Chapter 7
Rhetoric and the Self

> We derive as much dignity as we possess from our status as works of art.
>
> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*

> Je ne peints pas l'estre. Je peints le passage.
>
> Montaigne, *Essais*, Bk. III, ch. 2

I

The Death of the Author, I shall argue, has been much exaggerated. Only a weaker claim is seriously defensible: that the relationship between discourse and the self cannot be that sketched by one tradition of Western metaphysics. If that tradition offered the only possible way of conceiving of the relationship between the self, its utterances and the Other it addresses, the coffin of the author might all the same be well on its way to being nailed shut. But 'the Western Metaphysical Tradition' is not nearly as coherent and monolithic a body of intellectual constructions as writers like Rorty and Derrida, for good polemical reasons, like to make out. And even if it were, the formal constructions of metaphysicians are not the only means we have for making sense of our relationships to one another; even those mediated by talk; even, when it comes down to it, those mediated by talk which takes the form of poetry or narrative fiction.

It is certainly possible, at the cost of neglecting very substantial differences between individual writers and schools of thought, to formulate an (admittedly pretty skeletal) account of the self which unites at least the metaphysical tradition which extends from Descartes to Kant with some of its twentieth-century representatives such as Edmund Husserl or Bertrand Russell. According to this

account, the inner life of a person manifests itself as a temporal sequence of 'states of consciousness' (sensory states, desires, acts of will, moods, emotions, have all been considered 'states' in the required sense). The metaphysical problem is to say in what the *unity of the sequence* consists: what grounds there are for referring all the component 'states' of the sequence to a single 'subject.' Cartesianism, British Empiricism in its numerous versions, Kantianism, Husserlian phenomenology, offer, of course, radically different accounts of how the wished-for 'unity' is to be constituted. As so often in philosophy, it is only the bare form of a question (a 'problematic', as some people like to say) which serves as the glue holding together the work of such radically contrary minds in a single 'tradition of thought' on the topic. But, equally evidently, to see 'the problem of the self' in such a light is to grant certain assumptions about what it is to have, or to be, a self. One such assumption, hardly questioned before Wittgenstein questioned it,[1] is that the self enjoys perfect, doubt-free knowledge of the immediate character of its own states and acts as these present themselves to consciousness. Husserl, in this respect a characteristic representative of the tradition, thought indeed that awareness of the immediate contents of consciousness can be clouded by habits acquired through the 'natural attitude' – the attitude of ordinary sensory and scientific enquiry which takes for granted the accessibility of the physical world to consciousness – but equally that it can be restored through various techniques of *epoche*, Cartesian in inspiration, which involve setting aside questions of the objective reality of the objects of consciousness in order to become more fully aware of the structure of intentional acts through which each such object becomes accessible to consciousness.

Such an account of self-knowledge invites us to consider the relationship of language to the conscious life of the self as a mimetic one, in a rather straightforward sense of 'mimetic'. It suggests strongly that meaning itself is primarily a property, not of signs, but of states of consciousness, and that signs acquire meaning only secondarily, by being made to serve as arbitrary marks for mental contents which would otherwise be incommunicable. Such a view unites thinkers as diverse as Husserl (whose version of it in the *Logical Investigations* is brilliantly and savagely attacked by Derrida in *La Voix et le phénomène*), the early Russell and John Locke, in whom it finds expression in the following characteristically owlish passage:

> Man, though he have great variety of thoughts, and such from which others as well as himself might receive profit and delight; yet they are all

> within his own breast, invisible and hidden from others, nor can of themselves be made to appear. The comfort and advantage of society not being to be had without communication of thoughts, it was necessary that man should find out some external sensible signs, whereby those invisible ideas which his thoughts are made up of might be made known to others. For this purpose nothing was so fit, either for plenty or quickness, as those articulate sounds which, with so much ease and variety he found himself able to make. Thus we may conceive how *words*, which were by nature so well adapted to that purpose, came to be made use of by men as the signs of their ideas; not by any natural connection that there is between particular articulate sounds and certain ideas, for then there would be but one language amongst all men; but by a voluntary imposition, whereby such a word is made arbitrarily the mark of such an idea. The use, then, of words is to be sensible marks of ideas, and the ideas they stand for are their proper and immediate signification.... That, then, which words are the marks of are *the ideas of the speaker* [my italics]: nor can anyone apply them, as marks, immediately, to any thing else but the ideas that he himself hath. *For this would be to make them signs of his own conceptions, and yet apply them to other ideas* [my italics]; which would be to make them signs and not signs of his ideas at the same time; and so, in effect to have no signification at all. (*Essay*, III.ii.1–2)

The tension between the privacy of 'thoughts' or 'ideas' and the publicity of words in this passage no doubt provides an object-lesson in the self-deconstructing character of logocentrism. Words have meaning only as marks of *the ideas of the speaker*, yet it is the very incommunicability of the speaker's ideas which led to the introduction of language. It follows that it is only if words can shake off Locke's postulated unique and exclusive connection with the conscious states of a particular speaker that they can function as vehicles of communication.

In this aporia are prefigured all the arguments currently used to establish the Death of the Author. The root difficulty, as critics and philosophers alike are apt to see it, is that a private language could not serve the purposes of communication, so that, conversely, a public language cannot *in principle* be adequate to express the personal. Thus, for instance, Gabriel Josipovici:

> Who... is the author of a work of literature? The man whose name appears on the cover? But by what authority does this author determine the meaning of what he writes, since he is after all deploying a language which belongs to his culture and not personally to him.[2]

Barthes, again, praises Valéry for constantly arguing for 'the essentially verbal condition of literature, in the face of which all re-

course to the writer's interiority seemed to him pure superstition'.[3]

Beside this, as making essentially the same point, we can set Foucault's remark,

> Using all the contrivances that he sets up between himself and what he writes, the writing subject cancels out the sign of his particular individuality. As a result, the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence; he must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing.[4]

or de Man's,

> ... are we so certain that autobiography depends on reference, as a photograph depends on its subject or a (realistic) picture on its model? We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium?[5]

or Derrida's arguments to the effect that the meaning of a text cannot be sought in the consciousness of its author since a text is always readable (*itérable*) in the absence or after the death of its author.

These arguments are often taken to entail conclusions which appear blankly counter-intuitive. They invite us, for instance, to take Derrida's well-known remark that the author is an *effet de différance* in a straightforwardly idealist sense: to take it as implying, that is, that the author as we encounter him in the text is a mere *appearance*: a simulacrum confected out of grammatical and rhetorical conventions which no more places us in the presence of the author than the sensory field in Berkeley places us in the presence of material objects, at least as conceived of by Newton or Locke. It follows from this that we are never in fact *addressed* by the author, as, for instance we certainly seem to be addressed, and rather movingly, by Fielding over the heads of his contemporaries, in the preamble to Book XVIII of *Tom Jones*.[6] One might be prepared to swallow this – after all the milder thesis that the author may on occasion take on the role of a character in his own fiction was a respectable critical truism long before post-structuralism was heard of – were it not that the same arguments seem to yield the conclusion that I cannot be *addressed*, either, by my wife in a letter – which after all is a text: a piece of *writing*. That in turn seems to imply that there can never be any communication of inwardness from one person to another. Not just the Author but the person dissolves into a depersonalized, socially

constituted play of signs which bears upon its surface, continually dissolving and reconstituting themselves under the pressure of deconstructive analysis, simulacra which gesture towards a fictive origin in a Subject removed forever into *in-principle* inaccessibility behind the patterned surface of signs which is all a text offers to our inspection.

