree, while all the thatch
Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or whether the secret ministry of cold
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet moon,
Like those, my babe! which ere tomorrow’s warmth
Have capp’d their sharp keen points with pendulous drops,
Will catch thine eye, and with their novelty
Suspend thy little soul; then make thee shout,
And stretch and flutter from thy mother’s arms
As thou wouldst fly for very eagerness. (70-85)

Objects and times again interconnect: the poem ends with a vision of “all seasons” and of simultaneous sunlight and moonshine. Both frost and silence are reconstrued as further emblems of a harmonious world. The “secret ministry” assembles the “eave-drops” into icicles that reflect the shining moon. Heaven and earth participate together in this harmony, and both share a common trait, the quiet. In this early version, Coleridge imagines Hartley’s future response to these phenomena will be an exuberant “shout,” though in his subsequent revision of the poem he prefers to present silence itself as no longer a “vacancy” but as mute awe, of the sort that made Keats’s Cortez and men “Silent, upon a peak in Darien.”

The revaluation in “Frost at Midnight” is rejuvenating, the transcendental vision confirming Coleridge’s involvement with nature, society, family, and God. Wordsworth’s enclosure of the 1799 *Prelude* within quotations from “Frost at Midnight” is thus appropriate because he too finds renovation in memories even of unpleasant events. His brief discursive introduction to his idea of spots of time, in Book Eleven of the 1805 *Prelude*, stresses their value in overcoming adversity:

> There are in our existence spots of time,  
> Which with distinct preeminence retain  
> A renovating virtue, whence, depressed  
> By false opinion and contentious thought,  
> Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight  
> In trivial occupations and the round  
> Of ordinary intercourse, our minds  
> Are nourished and invisibly repaired. (257-64)

The wide range of emotional problems that Wordsworth believes can be alleviated by such spots is revealed throughout *The Prelude*. He gains confidence to embark on his immense program for poetry through the “beneficent influence” of such spots in Book One. He overcomes his disappointment at Cambridge, his dismay at urban life in London, and his imaginative impairment resulting from the sinister evolution of events in France all through the “motions retrograde” in his retrospective verse. And he becomes reconciled to nature (Book Eleven), man (Book Twelve), and imagination (Book Thirteen) because of memories that surface in his narrative as spots of time. If Coleridge’s conversation poems did provide the poetic form for dramatizing the therapeutic workings of imagination and memory, it is no wonder that Wordsworth addresses Coleridge so frequently in *The Prelude*, especially in those sections Wordsworth found particularly
Wordsworth seems to have adopted the features of the conversation poem as his own rather quickly, and even his earliest uses of them demonstrate his ability to modify them, to expand their flexibility in rendering different times simultaneously. The first difference we shall explore between Wordsworth’s use of the expectation-surprise-revaluation sequence and Coleridge’s is Wordsworth’s increased focus on differences between the way he felt about an event at the time it occurred and the way he interprets it at the time of composition. Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight” does implicitly and briefly contrast his boyhood displeasure at school and his happier recollection of the time as he reflects by his fireside as an adult. But Wordsworth makes this contrast his main, explicit topic and poetic technique in such poems as “Tintern Abbey,” “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” and The Prelude. In all three of these poems Wordsworth associates travels through time with journeys through familiar landscapes, disregarding the traditional distinctions between time and space. As he walks “again” through the Wye Valley in “Tintern Abbey” (he uses the word “again” four times in the opening paragraph), he encounters his former selves and contrasts “what then I was” with what he is now and with what he may become:

And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought,  
With many recognitions dim and faint,  
And somewhat of a sad perplexity,  
The picture of the mind revives again:  
While here I stand, not only with the sense  
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts  
That in this moment there is life and food  
For future years. (58-65)21

Wordsworth explores past, present, and future as he interacts with the landscape and as he watches his companion Dorothy: “in thy voice I catch / The language of my former heart, and read / My former pleasures in the shooting lights / Of thy wild eyes” (116-19). His turning to Dorothy as his silent auditor at the conclusion of the conversation poem resembles Coleridge’s address to Hartley at the end of “Frost at Midnight” and Wordsworth’s frequent addresses to Coleridge in The Prelude as he returns from his spots of time. The loving auditor, whether present or absent, helps to ease the author from the visionary glimpses of eternity back to the ordinary world of concrete reality and chronological time.

Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” though not a conversation poem, also contrasts Wordsworth’s perceptions as a child with those as an adult: “The things which I have seen I now can see no more” (9).22 But Wordsworth does not grieve over the loss because as an adult he retains visionary moments of childhood. He compares maturing to a journey westward from a primal sea:

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20. I discuss the rhetorical functions of Wordsworth’s addresses to Coleridge in the 1805 Prelude in my dissertation, pp. 48-106. See n. 17.
Hence in a season of calm weather
Though inland far we be,
Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither,
Can in a moment travel thither,
And see the Children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore. (161-67)

The mental processes that permit such visionary moments Wordsworth explores through personal autobiography in “Tintern Abbey” and as a generalized psychological process that strengthens all of us in “Ode: Intimations of Immortality.” We may call his technique in these poems temporal layering, a technique by which he makes his reader aware of two or more selves simultaneously, defying notions of time as sequence and dramatizing mental processes removed from time.

The 1805 Prelude is Wordsworth’s first use of such layering in a long poem. In it he presents numerous analogies to illustrate his looking back to previous times through lenses of the present, but none is so clear as his account of peering through the reflection on the surface of a lake to “the bottom of the deeps”:

As one who hangs down-bending from the side
Of a slow-moving boat upon the breast
Of a still water, solacing himself
With such discoveries as his eye can make
Beneath him in the bottom of the deeps,
Sees many beauteous sights—weeds, fishes, flowers,
Grotts, pebbles, roots of trees—and fancies more,
Yet often is perplexed, and cannot part
The shadow from the substance, rocks and sky,
Mountains and clouds, from that which is indeed
The region, and the things which there abide
In their true dwelling; now is crossed by gleam
Of his own image, by a sunbeam now,
And motions that are sent he knows not whence,
Impediments that make his task more sweet;
Such pleasant office have we long pursued
Incumbent o’er the surface of past time—
With like success. (IV, 247-64)

His metaphor is again a spatial one. Time has a surface that one can travel over and, in moments of stillness, peer through to the “region” or “dwelling” of the past. Those moments when the water is “still” recall the emotional tranquillity that permits his spots of time, an expression that many have noted configures time as a spatial phenomenon. This passage is one of many that explicitly blend current and former feelings throughout The Prelude and present Wordsworth’s mind as synchronic. When he remembers flying a kite, he writes:

at this hour
The heart is almost nine with which I felt
From some hill-top on sunny afternoons
The kite, high up among the fleecy clouds,
Pull at its rein like an impatient courser. (I, 517-21)
But his former "heart" is only "almost" his "at this hour." He does not lose his present feelings; he experiences both at once as "Two consciousnesses":

A tranquilizing spirit presses now  
On my corporeal frame, so wide appears  
The vacancy between me and those days,  
Which yet have such self-presence in my mind  
That sometimes when I think of them I seem  
Two consciousnesses—conscious of myself,  
And of some other being. (II, 27-33)

That his remembered consciousness remains "other" (despite its "self-presence" in his mind) shows that Wordsworth's experience of visionary moments is a paradoxical one: he can neither completely cross the temporal boundary into the past nor fully discriminate between present and former impressions as he remembers:

Of these and other kindred notices  
I cannot say what portion is in truth  
The naked recollection of that time,  
And what may rather have been called to life  
By after-meditation. (III, 644-48)

Experiencing such visionary moments, though pleasant, is thus confusing and difficult. He confesses that "We see but darkly / Even when we look behind us" (III, 491-92), and that "things remembered idly do half seem / The work of fancy" (VII, 147-48). Even in moments of holistic vision when past, present, and future merge, Wordsworth confronts a boundary which he cannot fully cross and from which he does not fully return to the present. The boundary is a murky one: when he faces it in vision, his present self prevents his crossing it, and, when he returns to the concrete world, he remains influenced by the recollection. His explanation of the poetic process embodies a similar paradox:

poetry . . . takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of re-action, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of his contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. 23

The emotion he recovers from the past is only "kindred" to the original, yet it does "itself actually exist in the mind."

