



University  
of Glasgow

<https://theses.gla.ac.uk/>

Theses Digitisation:

<https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/research/enlighten/theses/digitisation/>

This is a digitised version of the original print thesis.

Copyright and moral rights for this work are retained by the author

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge

This work cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the author

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the author

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given

Enlighten: Theses

<https://theses.gla.ac.uk/>  
[research-enlighten@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:research-enlighten@glasgow.ac.uk)

**Wordsworth in History:**  
**Radical Politics and the Poetry of the Poor, 1793-98**

**Thesis submitted to the University of Glasgow**

**by**

**Chan-Kil Park**

**in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**Department of English Literature**

**University of Glasgow**

**July 1993**

ProQuest Number: 10992143

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



ProQuest 10992143

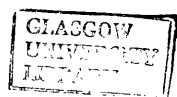
Published by ProQuest LLC (2018). Copyright of the Dissertation is held by the Author.

All rights reserved.

This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code  
Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

ProQuest LLC.  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 – 1346

Thesis  
9519  
Copy 1





## ABSTRACT

This thesis is yet another attempt to read Wordsworth's poetry within its contemporary historical context. In particular, it centres on those crucial five years 1793-98 during which Wordsworth pursued the career of a professional poet in the midst of his political disillusionment both as a republican ideologue and as a social reformer. The historically informed reading of Wordsworth's poetry attempted in this thesis, aims, on the one hand, to understand the contemporary topical significance of Wordsworth's poetic and non-poetic writings. On the other, it is focused on Wordsworth's problematic representations of the poor, particularly the figures of a soldier's wife and an impotent old man, in order to illuminate the political ambivalence of Wordsworth's poetic commitment to the suffering poor. Ultimately, such a reading purposes to understand Wordsworth's political frustration and poetical achievement of those five years as the product of Wordsworth's different responses to the contemporary socio-political reality by answering familiar, but still important questions: What was the content of Wordsworth's radical politics? How did Wordsworth's representation of the poor evolve in relation to his changing political stance? And how did the Wordsworthian poetic self grow out of his problematic poetic engagement with the poor?

Chapter I is a critical survey of the new historicism, the most vigorous critical discipline in the recent climate of Wordsworth studies. The point of my discussion is simply that new historicist reading is most convincing when it comes closer to E.P. Thompson than to Paul de Man.

Chapter II is a straightforward historical attempt to reconstruct Wordsworth's radical past. What is intended, however, is not to rewrite Moorman or Roe, but to re-read already well known political texts such as the 'French books' of *The Prelude*, 'A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff' and the 1794 letters to Mathews, with a particular attention to the immediate political atmosphere at the precise time when they were written.

Chapter III is an investigation of Wordsworth's first serious engagement with existing literary traditions, particularly that of the picturesque, in *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches*, and seeks to show that Wordsworth's handling of this tradition was already informed by his shifting ideological positions.

Chapter IV is an analysis of Wordsworth's representations of the 'soldier's wife' in the context of the contemporary anti-war protest in order to show how a poetry of political protest evolved into a poetry of natural stoicism. It is also an illustration of the procedure through which the contemporary ideology of the poor permeated Wordsworth's 'social protest' poems.

Chapter V concentrates on the 'old man' character. It illustrates not only the evolution of the character from an impotent victim of social injustice to a poet-teacher of moral wisdom, but also how the Wordsworthian poetic self was conceived and developed in the midst of his anxious commitment to the poetry of human suffering.

Chapter VI is an attempt to show how the lingering memory of Wordsworth's radical past is displaced in the ever-growing autobiographical project. As a way of concluding my discussion, I offer a close reading of three autobiographical poems in order to illustrate different ways in which the Wordsworthian displacement of history is carried out.

# CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>CONTENTS</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>ABBREVIATIONS</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>viii</b>
 <b>Chapter I: Wordsworth in History</b>	 <b>1</b>
 <b>Chapter II : 'Radical' Wordsworth</b>	
1. A Historical Study of Wordsworth: a few problems	28
2. Wordsworth and Beaupuy: Wordsworth at Blois	35
3. Wordsworth after Beaupuy: Wordsworth at Orleans and Paris	58
4. Wordsworth, a Republican: 'A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff'	70
5. Wordsworth, a Godwinian: 1793-95	94
 <b>Chapter III: The Poor in the Landscape: <i>An Evening Walk</i> and                     <i>Descriptive Sketches</i></b>	
1. <i>An Evening Walk</i> and <i>Descriptive Sketches</i> in the Tradition of Topographical Poetry	114
2. <i>An Evening Walk</i> and the Politics of the Picturesque	123
3. <i>An Evening Walk</i> and the Principle of Picturesque Description	133
4. <i>Descriptive Sketches</i> and the Rejection of the Picturesque	149
5. The 1794 Revision of <i>An Evening Walk</i>	162
 <b>Chapter IV: The Poetry of the Poor(I), 'a Soldier's Wife': from Political Protest                     to the Politics of Nature</b>	

1. Wordsworth and the Contemporary Debates on War	171
2. 'Salisbury Plain'(1793-94): a Poem of Anti-war Protest	183
3. 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain'(1795): a Social Criticism vs. an Ideology of Penal Law	204
4. 'The Ruined Cottage'(1797): Social Criticism and the Politics of Nature	225

#### **Chapter V: The Poetry of the Poor(II), the 'Old Man': from Social Protest to Moral Wisdom**

1. Wordsworth's 'Old Man': Human Suffering and the Role of the Poet	254
2. The Old Man and Wordsworth's Contribution to the Poor Law Debate: 'The Old Cumberland Beggar'	261
3. The Old Man and a Defence of Poetic Profession: 'Simon Lee' and 'A Narrow Girdle of Rough Stones and Crag's'	275
4. The Old Man and the Growth of a Poetic Self: 'The Ruined Cottage'(1798) and 'The Pedlar'	284

#### **Chapter VI: Emergence of a Poetic Self**

1. Purgation of a Radical Self : 'Lines left upon a Seat in a yew-tree'	300
2. Creation of a Poetic Self: 'Tintern Abbey'	309
3. History of a Poetic Self: 'Two-Part Prelude' of 1798-99	327

<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>367</b>
---------------------	------------

## ABBREVIATIONS

- A Letter* William Wordsworth, 'A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff' in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, edited by W.J.B. Owen and J.W. Smyser, vol 1 (Oxford, 1974).
- DS* William Wordsworth, *Descriptive Sketches*, edited by Eric Birdsall (Cornell Wordsworth Series; Ithaca, 1984).
- ELH* *Journal of English Literary History*
- EW* William Wordsworth, *An Evening Walk*, edited by James Averill (Cornell Wordsworth Series; Ithaca, 1984).
- EY* *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, edited by E. de Selincourt, second edition, *The Early Years, 1787-1805*, revised by C.L. Shaver (Oxford, 1967).
- Gill Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth, A Life* (Oxford, 1989).
- Goodwin Alfred Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Reform Movement in the Age of the French Revolution* (London, 1979).
- Grosart *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, edited by Alexander B. Grosart (3 vols, 1876).
- Harper G.M. Harper, *William Wordsworth: His Life, Works, and Influence* (London, 1916).
- Hayden *William Wordsworth: The Poems*, edited by John O. Hayden, 2 vols. (Harmondsworth, 1977).
- Jacobus Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's "Lyrical Ballads", 1798* (Oxford, 1976).
- JEGP* *Journal of English and German Philology*
- LB* *Lyrical Ballads: The Text of the 1798 Edition with the Additional 1800 Poems and the Prefaces*, edited by R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (London, 1963).
- LCS London Corresponding Society.
- Moorman Mary Moorman, *William Wordsworth, A Biography: The Early Years, 1770-1803* (Oxford, 1957).

- The Pedlar* The Text of 'The Pedlar' in *William Wordsworth: The Pedlar, Tintern Abbey, The Two-Part Prelude*, edited by Jonathan Wordsworth (Cambridge, 1985)
- PJ* William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, edited by Isaac Kramnick, (Harmondsworth, the third edition of 1797, 1985).
- PMLA* *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America.*
- Prose* *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and J.W.Smyser (3 vols; Oxford, 1974).
- PW* *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, edited by E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (5 vols, Oxford, 1940-49).
- RC* William Wordsworth, '*The Ruined Cottage*' and '*The Pedlar*', edited by J. Butler (Cornell Wordsworth Series; Ithaca, 1979).
- Reader* Thomas Paine, *The Thomas Paine Reader* edited by Michael Foot and Issac Kramnick (Harmondsworth, 1987).
- Reed* M.L.Reed, *Wordsworth: The Chronology of the Early Years, 1770-1799* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967).
- Reflections* Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France, and on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to that Event*, edited by C.C. O'Brien (Harmondsworth, 1968).
- Roe* Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford, 1988).
- SCI* Society for Constitutional Information.
- Sheats* Paul D. Sheats, *The Making of Wordsworth's Poetry, 1785-1798* (Cambridge, Mass., 1793).
- SIR* *Studies in Romanticism.*
- SP* William Wordsworth, *The Salisbury Plain Poems*, edited by Stephen Gill (Cornell Wordsworth Series; Ithaca, 1975).
- The Prelude* The text of 1805, in *William Wordsworth: The Prelude, a Parallel Text*, edited by J.C. Maxwell (Harmondsworth, 1971).
- TP-Prelude* *The Prelude, 1798-99*, edited by Stephen Parrish (Cornell Wordsworth Series; Ithaca, 1977).
- TWC* *The Wordsworth Circle.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I never knew that my study abroad would rely on so many favours from so many people. I never knew that my five year overseas research would require such painful sacrifice from the people around me. If I had known that, I would never have come to Britain to meet my academic vanity.

Let me talk about the favours first; I have been incredibly fortunate in having such nice people around me whose warm friendship made my lonely life in Glasgow much more endurable, sometimes even enjoyable. Particularly, I cannot forget Mrs Chung-Hee N. Kim whose sisterly care and concern was the single most important consolation in the earlier days of my lonely life in Britain. My dear friend Dong-Oh Min and his lovely wife In-Ai deserve the warmest appreciation from me; apart from their pleasant company, they helped me a lot from sheltering my relatives under their roof to treating me with a feast of Korean food. Dr Myung-Chul Park and his family was a sort of substitute family for me in the last year of my research when I struggled most. I am grateful to them. Also Tae-Kang Choi was like a brother to me all along, and I appreciate his constant friendship. And Mr Yong-Suk Han was always a help to hand whenever I needed it badly. I thank him and wish him well for the rest of his doctoral research in Glasgow.

I have been a rarely privileged student in having two extremely caring teachers on both sides of the earth: one is Professor Sung-Won Lee of Seoul National University whose lecture on Wordsworth was practically the starting point for the long academic journey which I have been making. I am particularly grateful for his invaluable advice and warm encouragement that I benefited from during his visits to Britain. The other is of course Mr Richard Cronin of Glasgow University who has supervised my research for the last five years. I have learned a lot from him. If this meagre piece of writing is found to be readable, the credit should go to him entirely and exclusively. Having a conversation with him, whether it was about Wordsworth or

about the last night film on TV, was not only educational in its most profound sense but also thoroughly enjoyable. He taught me how to write in English, but still I haven't learned enough to express my gratitude properly. I thank him.

If I am a lucky man, it is because I happen to be married to the one I have respected most as an academic colleague since my undergraduate years. Professor Eun-Ai Sung, my wife, deserves a very special acknowledgement from me. It was bad enough for her to stand her husband's five year absence. Considering what she had to cope with in the last two years, however, such an emotional problem might have been luxury; she has had to take care of our baby son and finance my research after my scholarship elapsed. Moreover, she also had to conduct her own doctoral research under terrible pressure. I can never forget what she had to go through as the result of my overseas research. It is therefore my duty and honour to devote this humble work of mine to my wonderful wife.



## Chapter I: Wordsworth in History

This thesis is yet another attempt to read Wordsworth's poetry within its contemporary historical context. Such a project is at once boringly old fashioned and flamboyantly fashionable. On the one hand, we have a large number of biographical studies where the details of Wordsworth's life and a description of contemporary society are offered as the 'background' for his poetry.<sup>1</sup> Along with these, we also have a series of analyses which are fundamentally biographical, but place greater emphasis on the historical context of the poetry.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Wordsworth's radical politics, in particular, have long been a standard item on the agenda of traditional Wordsworthian scholarship.<sup>3</sup> These biographical, historical, or ideological studies of Wordsworth's poetry, though diverse in their approaches, are by and large concerned with the reconstruction of the 'context' of the poetry, and they have established themselves as

---

<sup>1</sup>Moorman's biographical researches of Wordsworth(1957, 1965) have been so extensive that a later biographer like Stephen Gill(1989) had little to add. The representative biographies include: Christopher Wordsworth, *Memoirs of William Wordsworth*, 2 vols (London, 1851); Émile Legouis, *The Early Life of William Wordsworth 1770-1798, A Study of "The Prelude"* (London and Toronto, 1921); Mary Moorman, *William Wordsworth, A Biography; The Early Years: 1770-1803* (Oxford, 1957); *The Later Years: 1803-1850* (Oxford, 1965); Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth; A Life* (Oxford, 1989).