The possibilities of theory are not endless. The philosopher has always heard that one before somewhere. Argument of this strikingly metaphysical kind seldom concerns entities with which we become acquainted in everyday life, as distinct from the more august and capitalized Entities which populate philosophy books. So a philosopher is bound to feel a certain suspicion that the Subject which has just dissolved into the limpidly formal surface of the text is not the subject called Henry Fielding, still less the subject called Dorothy Harrison, but the Subject of Western Metaphysics, and more particularly the Subject of Descartes and Locke, whose disappearance into the abysm of *différance* is a simple consequence of the logocentric aporia into which a few paragraphs ago we observed Locke himself happily tumbling. The Self which retires into inaccessibility behind the text, that is, is the Cartesian Self, the self defined in terms of the unity across time of its 'inner states' and the epistemologically flawless presence to self-consciousness of the content of those states. The dissolution of that Self into the surface of the text is a simple consequence of the fact that the relationship between such a Self and language could only be the mimetic or specular one which Locke postulates. It follows that if the notion of a specular language is incoherent (a thought which both Derrida and Wittgenstein develop, though in very different ways), then language – the language we actually speak, not the specular language of logocentric theory – can offer no access to the (Cartesian) Self.

The effects achieved by deconstructive analysis, while startling, thus seem to depend, here as elsewhere, on the availability to the analyst of an already incoherent metaphysic whose predestined collapse in upon itself can be relied upon to produce the effects in question. This, no doubt, is why Derrida and his school are reluctant to announce the final demise of 'Western Metaphysics' (why Derrida, for instance, sustains the availability of familiar metaphysical concepts for both mention and use by adopting the typographical device of placing them *sous rature*). Deconstruction and 'Western Metaphysics' need one another. But are the resources of Western Metaphysics really coextensive with those of 'Western Metaphysics'? In the present instance, is the account given of the self by the Cartesian tradition down to and including, say, Russell and Husserl, really the only account of selfhood and its relationship to discourse

which can be given? Dissident voices in our century and the preceding one, in particular those of Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein, afford glimpses of a different way of thinking about these matters. The account I shall now offer owes something to all three, and to others.

II

It seems self-evident to me, as to each one of us, that I am a single self whose life extends continuously across time. Hume, on the other hand, was clearly right to argue that this assurance cannot be founded upon inner acquaintance with a special sort of *object*. What, then, is self-knowledge knowledge *of*? I want to suggest that it is, primarily, knowledge of *what I am about*. One reason for finding sense in this suggestion is that knowledge of what I am about can do duty for the Cartesian self-as-object in respect of its primary function, that of binding together the acts of one and the same self across time. It ties together, for example, the beginning of the movement of my arm towards the coffee cup on my table with the conclusion of the movement as my fingers close around the cup. But connectedness of that kind is resistant to analysis in terms of discrete, temporally located 'states of consciousness'. How many such 'states' occurred between the inception of the gesture of reaching for the cup and the closing of my fingers around the handle? The question is without a clear sense; hence without an answer; but without an answer we are left merely with the continuity across time of a bodily action continuously informed by one and the same intention. Moreover, the continuity of intention and purpose which such an act displays is not limited to the act itself. It spreads out to embrace the immediate context of the act. I am reaching for a sip of coffee because I have reached a momentary impasse in the composition of the chapter which I am sitting here in my room on a sunny Saturday afternoon to finish because . . . The intentionality of the act of reaching for the cup sites itself in a fabric of wider intentionalities whose boundaries also reach out until they become coextensive with the boundaries of my identity as a self. I am a *single* self, the self I am, not, as Kant thought, because the unity of my experiential field is both the ground and the mirror-image of the unity of the physical space I inhabit, but because of the uninterrupted continuity of the intentional space in which my acts situate themselves relative to one another.

To conceive of the unity of the self in this way (roughly speaking, in the spirit of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's version of existential phenomenology) is to abandon the *Cartesian* problem of the unity

of the self by, in effect, abandoning the tacit assumptions about the human existential situation which underlie and generate that version of the problem. The Cartesian problem derives from Descartes's perception that there is nothing in my total state of consciousness at any given instant of time which could necessitate my existence at the next instant of time. Putting matters in this way invites us to conceive of time, as Hume was later explicitly to do, as a succession of discrete instants, each occupied by a distinct state of consciousness. The problem is now to say what holds the states occupying successive instants together as states of one and the same self. Descartes's answer is, in effect, that they all inhere in one and the same substance, and that substances just are continuants: just are re-identifiable across time. The answer which Hume developed from Locke's suggestions is that successive states of the self are held together by a fabric of contingent associative relationships. Hume's theory, like Locke's, makes *memory* fundamental to the unity of the self. Memory provides the field in which past instants of consciousness can be brought together to be compared with one another and with the present. Self-knowledge thus becomes in essence a reflection upon the contents of memory: its deliverances (to slide back briefly into a literary mode) a continual *memorializing* of the self: the endless composing of an *epitaph* upon one's past, and thus dead, selves.

To conceive of self-knowledge as in the first instance knowledge of what I am about, however, is to displace memory from the pivotal role it occupies in eighteenth-century and later Empiricist theorizing about the self. The focus of selfhood and self-knowledge moves immediately from the past to the present; from what I have done and been to what I am doing, and am. Even more crucially, it is no longer the (contingent or necessary) facts about past 'states' of my self which establish that I *am* the self which 'owned' those past states. Instead, what allows me to reconstruct my past as a coherent temporal sequence is the *intentional* unity of the self to which I have access *in the act* which occupies any given present in which I find myself, and which always has the potential of reaching out to organize an intentional fabric of which that act is the culmination and centre. It is the unfolding of the intentionality of the bodily act into a larger intentional context which allows me to reconstruct the temporality of my past: on occasion to recognize false memories as false, or even to recover, by patiently reconstituting the intentional structure of a past passage of my life, the recollection of what actually took place.[7]

If we follow empiricism in founding the unity of the self on mem-

ory, instead of vice versa, memory becomes an essentially magic, Faustian faculty, capable of making dead Helen live again, of piercing the veil which cuts off the living present from the already past and so non-existent moment which preceded it. A notorious epistemological worry arises here: how can memory pretend to offer me *knowledge* of what, being past, is already out of the range of any possible verification? If we take the primary form of self-knowledge to be knowledge of what I am about, then this problem also fails to get off the ground. A temporal reference is implicit in knowledge of what I am doing, but it is secondary to and dependent upon my grasp of the intentionality of my own doings. I know what I just *did*, and what I *did* just before that, because I know what I am *doing*. Conversely, if I forget or become confused about what I am doing it may become difficult or impossible to recapture the sequence in which I did what I just did. My primary self-knowledge is not fundamentally temporal in character but fundamentally intentional and only secondarily and derivatively temporal; and it is because this is so that self-knowledge manifested as memory can give me, as it were, a cognitive grip upon past events even though those events have passed beyond the range of any possible direct verification. The intentional structures which continuously unfold out of my moment-to-moment knowledge of what I am about, taken in their interaction with the vast body of everyday knowledge each of us possesses about the behaviour and characteristics of the natural world, form a rigid reference grid which allows me to carry out running checks on memory, and, in the end, to distinguish between what counts as a genuine memory-image and what does not.

Self-knowledge in the sense of knowledge of what I am about, however, while it will suffice to account for the felt unity of the self across time, is very far from constituting self-knowledge as that has been understood in the Cartesian tradition. Hume's discussion of the self, for instance, presents self-knowledge as if it consisted in the direct apprehension of past states of consciousness strung like jewels upon the thread of temporal succession. Viewed in this way the mind becomes a special realm, occupied by a special kind of natural furniture, 'mental states', to which introspection affords us what Ryle, in *The Concept of Mind*, called 'Privileged Access'. Husserl, because of the Cartesianism of his method, makes something not dissimilar of his structures of constitutive intentional acts: a special 'phenomenological' realm to which the various 'reductions' give access. An intentional account of self-knowledge need not go like that, however (it does not go like that in Merleau-Ponty, for instance). And if we divorce self-knowledge intentionally construed

from the refined Cartesianism of Husserl's method it turns out to be oddly limited in scope. In particular it does not reach back beyond the inception of the act. As Wittgenstein made us see, explaining the difference between a thoughtful and a thoughtless act by taking the former to be the expression of a further, underlying 'mental state' (for which the very same distinction would need once again to be grounded in the presence of some yet deeper state) leads to a vicious regress. The same argument delivers the same conclusion for utterances. Utterance, whether spoken or written, does not mirror an underlying, 'purely mental', and only indirectly or inferentially accessible process of thought; it *is* thought. Speaking or writing, knowing what one is doing, is what thinking is.