The paradox within the experience may be restated as continuity within flux. When Wordsworth likens his mind (and his poem) to a river that "turns and will measure back his course," he does not claim that such "motions retrograde" make it a different river. His two consciousnesses are not evidence of a fragmented self, but of sibling faculties working together in necessarily different ways—one holistic, the other linear. Even when he contrasts different times in a temporally layered text, the boundaries blur, the times merge and separate, and the features of the landscape and of the figure in the landscape remain the same.

Wordsworth's portrayal of two consciousnesses, two ways his mind conceives of time, corresponds to a larger dichotomy in *The Prelude* between what Lindenberger calls inner (or private) time and outer (or public) time. Wordsworth's sustained interest in this dichotomy is the second difference between Coleridge's brief forays into nonlinear time in his conversation poems and Wordsworth's elaboration of the form in his spots of time. Outer or public time is time as measured by clocks, shown most clearly in Wordsworth's accounts of clocks and schedules at Cambridge:

the college kitchens made
A humming sound, less tuneable than bees
But hardly less industrious; with shrill notes
Of sharp command and scolding intermixed.
Near me was Trinity's loquacious clock
Who never let the quarters, night or day,
Slip by him unproclaimed, and told the hours
Twice over with a male and female voice.
Her pealing organ was my neighbour too;
And from my bedroom I in moonlight nights
Could see right opposite, a few yards off,
The ante-chapel, where the statue stood
Of Newton with his prism and silent face. (III, 47-59)

Wordsworth juxtaposes the kitchen's "shrill notes / Of sharp command and scolding" with the clock's telling the hours and finally with Newton's "silent face." Public time regulates the individual, authorizes presidents and deans to marshall young minds with petty schedules. To Wordsworth, it is supremely ironic that a church tower houses a clock because clock time is antithetical to religion and God:

Be wise,
Ye Presidents and Deans, and to your bells
Give seasonable rest, for 'tis a sound
Hollow as ever vexed the tranquil air,
And your officious doings bring disgrace
On the plain steeples of our English Church,
Whose worship, 'mid remotest village trees,
Suffers for this. (III, 420-27)

The bells vexed the "tranquil air" and no doubt vexed the student Wordsworth for whom tranquillity and freedom from regulation were necessary for pleasure and mental health. Public time requires punctuality, but Wordsworth is "not a punctual presence, but a spirit / Living in time and space, and far diffused" (VIII, 763-64). Wordsworth cherishes those moments when he is free to experience private time, freedom from chronology, freedom to glimpse eternity that surpasses commonplace life, space, and linear time.

What Lindenberger calls a dichotomy between inner and outer time, John Beer calls a conflict between "subliminal" and "rational" time in *The Prelude.*

Beer’s terminology permits a readier connection between Wordsworth’s time-sense and his overall interest in the processes of imagination and reason, intuition and discursive thinking. But a more recent commentator objects to any expression of Wordsworth’s two consciousnesses of time as a dualistic one. Speaking of Lindenberger’s study, Jeffrey Baker argues:

I agree with the definitions of, and distinctions between, these kinds of time; I do not accept that they can be simply paired off. There is in Wordsworth’s time schemes a distinguishable, qualitative order. Thus the lowest time is clock time, mechanical in the narrowest sense, inflexible and uncreative. Next there is nature’s time, Newtonian, a mathematical continuum, and also inflexible, but less artificial than clock time and more conducive to spiritual well-being. Above these two is inner time, felt by the nerves and brain and lodged, as Woolf put it, “in the queer element of the human spirit.” This time is liberating and creative. 26

I think Baker’s “qualitative order” does better represent Wordsworth’s attitude toward conceptions of time than any duality though his use of the middle term, “nature’s time,” implies a more consistent and systematic scheme than Wordsworth seems to have applied within *The Prelude*. 27 What Baker recognizes, and Baker implies, is that Wordsworth proposes an alternative to commonsense notions of time, more personally valuable and renovating than time measured by clocks. Just as in most of *The Prelude* Wordsworth prefers imagination to analysis, so too does he prefer to write verse that embodies and promotes inner time. Wordsworth’s time-sense is not an independent feature of his poetry; it is integral to his portrayal of the workings of imagination, man’s holistic mind.