<sup>2</sup>The tradition of historical research in Wordsworth scholarship started monumentally with Harper(1916) and is still impressively continued by Nicholas Roe(1988): G.M. Harper, *William Wordsworth; His Life, Works, and Influence* (London, 1916); Arthur Beatty, *William Wordsworth; His Doctrine and Art in Their Historical Relations* (Madison, 1922); G.W. Meyer, *Wordsworth's Formative Years* (Ann Arbor, 1943); E.P. Thompson, 'Disenchantment or Default? A Lay Sermon', in *Power and Consciousness*, edited by C.C. O'Brien and W.D. Vanech (London and New York, 1969); David Erdman, 'Wordsworth as Heartsworth; or, was Regicide the Prophetic Ground of Those Moral Questions?', in *The Evidence of the Imagination: Studies of Interactions between Life and Art in English Romantic Literature*, edited by D. Reiman, M. Jaye, and B.T. Bennett (New York, 1978); Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge; The Radical Years* (Oxford, 1988).

<sup>3</sup>F.M. Todd, *Politics and The Poet; A Study of Wordsworth* (London, 1957); Carl Woodring, *Politics in English Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970); Leslie Chard, *Dissenting Republican; Wordsworth's Early Life and Thought in their Political Context* (The Hague, 1972); Michael H. Friedman, *William Wordsworth and the Idea of Community* (New York, 1979); H.J. Wüscher, *Liberty, Equality and Fraternity in Wordsworth, 1791-1800* (Uppsala, 1980); James Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics* (Chicago and London, 1984); John Turner, *Play and Politics; A Study of Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1800* (London, 1986); John Williams, *Wordsworth: romantic poetry and revolution politics* (Manchester, 1989).

one of the major currents within the tradition of Wordsworth studies. 'Contextual' studies of this kind, though still pursued by Stephen Gill, Nicholas Roe, and John Williams, seem to have reached a point at which any further contribution is likely to be reiterative and redundant.

This jaded tradition seems to have been revitalized in the last decade by the activity of a group of critics whose work is informed at once by the critical disciplines of deconstruction and of neo-marxism. Their academic ambition is to restore the historical dimension to the study of Romanticism, which, they suggest, had been damagingly de-politicised, or de-historicised by the critics of the Yale school, and to do so not by simply resuming the search for an appropriate historical 'background', but by appropriating the new analytical methods made available by the deconstructionists. They were no longer happy with the teleological, causal discourse of traditional historicism, nor with the hermeneutic chaos of deconstructionist rhetoric; their ambition was to offer an alternative both to the naive reductionism of traditional historicist reading and to the non-referentiality of deconstructionist analysis. They describe traditional historical studies as 'old' historicism and their own variety of scholarship as 'new' historicism. This new initiative in historical criticism has been in full swing since the mid 1980s, which makes the title of this thesis, 'Wordsworth in History', unexpectedly up-to-date. It seems therefore necessary, before launching my own argument, to locate myself as precisely as possible within the existing landscape of Wordsworth studies.

The advent of the new historicism in Wordsworthian studies was signalled by Jerome McGann's *The Romantic Ideology*(1983) and most thoroughly practised by Marjorie Levinson in her *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems: Four Essays*(1986). David Simpson, though sharing the common academic ambition, demonstrated a significantly different reading practice from Levinson's in his *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination: the Poetry of Displacement*(1987), while Alan Liu offered still another example of new historicist reading in his epic study *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*(1989). If McGann proposed the new project of historical criticism in theory,

the other three critics practised it in their own fashions, disclosing both the potentialities and the problematics of McGann's project.

McGann's polemical point lies not simply in its conceptualization of 'Romantic ideology', but also in his challenge to Romantic scholarship and criticism as a whole, which he believes has perpetuated the ideology that Romantic poetry embodies.<sup>4</sup> The main function of such an ideology is the displacement of socio-political issues from poetry:

The poetry of Romanticism is everywhere marked by extreme forms of displacement and poetic conceptualization whereby the actual human issues with which the poetry is concerned are resituated in a variety of idealized localities.<sup>5</sup>

The primary task of historical criticism, then, should be the disclosure of those displacing tactics surreptitiously working in the poem so as to reinstate 'the actual human issues' within the poetical landscape. As a matter of fact, the tendency of Romantic poems to 'transcend' socio-political issues has been pointed out often enough in the traditional historically oriented studies cited above. The difference between the old and the new lies in the methods used. McGann writes,

---

<sup>4</sup>McGann's question to the institution of Romanticism and its ideological influence is more properly engaged by Clifford Siskin in his book *The Historicity of Romantic Discourse* (Oxford, 1988): 'I show that whenever we designate certain texts as "literature," or valorize that distinction in terms of "creativity," "imagination," or "expressiveness," or analyze those qualities as variables of individual development, we join Wordsworth in taking the "mind of Man" to be the "main haunt and region" of our "song." The traditional six-poets, 1798-1832 Romanticism of the anthologies and most criticism is itself a product of that haunting: a transformation of history into a short, and therefore sweet, developmental narrative. I show that it tells the same story of creative epiphany and world-weary despair that we have also employed, on a small scale, to make Romantic sense of the canonized poems and the lives of the poets. My purpose in using the label "Romanticism" is to detach it from that tale and thus make it an effective tool for understanding rather than replicating the past'(pp.7-8). Siskin's aim is to deconstruct 'the Romantic myth of culture' as a whole on the level of its formal strategy. Since it is 'a generic approach' rather than a practical discipline with which to read a particular poem, it would be sufficient here to note that his project for 'a new literary history' is another theoretical development of McGann's premise.

<sup>5</sup>Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago, 1983), p.1.

My own view--it follows Heine--is that Romantic poetry incorporates Romantic Ideology as a drama of the contradictions which are inherent to that ideology (pp.1-2).

The Romantic ideology, according to McGann, led the poets themselves and the critics who followed them ('its clerical preservers and transmitters' p.1) to displace human issues from the poetry, but preserve, in the work of both, elements that 'inherently' undermine the very strategy of displacement. There is no explanation of why this is so. Why should we assume as 'inherently' incomplete an ideology which has completely manipulated not only the poets themselves but also generations of critics? Do these recalcitrant elements represent the triumph of 'poetry' over ideology, or are they the product of the analytical power of a critic like himself? McGann hints at the first option when he goes on to argue that 'Romantic poetry occupies an implicit -- sometimes even an explicit--critical position toward its subject matter'. But the main credit seems to be given to the critics:

The works of Romantic art, like the works of any historical moment, "transcend" their particular socio-historical position only because they are completely incorporated to that position, only because they have localized themselves. In this fact we observe that paradox fundamental to all works of art which is best revealed through an historical method of criticism: that such works transcend their age and speak to alien cultures because they are so completely true to themselves, because they are time and place specific, because they are--from our point of view--*different*. (McGann's italics, p.2)

McGann's emphasis on the historical 'difference' between the culture of Romanticism and our own culture seems to suggest that the Romantic ideology is visible and therefore vulnerable to critics like himself only by virtue of their historical belatedness and by means of 'an historical method of criticism'. But what about traditional historical scholars? Are they not also historically removed and producing an historical criticism? With the prominent exceptions of Heine and Raymond Williams, McGann is not at all happy with existing historical criticism:

...thematic criticism sidesteps the concrete, human particulars of the originary works, either to reproduce them within currently acceptable ideological terms, or to translate them into currently unacceptable forms of thought. The latter maneuver--so frequent today--generally operates by reducing poetic works to a network of related themes and ideas--a condition of being which no artistic product can tolerate without loss of its soul. (p.11)

This criticism of the reductive tendency of Marxist criticism<sup>6</sup> appears to have come from a humanist critic such as F.R. Leavis or John Beer, particularly in the last sentence, rather than from a critic who proposes a 'new' kind of historical criticism. His criticism of existing historical criticism, therefore, is not particularly helpful in clarifying the distinctive nature of the 'new' historical criticism he proposes. Perhaps the close reading of New Criticism plus the empirical and concrete historical research of E.P. Thompson? His proposal seems to come close to it:

In the case of Romantic poems, we shall find that the works tend to develop different sorts of artistic means with which to occlude and disguise their own involvement in a certain nexus of historical relations. This act of evasion, as it were, operates most powerfully whenever the poem is most deeply immersed in its cognitive (i.e., its ideological) materials and commitments. For this reason the critic of Romantic poetry must make a determined effort to elucidate the subject matter of such poems *historically*: to define the specific ways in which certain stylistic forms intersect and join with certain factual and cognitive points of reference. (McGann's italics, p.82)

Whereas traditional Marxist critics were content with exposing the bourgeois illusion of transcendence, McGann offers the concept of displacement, a strategy that operates in the poem more aggressively, but more complexly and more surreptitiously. He demands therefore on the one hand a more sensitive attention to the forms and styles

---

<sup>6</sup>As a recent example of such a criticism in Wordsworth studies, see David Aers, 'Wordsworth's Model of Man in *The Prelude*', in *Romanticism and Ideology: Studies in English Writing 1765-1830*, edited by David Aers, Jonathan Cook, David Punter (London, 1981), pp. 64-81.

of the literary genre employed in the poem. On the other, he also wants a concentration on 'ideological materials and commitments', the usual interest of historical criticism, but with more detailed and concrete research so as to illuminate the complex manoeuvres of that 'act of evasion' in the poetical text. McGann's proposal is, in fact, no more than an emphatic articulation of the existing academic consensus that historical criticism should accommodate, somehow, the more sensitive readings offered by the variety of formalistic approaches. But McGann's case, as far as Wordsworth studies are concerned, has been valorized neither by a full theoretical support, nor by any convincing example of his own practical criticism.

McGann fails to explain whether, and if so how, the modern reader is freed from ideology. A Marxist critic might insist on the need to adopt a perspective determined by the proletarian class interest and in accordance with the Marxist scheme of history.<sup>7</sup> But does McGann still endorse the idea of history as a causal, teleological sequence? He insists on the 'difference' between the past to which Romantic culture belongs and the present in which 'we' live, but he offers no explanation of how the two are related. He gives no answer to the crucial question about the relation between the critical subject of the present and the ideology of the past.<sup>8</sup> In his practical criticism, McGann does not seem to offer anything that would meet his own requirement for a

---

<sup>7</sup>As to the problem of locating the critical subject, John Barrell is rather naively dependent upon the Marxist solution, that is, the adoption of the viewpoint of the oppressed as if it can be employed or discharged at convenience: 'To resist in a way that has a chance of effecting a political challenge to practical criticism and to the interests whose power it serves, it is necessary to identify the available positions from which an effective challenge can be made, which seems to read from those generic positions which practical criticism seems to deny; the positions of an oppressed class, an oppressed gender, an oppressed race. And it is necessary to identify which of those positions it is appropriate to adopt in relation to each individual text we read.' *Poetry, Language and Politics* (Manchester, 1988), pp.9-10.

<sup>8</sup>On this problem, Frances Ferguson's penchant comment is on target: 'Although he repeatedly urges a critical criticism upon his readers, critique sounds less like a panacea when we realize that we can never know when we are standing apart from ideology and when we are merely instantiating it. On the one hand, ideology prevents the self from knowing itself: "for the cooptive powers of a vigorous culture like our own are very great". On the other hand, the self that has been deluded is enjoined to move from its position of abject powerlessness to one of absolute power in being able to isolate and eject the alien power of ideology. The problem is that the self can never know when it is done with this project of casting out ideology, and a subsidiary difficulty is that it is hard to see how the process of critique will not itself become a version of the very self-involvement it was designed to repudiate.' 'Historicism, Deconstruction, and Wordsworth', *Diacritics* (Winter 1987), p.33.

genuinely historical criticism, either. He concludes his discussion of Wordsworth, saying:

Wordsworth went on to struggle further with those problems and to arrive at what he believed was their solution. What he actually discovered was no more than his own desperate need for a solution. The reality of that need mirrored a cultural one that was much greater and more widespread. Wordsworth transformed both of these realities into illusions. ...Indeed, it is a very emblem of the tragedy of his epoch, for in that conceptualization Wordsworth imprisoned his true voice of feeling within the bastille of his consciousness. Wordsworth made a solitude and he called it peace.(p.91)

It is not clear in what way this represents an advance on traditional Marxist criticism:

Christopher Caudwell, for example, argues:

The bourgeois illusion is, in the sphere of poetry, a revolt. In Wordsworth the revolt takes the form of a return to the natural man, just as it does in Shelley. Wordsworth, like Shelley profoundly influenced by French Rousseauism, seeks freedom, beauty - all that is not now in man because of his social relations - in "Nature". The French Revolution now intervenes. The bourgeois demand for freedom has now a regressive tinge. It no longer looks forward to freedom by revolt but by return to the natural man.<sup>9</sup>

There seems no significant difference between McGann's and Caudwell's 'illusions'.