From this Wittgensteinian perspective Derrida's much-quoted and to the humanist profoundly unsettling remark that the author is an 'effect of *différance*' begins to take on a new sense. So viewed, it says not that the text offers only a simulacrum of its putative author, but that the author is not in the end distinguishable from the text he or she writes, being like all men and women essentially involved in the intentionality of his or her acts and utterances.

Wittgenstein's argument suggests an account of self-knowledge going roughly as follows: I know from moment to moment what I am doing and what I am saying. That is, at any given moment I can relate what I am doing and saying at that moment, with reference both to my intentions and to the context to which my acts and utterances have been and continue to be intentionally and cognitively related, to what I was doing and saying a moment ago and to what, provisionally at any rate, I have it in mind to do and say a moment from now. To that limited extent I dispose of (or more precisely *am*) a self 'unified across time'. On the other hand it is entirely compatible with the unity of such a self that acts and utterances from time to time simply, as it were, erupt from me. In the heat of a quarrel, for instance, I blurt out an accusation which surprises even me. I know what I have just said (I know what those words mean in English, that is); and in a sense when I said it I knew what I was doing: I was quarrelling; the quarrel had arisen in a certain way, had taken a certain familiar course, I had lost my temper, and so on. What I am at a loss to explain is *what I meant by saying it*, where one part of answering that question would involve explaining how my having said it fits with the account I ordinarily give, to myself and to others, of the kind of person I am. At such moments of aporia, as one's self-image and the brute fact of a particular utterance having burst from one confront each other, one is apt to feel a type of anxiety not unrelated to Sartrean *angst*. It would be nice, at such times, if one

could inspect one's Cartesian Self, under the impulsion of whose unchanging Essence the words presumably leapt into utterance, to discover there the real meaning, the correct interpretation, of those unfortunate words; since an interpretation so discovered, even if in some respects disquieting, would at least be coherent – and necessarily coherent – with the nature of my Real Self, and would thus at least free me from the sense of having in the heat of the moment lost track of my true identity. But unfortunately (here Hume, Wittgenstein and Derrida shake hands, as it were, over the prostrate forms of Descartes and Freud) I have no access to a Cartesian Self: that avenue is closed. There is, then, no saving 'true' meaning of my utterance, transcendentally guaranteed by its origin in pure Cartesian self-knowledge. I said what I said. The utterance stands there in all its grisly blankness and opacity, and if any sense is to be made of it it is the temporal 'I' of limited, merely intentional self-knowledge which must make it. The Self which might have the power to make sense of that utterance lies, in other words, not at its point of origin, but in the future.

We seem to have arrived, by way of Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein, at a position somewhat reminiscent of Nietzsche: the Nietzsche of the gnomic apothegm, 'What does your conscience say? – You must become who you are' ('du sollst der werden, der du bist' [*The Gay Science*, par 270]. Nietzsche, according to his best recent interpreter,[8] divides the self into a multiplicity of discordant drives and impulses. These are not the drives and impulses *of* any *thing*: we can begin to speak of a self only when, and to the extent that, a hierarchy of domination has been established amongst them. To achieve that, however, requires according to Nietzsche an effort of 'co-ordination'.

> *Weakness of the will*: that is a metaphor that can prove misleading. For there is no will, and consequently neither a strong nor a weak will. The multitude and disgregation of impulses and the lack of any systematic order among them result in a 'weak will'; their co-ordination under a single predominant impulse results in a 'strong will': in the former case it is the oscillation and the lack of gravity; in the latter, the precision and clarity of the direction.[9]

The freedom attained in this way is, as Nehamas puts it,

> . . . not the absence of causal determination but a harmony among all of a person's preference schemes. It is a state in which desire follows thought, and action follows desire, without tension or struggle, and in which

> the distinction between choice and constraint may well be thought to disappear.

But such serenity represents a limiting case only, for

> ... Nietzsche does not think of unity as a state of being that follows and replaces an earlier process of becoming. Rather, he seems to think of it as a continual process of integrating one's character traits, habits and patterns of action with one another.[10]

If his position, so set out, is not to collapse into incoherence, Nietzsche has two pressing questions to answer. Firstly, if the self has no being, but only a perpetual becoming, what organizes the becoming? Nietzsche's talk of 'co-ordination [of impulses] under a single predominant impulse' evades the question without answering it. It is easy enough to see how one impulse can dominate over other impulses (I want to sober up but want a drink more, e.g.) but to *co-ordinate* other impulses, now giving some rein, now restraining others, seems to require more similarity than is conceptually intelligible between an impulse and a person. For the same reason it is not easy to see how an impulse could audition, even in principle, for the role of what responds to the command of Nietzschean conscience – 'Du sollst der werden, der du bist' – unless that is to be interpreted as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the very idea of conscience: Don't even bother trying: you will become what chance makes you. Nor, although it seems to me to be moving in the right direction, does Nehamas's suggestion that 'Because it is organized coherently, the body provides the common ground that allows conflicting thoughts, desires, and actions to be grouped together as features of a single subject',[11] cut very much ice in this connection.

The second question a Nietzschean account of the self[12] must face is this: if the self is to arrive at any assessment of its own impulses and proclivities, in order to integrate them into some new structure, then (a) the impulses and proclivities of the self must have some sort of reality, however provisional, despite the non-existence of the Cartesian Self, and (b) the self must have some means of getting to know about its own impulses and proclivities, despite the non-availability of Cartesian privileged access.

As so often in Nietzsche when major metaphysical issues are at stake, we seem to have ended up head-on to a string of contradictions. But there is a way back to firmer ground. The difficulties faced by an account of the self as self-synthesizing which posits radical or ground-up synthesis are indeed insoluble. The move from thinking of the life of the self as a string of temporally discrete 'states of

consciousness' (which, because in theory they might not be states of the same person, require some further step to establish that they are) to thinking of the self in terms of the intentionality of its acts,[13] however, removes the need for a ground-up synthesis.[14] A self which is capable of keeping track of the intentionality of its acts across even the short space of time needed to complete the simplest action is a self which is *already* unified in the required sense. Such a self, however, although thus provided with the minimal unity and coherence needed to make the notion of self-synthesis intelligible, still has plenty of self-synthesizing left to do. The reason for this is that, for a self constituted on the level of agency, an entirely adequate grasp of what it is about can coexist with the most blank inability to give any persuasive general account of its own motives and proclivities. Cartesianism forges an unbreakable link between the unity of the self and perfect self-knowledge. Construing self-knowledge as in the first instance knowledge of what I am about cleaves these two categories apart, giving a theoretical description of the self in which each of us, if he is honest, can recognize at least a former self: a self possessing an iron grip on its own unity and its immediate goals and strategies, coupled with a Lear-like slenderness of self-knowledge. Such a self is Nietzschean precisely in that, while it possesses the unity and the potential for domination and co-ordination which it must possess if it is to take on the Nietzschean role of organizing its impulses into a hierarchical order, it lacks cognitive access to itself as a transparent and purely spiritual realm of 'inner states'. Its horizons are near and contingent ones, bounded by what Nietzsche called 'physiology': the enigma and opacity of impulse, the unchosen but unignorable significances of the body, and an imperfectly faced and comprehended past.