We need to consider one further innovation in the spots of time structure, as Wordsworth adapts it from the structure of Coleridge’s conversation poems. Coleridge employs the expectation-surprise-revaluation sequence only to record moments of personal vision. The problems he solves, the impressions he corrects in his conversation poems are always private ones, relevant only to psychological or domestic interests. As Wordsworth expands *The Prelude* to its thirteen-book version, he discovers that the spots sequence is equally suited to treating public topics of political or historical importance. Despite the occasional recent claims that the spots of time are merely personal, even “solipsistic,” experiences, 28 Wordsworth continues to employ the structure even in the books concerned with the broader topics Wordsworth originally planned to save for *The Recluse*. When Lindenberger discusses the “historical” spots, he associates Wordsworth’s shifting to public topics with his decline in poetic power:

One might conclude that in the course of writing the poem Wordsworth’s preoccupation was shifting from the more personal aspects of time to the impersonal, from the intimate to the monumental. As a poet he was beginning to lose touch, as it were, with the more intimate ranges of human experience. (p. 174)

27. Baker provides an example of Wordsworth’s ignoring nature’s time signals (p. 18), but in other sections of *The Prelude* Wordsworth suggests that nature’s temporal rhythms are akin to his own. See, for example, Book Two, lines 180-202 and 303-12.
Rather than see this shift as a loss of his sense of human experience, however, I think it demonstrates Wordsworth’s ability to humanize history, to reclaim from the historian’s strict methodology a sense of the personal within the ongoing human drama.

Wordsworth admits that he has never enjoyed the “modern narratives” of the historian:

"Tis true the history of my native land,
With those of Greece compared and popular Rome—
Events not lovely nor magnanimous,
But harsh and unaffecting in themselves;
And in our high-wrought modern narratives
Stript of their humanizing soul, the life
Of manners and familiar incidents—
Had never much delighted me. (VIII, 770-77)

Wordsworth, in effect, proposes an alternative theory of history, one neither bound by chronology nor deadened by efforts to be objective. When he discusses the ancient events in Sicily alongside the contemporary struggles in France (Book Ten), he implies that the lessons of history are clearer when unencumbered by strict chronology. Similarly, his vision of the Druids on Salisbury Plain (Book Twelve) proposes personal “reverie” as a genial form for historical discourse. Wordsworth’s accounts of his discussions with Beaupuy in Book Nine most clearly demonstrate the value of the spots of time as a means of personalizing history.

In Book Nine of The Prelude, Wordsworth discusses his and Beaupuy’s habit of imaginatively reshaping current public events into personal tales that amuse them or strengthen their political resolve. Wordsworth’s phrasing as he describes their dialogues shows his awareness of the parallels between “ancient story” as the two experienced it and his own spots of time:

We summoned up the honorable deeds
Of ancient story, thought of each bright spot
That could be found in all recorded time,
Of truth preserved and error passed away,
Of single spirits that catch the flame from heaven,
And how the multitude of men will feed
And fan each other—thought of sects, how keen
They are to put the appropriate nature on,
Triumphant over every obstacle
Of custom, language, country, love and hate,
And what they do and suffer for their creed,
How far they travel, and how long endure—
How quickly mighty nations have been formed
From least beginnings, how, together locked
By new opinions, scattered tribes have made
One body, spreading wide as clouds in heaven.
To aspirations then of our own minds
Did we appeal; and, finally, beheld
A living confirmation of the whole
Before us in a people risen up
Fresh as the morning star. (IX, 372-92)
The deeds they summon up, of course, are not personal reminiscences of their own but those of individuals whose aspirations and actions are delivered to them by the historian. Wordsworth and Beaupuy select the best examples of triumph over obstacle, of suffering and endurance rewarded, of “truth preserved and error passed away.” These deeds attest the power of individuals affecting multitudes, of “least beginnings” forming “mighty nations,” of “scattered tribes” merging as “One body, spreading wide as clouds in heaven.” Wordsworth’s language in this passage begins with the colloquial “We summoned up the honorable deeds” but rises to the visionary “clouds in heaven.” Recalling the ancient stories enables them better to cope with the contemporary ones. They consider their own “aspirations” and behold a “living confirmation of the whole / Before us in a people risen up / Fresh as the morning star.” Wordsworth and Beaupuy borrow energy and ideals from mankind’s collective past in ways similar to Wordsworth’s fetching “invigorating thoughts from former years” as he confronts his personal problems. That he calls the ennobling deeds in history “bright spot[s] / ... in all recorded time” suggests the similarity between his personal and their historical moments of vision. And that Wordsworth first experiences the historical spots of time during conversations with Beaupuy attests the value of affectionate auditors (like those of the conversation poems) in prompting such unorthodox views of history.