Nevertheless, McGann's articulation of the need for a new kind of historical criticism prompted the sudden renewal of academic interest in historical criticism which eventually expressed itself as the 'new historicism'. In particular, McGann's concept of the poetical work as 'the drama of contradiction' which works by undermining its own ideological premise initiated the most characteristic new historicist reading strategy, what might be described as the aesthetics of absence.

---

<sup>9</sup>Christopher Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry* (London, 1937, 1977), p.106.

Marjorie Levinson, who was the first and remains the most important exponent of the new historicism in Wordsworth studies, defines her project thus:

Structuralism, by way of deconstruction, materializes textual absence and identifies its semiotic charge, so to speak; the reconstructive efforts of Thompson through Butler expose the faceted nature of works that present to our view a single plane. What was wanted was a way to mediate those projects, a theory of negative allegory.<sup>10</sup>

Just as McGann imagined a happy marriage of close reading and historical criticism, Levinson proposes a marriage of convenience between deconstruction and cultural materialism: she wants to assail the Wordsworthian affirmation with the analytical tools made available by deconstructionists, as well as to reconstruct the historical past displaced from the textual surface by means of Thompsonian historical research. Since 'one cannot unknow Derrida', her attempt to 'mediate Yale and the historians' is, as she represents it, inevitable (p.11). The key concept of the resulting reading strategy is 'textual absence', which functions simultaneously as the textual trace of the displacement of history and as the evidence of 'contradiction'. What should be focused on in the text is not the main theme or argument of the poem, but something that is marginalized, displaced, or unarticulated. The poetry is to Levinson 'a sort of allegory by absence, where the signified is indicated by an identifiably absented signifier' (p.9). David Simpson shared the same need to focus on textual 'silence':

A literary criticism that is committed to a historical method must, it seems to me, do more than offer allegorical or referential translations of images that can be simply substituted into the poem. It must recognize also the significance of silences - the things that a poet does not mention but which we must believe his audience to have been familiar with - and the frequent subtlety (or crudeness) of the poet's particular inflection of the medium, whether it be that of historical facts or discursive debates (so often assuming the status of facts).<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>Marjorie Levinson, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems: Four Essays* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), p.8.

<sup>11</sup>David Simpson, *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination* (New York and London, 1987), p.11.



Alan Liu also added his contribution to this quest in search of a displaced, repressed history, claiming that 'strong denials of history are also the deepest realizations of history'.<sup>12</sup> As a matter of fact, if there is anything that groups these critics together as a school, it is not their theoretical advance upon any previous theoretical positions (whether humanist, new critical, Marxist, or post-structuralist), but their common preoccupation with locating 'absence', 'silence', or 'denial' in poetical texts (or rather in *subtexts*). Their shared critical objective, therefore, is to reinstate the displaced or repressed historical meaning to the poetry by concentrating on what is *not quite* articulated in the text, except as gaps, fissures, or disconnections of the kind usually ignored in orthodox criticism. On the other hand, the crucial theoretical questions - the placement of a critical subject in history, the concept of history itself, the text/ context relation, etc- to which McGann had no answer, became even more pressing on these critics because they were making more conscious efforts to combine heterogeneous theoretical positions into one reading discipline. But they have made little effort to offer their answers in terms of theory.<sup>13</sup> In Levinson's deconstructionist-materialist reading, for example, what kind of history is assumed? Is she assuming a causal, teleological historical narrative, or the arbitrary relation of signifiers in a synchronic linguistic order? Philip Martin sharply points out the theoretical dilemma Levinson confronts:

---

<sup>12</sup>Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford, 1989), p.32.

<sup>13</sup>Simpson, for example, explains why there is a lack of theory to sustain the new historicism as a viable literary discipline; 'there are methodologically serious problems in attempting to provide a theory for a new historicism, given that it must in its own terms tend to remain a period-centered practice, developed not for literature as a whole (the traditional province of theory) but for particular epochs and particular societies. It must also, again by its own logic, refuse any schismatic break from tradition, of the sort that makes theories easy to devise, since it must finally seek to explain and adjudicate the findings of various skills and approaches into intelligibly interdependent structures. We should not expect anyone to do for the new historicism what Northrop Fry's *Anatomy of Criticism* did for myth criticism, nor anticipate a Jonathan Culler figure to set forth or create the limits of a unitary enterprise.' David Simpson, 'Literary Criticism and the Return to "History"', *Critical Inquiry* 14 (Summer 1988), p.724. But it is one thing that the new historicism, by its own logic, cannot be 'a unitary enterprise', and quite another that none of its exponents has managed to offer a coherent theoretical explanation for the key questions mentioned above.

New historicism, so nervous of the grand narrative of history, defers to Foucauldian rather than Marxist versions of history. Even so this can be seen as an opposition about which - in Romantic studies at least - it is nervous, for in the writings of Marjorie Levinson, Marx is a far greater presence than Foucault. Nevertheless, new historicism is determined to be rid of a teleology, and is therefore happier with Foucault's *epistemes* than Marx's dialectical materialism; happier, also, with localised archaeologies rather than with what it must be regarding as ideal history. Its major difficulty is that in ridding itself of the historical continuum, it is compelled to situate the present in an alternative way. What interest does new historicism have in the past? How will it site itself in relation to that past? In its latest manifestations, its prime mover seemingly is its self-consciousness, its almost ironic awareness that it is caught up within the myths and the modes of discourse that it is examining.<sup>14</sup>

Given this obvious theoretical contradiction, Levinson's new historicist proposal for 'the mediation of Yale and the historians', could only be validated by her practical criticism rather than by any new theoretical formula. In fact, her project was immediately prompted by her desire to grasp in historical criticism 'the subtler languages of politics in Wordsworth's poetry, and the way these languages inform and inflect the manifest doctrine of the poetry, as well as its innocent aesthetic decisions',<sup>15</sup> subtleties of Wordsworth's poetic language which Geoffrey Hartman, though not in political terms,<sup>16</sup> has best grasped and that the Thompsonian historians had failed to

---

<sup>14</sup>Philip W. Martin, 'Romanticism, history, historicisms', *Revolution in Writing: British literary responses to the French Revolution*, Kelvin Everest ed. (Milton Keynes, 1991), p.16. Levinson herself admits the same theoretical difficulty of her proposed scheme later in her essay; 'By disengaging the Marxian content with its dramatically progressive narrative, we obstruct the development of a logic that would relate the contradictions of one age to the formations of another. Specifically, we construct for ourselves an experience of freedom and power with respect to our negotiations with the past. Of course we pay a price for this pleasure. Without the teleological framework, we cannot articulate our relation to the poetry we study, and without that articulation, our criticism must be but a weak version of that poetry: a repetition of its more vivid knowledge.' 'The New Historicism: Back to the Future,' *Rethinking Historicism*, Marjorie Levinson, Marilyn Butler, Jerome McGann, and Paul Hamilton eds. (Oxford, 1989), p.34.

<sup>15</sup>Levinson, *Great Period Poems*, p.6.

<sup>16</sup>Hartman himself was not unaware that the complex movements of Wordsworth's psyche he depicted were somehow related to Wordsworth's historical circumstances. Hartman, unlike his

appreciate. In this sense, 'Historicise Hartman!' may well have been an apt practical motto for her and her new historicist colleagues.<sup>17</sup> If it was her intention simply to employ every theoretical device available to achieve a richer historicist reading of a particular poem, and if she was successful in producing such readings, the theoretical contradictions inevitably involved might be more generously understood.

It is neither possible nor necessary here to give a verdict on Levinson's overall performance in practical criticism. Her real achievement might be yet to come. But her practice of new historicist reading strategies thus far seems to confirm the theoretical contradiction rather than excuse it. Her apparent criticism of deconstruction<sup>18</sup> seems to imply that her own engagement with deconstruction will be limited to the strategic deployment of its analytic methodology, but the very logic of the methodology seems to force her to a much fuller compromise with deconstruction, which makes her already unstable theoretical position even more precarious. Let me take her essay on 'Tintern Abbey' as an example. In her discussion of this poem, Levinson had to demonstrate that her efforts to reconcile the two schools works on the level of practical criticism.

---

deconstructionist successors like de Man or H. Miller, was not entirely hostile to contextual criticism even though he was not committed to it: 'I did not neglect the historical milieu, but neither did I offer it as an explanation. In a strange way, the violence in France as well as the slower trauma of industrialization coincided with Wordsworth's inner sense of irreparable change.' *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814* (New Haven, 1964, 1971), 'Retrospect 1971', xvi.

<sup>17</sup>Levinson, at the very end of her introduction, identifies Hartman as still *the* main influence on her new project: 'One read the historians (and Frye and Abrams) of course, but how hard it was for students trained as close readers to *use* that material. The great precursor, then, synecdochically speaking, was Hartman, not Erdman. I suspect that the defensive tone and the polemical tactics of this new historicist criticism confirm the syndrome Bloom himself conceived: the anxiety of influence. The dependence, and the admiration, then, persist in this form.' Simpson also appreciated the value of Hartman's reading in Wordsworth studies which historical criticism should accommodate rather than reject: 'Hartman's thesis is constantly cited as the one primarily responsible for taking the poet *out* of history. But it articulates, in a more exact and sophisticated way than almost any other of its kind, all the major syndromes that a historical method must account for. ... My aim here is not to negate this tension (between imagination and nature), but to explain it in a new way, arguing for its place as a symptom of social as well as theological or psychic alienation' (Simpson's *italics*). Simpson, *Historical Imagination*, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup>Levinson notes: 'I merely observe that the marriage of Romantic poetry and contemporary semiotic theory was perhaps happier for the theory than for the poetry. In Wordsworth's case the effect of this critical liaison was further to attenuate an already idealized canon, and to defend it more securely from properly historical interrogations.' *Great Period Poems*, p. 7.

Quite understandably, her analysis is segmented into separate chapters: she begins in chapter 1 with her reflection on 'Tintern Abbey's particularly long and specific title and its possible political significance'.<sup>19</sup> Chapter 2 is an extended social history of Tintern Abbey offered as the reconstruction of the historical context in which 'Tintern Abbey' was produced. After carrying out the old historicist's job in the first two chapters in order to reveal the poems 'transformational grammar'(p.18), she now turns in chapter 3 to an analysis through which she tries to deconstruct 'the syntactic device' employed by Wordsworth for 'the suppression of the social' (pp.37-38). Deconstruction provides her with the method of semiotic analysis that enables her to illuminate the poem's 'disarming discursive strategies'(p.41) such as the 'doublet', 'omission', 'the repeated withholding of the referent', etc. Her relative success in each chapter could only be assessed by an extensive critique. A more important question here, however, is how her proposal to mediate between deconstruction and historicism is actually materialized in her practical criticism. Chapter 4, the last of the major sections, is the place where she has to convince us, not by taking turns in playing the historian or deconstructionist, but by a unified 'deconstructive materialist' analysis. In this chapter, Levinson is trying to substantiate McGann's premise that Romantic poetry contains self-destructive elements, by establishing 'Tintern Abbey' as a container of the 'knowledge' that 'Wordsworth's transformation of landscape into aesthetic prospect consumes...sensuous concrete reality, and the human meanings' (p.49). She sees 'Tintern Abbey' as an illustration of 'natural selection'. Wordsworth's compositional scheme (as set forth in the '1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*') is designed to displace 'naturally' socio-political issues by pretending to follow 'the spontaneous overflow of

---

<sup>19</sup>Her findings that the day of its composition, 13 July 1798, is the ninth anniversary of the Bastille uprising, the fifth anniversary of murder of Marat, and the eighth anniversary of his first visit to France(p.16) are not particularly new revelation because J.R. Watson had already pointed out the same facts in his 'A Note on the Date in the Title of "Tintern Abbey"'. *TWC*, 10 (1979), pp.379-80. Her suspicion of the length of the title proves less convincing with Abrams's indication that the long, elaborate title 'had long been standard in the eighteenth-century local poem'. M.H. Abrams, 'On Political Readings of "Lyrical Ballads"', in *Romantic Revolutions: Criticism and Theory*, edited by K. Johnston and others (Bloomington, 1990), p.321.

natural feeling', which is in fact a dark strategy to disguise his own moral irresponsibility. Levinson's sophisticated argument necessitates a long quotation:

Wordsworth's entire experience had led him to conceive Tintern Abbey as the incarnation of a social ideal and as the passionate expression of inner vision...That notion was discomfited in the cruellest way by the physical and social reality of the place...The obvious authorial question posed by that scenic text is, how to write; or, how to write oneself out of that miserable script? Wordsworth's answer is that the poet must work in the dark, with only a phantom or negative knowledge of the sources, interests, and objects of his labour. By his natural selections, the poet not only engenders for himself an illusion of freedom and sincerity - the condition of his writing - but also develops a social image of this labor. "Tis (Nature's) privilege,/ ...to lead / From joy to joy: for she can so inform/ The mind that is within us, so impress...' To paraphrase, poets do not work for their meaning; they receive it from a Nature which has been already and unconsciously appropriated, that is vicariously (ideologically) worked.(p.52)