For such a self, of course, the second of the two questions confronting Nietzsche is now pressing. The proclivities and personality patterns of such a self must on some level be real and enduring, and the self must have some cognitive access to them: must be able in some way to get to know about them if it is to change them. What is their habitation, if it is not the transparent abyss of the Cartesian Self? Only one answer seems possible. Their habitation is the text of the self's actions and utterances, taken in context. The acquisition of self-knowledge is more like reading a difficult and painful text than it is like gazing at a harmoniously proportioned and shadowlessly illuminated object. We come to know ourselves by coming to grasp the *effets de différance* which display themselves in the temporally extended text of our own past words and actions, taken in context, to whatever extent we can bring ourselves to scrutinize and assess

that text dispassionately. We now need to look in more detail at the nature of the textual mechanisms which such scrutiny brings into play.

III

One version of the argument for the Death of the Author holds that the formal, rule-governed character of language, the *textuality* of the text considered as a play of rhetorical devices and inter-textual references, is alone sufficient to cut the tie holding together the self and its utterances. Another version, of Derridean inspiration, holds that it is primarily the presence of failures of coherence, aporias, *mises-en-abîme* in the text, which disconnects it from the self. Both arguments make sound enough sense from the standpoint of a generally Cartesian account of self-knowledge. From a Cartesian standpoint the relationship between language and inner life is specular. For that to be so the expressions of a language fitted to describe the inwardness of a speaker must have meanings fully and finally determined by reference to the inner states which it is the business of the language to describe. If the meanings of expressions in the texts we actually have to deal with are in crucial ways established by reference to other texts and through the play of rhetorical devices resting upon literary conventions antedating and quite independent of the author, then clearly, to whatever extent that is the case, their supposedly directly referential connection with states of their authors' Cartesian Selves thins and dissipates. Similarly, if different aspects of a text are at odds with one another, if meanings fissure, disseminate into alternative and incompatible readings, that too must place in question the claim of the text to offer an adequate representation of the Cartesian Self which is its supposed origin. The Self of the Cartesian tradition is nothing if not internally coherent, whether the style of its coherence is of the rational-causal, associative, transcendental or noetic-noematic variety.

It is less clear that either textuality or aporia is a bar to access, via the text, to its author, if the relation between the self and discourse is of the kind sketched in the preceding section. Proust, in *Du côté de chez Swann*, offers a good example of the kind of textual access to the self I have in mind.[15] The young Marcel is visiting a family friend, M. Legrandin, and happens to ask him whether he is on visiting terms with the Duchesse de Guermantes.

> I summoned up all my courage and said to him: 'Tell me, sir, do you, by any chance, know the lady – the ladies of Guermantes?' and I felt glad

because, in pronouncing the name, I had secured a sort of power over it, by the mere act of drawing it up out of my dreams and giving it an objective existence in the world of spoken things.

But at the sound of the word Guermantes, I saw in the middle of each of our friend's blue eyes a little brown dimple appear, as though they had been stabbed by some invisible pin-point, while the rest of his pupils, reacting from the shock, received and secreted the azure overflow. His fringed eyelids darkened and drooped, his mouth, which had been stiffened and seared with bitter lines, was the first to recover, and smiled, while his eyes still seemed full of pain, like the eyes of a good-looking martyr whose body bristles with arrows.

'No I do not know them,' he said, but instead of uttering so simple a piece of information, a reply in which there was so little that would astonish me, in the natural and conventional tone that would have befitted it, he recited it with a separate stress on each word, leaning forward, bowing his head, with at once the vehemence which a man gives, so as to be believed, to a highly improbable statement (as though the fact that he did not know the Guermantes could be due only to some strange accident of fortune) and with the emphasis of a man, who, finding himself unable to keep silent about what is to him a painful situation, chooses to proclaim it aloud, so as to convince his hearers that the confession he is making is one which causes him no embarrassment, but is easy, agreeable, spontaneous, that the situation in question, in this case the absence of relations with the Guermantes family, might very well have been not forced upon, but actually designed by Legrandin himself, might arise from some family tradition, some moral principle or mystical vow which expressly forbade his seeking their society.

'No,' he resumed, explaining by his words the tone in which they were uttered. 'No, I do not know them; I have never wished to know them; I have always made a point of preserving complete independence; at heart, as you know, I am a bit of a Radical. People are always coming to me about it, telling me I am mistaken in not going to Guermantes, that I make myself seem ill-bred, uncivilized, an old bear. But that's not the sort of reputation that can frighten me; it's too true! In my heart of hearts I care for nothing in the world now but a few churches, books – two or three, pictures – rather more perhaps, and the light of the moon when the fresh breeze of youth wafts to my nostrils the scent of gardens whose flowers my old eyes are not sharp enough, now, to distinguish.'[16]

Proust sums up the significance of this passage with the following strikingly anti-Cartesian observation:

Et certes cela ne veut pas dire que M. Legrandin ne fût pas sincère quand il tonnait contre les snobs. Il ne pouvait pas savoir, au moins par

lui-même, qu'il le fut, puisque nous ne connaissons jamais que les passions des autres, et que ce que nous arrivons à savoir des nôtres, ce n'est que d'eux que nous avons pu l'apprendre.*[17]

The point of this observation, I take it, is that Legrandin's snobbery is not a matter of an inner state to which he might possess Cartesian guaranteed access, but something which displays itself in, among other things, a pattern of incoherences and aporias in the text of his remarks in response to Marcel's innocent question. His explanations of why he is not on visiting terms with the Guermantes are too numerous, and are inconsistent one with another. The discord arises because each successive explanation presupposes a certain *stance*, and with it a certain general description of the self supposedly offering the explanation, which simply fails to cohere with the stances and the correlative self-descriptions presupposed by the others. The old Radical, the *tête de jacobin* who would feel politically compromised in an aristocratic drawing-room, cannot easily be reconciled with the Epicurean hermit of the next sentence. Worse still – this, I think, is the clincher – there would not be the multiplicity of explanations, the solemn emphasis on words, the vehemence, the bowing of the head, the readiness all this manifests to take as an extraordinary state of affairs, requiring extraordinary feats of explanation, a social lacuna which seems entirely normal to the young Marcel (to whom the Guermantes are as remote and as majestically fabulous as figures in a tapestry), and which would excite as little wonder in a genuine *tête de jacobin* or a genuine Epicurean sage.

In so far as these incoherences invalidate Legrandin's claim to be offering a mimetically accurate description of his Cartesian inwardness we have here a palmary instance of deconstructive aporia. The trouble is that deconstructive aporia seems to be functioning here not as a means of severing Legrandin's words from any connection with Legrandin, but as a means of making both the fact and the nature of that connection clear. For if we ask ourselves: What is Legrandin, really? How is one to describe a man who offers, in response to a simple question, such an incoherent rigmarole as this? – only one answer plausibly offers itself: as a covert and deeply repressed snob, who feels keenly, *in propria persona*, the social exclusion which, in

* ('Certainly that does not mean that M. Legrandin was not sincere when he inveighed against snobs. He could not know, at least of himself, that he was one; since we are only aware, ever, of the passions of others, and whatever knowledge we may come to have of our own can only have been acquired from them.')

the characters of *tête de jacobin* or elderly Epicurean, he would like to persuade his young listener that he does not feel at all. The conclusion that the stance from which Legrandin is really speaking is that of a snob is the only possible one because that hypothesis alone fails to disintegrate into aporia under deconstructive scrutiny. Note, too, that the knowledge of Legrandin's real feelings and character which Marcel, and we as readers, obtain from what essentially amounts to deconstructive analysis of the text of Legrandin's remarks is *definitive*, in a sense in which the 'knowledge' of himself upon which Legrandin supposes himself to be drawing in giving his explanation is not. For suppose someone were to say: 'After all, perhaps one should not base too much on a mere string of words. Isn't it possible that M. Legrandin's True Self, the self which is forever and in principle hidden behind the veil of his words and deeds, is in reality not, after all, a snobbish self?' Wouldn't we just ignore this as a contribution to the discussion? And wouldn't we be right to do so, since the hypothesis it propounds is an entirely empty one which could make no difference either way? In reality the way in which we come to understand *les passions des autres* is not by inspecting, or framing hypotheses about, their Cartesian selves, but by subjecting the text of their words and actions to exactly the sort of scrutiny to which Proust subjects the text of M. Legrandin's. That text is not a veil cutting us off from the self of its author, but a small portion of the vast web of talk and action in which that self lives and manifests itself.

