

EURAMERICA Vol. 44, No. 2 (June 2014), 193-238
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<http://euramerica.org>

Between Speech and Silence in Wordsworth's *The Prelude* —Transformation of Self in Text

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Abstract

The article focuses on William Wordsworth's self-representation in Book V of *The Prelude*. I will consider Wordsworth's "textual self" in the draft materials and revisions of this Book in order to explore the vital relationship between Wordsworth and his text, and to observe how he writes his complicated emotions into the process of composition. Wordsworth's represented self vanishes into language in his act of writing. Wordsworth, engaging with the "counter-spirit" of language, represents a self overwhelmed by the "loud blast" from writing itself and defaced by its substitutive figurations. However, I will argue that, in response to the failure of self-representation, Wordsworth transforms his vision of the "weak[ness] of words" into an opportunity for the working of language itself. I will add to Paul de Man and Mary Jacobus' largely

Received December 12, 2013; accepted March 13, 2014; last revised March 31, 2014

Proofreaders: Fang-Yi Chen, Wen-Chi Chang, Chia-Chi Tseng

negative reading of Wordsworth's language by focusing on the positive use Wordsworth makes of the "texture" midway between "life and books." For Wordsworth, the "visionary power" in the "mystery of words" is capable of visioning at least the "presence" of the represented self. I show, in particular, how Wordsworth communicates a sense of self in language precisely by signalling its absence from that language. He does this by situating his self-representation midway between speech and silence, acknowledging but resisting the working of "darkness" and "shadowy things" in "the mystery of words." Through his precisely inconsistent and opaque use of language, Wordsworth's writing avoids the total "defacement" of the "unrepresentable" self in words.

Key Words: William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, mystery of words, self-representation, the "counter-spirit" of language