What Levinson is trying to present is 'Tintern Abbey' as an embodiment of Wordsworth's strategy of displacement; given this critical motivation, 'Tintern Abbey' has to tell a story of its own composition rather than a story founded on the empirical fact of Wordsworth's actual visit to the ruined Abbey. Such an empirical fact, of course, is being displaced, transcended, in the poem by Wordsworth himself, who, however, cannot, or does not even attempt to, achieve the complete removal of the material reality - the material reality of the beggars, charcoal burners, and his own physical presence in the landscape. As soon as she begins to see the material reality of the natural landscape of the Wye Valley as 'scenic text', the sight of beggars and vagrants as 'miserable script', Levinson unwittingly accomplishes Wordsworth's incomplete attempt at transcendence, replacing a record of Wordsworth's physical presence, perception and feeling with an allegory of writing. 'Wordsworth's answer', supposedly extracted from the text of 'Tintern Abbey' by Levinson, is in fact founded on her ideologically based interpretation of Wordsworth's 1800 *Preface* rather than on

what is present in the text of 'Tintern Abbey'. Wordsworth's personification of Nature as the source of poetic inspiration and his invocation of Nature is by no mean exclusive to 'Tintern Abbey', nor to Wordsworth, perhaps not even to Romantic poetry. Levinson's quotation of the lines from 'Tintern Abbey' - "Tis (Nature's) privilege..." - serves only to offer an occasion for her own 'paraphrase'; 'poets do not work for their meaning.' Wordsworth may well have written 'Tintern Abbey' under the direction of such an ideological maxim, but obviously he *did not* write such a maxim in the form of the poem 'Tintern Abbey'. Levinson's disparate chapters are not rendered a coherent whole by a unified 'deconstructive-materialistic' reading method, but by the new historicist mandate that the task of the critic is to disclose the omnipresent strategies of displacement. While preoccupied with the discovery of the author's displacing tactics, Levinson unwittingly allows herself to be intercepted by the deconstructionists, losing touch with the materialistic ground of her criticism. Despite her determined denunciation of deconstruction, Levinson has failed to clear herself from the charge of eclecticism; perhaps she is making, in Simpson's words, too many 'disabling concessions to those very influences'<sup>20</sup> she wants to overcome in the first place.

But in her introduction Levinson shows herself well aware of the charges that she is courting: one is anecdotalism<sup>21</sup> and the other is the charge of 'unnecessarily and

---

<sup>20</sup>Simpson's expression to describe Jameson's way of opposing the post-structuralists. 'Return to "History"', p.724.

<sup>21</sup>Levinson warned herself of the danger of fragmenting the poem by giving an exclusive attention to the marginal elements: 'To focus these contradictions does not mean to discount the work's manifest themes and rhetoric, or what used to be called its achieved form.' *Great Period Poems*, p.9. Carolyn Porter, for example, saw the new historicist's concern with 'nonliterary, marginal, and often esoteric documents as well as canonical texts' as their defining characteristic, illustrating and criticizing their use (or abuse) of anecdote in building up their case, and reaching the following conclusion: 'I am suggesting, then, insofar as new historicist work relies upon the anecdotalization of the discursive field now opened for interpretation, it can only expand the range of the very formalism which it so manifestly wants to challenge. According to Walter Cohen, this anecdotal technique reflects a principle of "arbitrary connectedness" at work in new historicist criticism in which "the strategy is governed methodologically by the assumption that any one aspect of a society is related to any other." If such a principle serves to legitimate a suspect functionalism in the social sciences, in literary studies it serves to legitimate an equally suspect formalism which can treat the literary one, that is, as the scene of tension, paradox, and ambiguity. Insofar as this happens, the 'social text' remains a text in the formalist sense, rather than the literary being historicized as itself a form of social discourse.' 'History and Literature: "After the New Historicism"', *New Literary History* (1990), p.258, p.261.

therefore inaccurately ingenious' over-reading.<sup>22</sup> And her self-conscious efforts to maintain her theoretical balance, though not very successful, are reflected in her criticism, which makes it readable and interesting in its own way. The charges of 'anecdotalism' and 'over-reading' could be more aptly brought against Alan Liu, who pushes to the extreme the problems of the new historicism already disclosed in Levinson's criticism. His *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* is an overwhelmingly massive volume whose encyclopaedic amassment of materials exceeds any comparable attempt in Wordsworth scholarship. There is no space here to offer a fair description of his whole project, but in order to express my reservations on one obvious aspect of Liu's new historicist project, it will be sufficient to take a passage which seems to me an illustration of his sparkling academic wit, as well as of his critical bias. In his discussion of 'The Ruined Cottage', after an extended analysis of the ideological function of 'rich imagery', he begins a section called 'The Economy of Lyric' in the following terms:

Careful definition of the economy of debt is necessary before we can detail the Wordsworthian capitalization. The leading indexes of this economy in the poem are Robert, whose vocation defines a crux in contemporary industry, and the Poet, whose entrance in existential "toil" defines a corresponding crux in Wordsworth's own industry of writing. As intimated by the etymological link between "textiles" and

---

<sup>22</sup>M.H. Abrams had already articulated in the early seventies his discomfort with the tendency towards 'over-reading' of the Yale school critics: 'An inveterate under-reading of the textual surface, however, turns readily into an habitual over-reading. The problem is, to what extent do these critical perspectives on Wordsworth simply bring into visibility what was always, although obscurely, there, and to what extent do they project upon his poems the form of their own prepossessions?', 'Introduction: Two Roads to Wordsworth', in *Wordsworth: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by M.H. Abrams (London, 1972), p.9. Predictably, he saw the same danger in the recent readings by the new historicists: 'The critic, bringing to any text an *a priori* knowledge of the kind of meaning that he or she must of necessity find, and possessed of a can't fail set of devices for transforming anything whatever that a text says--or doesn't mention--into the predetermined subtexts, will infallibly, given some biographical and historical information and sufficient ingenuity, be able to produce a political reading. But such a reading is in effect self-confirming because empirically incorrigible; it is the product of a discovery procedure that prepossessed the political meanings it triumphantly finds. The risk, in other words, is of a critical authoritarianism...', Abrams, 'On Political Readings', p.325. For a more vicious attack on Levinson's reading of 'Tintern Abbey' on similar grounds, see Thomas McFarland, *William Wordsworth: Intensity and Achievement* (Oxford, 1992), Chapter I 'The Clamour of Absence: Reading and Misreading in Wordsworthian Criticism', pp.1-33.

"texts," as well as by such stock metaphors as the "warp and woof" of verse, Robert's weaving and Wordsworth's writing are really one labor I will call "textualization." Whereas the Pedlar indexes the sun as the blinding source of reality, Robert and the Poet point to a different kind of sun: a strangely hollow "purse of gold." (pp.325-26)

In traditional criticism of 'The Ruined Cottage', the critical focus has always fallen on Margaret's tragic story, and more significantly on the rich natural imagery whose power neutralizes both human sympathy and any indignant recognition of social injustice. In order to deconstruct such a reading, therefore, it seems reasonable to reconstruct the social history of the weaving profession in which Robert was employed because Margaret's tragedy has its origin in the decline of the weaving industry. To understand Wordsworth's personal and professional motivation in the characterization of the 'Poet', particularly in regard to his response to a tale of human suffering, it seems also useful to investigate Wordsworth's circumstances when he wrote this poem, and to investigate how those circumstances may have contributed to his characterization of the Poet. But to identify writing a poem ('text industry') and weaving ('textile industry') is simply absurd. It is, in fact, more than absurd: by equating 'context'('textile industry') with a 'text'('writing industry'), Liu openly and explicitly endorses the deconstructionist's version of history-- history as text. As soon as history becomes text, as soon as the distinction between the context and the text disappears, there is no room left for the material history which conditions the poetical text,<sup>23</sup> for all historical texts are no more than a variety of allegories of writing itself. In Liu's discussion, all historical knowledge is offered simply as the signifiers which allow Liu to construct his version of the story of Wordsworth, with the result that the reader's attention is repeatedly diverted from the writing of Wordsworth's poems to the writing

---

<sup>23</sup>Philip Martin's point is relevant here: 'Once it was admitted that there can only be a history of writing...and that discourses act and react continuously upon and within each other, contemporaneously or across time, then the prospect of history as the shaping or tranfixing backcloth for the signifier has to be surrendered, and we are left with an agglomeration of troping which denies historical sequence as we once knew it...', p. 14.



of Liu's book<sup>24</sup>. It is a tactic that can be compared interestingly with the advice given by McGann:

The critic need not feel obliged to work within the narrow limits of a poem's purely linguistic elements. To take up the subject of poetry's conceptual and ideological elements is to allow criticism once again to intersect with those other traditional fields of inquiry so long alienated from the center of our discipline: textual criticism, bibliography, book production and distribution, reception history. On all fronts the critic will be asked to expand the concept of the poem-as-text to the poem as a more broadly based cultural product: in short, to the poem as poetical work<sup>25</sup>

Ostensibly, Liu appears to appropriate indeed not only the 'traditional fields of inquiry' but also all sorts of contemporary post-modernistic ones into his critical discipline. If McGann wanted to treat the poetical text more as a product of its contexts with a view to releasing literary study from the confinement of linguistic discipline, Liu achieves precisely the opposite by treating all these contexts as texts which are themselves imprisoned in the self-referential world of signifiers. And that is why McGann prefers to speak of a 'poetical work' rather than a 'text' whereas for Liu everything is a 'text'. As Carolyn Porter has said, if McGann intended to release literary studies from the trap of formalism, Liu's work functions to defeat the project.<sup>26</sup>

David Simpson represents another development of McGann's new historicist project. On the matter of relation between 'text' and 'context', or literary discourse and

---

<sup>24</sup>One review trenchantly points out that Liu's book is an example of the recent trend of 'self-reflexiveness' in Wordsworth scholarship, that 'books about Wordsworth are now books about writing books about Wordsworth, as well as about the person writing them'. To him, Liu's book is 'rife with wonderfully dangerous speculations about poetry and its relationship to history'. Grant F. Scott, a book review, *Philological Quarterly* 69 (1990), p.522-23. Another hostile review is by John O. Hayden, *Nineteenth Century Literature* 45 (1990), pp.245-49. For a favourable view, see Peter J. Manning's review in *Studies in Romanticism* 28 (1989), pp. 515-22.

<sup>25</sup>McGann, *The Romantic Ideology*, p.81.

<sup>26</sup>See Carolyn Porter's criticism of the new historicism already quoted that (because of its abuse of anecdote) 'it can only expand the range of the very formalism which it so manifestly wants to challenge'. p.261.

history, for example, he offers a view which may be theoretically naive, but is at any rate firmly founded on the common sense of a materialist critic:

It is not controversial to insist that much of what we know about the past is known in textual form, and thus requires textual analysis; but it is simply absurd to claim or imply that wars and revolutions cannot be thought about *except* as texts, especially when the comment is framed by the assumption that all texts limit knowledge in exactly the same ways.<sup>27</sup> (Simpson's italics)

However this may appear to be theoretically irresponsible, it is exactly Simpson's materialist common sense that enables him to read some of Wordsworth's poems in so convincing a way. Simpson's reading strategy, though targetted on the same kind of textual absence, is more practical and more firmly supported from the text, for he is well aware of the danger of the kind of 'over-coherent' reading found in McGann (and Levinson): Simpson finds in McGann's practical criticism 'a residual tendency to read Wordsworth's poems as unified and achieved instances of successful displacement, rather than as transcriptions of conflict':

To make the Wordsworthian subjectivity so efficient in its avoidance of uncomfortable social pressures is to present yet another version of an organically coherent personality, this time held together not by its incorporation into nature but by its ability to deny and to negate. By contrast, I think that the phenomenon of displacement occurs not just as an effect wrought *by* Wordsworth *upon* the world, but also as a feature of the language of subjectivity itself.<sup>28</sup> (Simpson's italics)

Simpson's denial of 'a persona masterfully commanding the kind of tried and true view of the world that might reciprocally make possible an efficient habit of self-endorsement and self-consolidation'(p.3) is a significant revision of McGann-Levinson's project and renders him less vulnerable to the recent critical onslaught on

---

<sup>27</sup>Simpson, 'the Return to "History"', p.726.