The deconstructionist will want to protest that the concept of *différance* cannot simply be stood on its head in this summary way. Derrida's arguments show that the text – that *writing* – constitutes a sphere of pure textuality, hermetically sealed off from any 'outside' – any *hors-texte* – within which meanings disseminate and shift endlessly with no possibility of ever being brought to a halt, as Proust's deconstruction of Legrandin's reply comes to a halt in the fact of Legrandin's snobbery. This, of course, is just what is contestable. What Derrida's arguments in fact show is that logocentrism and the 'Metaphysics of Presence' are incoherent. The impossibility of any kind of interaction between text and *hors-texte* follows from the incoherence of those doctrines only if they offer the only possible means of conceptually constituting the notion of an *hors-texte*. The main task of the argument in Chapter 1 and the present chapter has been that of showing this second assumption of conventional deconstructionism (I use the term 'conventional deconstructionism' because, while many of Derrida's literary disciples take this second step, it remains quite unclear to me whether Derrida himself is

prepared to take it) to be false. My claim in Chapter 1 was that the relationships between sign and sign which constitute meaning within the text can only be weakly internal to the text. They relate sign to sign only via features and aspects of the extra-linguistic world. My contention in this chapter is that the way in which we test the sincerity of a speaker's account of himself in terms of the coherence of what he is saying with one or another account of the stance from which he may be supposed to be saying it, is a case in point of a sign–sign relationship weakly internal to language.

The notion of 'stance' which we employ in such cases is clearly replete with extra-linguistic reference. It takes for granted the intentional coherence of the acts and discourse of a normal human being. Taking that for granted in no way involves a commitment to logocentrism or the metaphysics of presence: it is no bar, for instance, to accepting everything that Saussure has to say about meaning as a function of relationships between signs, and thus everything that Derrida has to say about *différance*. It offers us, certainly, access to an *hors-texte* capable of bringing the movement of meanings to a halt, as in the case of M. Legrandin's reply; but (a) access to an *hors-texte* in that sense in no sense involves access to *presence* in the shape of M. Legrandin's 'inner states', and (b) the *hors-texte* in question, for that very reason, cannot be shown to be inaccessible by appeal to the arguments which demonstrate the incoherence of logocentrism. What, after all, would it be to doubt the intentional coherence of M. Legrandin's, or for that matter Proust's, acts and utterances? If such doubts could intelligibly be raised the immediate consequence would be to make it a real, and in principle undecidable question whether the string of sentences which compose the text of *A la recherche du temps perdu* should be regarded as constituting a *text* at all, rather than just a string of unrelated sentences. I can find nothing in Derrida to support a scepticism as whimsical as this; and even if there were, what would follow? We should, rightly, shrug our shoulders and carry on as usual.

If textual aporia interacts, in the way we have just observed, with the stance or stances from which a text is nominally produced to discredit the claim to authenticity of some putative stances and correlative characterizations of the authorial self while leaving others as residual legatees, as it were, of the text, then the mere *textuality* of the text, its status as a play of socially and historically locatable tropes and inter-textual references, offers no greater bar than aporia to the text's functioning as a manifestation, and as such a source of direct knowledge, of the self of its author. Legrandin's response, after all, is an entirely formal, literary construct, replete with allusions to genres

as diverse as pastoral and the political tract; but this in no way prevents it from functioning as the vehicle of a self-revelation, however inadvertent. The counter-intuitive consequences of the arguments for the Death of the Author which we listed earlier included the impossibility of being addressed by the author through his text and the impossibility of a text's communicating an individual person's thoughts and feelings. To these we might add the odd conclusion that there is no reason for an author to feel in any way responsible for his text, since once it passes from his hand all connection between him and it is automatically severed. The temptation to say any of these things about the Marcel / Legrandin exchange is, I think, rather slight. Marcel is quite evidently being addressed by Legrandin despite the entirely fictional character of the explanation which Legrandin is addressing to him. Equally, Legrandin's little fiction certainly communicates to Marcel his thoughts and feelings, confused and self-indulgent though these are. Finally, it seems clear that Legrandin is responsible for his words, just in the sense that, since they do manifest one aspect of his self, he cannot detach them from him, or disown them merely on the grounds that they do so under the form of a flawed literary construct. It seems that the author may be alive after all, and living in the region in which New Criticism (which never, after all, subscribed to the Method of Sainte-Beuve) located him, namely, in the text.

IV

The critical consequences of taking the relationship between the self and its utterances to be either specular in character or non-existent are well displayed in Paul de Man's discussion, in his subtle and brilliant essay 'Autobiography as De-Facement',[18] of Wordsworth's *Essays upon Epitaphs*. De Man's reading, it seems to me, makes Wordsworth into more of a Cartesian than he is. To put it more precisely, while Wordsworth is apt, hardly surprisingly, to avail himself of Cartesian or Lockeian formulas when he wants a *general* way of characterizing the relationship between self and utterance, his detailed treatment of examples in *Upon Epitaphs*, and many of his occasional reflections, here and elsewhere, upon his own poetic practice, conform much more closely to the alternative account of that relationship sketched in the preceding two sections. A whole cluster of issues concerning Wordsworth's type of Romanticism and Romanticism in general, about Wordsworthian 'truth to Nature' and about what it is to take writing seriously, come to a head here.

De Man takes the stance of autobiography to be that 'The author

declares himself the subject of his own understanding . . .'. The putative relation of autobiography to the self is specular, that is. To a philosopher within the tradition of Cartesian metaphysics that is the relation of all writing to the self. De Man accepts that, and thus accepts that the particular practice of autobiography

> merely makes explicit the wider claim to authorship that takes place whenever a text is stated to be *by* someone and assumed to be understandable to the extent that this is the case. Which amounts to saying that any book with a readable title page is, to some extent, autobiographical.[19]

There is already here, I think, a suspicion that de Man may be proceeding a priori from a half-acknowledged metaphysic to a conclusion about what the stance of autobiography, and by extension of literature in general, given the exclusive truth of that metaphysic, *must be*. Not only is it hard to find an express declaration of authorial self-understanding in Wordsworth's text; such a stance seems actually to be excluded by passages such as the following, from the address to the Friend in Book I of *The Prelude* (1805–6):

> Nor will it seem to thee, my Friend! so prompt
> In sympathy, that I have lengthen'd out
> With fond and feeble tongue, a tedious tale.
> Meanwhile my hope has been that I might fetch
> Invigorating thoughts from former years,
> Might fix the wavering balance of my mind,
> And haply meet reproaches, too, whose power
> May spur me on, in manhood now mature,
> To honourable toil. Yet should these hopes
> Be vain, and thus should neither I be taught
> To understand myself, nor thou to know
> With better knowledge how the heart was fram'd
> Of him thou lovest, . . . (ll. 645–57)[20]

Here self-understanding is precisely not seen as a necessary precondition for the composition of *The Prelude*, but as something which might, though only chancily and with luck, result from it. The proposed method, too, is not the lapidary representation of a past life already understood in all its significances and consequences for a narrator speaking with all the authority of a self which at the point of utterance is stable and fully achieved. Rather, the object is, by reflection upon the past, to achieve stability of personal stance *in the present*: to 'fix the wavering balance of my mind' (a foreshadowing here of Nietzsche on strength of will!) by fetching 'invigorating

thoughts from former years'. Altogether the stance of these lines is much more that of someone embarking upon an enterprise of self-examination in the interests of Nietzschean *Selbstbildung* than that of the achieved specular magus of de Man's characterization.[21] Of course one could try retorting that to talk about any subject, and hence to talk about myself, implies a claim to know what I am talking about. But this merely offers de Man the uninviting choice between a truism and a falsehood. I know *what happened* in my childhood if I can talk about it. What I may not know, and perhaps can only find out by attempting to talk or write about those events, is their significance for my present self: how they are or might be articulated into the structure of my present outlook and personality.