His habit of experiencing history as personal, glorious moments survives Beaupuy as Wordsworth describes the most unfortunate turns of the French Revolution in Book Ten. In the middle of his account of “a reservoir of guilt / And ignorance” that bursts and spreads “in deluge” (436-39), he turns again to history’s “bright spots”:

And as the desert hath green spots, the sea
Small islands in the midst of stormy waves,
So that disastrous period did not want
Such sprinklings of all human excellence
As were a joy to hear of. (440-44)

The “sprinklings” are “a joy to hear of” but are not enough to help Wordsworth through his worst crisis. He thus turns to personal spots as well:

Yet—nor less
For those bright spots, those fair examples given
Of fortitude, and energy, and love,
And human nature faithful to itself
Under worst trials—was I impelled to think
Of the glad time when first I traversed France,
A youthful pilgrim. (444-50)

Wordsworth is comfortable, as a historian would not be, mingling subjective experience with public record in non-chronological samplings of the human drama at large.29

I have noted three modifications Wordsworth makes in the form he borrows from Coleridge’s conversation poems and turns into his spots of time: temporal layering of his feelings at the time of composition with those at the time of the remembered event; sustained contrast of inner time experiences with outer time, Wordsworth preferring the former; and consideration of public topics within the spots sequences. These innovations evolve as he composes, expands, and revises *The Prelude*, which began as and continued to be his “poem to Coleridge.” Of course, not every passage in *The Prelude* surfaces as a visionary moment. Interpolated among such moments are passages of discursive verse. But the spots of time sequence provides Wordsworth with a structure flexible enough to incorporate various subjects and techniques and to shape the poem both as a whole and in its parts. It frees him from the restrictions of chronology that otherwise would impede his creation of living, spontaneous verse. The spots of time do not concern merely the processes of memory, as one study has argued, but are central to Wordsworth’s poetics of the imagination, of the holistic mind itself.

It does not matter that the resulting poem misrepresents the actual sequence of events in Wordsworth’s biography, as many have noted that it does. Wordsworth’s poem presents his inner life, the turning river of his living mind. He admits in Book Six that he has erred in dating his first acquaintance with Coleridge (246-48), but that is the result of this poetic method, which he does not choose to abandon:

> Through this retrospect
> Of my own college life I still have had
> Thy after-sojourn in the self-same place
> Present before my eyes, have played with times
> (I speak of the private business of the thought)
> And accidents as children do with cards. (296-301)

His simile is apt. He plays (in “deliberate holiday”) with “times,” conceived of as separable, illuminated moments that can be grouped and regrouped to suit his pleasure. He is often surprised at how brief such moments can be. His accounts of the moments may be longer than the moments themselves. His entry into London is one such incident. As he recounts the very instant that London’s immensity dawned on him, even though he fears he may be “trifling,” he repeats “the moment,” “the very moment,” “‘Twas a moment’s pause,” “As in a moment,” and remembers “only now” that “it was a thing divine” (VIII, 689-710). Wordsworth’s discovery of the spots of time structure enabled him to simulate in verse the workings of divine imagination, in a form flexible enough to incorporate diverse personal and public topics. As *The Prelude* evolved from two, to five, to thirteen, to fourteen books, Wordsworth never chose to delete his apostrophes to Coleridge. He preserved the intimate address to a friend he found in Coleridge’s conversation poems (as he borrowed their fundamental structure)

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30. Salvesen holds that “memory in Wordsworth cannot be studied as an aspect of the Imagination; it is an independent force, and it is an independent literary idea” (p. 35).
to retain a sense of unrehearsed immediacy and to strengthen the emotional bond between himself and his readers. He elaborated on the structure to incorporate more sophisticated studies of time and to capture and share moments of eternity within a flexible form. Wordsworth’s labors were not child’s play with cards. They call into play our most mysterious and valuable faculties.