<sup>28</sup>Simpson, *Historical Imagination*, p.4.

the new historicism.<sup>29</sup> Predictably, his version of Wordsworthian subjectivity is not as a clever strategist, but as an entity of contradiction which obstructs its own narrative intention:

I have found it most productive of insight to regard the Wordsworthian subjectivity as a particular medium (and entity) that was, by virtue of its openness to the energies of language and experience, extraordinarily articulate about the pressures and tensions that we may with hindsight regard as central to the culture at large. Few writers can match Wordsworth in his representation of the creative mind as the site of error, conflicts and uncertainties.<sup>30</sup>

The advantage of Simpson's assumption is that it releases him from the contradictory need to prove at once the absolute power of Romantic ideology (impersonated as the Wordsworthian subject) and its vulnerability to right-minded critics. McGann tried to meet such a need by offering the critics' historical belatedness, the cultural 'difference' between the past and the present. Levinson believed that her own theoretical mediation between historical study and deconstruction could provide an answer. In their practical criticisms, however, both are found to be more engrossed with their own theoretical premises rather than the poem itself. Simpson, on the other hand, believes that a critic should be more attentive to the poetical language not because the poetical language is unknowably truer than the critic's analytical language but because it is more objectively inspectable than the imagined Wordsworth's subjectivity. In Simpson's view, the poetical language is 'intersubjective', that is, 'specific to one writer but at the same time draws heavily upon semantic residues that are verifiably objective' (*Historical Imagination*, p.6). Even when such a language was employed with the strongest

---

<sup>29</sup>In the recent criticisms of the new historicism already cited here (Abrams, McFarland, Martin, Porter, and Ferguson), Simpson is not mentioned. Interestingly, Frances Ferguson virtually reiterated Simpson's point in her criticism of the McGann-Levinson reading of 'Tintern Abbey': 'The presence or absence of the representation of persons in a poem, that is, becomes the personal responsibility of the poet who did not put them in, or who edited them out. ...the position that McGann and Levinson here adopt reenacts the solipsism that it claims to cast out by imagining that one's very perceptions lie within one's control' ('Historicism', p.36)

<sup>30</sup>Simpson, *Historical Imagination*, p.4.

ideological intention, its public dimension will resist a complete appropriation, offering itself as the object of critical analysis.

Simpson's shift of emphasis from a new theoretical formulation to the poetic language itself<sup>31</sup> enabled him to produce a much more convincing reconstruction of 'textual silence'. 'Tintern Abbey', for example, is traditionally known as the poem of Wordsworthian affirmation of natural providence.<sup>32</sup> What is 'displaced', 'absent', or 'silenced' in such an apparent affirmation, from the new historicist's point of view, is Wordsworth's own memory of the previous five years, the presence of the beggars, the barges, the charcoal burners, and so on. And they all agree that the 'traces' of such things are left in the poem's long title, and in phrases such as 'vagrant dwellers'(l.21), and 'wreathes of smoke'(l.18). What divides them is Wordsworth's fluctuating tone in building up such an affirmative argument; Wordsworth's ecstatic experience of Nature in which 'We see into the life of things' (l.49) is abruptly questioned by himself: 'If this/ Be but a vain belief....' Moreover, what seems to be an ultimate transcendental vision achieved in ll.59-112 is obliquely invalidated by Wordsworth's sudden turn to Dorothy for a further assurance. Wordsworth's own recollection that he had intended these

---

<sup>31</sup>Susan J. Wolfson is following the same path as Simpson in her criticism of McGann (and his 'students') and her alternative: 'My aim is not to question the value of historical context in exposing what is at stake in an aesthetic agenda of resolution, but to urge a more careful analysis of what poetic texts show. This requires attention, first, to how poets such as Wordsworth generate a potentially "workable," "speakable" discourse about lived contradictions, and second, to how the "redemptive, figural definition" claimed for these poems may be contested by the poem's own procedures. The problem, in other words, is a new historicist tendency to overturn Brook's well wrought urn without looking closely enough to see what it contains: a commitment to the complex ways in which literary language can signify. ...we need a fuller account of the way his poetics of displacement are energized by a continual refiguring of what they would displace --the way a poet such as Wordsworth contests and fractures from within the illusions he constructs.' What is slightly different in her is that she valorizes as the essential mode of Romantic poetry ('unresolved interrogative mode'[p.436]) what Simpson saw as the revelation of Wordsworth's unstable subjectivity. 'Questioning "The Romantic Ideology": Wordsworth', *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 174, no.3. (1990), pp.429-47.

<sup>32</sup>To John Beer, for example, 'Tintern Abbey' was 'Wordsworth's greatest study of nature as mediating power'. *Wordsworth and the human heart* (London, 1978), p.73. Probably, Mary Jacobus offers the best summary of this orthodox view: 'Self-exploratory and self-communing, 'Tintern Abbey' proffers a statement of belief; individual consciousness finds its fullest expression in the consciousness of something beyond the self--'A motion and a spirit' which rolls through all things. Memory allows the poet to experience the essential continuity of the changing self: belief allows him to experience another dimension of relationship altogether, that of the One Life. Landscape serves as the point of reference for Wordsworth's greatest theme, the growth of a poet's mind.' *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's "Lyrical Ballads", 1798* (Oxford, 1976), p.104.

fluctuating tones to produce an effect comparable to that of an ode<sup>33</sup> cannot silence the doubts of critics such as McGann, Levinson, and Simpson. McGann claims:

We are not permitted to remember 1793 and the turmoil of the French Revolution, neither its 1793 hopes nor--what is more to the point for Wordsworth--the subsequent ruin of those hopes. Wordsworth displaces all that into a spiritual economy where disaster is self-consciously transformed into the threat of disaster ("*If this/ Be but a vain belief,*" 50-51, my[McGann's] italics), and where that threat, fading into a further range of self-conscious anticipation, suddenly becomes a focus not of fear but of hope. For the mind has triumphed over its times.<sup>34</sup>

For McGann, Wordsworth's hesitating tone is also part of the tactical manoeuvre to 'transform disaster into the threat of disaster': Wordsworth's strategy of displacement is executed rather than undermined. Levinson's view is fundamentally similar to McGann's, but she goes a step further to argue:

Each of the four textual movements I have plotted has a contextual original or equivalent. Wordsworth and Dorothy bypassed the Abbey *en route* to Goodrich Castle, Monmouth, then again on their way to Chepstow, back in the other direction. On the next day, they paused to observe the Abbey and then proceeded to Bristol. One might construe this strangely frantic itinerary as a sort of physical effort on Wordsworth's part to change his point of view spatially, as the narrator alters his temporal position within the poem<sup>35</sup> (*Great Period Poems*, p.48).

From the poem's tonal fluctuation, Levinson not only detects Wordsworth's tactic of displacement, but also construes his actual movements as designed to evade disturbing

<sup>33</sup>In 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth added the following note to 'Tintern Abbey': 'I have not ventured to call this Poem an Ode; but it was written with a hope that in the transitions, and the impassioned music of the versification, would be found the principal requisites of that species of composition.' *LB*, p.296.

<sup>34</sup>McGann, *The Romantic Ideology*, p.88.

<sup>35</sup>Levinson, *Great Period Poems*, p. 113.

sights of beggars and barges which offered itself as a biographical parallel with the textual structure. Levinson's suspicion of 'this strangely frantic itinerary' is, in her own words, 'unnecessarily and therefore inaccurately ingenious'(p.11). It is unprovable in itself on the level of material history, but also symptomatic of her tendency towards blurring the division between 'text'(poetry) and 'context'(material history). Simpson, on the other hand, does not see such textual manoeuvres as an expression of Wordsworth's displacing tactic, still less as the reflection of his physical movements, but as the manifestation of Wordsworth's 'political unconscious' oscillating between the reassuring natural vision and the recognition of the real. It is to him the textual evidence that contradicts, rather than confirms, the historical displacement:

...the 'Tintern Abbey' poem does not then stand as the record of a highly affirmative moment in Wordsworth's life. It seems indeed to offer some experience, variously human and natural, as an alternative to the general music of humanity, but it remains a poem of aspiration rather than achievement. The conviction of particular passages is unsettled by their contiguity to other passages, and by the general rhetoric of hypothesis. We see here neither the successful displacement of the social by the natural, nor the convincing subsumption of the natural within the social. On the contrary, the poem transcribes the speaker's sense of the reciprocal instability of both social and natural environments (Simpson, *Historical Imagination*, p.113).

This seems a much more accurate description of what is taking place in the text of 'Tintern Abbey'. Such a sensitive reading, however, is not always and automatically possible through a closer attention to the text. Simpson not only points out the fundamental difficulty of theorizing in the new historicist project, but also denies the possibility of such a theoretical panacea applicable to all kinds of literary works:

...thanks to the powerful influence of especially the American establishment over both material rewards (jobs, salaries, reputation) and spiritual initiatives (what we 'see' as exciting and important), we live in a 'theoretical' time. If this commitment to theory has assumed a hegemonic form - a shifting form, it must be said - then it is one often

characterized by an aspiration toward *totality*: something that can pronounce upon all poetry, all language, all criticism. ...My suggestion is that, if we want to discover something about how intersubjective motives operate in language, we had best do away with theories of ideology ...and acquaint ourselves with the materials familiar to the social historians.<sup>36</sup> (Simpson's *Italic*)

Simpson's reservation about his new historicist colleagues was obviously intended as friendly advice, which, however, turned out to be the most radical criticism they had ever suffered. Although Simpson's distaste for 'theory' is in itself symptomatic of the fragmented, localized historicism of Foucauldian archaeology, it clearly signals his separation from McGann's Romantic ideology, which ushered back Thompson's materialistic research into the arena of Romantic studies as *the* method of historical criticism. The price Simpson had to pay for his use of this method was that he had to limit his practical criticism, at least for the moment, to a particular group of poems that suited best his idea of Wordsworthian subjectivity-- 'the site of errors, conflicts and uncertainties'(p.4).

In the course of this rough survey of the new historicism, my position, I believe, has already clearly emerged; McGann's theoretical initiative for a 'new' historicism, expressed as the Romantic ideology, was significant only to the extent that it prompted the self-revisionary efforts from both parties- historicist and deconstructionist - to formulate a new way of reading which explains not only 'the poem's own central story,'<sup>37</sup> but also what has been marginalized by such central elements. Levinson's theoretical experiment to reconcile the old historicism with deconstruction was swamped by its own unresolved theoretical contradictions, contradictions which have been pointed out not only by critics hostile to the new theories (such as Abrams and McFarland), but also, probably more fatally, by those of

---

<sup>36</sup>Simpson, *Historical Imagination*, p.12.

<sup>37</sup>Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company* (Ithaca, 1971), p.140.

her own camp such as Simpson. Simpson's determination to maintain the materialistic ground in his reading practice enabled him to produce much more convincing criticism of some poems, which, however, made his project closer to Thompsonian historical criticism than to the 'new' historicism McGann and Levinson originally had in mind.

But as Simpson himself admits, we cannot simply go back to 'vulgar materialism, or empiricism, or humanism' because they have already been 'so thoroughly displaced by the writings of the last twenty years'(Simpson, 'Return to "History"', p.741). Given all these theoretical problematics, therefore, the prospect for a new kind of historical criticism cannot help being tentative and provisional. Whether we agree with Simpson's idea of the 'intersubjectivity' of language or not, his sensitive attention to the slightest rhythm and nuance of Wordsworth's poetical language, particularly for the reconstruction of their contemporary implications<sup>38</sup>, is a useful guideline in its own right. Susan Wolfson's recommendation of a renewal of interest in literary genre and literary form itself seems to be another valuable piece of advice unless her insistence on an 'interrogative mode' is unduly emphasized to mystify the Romantic form as something beyond critical analysis. It seems to be more important and rewarding to ask the socio-political meaning of the formation of the literary style itself as is demonstrated by John Barrell's books on the picturesque.<sup>39</sup> As to the method of old historicism, it is important to remind ourselves of Simpson's warning

---

<sup>38</sup>For this particular task, Olivia Smith's *The Politics of Language 1791-1819* (Oxford, 1984) is a good example of reliable and useful scholarship.

<sup>39</sup>John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge, 1972); *The Dark Side of the Landscape* (Cambridge, 1980). Interestingly, he also shows how much his practical criticism can become less convincing when a particular critical theory was consciously employed on a particular poem; see Barrell's feminist approach to 'Tintern Abbey' in his *Poetry, Language, and Politics*, pp. 135-67.



that there is an ultimate limitation on the reconstruction of the past even within its own discipline.<sup>40</sup>

With these obscure guidelines, I start my research into 'Wordsworth in History' - rather precariously. The primary objective of my research is to reconstruct the crucial 'five years' of Wordsworth's life between 1793 and 1798, the years which Wordsworth passionately recalls at the opening of 'Tintern Abbey'. There are a set of questions concerning this famous poem which are entirely commonplace, and asked time and again in traditional Wordsworth scholarship: What was it that did actually happen to Wordsworth in those five years? If he was a radical, how much of a radical was he and in what way? If he was disillusioned by the way that the French Revolution progressed, what was his political alternative, and when did he shift his ideological position? More importantly, how are Wordsworth's changing politics related to his poetical development? If the 'vagrant dwellers' are the shadow of the real beggars at Tintern Abbey, is the displacement the direct result of Wordsworth's alleged political defection? If the single most important subject of Wordsworth's poetry between 1793 and 1798 was the human suffering of the poor, what kind of poor people are represented in Wordsworth's poems and in what way? How was Wordsworth's representation of the poor related to his shifting political position? Was Wordsworth's depiction of the poor different from that of other contemporary writers? When Wordsworth turned his attention to his own poetic growth and claimed to 'have learned/ To look on nature', 'hearing oftentimes/ The still, sad music of humanity,' to what extent was this true to the real Wordsworth of July 1798? Does this understanding of his own 'poetic growth' necessitate Wordsworth's abandonment of his alleged former radical politics?