Wordsworth's theme in the third of the *Essays upon Epitaphs* is the Romantic opposition between Nature and Artifice. The 'artifices which have overrun our writings in metre since the days of Dryden and Pope' are contrasted with

> Energy, stillness, grandeur, tenderness, those feelings which are the pure emanations of nature, those thoughts which have the infinitude of truth, and those expressions which are not what the garb is to the body but what the body is to the soul, themselves a constituent part and power or function in the thought – all these are abandoned for their opposites, – as if our Countrymen, through successive generations, had lost the sense of solemnity and pensiveness (not to speak of deeper emotions) and resorted to the Tombs of their Forefathers and Contemporaries only to be tickled and surprized. (p. 84)[22]

Language, correctly used, is continuous with Wordsworthian Nature in its power for good: it is because words so used are a *part of Nature* (they must be, since they are a 'constituent part and power or function' of our thought – of our selves, that is – and we ourselves are a part of Nature), are 'external powers', that they are not to be 'trifled with'.

> Words are too awful an instrument for good and evil to be trifled with: they hold above all other external powers a dominion over thoughts. If words be not (recurring to a metaphor before used) an incarnation of the thought but only a clothing for it, then surely will it prove an ill gift; such a one as those poisoned vestments, read of in the stories of superstitious times, which had power to consume and to alienate from his right mind the victim who put them on. Language, if it do not uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet, like the power of gravitation or the air we breathe, is a

> counter-spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work to derange, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve. (pp. 84–6)

It is worth noting in passing, of course, that Wordsworth's observation that words which are not, in the sense intended, trifling are 'themselves a constituent part and power or function of the thought', suffices in itself to make what is, finally, the central point of the present chapter concerning the relationship between discourse and the self.

After some further consideration of examples of epitaphs, the third *Essay* ends with what is in effect a long verse epitaph of Wordsworth's own composition, taken from *The Excursion*. It concerns a Dalesman, made deaf in childhood, for whom books remedy the silence of nature. The point is that words *give nature voice*: Book and Nature work together in moral harmony.

> The dark winter night,
> The stormy day, had each its own resource;
> Song of the muses, sage historic tale,
> Science severe, or word of holy writ
> Announcing immortality and joy
> To the assembled spirits of the just,
> From imperfection and decay secure. (p. 95)

From a post-structuralist standpoint this whole long passage of distinction, analogy, lyric and prose exhortation is, of course, simply logocentrism on stilts. The central distinction, between language as analogous to the body (as 'incarnation of thought') and as analogous to clothing, is easily 'placed' at first sight as a variation upon the standard logocentric distinction between a language which mirrors, with specular fidelity, the living process of thought (Derridean *speech*) and a language (Derridean *writing*) which merely sets signs together in dazzling and unexpected ways to 'tickle and surprize'.

Not surprisingly, then, it is the distinction between language as clothing and as incarnation which de Man singles out (his p. 79 *et seq.*) as 'The main inconsistency of the text'. De Man's argument is, in effect, that the second wing of the distinction collapses into the first: all language is clothing. Ostensibly the thought here is Derrida's: all language, including speech, is writing: there is no language which neutrally and immediately mirrors the living presence of the self. But de Man's discussion infects this thought, the native tenor of which is not epistemological but metaphysical (see my Chapter 4, 'Deconstructing Derrida'), with the appearance / reality doubts characteristic of philosophical idealism. De Man's deconstruction begins thus:

> De Quincy singled out this distinction and read it as a way to oppose compelling figures to arbitrary ones. But incarnate flesh and clothing have at least one property in common, in opposition to the thoughts they both represent, namely their visibility, their accessibility to the senses.[23]

De Man takes Wordsworth's claim to be that 'a garment is the visible outside of the body as the body is the visible outside of the soul'. Of course Wordsworth cannot keep language-as-clothing and language-as-incarnation apart as distinguishable categories of discourse on this interpretation: 'The language of tropes (which is the specular language of autobiography) is indeed like the body, which is like its garments, the veil of the soul as the garment is the sheltering veil of the body.'[24]

No one, not even a Lake Poet, could be supposed altogether insensible to the discomfort of finding himself perched above a *mise-en-abîme* as vertiginous as this. De Man's next move, therefore, is to search the third *Essay* for signs of the discomfort produced by an obscure consciousness of *mauvaise foi*. They are not hard to find. The violence of Wordsworth's attack on Dryden and Pope is first singled out as suspiciously inconsistent with the former's expressed (and of course putatively logocentric) preference for what de Man characterizes as 'a lucid language of repose, tranquillity and serenity'. Wordsworth's choice of the coat of Nessus as a metaphor for the destructive power of a language that does nothing more than 'tickle and surprize' is itself evidence of lurking bad faith, since, given the impossibility of 'the specular language of autobiography', it is in reality not trifling language but language *per se* which obscures and de-faces the self.

> The coat of Nessus, which caused the violent death of Hercules, as narrated in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, was given to his wife Deianeira, in the hope of regaining the affections from [sic] which she would soon be deprived. It was supposed to restore the love which she lost, but the restoration turned out to be a worse deprivation, a loss of life and sense.[25]

The story of Wordsworth's 'gentle Dalesman' is similarly ambiguous. The Dalesman's deafness, his dependence upon *writing*, does not represent the restoration of nature, but is merely the counterpart of the muteness of nature, which even at the height of a storm is 'silent as a picture'.

> To the extent that language is figure (or metaphor, or prosopopoeia) it is indeed not the thing itself but the representation, the picture of the thing and, as such, it is silent, mute as pictures are mute. *Language, as trope, is always privative* [my italics].[26]

V

De Man's argument depends upon the assumption that Wordsworth's distinction between language as dress and language as incarnation, to be sustainable at all, must be sustainable on conditions set by Cartesianism and by the philosophical idealism which is one natural terminus of Cartesianism. Is this really so? One thought which might give us pause is that if this had been the interpretation Wordsworth had in mind it would have been difficult for him to fail to perceive its incoherence.

Certainly twentieth-century philosophy has returned often enough to the thought that language *incarnates* being, including the being of the self. I am thinking here not merely of Heidegger's talk of language as the House of Being, but of Merleau-Ponty's version of existential phenomenology, with its denial of Cartesian (or Kantian, or Husserlian) intellectualism in favour of an intrinsic connection between language, consciousness and the body, and of Wittgenstein's denial that 'inner states' can intelligibly be abstracted from their bodily manifestations and functional context.[27] Is there textual warrant, perhaps, for siting Wordsworth's distinction as a foreshadowing of this essentially anti-Cartesian (and certainly in some sense late Romantic) tradition, rather than as yet another manifestation of Cartesian logocentrism? I think there is, if we turn from the logocentric-sounding formulae of the polemical portions of the third *Essay* to the poet's detailed treatment of examples.

There are, says Wordsworth, epitaphs which 'strike with a gleam of pleasure, when the expression is of that kind which carries conviction to the heart at once that the author was a sincere mourner, and that the Inhabitant of the Grave deserved to be so lamented' (p. 66). His example is a German epitaph:

Ach! sie haben
Einen Braven
Mann begraben –
Mir war er mehr als viele

('Ah! they have buried a brave man – he was more to me than many'). What is it about this that 'carries conviction to the heart'? Is it, perhaps, just the terseness, the stiff-upper-lip *tone*, and mightn't something like that become (think of the numerous parodies of Hemingway) just one more trope, one more literary trick?

Well, what is it that would make us feel, in another case, that neither sincerity nor perhaps desert were present? Wordsworth's criterion here is not, as it turns out, 'artificiality' construed as literary

elaboration *per se*, but literary elaboration *where that manifests an incoherence between what is written and the putative stance from which it is written*. Of a clumsily Metaphysical epitaph cited in the second *Essay*,

> Under this Stone, Reader, inter'd doth lye,
> Beauty and virtue's true epitomy.
> At her appearance the noone-son
> Blushed and shrunk in 'cause quite outdon.
> In her concenter'd did all graces dwell:
> God pluck'd my rose that he might take a smel.
> I'll say no more: but weeping wish I may
> Soone with thy dear chaste ashes come to lay.
> Sic efflevit Maritus

Wordsworth says,

> Can any thing go beyond this in extravagance? Yet, if the fundamental thoughts be translated into a more natural style, they will be found reasonable and affecting – 'The Woman who lies here interred, was in my eyes a perfect image of beauty and virtue; she was to me a brighter object than the sun in heaven: God took her, who was my delight, from this earth to bring her nearer to himself. Nothing further is worthy to be said than that weeping I wish soon to lie by thy dear chaste ashes – Thus did the Husband pour out his tears. (p. 73)

Wordsworth's thought is that the epitaph presents itself as written by a husband grief-stricken by his wife's death, is written in a euphuistic vein which at first appears inconsistent with that putative stance, but that when we go deeper and expose the thought we see that all is well; despite the extravagance of the expression there is no ultimate discord: the thought, if not the way it is expressed, is consistent with the stance from which it presents itself as being uttered.

> These verses are preceded by a brief account of the Lady, in Latin prose; in which the little that is said is the uncorrupted language of affection. But, without this introductory communication, I should myself have had no doubt, after recovering from the first shock of surprize and disapprobation, that this man, notwithstanding his extravagant expressions was a sincere mourner; and that his heart, during the very act of composition, was moved. These fantastic images, though they stain the writing, stained not his soul. – They did not even touch it; but hung like globules of rain suspended above a green leaf along which they may roll and leave no trace that they have passed over it. This simple-hearted Man must have been betrayed by a common notion that what was natural in

> prose would be out of place in verse; – that it is not the Muse which puts on the Garb but the Garb which makes the Muse. And, having adopted this notion at a time when vicious writings of this kind accorded with the public taste, it is probable that, in the excess of his modesty, the blankness of his inexperience, and the intensity of his affection, he thought that the further he wandered from nature in his language the more would he honour his departed Consort, who now appeared to him to have surpassed humanity in the excellence of her endowments. The quality of his fault and its very excess are both in favour of this conclusion.
>
> (pp. 73–4)

Wordsworth next turns to an epitaph by Lyttleton upon the death of his daughter. Here the expression is equally stilted, but now there is no way of saving a claim to sincerity by retreating to a simpler expression of the underlying thought; for there is no underlying thought.

> The Reader will perceive at once that nothing in the heart of the Writer had determined either the choice, the order, or the expression, of the ideas – that there is no interchange of action from within and without – that the connections are mechanical and arbitrary, and the lowest kind of these – Heart and Eyes – petty alliterations, as meek and magnanimous, witty and wise, combined with oppositions in thoughts where there is no necessary or natural opposition.

In the case of the bereaved husband, however,

> ... we have a Mourner whose soul is occupied by grief and urged forward by his admiration. He deems in his simplicity that no hyperbole can transcend the perfections of her whom he has lost; for the version which I have given fairly demonstrates that, in spite of his outrageous expressions, the under current of his thoughts was natural and pure.
>
> (p. 75)

Now we see why 'Ach! sie haben / einen Braven ...' impresses Wordsworth as sincere. If its terseness were a trope, a literary device in a bad sense, that would show as a tension between the requirements of the presumed stance of the text and the requirements of literary elaboration (cf. the way in which the muscular qualities of Hemingway's prose can be rendered by such tricks as using the sonorities of archaic English to render everyday Spanish); a tension in which the demands of the latter would ultimately overwhelm and efface those of the former, as they have done in the Lyttleton epitaph. There is no such tension in the words 'Ach! sie haben ...'. They are words which a man who felt what they express might indeed utter.

When Wordsworth speaks of an 'interchange of action from within and without' he is thinking, that is, not of the hermetic Within constituted by language relative to the metaphysically inaccessible Without of another speaker's Cartesian Self, but of a Within and a Without related as, for instance, are the Within of M. Legrandin's explanation together with the deluded self-consciousness it expresses, the false Without of his putative Jacobinism or Epicureanism, and the actual Without of his repressed but unquiet snobbery.

Two connected points are crucial here. The first is that Wordsworth's criterion for the distinction between language functioning as clothing and language as incarnation is a textual one, a criterion internal to the text, that is, and not a logocentric one at all.[28] The second is that the criterion, although internal to the text, gives access to a reality beyond the text. The grief and the literary simplicity of Wordsworth's bereaved husband are real characteristics of a real person, even though we have access to them only through a text. To put it in that way may sound, perhaps, like a covert reinstatement of logocentrism, but is not. The bereaved husband acted, spoke and wrote in the world. His self throughout was not located outside or behind those acts but inhabited them. So it inhabited, as it inhabited his other acts, the epitaph he wrote for his wife.[29] Suppose, someone will object, the epitaph was in fact invented by some cunning literary fellow, as M. Legrandin's words were invented by Proust? Well, then, what we have is an excellent literary representation of just such a person as the bereaved husband. Either way we have something more than a tissue of signs interacting with other signs in a manner wholly internal to language.

Roland Barthes in 'The Death of the Author' argues that the mere act of composing *narrative* disconnects what is written from the writer.

> As soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins.[30]

Barthes here seems to be drawing back from the idea that the Death of the Author might infect the everyday communications of practical life. Barthes is clearly right. We cannot take letters or instructions on packets as strings of disconnected sentences subject to indefinite reinterpretation by the application of socially sanctioned hermeneutic procedures. Indeed, if we cannot assume the intentional coherence of the acts and utterances of the individual members of a

society, the notion of a socially sanctioned hermeneutic principle itself lapses into vacuity. But Barthes thinks that that restraint is lifted as soon as practical considerations give place to literary ones. Here Barthes is just wrong. All narration presupposes a stance from which it is conducted; and that being so, there is no way of preventing questions of the coherence of discourse and stance, of exactly the kind which govern our assessment of the characters and the sincerity of others and ourselves in everyday life, from leaking into the interior of even the most formal and artificial narrative. If we obstinately insist that they are 'merely textual effects' when they crop up in literary contexts, then we shall have in consistency to say that they are also 'merely textual effects' when they crop up in everyday life. And with what are we contrasting such textual effects when we assert that they are *merely* textual? Presumably with the extra-textual reality of 'pure presence', of the Cartesian Self. But even when granted a kind of courtesy status as viable concepts by being placed *sous rature*, presence and the Cartesian Self lack the content they would need to underpin the required contrast between reality and mere appearances. In literature as in practical life, we know others, and for that matter ourselves, by the coherence, or lack of it, obtaining between how we present our acts and utterances and what the content of those acts and utterances actually consists in. That is why Wordsworth can infer from a clumsy piece of metaphysical verse the sincere feelings of a bereaved husband, or Marcel from M. Legrandin's (fictional) account of himself his (real) snobbery; and why Wordsworth has a perfect right to his distinction between language-as-dress and language-as-incarnation; drawn as it is internally to the text and paralleling as it does the operation of a similar, and indispensable, distinction in real life.