---

<sup>40</sup>Simpson observes: 'In this way, it is an essential condition of the analysis that users of the historical method are honest about what they do not know, and about the forms of information that would modify the terms of knowing. For many periods and genres of literature, there is a great deal that we do not know, and much that we may never be able to discover. These lacunae must be figured into the analysis, not replaced by spurious totalities or ignored by idealist reconstructions' ('Return to "History"', pp. 743-44).

All historically oriented studies of Wordsworth have attempted to answer these questions, and, as Kenneth Johnston honestly confesses, it is very difficult to change significantly what is already known.<sup>41</sup> Given the long history and the academic vigour of Wordsworth scholarship, it may have been more sensible not to have accepted such a hackneyed agenda in the first place, particularly as a non-native, foreign student from South Korea. Reading Wordsworth, however, I found myself asking all those big questions once again. To have been a student of literature in the 1980s in South Korea was to have the Wordsworthian moral dilemma of the 1790s recreated in one's own life, which naturally prompted my curiosity about Wordsworth's early radical career. Once Wordsworth's politics is involved, it is absolutely inevitable to ask all those questions yet again. Apart from my personal motivation, my old fashioned theme may be justified on other grounds, for it is by no means the case that Wordsworth's 'radical' past is an interest that has been thoroughly exhausted. Also, it is not entirely impossible to read Wordsworth's well known poems in an interesting 'new' way if we can manage more flexibly to incorporate the achievement of the existing scholarship.

To ask all these questions more effectively, I set out three comprehensive questions as a working agenda: first, what was the content of Wordsworth's radical past? Secondly, how did Wordsworth's representation of the poor evolve, particularly in characters such as a soldier's wife and an impotent old man? Thirdly, how did the Wordsworthian poetic self (the theme of his life-long autobiographical project) grow out of his problematic poetic engagement with the poor?

Chapter II is a straightforward historical attempt to answer the first question. If there is anything distinctive in it at all, it is that I try to read the most reliable basic texts dealing with his radical career as closely as possible with a particular attention to the political atmosphere at the exact time when they were written.

---

<sup>41</sup>Kenneth R. Johnston, 'Wordsworth's Revolutions, 1793-1798', in *Revolution and English Romanticism: Politics and Rhetoric*, edited by Keith Hanley and Raman Selden (Hemel Hemstead, Hertfordshire, and New York, 1990), p. 169.

Chapter III is an investigation of Wordsworth's first serious engagement with the existing literary tradition, particularly that of the picturesque, in *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches*, and seeks to show that Wordsworth's handling of this tradition was already deflected by his shifting ideological positions.

Chapter IV is an analysis of Wordsworth's representations of the 'soldier's wife' in the context of the contemporary anti-war protest in order to show how a poetry of political protest evolved into a poetry of natural stoicism. It is also an illustration of the procedure through which the contemporary ideology of the poor permeated Wordsworth's 'social protest' poems.

Chapter V concentrates on the 'old man' character. It illustrates not only the evolution of the character from an impotent victim of social injustice to a poet-teacher of moral wisdom, but also how the Wordsworthian poetic self was conceived and grew in the midst of his anxious commitment to the poetry of human suffering.

Chapter VI is an attempt to show how the lingering memory of Wordsworth's radical past is displaced in the ever-growing autobiographical project. It includes my own reading of 'Tintern Abbey', the point of departure for so many critics in their exploration of Wordsworth's radical youth. This chapter consists of a close reading of three autobiographical poems in order to illustrate three different ways in which the Wordsworthian displacement of history is carried out.

One more thing before I start: I plead guilty on the predictable charge of eclecticism in theoretical (as well as thematic) terms. But Wordsworth's constant and swift self-revisions in his political and poetical perspective between 1793 and 1798, I believe, demand such an eclectic (or flexible) approach from readers whose priority is a fruitful understanding of a particular poem rather than the coherence of their own theoretical thesis.

## Chapter II : 'Radical' Wordsworth

### 1. A Historical Study of Wordsworth: a few problems

Wordsworth's political initiation into revolutionary politics is recounted in book IX of *The Prelude* with unusual certainty and confidence. Even after 13 years, he not only pinpoints the time for his conversion to Jacobinism as the spring and summer of 1792 when he was staying at Blois,<sup>1</sup> but also names as his political mentor a real person<sup>2</sup> who appeared to him the very embodiment of the revolutionary ideal. Wordsworth recollects in *The Prelude* of 1805 that after becoming tired with the elegant society of the Royalist officers in Orleans:

... I gradually withdrew  
 Into a noisier world; and *thus* did soon  
 Become a patriot; and my heart was all  
 Given to the people, and my love was theirs.  
 (IX, ll.122-125, my italics)<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>The dates of Wordsworth's arrival at and departure from Blois cannot precisely be ascertained. Reed supposes that Wordsworth's stay at Blois is 'probably between January and mid-April, possibly by 3 February' and '3-6 September or perhaps later September or October 1792'(Reed, p.129). The day 3 February has been an object of special attention to many scholars because there is a record that 'A member asked to have the floor, and proposed two Englishmen for membership, requesting that they should be dispensed from taking the oath, as foreigners and not naturalized. The matter being discussed, it was decided that they should not be admitted, but that nevertheless they might attend the meetings' (Harper, p.155). The idea that Wordsworth tried to obtain membership of the revolutionary club called 'the Friends of the Constitution' is exciting to the critics because it could be the first positive evidence of Wordsworth's actual involvement with, at least his willingness to participate in, the revolutionary activities which would substantiate his later claim of having been a radical during his stay at France. Moorman thinks that it is too early for Wordsworth to have been there (p.193), with which Reed does not agree(p.130). Recently Roe has tried very hard to substantiate this tantalising possibility. In spite of his vigorous efforts of first-hand historical research he also fails to provide any decisive evidence to settle the problem (pp.49-50).

<sup>2</sup>Michel-Armand Bacharetie Beaupuy(1755-1796) was a patriotic French officer who later on became a general after a number of military successes in the patriotic army. The most thorough study of Michel Beaupuy is M.M. Bussière and E. Legouis, *Le Général Michel Beaupuy* (Paris and Périgueux, 1891). In English, G.M. Harper provides the most detailed information about Beaupuy in his *William Wordsworth: His Life, Works, and Influence*( London, 1916) Chapter VIII. pp. 161-181. *Dictionnaire Biographique des Généraux & Amiraux Français de la Révolution et de l'Empire*(1792-1814) (Paris, 1934) vol I. also registers Beaupuy's military career in detail(pp.68-69).

<sup>3</sup>All quotations are from the 1805 version of J.C. Maxwell's parallel texts, unless stated otherwise.

Wordsworth's claim of becoming a 'patriot' is rather abrupt and hasty in the context of the poem, and the whole of book IX of *The Prelude* is structured to substantiate the one word 'thus'. Apart from a brief account of his background which is said to have predisposed him to be more responsive to egalitarian principles (ll. 217-266), the main content of 'thus' is the political education he received from Michel Beaupuy. Wordsworth's fruitful friendship with Beaupuy not only represents the process of his initial awakening to the political significance of current public affairs, but also constitutes in itself the most unalloyed form of his allegiance to the revolutionary principle; if Mauculay's famous comment that *The Prelude* is 'to the last degree Jacobinical, indeed Socialist'<sup>4</sup> is not entirely an absurd exaggeration based on his Whig political bias, the ground for his statement should be sought in Beaupuy's political education which Wordsworth himself consciously offered in book IX of *The Prelude* as the origin of his past radicalism. Then the questions that naturally follow would be what the actual content of this political education could have been, and how we might recover it.

Despite Wordsworth's confident claim in *The Prelude*, which deceptively leads us to believe that it will be pretty simple and straightforward to reassemble the story of his past radical self, it turns out to be frustratingly problematic as soon as we set to work on it. First of all, the narrative of book IX is not as straightforward as we are led to believe; for example, at the end of the episode of the hunger-bitten girl on which Wordsworth grounds his understanding of revolutionary ideals, Wordsworth suddenly shrinks from the grand subjects of the aims of the revolution to introduce a sentimental story of a young couple's tragic love:

...Having touched this argument  
 I shall not, as my purpose was, take note  
 Of other matters which detained us oft  
 In thought or conversation, public acts,  
 And public persons, and the emotions wrought

---

<sup>4</sup>G.O. Trevelyan, *Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay*(London, 1876), vol.4, p.45.

Within our minds by the ever-varying wind  
 Of record and report which day by day  
 Swept over us; but I will here instead  
 Draw from obscurity a tragic tale  
 Not in its spirit singular indeed  
 But haply worth memorial, as I heard  
 The events related by my Patriot friend  
 And others who had borne a part therein.  
 (IX. ll.542-554)

This is the very point at which our expectation about the details of Wordsworth's past understanding of revolutionary ideas reaches its climax because he has just begun to dwell upon the particulars of the statement of human rights declared at the outset of the Revolution. Frustratingly for the researcher of Wordsworth's radical past, he tantalisingly mentions what he could reveal, but has decided to withhold: 'public acts,/ And public persons, and the emotions wrought/ Within our minds by the ever-varying wind/ Of record or report which day by day/ Swept over us' - the detailed history, in other words, to which one would most like access. 'Instead' he offers 'a tragic tale'. But it is very difficult to find the common ground between the unrevealed contents of Wordsworth's discussions with Beaupuy and the tragic love-story except that both were the subjects of conversation between the two men. But even that flimsy excuse collapses if we refer to the Fenwick Note which records that it was not from Beaupuy but from 'A French Lady, who had been an eye-and-ear-witness of all that was done and said' that he heard the story.<sup>5</sup> The removal of this episode from the 1850 version, generally attributed to embarrassment at its possible association with his own affair with Annette Vallon (Moorman, p.182), testifies to Wordsworth's own recognition of the difficulty in justifying his use of the word 'instead'. Wordsworth's sudden withdrawal from the topical issue of contemporary politics does not seem to be a consequence of his ignorance of contemporary issues nor the result of

---

<sup>5</sup>John O. Hayden, ed., *William Wordsworth: The Poems*, 2 vols. (Harmondsworth, 1977), the note for 'Vaudracour and Julia', p.1007.

forgetfulness, for Wordsworth's brief reference to contemporary political events in his letter to Matthew on May 19 shows that he was reasonably well informed of the progress of revolutionary politics,<sup>6</sup> and his memory in the rest of the book IX is shown to be often extraordinarily vivid and sharp. Wordsworth's revisionary efforts to displace or play down his radical past, which are often evident in his later poems, are not applicable here where he is self-consciously offering an account of the origin of his past radicalism.

Another problem is the fact that there is a general lack of information about Wordsworth in this period with which to prove or disprove his poetical summary of his radical past; there are only two surviving letters written at Blois, one poem written in this period, *Descriptive Sketches*, and book IX of *The Prelude* written about this period 13 years later, and each of these was written in different circumstances and in a different *genre* so that each has a different value as the representation of the reality it refers to.

The difficulty of the study of Wordsworth's radical past is well illustrated by the controversy over the question of how far Wordsworth could be said ever to have been a radical, in which George Watson and John Beer have participated.<sup>7</sup> More interesting than the main controversy is David Ellis's brief commentary<sup>8</sup> on the conflicting arguments where he perceptively criticises a trend in Wordsworth scholarship, 'the method' of contrasting 'with Wordsworth's own version of events an account the critic builds up by combining his reading of the poem with reference to contemporary

---

<sup>6</sup>Wordsworth observes in the letter: 'the horrors excited by the relation of the events consequent upon the commencement of hostilities, is general. Not but that there are men who felt a gloomy satisfaction from a measure which seemed to put the patriot army out of a possibility of success. An ignominious flight, the massacre of their general, a dance performed with savage joy round his burning body, the murder of six prisoners, are events which have arrested the attention, of the reader of the annals of Morocco, or of the most barbarous of savages. The approaching summer will undoubtedly decide the fate of France', *EY*, pp.77-78.

<sup>7</sup>George Watson, 'The revolutionary youth of Wordsworth and Coleridge', *Critical Quarterly*, 18, no.3 (1976), pp.49-66; John Beer, 'The "revolutionary youth" of Wordsworth and Coleridge: another view', *Critical Quarterly*, 19, no.2 (1977), pp.79-87.

<sup>8</sup>David Ellis, 'Wordsworth's revolutionary youth: how we read *The Prelude*', *Critical Quarterly*, 19, no. 4 (1977), pp.59-67.

evidence' (p.59). His argument is that there is no reason for giving more credit to the critic's version than to Wordsworth's own because the general dearth of contemporary evidence tends to lead the researcher to speculation rather than to 'objective truth'; 'by what right and on what authority', he asks, '(does) he contradict Wordsworth's idea of himself?' (p.65)

Together with Ellis's pertinent question we are led to raise another question which needs to be met before launching our historical inquiry into Wordsworth's radical past: what we really mean by his 'radical past'; what exactly do we want to reconstruct?

First, do we want to reconstruct his actual political activities during that time? There has been an understandable academic desire to confirm Wordsworth's shadowy involvement with revolutionary politics in terms of some recognisable activity; not in the form of 'what he could have done', but 'what he actually did'. Nicholas Roe's *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* is the most recent work that manifests this desire. Even if we do not concur with David Ellis's implication when he reminds us that 200 years of historical research has failed to settle the single question of whether Wordsworth actually visited Paris in the Autumn of 1793 as Carlyle testifies,<sup>9</sup> Roe's book shows us how difficult it is to confirm Wordsworth's poetic statements by reference to documented fact. Although he provides a quantity of relevant circumstantial evidence which enriches our reading of Wordsworth, he is surprisingly unsuccessful in giving us any new, decisive evidence to demonstrate Wordsworth's political activity. On the contrary, he is often forced to rely heavily on *The Prelude* to substantiate his own hypotheses, implicitly endowing *The Prelude* with factual credibility (Roe, pp.55-80). The most sympathetic reading of Roe's book, ironically, leaves us with the impression that Wordsworth's actual involvement in French revolutionary politics was minimal or non-existent. This is not Roe's fault, but a consequence of the fundamental difficulty of historical research on this level. What is

---

<sup>9</sup>Ellis, p.66.



important then is to recognize an ultimate limitation in historical investigations of this kind<sup>10</sup> and the danger of being driven into speculation, which, however, does not necessarily mean that we have to accept Ellis's scepticism about the usefulness of historical research in literature in general.

Secondly, we may aim at identifying and mapping Wordsworth's radical 'ideas' in the context of diverse ideological traditions. Traditional Wordsworth scholars have attempted this, the prime example being Arthur Beatty's *William Wordsworth: His Doctrine and Art in Their Historical Relations*.<sup>11</sup> There can be no doubt about the usefulness of studies of this kind, but they are irrelevant to our present purpose in that, on the one hand, there is little to add to the existing scholarship, and on the other, it is impossible not to feel reservations about the tendency of such critics to treat poetical texts simply as the source of ideas rather than a particular kind of discourse whose own distinctive nature as a literary work deserves more sensitive attention.

Most critical studies of Wordsworth's politics, in fact, do share the tendencies of both approaches, and offer 'biographical' criticism with the emphasis on historical background.<sup>12</sup> By and large, they seem to aim at creating the picture of a 'real' Wordsworth lurking behind the poetical texts, as was cynically pointed out by Ellis. The solution offered by Ellis himself is in fact rather conventional; he argues that *The Prelude* should be allowed 'to set its own limits of enquiry' so that the reader should judge the poem 'by the laws implicit within its own structure and not by reference to a speculative "what really happened"' (Ellis, p.66). Ellis's case turns out to be much stronger and more useful in exposing the theoretical problem inherent in most history-oriented criticisms than offering an alternative theoretical position that will make a better case for historical criticism. He is rather sceptical of the value of historical research in literary studies.

---

<sup>10</sup>See Chapter I, note 40.

<sup>11</sup>Apart from this, Basil Willey's *The Eighteenth-Century Background: Studies on the Idea of Nature in the Thought of the Period* (London, 1940) is another good example of this traditional approach.

<sup>12</sup>See Chapter I, note 2.

The objective of this chapter is to reconstruct, with full awareness of the theoretical and practical limitations of historical research indicated by Ellis and illustrated by Roe, Wordsworth's ever-shifting political ideas by re-reading Wordsworth's already well known compositions(poems and prose) concerning his radical thoughts or activities, particularly in relation to the immediate political circumstances and the ideological conflicts of the period. In the vicissitudes of a revolutionary age, the political significance of a set of ideas is contingent upon the immediate circumstances within which they were formulated: the significance of being a 'patriot' in the France of 1792, for example, is enormously different from being one in the Britain of 1793. To think about Wordsworth's compositions with a close reference to the immediate political situation will enable us to measure by a contemporary standard the nature of Wordsworth's ideological commitments to the revolutionary or democratic cause, but it is also an oblique attempt to assess the objective possibility of Wordsworth's actual involvement with the revolutionary politics at each stage of his career. If it is practically impossible to confirm, for example, Wordsworth's membership of a particular radical debating society, it may still be rewarding to place Wordsworth's political statements within the ideological spectrum that can be formed by studying the views of his contemporaries.

## b. Wordsworth and Beaupuy: Wordsworth at Blois

Wordsworth's acquaintance with Beaupuy may have started as early as 3 February and must have ended at latest by 27 July, 1792, on which date Beaupuy's regiment left Blois for the Rhine frontiers (Reed, p.134). Coincidentally this period can be described as truly momentous in the progress of the Revolution. The war with the foreign powers to defend the Revolution at last broke out providing the opportunity for the abolition of the monarchy, the turning-point from which a series of political reforms began to assume a truly radical character. The newly formed Girondin ministry(10-23 March), very willing to engage in war as a means to consolidate their revolutionary initiative, was decisively encouraged by the ascension of Francis II who was openly hostile to the revolution. Eventually, the Gironde managed to force the king to declare war against 'the king of Bohemia and Hungary', that is, the emperor of Austria. The initial defeat in the first phase of war, shockingly culminating in the murder of General Dillon,<sup>13</sup> endangered the Revolution, convincing more and more people that Liberty and Monarchy were not really compatible. The dissolution of the king's bodyguard on 29 May was soon followed by the 'Journée of 20 June',<sup>14</sup> the crowd's invasion of the Tuileries, as a result of which the king's authority was irrevocably damaged. Growing fear of invasion by foreign forces provided a pretext for getting rid of the king, the last obstacle in the way of Liberty. On 10 August, demonstrators attacked the Tuileries with the aim of putting an end to the monarchy once and for all in France. Having eliminated the king, it was only a matter of time before France was declared a Republic, an event which took place on 25

---

<sup>13</sup>General Dillon was one of the three Generals who took the first unsuccessful initiative in the war against Austria. After his order to retreat, he was murdered by his own soldiers. Wordsworth mentioned this incident in his letter to Matthew on 19 May 1792. See note 6 of this chapter.

<sup>14</sup>This is the incident in which the radical crowds of Paris invaded the Tuileries where the king had been confined, asking him to withdraw his veto on the legislation about the deportation of the non-juring priests on 27 May, and the establishment of a camp of 20,000 fédérés. They managed to humiliate the king by forcing him to wear a red cap, the symbol of jacobinism, and to toast for the nation, but they failed to obtain the withdrawal of his veto. Colin Jones, *The Longman Companion to the French Revolution* (London and New York, 1988), pp.19-24.

September. The Reign of Terror was already foreshadowed by the September Massacre (2-6 September) in which more than 1000 prisoners were ruthlessly butchered. The massacre, the main victims of which were the non-juring priests, was the most brutal expression of the Jacobin policy towards the clergy who had been doggedly resisting revolutionary measures in concert with the other remnants of feudalism. It also marked the beginning of the power struggle between the Girondin and the Mountain ended in the defeat of the former. The execution of the King on 21 January, 1793 triggered the long lasting revolutionary war with the coalition force of European countries including Britain.<sup>15</sup>

Wordsworth was not innocent of all knowledge of these events. He claims that although he was 'unprepared/ With needful knowledge' (IX, l.91), 'Like others' he 'had read, and eagerly/ Sometimes, the master pamphlets of the day' (IX, ll.95-96). And his political enthusiasm, though 'loose and disjointed' (IX, l.106) then, may have provided a minimal common ground with Beaupuy from which to start their educational relationship. In the context of book IX, however, it serves only to highlight Beaupuy's role in the making of an ardent patriot by emphasizing the shallowness of his political knowledge and experience.

The most substantial description of Beaupuy's political lessons appears in the later part of book IX, the famous scene of their chance meeting with a 'hunger-bitten girl' (ll. 481-554). What is remarkable in this section is its carefully arranged narration designed to highlight the process by which Wordsworth becomes epiphanically convinced of the righteousness of the revolutionary cause; on the site of the 'home of ancient kings', Beaupuy pointed out the evil traces of the ancien regime only to remind Wordsworth of his 'chivalrous delight'. Although Wordsworth insists that his love of chivalry did not extend to an acceptance of absolute monarchy - 'Yet not the less,/

---

<sup>15</sup>For overall description of the revolution, I used Georges Lefebvre, *The French Revolution From Its Origin To 1793*, (London, 1962). For more detailed description of the incidents, Christopher Hibbert, *The Days of The French Revolution*(London, 1982) was useful. In Nesta H. Webster's *The French Revolution: A Study in Democracy*(London, 1919), there are a lot of direct quotations of significant speeches.

Hatred of absolute rule, where will of one is law for all...(ll.502-504) - the political significance associated with the feudal architecture remains alien to his mind until it is more concretely revealed in the person of a hunger-bitten girl. At that very moment, Beaupuy's words are directly quoted for the first and the last time with a maximum dramatic effect; ' 'Tis against *that*/ Which we are fighting' (Wordsworth's own italics). Wordsworthian scholars have usually concentrated on the poetic significance of the episode, so that we tend to be rather inattentive to the political message contained in the following passage which reflects Wordsworth's understanding of Beaupuy's revolutionary ideas:

...I with him believed  
 Devoutly that a spirit was abroad  
 Which could not be withstood, that poverty  
 At least like this would in a little time  
 Be found no more, that we should see the earth  
 Unthwarted in her wish to recompense  
 The industrious, and the lowly child of toil,  
 All institutes for ever blotted out  
 That legalized exclusion, empty pomp  
 Abolished, sensual state and cruel power,  
 Whether by edict of the one or few;  
 And finally, as sum and crown of all,  
 Should see the people having a strong hand  
 In making their own laws; whence better days  
 To all mankind. But, these things set apart,  
 Was not the single confidence enough  
 To animate the mind that ever turned  
 A thought to human welfare? That henceforth  
 Captivity by mandate without law  
 Should cease; and open accusation lead  
 To sentence in the hearing of the world,  
 And open punishment, if not the air  
 Be free to breathe in, and the heart of man  
 Dread nothing. Having touched this argument  
 I shall not, as my purpose was, take note  
 Of other matters which detained us oft

In thought or conversation, public acts,  
 And public persons, and the emotions wrought  
 Within our minds by the ever-varying wind  
 Of record and report which day by day  
 Swept over us; but I will here instead  
 Draw from obscurity a tragic tale  
 Not in its spirit singular indeed  
 But haply worth memorial, as I heard  
 The events related by my Patriot friend  
 And others who had borne a part therein.  
 (IX. ll.519-554)

As Beaupuy's words dramatically insist, the problem of poverty seems to occupy the first place in the list of the aims of the Revolution Wordsworth had in mind. Arthur Young recollects an encounter on 12 July 1789 with a poor woman who looked sixty or seventy, but actually was only twenty eight, saying 'Something was to be done by some great folks for such poor ones, but she did not know who nor how, but God send us better, ...'<sup>16</sup> 'Some recent disturbances have taken place in this city, for want of bread', Samuel Ireland records, 'a plea, I fear, that has much truth in it, as I never remember to have seen so great a number of beggars in any city I have passed through: they flock through the streets in immense crowds, and are sometimes exceedingly vicious, on being refused their request, or rather demand... On our return to Amiens we prepared for our route to England, when in getting into our chaise, to exemplify what I have before remarked of the poverty of this place, we counted no less than sixty-four beggars, who surrounded our carriage, and with one voice, in full cry, implored our charity(Amiens, Sept.1789).'<sup>17</sup> Alan Forrest summarises the rural crisis at the eve of the Revolution:

---

<sup>16</sup>Arthur Young, *Travels in France: during the years 1787, 1788 and 1789*, edited by Jeffry Kaplow (Gloucester, Mass, 1976), p.144. Also quoted in Lefebvre, p120. French rural poverty was witnessed by many British travellers recorded in John Lough, *France on the Eve of Revolution* (London, 1987), pp.48-51.

<sup>17</sup>*English Witnesses of the French Revolution*, edited by J.M. Thompson (Oxford, 1938), p.64.

1788 and 1789 were years of serious crop failure throughout large areas of France's grain-producing provinces, and the Revolution added to the food shortage by spreading confusion and bewilderment among the peasantry. Rents, taxes, tithes, and feudal exactions alike often went unpaid as the peasants enthusiastically convinced themselves that the calling of the Estates-General and the storming of the Bastille had coincidentally settled all their longstanding grievances, and sowing and harvesting were seriously disrupted by political meetings and village celebrations, by armed attacks and lurid local scares. Law and order, so essential to the smooth turn-over of the agricultural year, had broken down in many parts of the country, and the grain supply suffered accordingly. Misery and suffering rose apace, as did the numbers of beggars and vagabonds who took to the roads once the harvest was in and unemployment loomed. As the Revolution progressed, poverty would remain one of its most urgent problems, with unemployment rampant in many of France's traditional industries and with the widows and dependants of those killed and maimed in the war adding still further to the long roll-call of the needy.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, poverty was the most concrete, most practical reason for the revolt, at least for the lower class. Beaupuy's rather simplified definition of the aim of revolution is justifiable in the sense that freedom from poverty was the chief aspiration of the revolutionary vision in which the lower class was willingly mobilized to support the bourgeois's political challenge to the feudal regime. The first stage of the Revolution, as Georges Lefebvre indicates, was propelled by a millenarian vision of 'a miraculous change in man's fate', which 'united the heterogeneous elements of the Third Estate and became a dynamic source of revolutionary idealism.'<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore it was not just a matter of revolutionary ideas, but also concerned a practical process of revolutionary struggle; giving relief to the poor, as Forrest notes, was traditionally the business of the church, and revealing 'the inadequacies of clerical

---

<sup>18</sup>Alan Forrest, *The French Revolution and the Poor* (Oxford, 1981), p.22.