VI

If the content of the contrast between sincerity and insincerity can be established internally to the text in this way, what kind of sincerity, what kind of truthfulness, are we to demand of the autobiographer? How is Wordsworth as author of *The Prelude*, say, to respond to his own dictum that 'Words are too awful an instrument for good and evil to be trifled with'? We seem to have before us two ways of conceiving the autobiographer's project. On the one hand one can think of it as the task of explaining one's mind and personality by giving a true causal account of their development over time. This is the project which de Man implicitly ascribes to Wordsworth. It plainly is a necessary precondition of this project that 'The author

declares himself the subject of his own understanding'. Autobiography in this sense involves a host of factual claims, both about past events and about their effects upon the author, and for the truth of any of these claims we have indeed only the warrant of the author's signature; that signature which in post-structuralist writings shrivels ineluctably from the fullness of offered presence to a mere mark: another trope. One hardly needs to have read *Limited, Inc.*, for that matter, to see the force of this point: the whole situation is too reminiscent of the clergyman who took it upon himself to assure Hume of the existence of the Deity and, when asked what warrant he could offer for such assurance, replied, 'Why, my *word*, sir; the word of a gentleman!'[31]

On the other hand, we can construe the autobiographer's project in a different way. We can see it, not as an attempt at retrospective reconstruction of the causal relationships linking past selves to one another and to the world, but as the attempt to come to terms, through writing, with one's present self. Can the 'past' which the autobiographer recounts then be an imaginary past? That depends. Whether, for instance, the events which occupy the 'spots of time' in the early books of *The Prelude*, the theft of the boat, and so on, happened just as Wordsworth affects to remember them, or whether there has been some, or much, embroidery, seems to me relatively unimportant in this context. Wordsworth can perfectly easily hide the real events of his childhood from us if he wishes: we have, for most of them, no other warrant. What he cannot hide from us is the coherence, or lack of it, of the self which unfolds itself before us through many thousand lines of complex and internally reverberating reflection upon itself, its past and life in general. The ultimate test which such a monumental self-avowal has to pass is not that applied by asking whether contemporaries of Wordsworth would have been able to verify, for instance, if asked, the episode of the boy set ashore with his flute, but the test which Marcel applies to M. Legrandin's rigmarole: the test which the more direct epitaphs in Wordsworth's collection pass. To the extent that we consider, if we consider, that *The Prelude* passes that test, we are prepared to accept Wordsworth's assurances about boys with flutes, or if we doubt them, to grant him freely the need to shape the past a little for the purposes of the poem. For to pass that test is to have succeeded, provisionally at least (for there is always more to be said, more poems to write), in Nietzsche's enterprise of making a self for oneself; of becoming what one is.

If autobiography were the recounting of a causal truth about the past, then it would be something which, if it could be done at all, could be done definitively: there can only be one causal truth about

past events. If it is not the attempt to recount the adventures of a self, but the attempt to constitute one through writing, then it must always be to some degree provisional. Wayne Booth argues in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* that the authorial self of a novel cannot be the author's real self because it changes from book to book. Who, he asks, could predict Fielding's authorial self in *Tom Jones* from his authorial self in *Amelia*? The proper answer, it seems to me, is that while one couldn't *predict* that kind of thing either way, one can certainly find enough of the Fielding of *Tom Jones* in the Fielding of *Amelia* to understand the latter as a development of the former. Nietzsche's vision of the self as permanently under construction is a better guide here, in other words, than the Rationalist vision of the self as an unchanging substance from whose essence all of its capacities and potentialities could be predicted.

The provisional character of autobiography construed as an enterprise of self-constitution does something, I think, to explain both Wordsworth's views on poetic language and the actual language of *The Prelude*. De Man, I am inclined to think, altogether misconstrues the nature of Wordsworth's hostility to the 'antithetical' Augustan style, by assuming it to be rooted in Wordsworth's supposed preference for 'a lucid language of repose, tranquillity and serenity'. Such a language would indeed be appropriate to the practitioner of specular autobiography, and fits the well-known tag about 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'. The trouble is that the language of *The Prelude* is manifestly just not like that. It is tentative, exploratory, marked by the kinds of personal and epistemological uncertainty caught by the recurrent 'whether . . . or' construction, and above all it is a language of crisis and partial resolution; a resolution which always involves loss as well as gain. The self of the 1805/6 *Prelude* is that of a man conscious of violent tensions in his outlook and predilections, and of a past as incoherent and rich in disconfirmation as his present.[32] His task is to find some stable footing for his present self; to find a stance which will weld his present and his past together into a stable and coherent system of significances. The notion of the unity of the self is functioning here, as in Nietzsche, as an ideal limit; something to be striven towards, not something achieved and originary which both founds and guarantees the success of the enterprise. Nevertheless the drive towards unity is essential to the Wordsworthian project of sincerity and 'truth to Nature': of incarnating rather than merely clothing oneself in language. What is wrong with the 'antithetical' language of Pope and Dryden is that, implicitly, it refuses this project.

For de Man, Wordsworth's dislike of antithetical language is

prima facie disingenuous. Wordsworth's superficial moral reasons for disliking it – that it is fit only to represent the state of mind of an evil or depraved man, and so forth – conceal a more fundamental ground of hostility. Wordsworth dislikes antithetical language because it reveals itself too openly *as* language – as *writing* – and thus threatens the logocentric project of a specular language.

If Wordsworth's argument in the *Essays upon Epitaphs* in no way depends upon the project of a specular language (and I cannot myself see any but superficial reasons for supposing that it does), then of course de Man's argument falls to the ground, and we need to look again at the reasons Wordsworth actually gave for not only disliking but reproving the poetry of Dryden and Pope.

> Pope's mind had been employed chiefly in observation upon the vices and follies of men. Now, vice and folly are in contradiction with the moral principle which can never be extinguished in the mind: and, therefore, wanting this controul, are irregular, capricious and inconsistent with themselves. If a man has once said . . . 'Evil be thou my Good!' and has acted accordingly, however strenuous may have been his adherence to this principle, it will be well known to those who have had an opportunity of observing him narrowly that there have been perpetual obliquities in his course; evil passions thwarting each other in various ways; and, now and then, revivals of his better nature, which check him for a short time or lead him to remeasure his steps: – not to speak of the various necessities of counterfeiting virtue which the furtherance of his schemes will impose upon him, and the division which will consequently be introduced into his nature. (p.80)

For better or for worse the Wordsworthian autobiographer is attempting not to live like that. He is setting out to try to achieve, through reflection and writing, unity within himself, amongst his various selves, his past and (in a broad sense) Nature. Antithetical language, however well it may serve the purposes of satire or social observation, will not serve the purposes of such a project. But to dismiss it for those reasons, because *in that sense* it fails to respect 'the rights and dignity of Nature', is not necessarily to commit oneself *à rebours* to the entirely metaphysical – and indeed incoherent – project of a specular language in which it is perfectly manifest that Wordsworth never for one moment believed.

Is Wordsworth's project an important one? I mean by these words to pose a question of a type which many critics nowadays would consider absurdly old-fashioned and naïve: something along the lines of 'Is *The Prelude* a great work of literature?' Philosophers, to whom far more ingenious forms of scepticism are daily bread, may perhaps

be less timid of asking such resounding questions than critics, to whom subjective idealism served up with a gloss of Saussurian linguistics and some sound debunking of bad metaphysics constitutes a potent and unfamiliar brew. It does no harm, at any rate, to ask a straight question of this kind now and then, and in this case the question is susceptible of a straight answer: namely, yes. I think Wordsworth (and for that matter Nietzsche) was right to connect the effort to achieve coherence, both in one's life and feelings and in the account one gives of them, with deep and important kinds of integrity. Our age, by and large, does not believe that words are too awful a power for good and evil to be trifled with. On the contrary we behave as if we believe that any utterance, no matter how flatulent, obscene, cruel or dishonest, will be blown away on the winds tomorrow, never to rise again to haunt the speaker. I think we need to read more, not less Wordsworth, and we need to read him not sociologized or deconstructed or embedded in some transient and (to some minds) comforting archaeology of knowledge, but straight. That is why any criticism, however brilliant and ingenious, which obstructs a clear view of him should be resisted.