<sup>19</sup>Lefebvre, pp.119-20.

charity in times of crisis and the gross inequalities in its distribution',<sup>20</sup> along with the enforcement of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, was a measure by which the revolutionary government signalled its intention to take over the overall control of society from the feudal Catholic church. Giving a better provision to the poor was not merely a matter of improving the system of social welfare, but also involved the enormous task of reorganising the local administrative system; the transformation from a priest-dominated parish system to a non-religious civil government based on democratic election. After the fall of the Bastille, the commitments of each revolutionary government were indeed serious. Forrest summarises:

The Revolutionary years saw poor relief elevated to a new position of importance among the stated priorities of national government, and for the first time there was no question but that this was the rightful province of the state. Under both the Constituent and the Legislative Assemblies, committees of deputies were established on a permanent basis to deal with matters concerning the relief of indigence--the *Comite de Mendicite* from 1790 to 1791, which concentrated on the problems of diagnosis and prescription, and a *Comite des secours* under the Legislative, which was responsible for making assistance payments to the indigent, provisioning hospitals and poorhouses, and processing and answering complaints and petitions.<sup>21</sup>

From the 'Night of 4 August' when many of the major sources of income of existing charitable institutions (tithes, seigneurial dues, etc) were abolished, the government's revolutionary measures to deny the church its social functions and traditional privileges were necessarily accompanied by its more constructive proposals to take over the business of social welfare from the church. On 2 November, 1789, the state began to assume responsibility for reorganizing poor relief, which eventually led to the passing of the 'Law on public assistance' on 19 March and 28 June 1793.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup>Forrest, p.16.

<sup>21</sup>Forrest, p.23.

<sup>22</sup>Colin, pp.307-309.



The problem of poverty occupies the central place in Wordsworth's political concerns in subsequent years. More significantly, Wordsworth's indignation at the social injustice of poverty not only transformed Wordsworth into a radical, but also became a source of his poetic imagination prompting him to create a series of significant poetic characters whose lives are devastated by poverty. The individual disfigured by the pressure of poverty was to become the most important of his poetic subjects in the next couple of years, from the female vagrant to the discharged soldier. In this sense, Beaupuy's dramatic characterization of the revolution as the fight against poverty constitutes the most important reference for Wordsworth's political viewpoint as well as for his poetic imagination; it continued to preoccupy Wordsworth's for the next few years as the point at which his poetic imagination and his political passion converged, indicating that Wordsworth's poetic development was inseparable from his political concern even when it appeared to be most apolitical.

In this light, there is no doubt that, for Wordsworth, poverty was the most urgent problem to be addressed in the course of the Revolution. But Wordsworth does not seem always so happily in agreement with the Girondin government. Just before the hunger-bitten girl episode, Wordsworth expresses anger at the ruination of a convent:

And sometimes--  
 When to a convent in a meadow green,  
 By a brook-side, we came, a roofless pile,  
 And not by reverential touch of Time  
 Dismantled, but by violence abrupt --  
 In spite of those heart-bracing colloquies,  
 In spite of real fervour, and of that  
 Less genuine and wrought up within myself--  
 I could not but bewail a wrong so harsh,  
 And for the Matin-bell to sound no more  
 Grieved, and the evening taper, and the cross  
 High on the topmost pinnacle, a sign  
 Admonitory to the traveller,

First seen above the woods.

(IX. ll.467-480)

As Wordsworth himself admits here ('in spite of'), his anger at the destruction of the church is not consistent with his revolutionary fervour. To fight against poverty, at least in terms of practical social policy, is to recognise the inappropriateness of the church's social function, which the newly formed local civil government was attempting to replace. To 'rationalise' the Catholic church which still dominated, as a basic administrative unit of society, all aspects of people's social lives from birth to death was a necessary step in a social revolution designed to realize idealistic abstract values in the real lives of people.

The suppression of the church was signalled by the nationalization of the Church's property on 2 November 1789, which made the clergyman a kind of civil servant paid by the state. On 12 July 1790, the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, the legislation which intended to reorganise the whole structure, function, and system of appointment of the priests, was introduced. And on 27 November 1790, the duty of oath-taking was imposed on all state functionaries, which was to be extended to all priests on 29 November, 1791. The relentless persecution of the church was concentrated in the period just before and after the dethronement of the King on 10 August 1792. It climaxed in the September Massacre on 3 September. Religious institutions were ordered to be evacuated; on 4 August, most female religious orders were ordered to be closed and all houses at present occupied by monks and nuns were to be evacuated and sold off; from 10 August, attacks on and harrassment of refractory clerics started; on 26 August, the priests were to be deported who failed to take the oath and whose removal was requested by six citizens; and during the massacre between 2-6 September, three ex-bishops and over 200 priests were killed; finally, on 10 September, requisitioning of church silver was permitted for the war effort.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup>Colin, pp.242-43.

Wordsworth repeatedly expresses his strong misgivings at the revolutionary violence applied to the convents. In *Descriptive Sketches*, written during his stay at Blois, Wordsworth recollects his visit to *La Grande Chartreuse*, which was invaded and pillaged by the revolutionary army.<sup>24</sup>

The cloister startles at the gleam of arms,  
 And Blasphemy the shuddering fane alarms;  
 Nod the cloud-piercing pines their troubl'd heads,  
 Spires, rocks, and lawns, a browner night o'erspreads.  
 Strong terror checks the female peasant's sighs,  
 And start th' astonish'd shades at female eyes.  
 The thundering tube the aged angler hears,  
 And swells the groaning torrent with his tears.  
 (DS, 1793, ll. 60-67)

This is a description of the spectacle of the violent invasion relying on a fairly conventional prosody; apart from a slight implication of misgiving, little personal

---

<sup>24</sup>*La Grande Chartreuse* is the headquarter of the Carthusian Order which was established by St. Bruno in 1084. It is located in a section of the French Alps, about 30 miles from Grenoble. It is 'a purely contemplative monastic order'. The Carthusian way of life pursues 'a life of contemplative union with God' in an anchorite life, which means that it is not actively committed, at least as far as *La Grande Chartreuse* is concerned, to the church's social functions such as poor relief, education, or local administration. *New Catholic Encyclopedia* vol III.(Washington, 1967), pp.161-168. Nevertheless, it was not exempt from revolutionary violence. *New Catholic Encyclopedia* notes, 'At the beginning of the French Revolution, the general chapter had authority over only 126 houses, 75 of which were in France. The decrees of the revolutionary government confiscated all the French houses, and these were subsequently thoroughly pillaged by the army. During the Bloody days of the Revolution, many Cathusians were imprisoned; some died in prison, and others were put to death or exiled' (p.163). Reed notes that *La Grande Chartreuse* was occupied by four hundred soldiers between 10 May and October 1792 (p.132). C.M. Bourtrais, *The History of the Great Chartreuse*, translated by E. Hassid (London, 1934) provides more detailed information about the history of persecution during the days of Revolution. Its suffering began from the start of the Revolution, and when Wordsworth visited the place between 4-5 August 1790( Reed, p.103), the devastation could already have been in progress, for Dom Hilarion who died on 4 May 1791, had 'witnessed the destruction, stone by stone of the Carthusian edifice'. The occupation by four hundred soldiers Reed mentions took place on 20 May 1792; they occupied in the pretext of defending the frontier, but with the real purpose of looting and pillaging the place in a most brutal way. They were replaced by another regiment on 10 July 1792 after 'inflicting every suffering upon them except death'. The army occupation continued until it was finally evacuated 17 October 1792. Most of the monks expelled died miserably. For more detail, see III. i. 'The Revolutionary Period', pp.99-106. Moorman also records the details of the revolutionary violence inflicted on the monastery relying on the same source. pp. 135-137.

indignation is evident.<sup>25</sup> In book IV of 1805 *Prelude*, the same visit is briefly mentioned. In the 1850 revision of the same scene, however, Wordsworth's later political view is more clearly revealed:

... we pursued  
 Our journey, and ere twice the sun had set  
 Beheld the Convent of Chartreuse, and there  
 Rested within an awful *solitude*:  
 Yes, for even then no other than a place  
 Of soul-affecting *solitude* appeared  
 That far-famed region, though our eyes had seen,  
 As toward the sacred mansion we advanced,  
 Arms flashing, and a military glare  
 Of riotous men commissioned to expel  
 The blameless inmates, and belike subvert  
 That frame of social being, which so long  
 Had bodied forth the ghostliness of things  
 In silence visible and perpetual calm.  
 --'Stay, stay your sacriligious hands!' --The voice  
 Was Nature's, uttered from her Alpine throne;  
 I heard it then, and seem to hear it now --  
 'Your impious work forbear: perish what may,  
 Let this one temple last, be this one spot  
 Of earth devoted to eternity!'  
 She ceased to speak, but while St Bruno's pines  
 Waved their dark tops, not silent as they waved,  
 And while below, along their several beds,  
 Murmured the sister streams of Life and Death,  
 Thus by conflicting passions pressed, my heart  
 Responded; 'Honour to the patriot's zeal!

---

<sup>25</sup>Actually, Wordsworth was not alone in deploring the devastation of the convents; Major Trench records his remorseful feeling at the ruined cathedral on 2 March 1795: 'Here I had leisure to contemplate the scene of desolation which this venerable temple presented. At least half the windows of fine old painted glass, "richly dight", were broken; all the monuments torn down; and the bones of the dead exposed to view, and commingled with the ruins of their tombs, the names and armorial devices being utterly defaced, and the coffins taken away and converted into bullets. When the service was finished, I went within the railing which incloses the altar, to look at a large picture, representing the Ascension, the figures of which are pierced through in more than twenty places, by sabres and bayonets' in Thompson, *English Witnesses*, p.258.

Glory and hope to new-born Liberty!  
 Hail to the mighty projects of the time!  
 Discerning sword that Justice wields, do thou  
 Go forth and prosper; and, ye purging fires,  
 Up to the loftest towers of Pride ascend,  
 Fanned by the breath of angry Providence.  
 But oh! if Past and Future be the wings  
 On whose support harmoniously conjoined  
 Moves the great spirit of human knowledge, spare  
 These courts of mystery, where a step advanced  
 Between the portals of the shadowy rocks  
 Leaves far behind life's treacherous vanities,  
 For penitential tears and trembling hopes  
 Exchanged - to equalize in God's pure sight  
 Monarch and peasant: be the house redeemed  
 With its unworldly votaries, for the sake  
 Of conquest over sense, hourly achieved  
 Through faith and meditative reason, resting  
 Upon the word of heaven-imparted truth,  
 Calmly triumphant; and for humbler claim  
 Of that imaginative impulse sent  
 From these majestic floods, yon shining cliffs,  
 The untransmuted shapes of many worlds,  
 Cerulean ether's pure inhabitants,  
 These forests unapproachable by death,  
 That shall endure as long as man endures,  
 To think, to hope, to worship, and to feel,  
 To struggle, to be lost within himself  
 In trepidation, from the blank abyss  
 To look with bodily eyes, and be consoled.'  
 (Wordsworth's italics, *The Prelude*, 1850, VI. ll. 416-471)

The description of the scene of violence itself is here rather simplified, but the poet's misgivings, conveyed through a conventional personification ('Blasphemy'), become here an open denunciation of the revolutionary violence as is shown in the contrast of 'a military glare/ Of riotous men' and 'The blameless inmates'. And the poet's human feeling of compassion for the victims of violence is here more positively

articulated through the stern voice of 'Nature', as well as in his own exclamatory plea. Furthermore, his consciousness of the contradiction between his revolutionary fervour and his human feeling of sorrow at the revolutionary violence inflicted on the convent ('*in spite of* real fervour', my italics) is here more consciously and more skilfully dealt with. First, the sincerity of the revolutionary cause ('the patriot's zeal', 'the breath of angry Providence') is once again confirmed and justified in the form of apostrophe. It serves, however, as a kind of rhetorical foil against which to highlight the following statement which explains why the convent should be spared from the revolutionary clearance. In addition, Wordsworth tries to mitigate his disapproval of the destruction of the convent by offering the church as the means to achieve the equality of man in a different sense; 'to equalize in God's pure sight, / Monarch and peasant'. But the Church's status, raised over secular society, which makes possible that spiritual equality as well as securing its privileged immunities, was the very thing the revolution wanted to destroy.

The addition of 1850 quoted here is an example of Wordsworth's dexterity in adapting his poem to his later political viewpoint rather than a fair reflection of Wordsworth's thought in 1790 or 1792. To illustrate the discrepancy, it will be useful to cite a passage from *A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff* here although it is to be discussed in full in the next section. After vehemently vindicating the necessity of revolutionary violence ('[France]...in order to reign in peace must establish herself by violence. She deplores such stern necessity, but the safety of the people, her supreme law, is her consolation....Political virtues are developed at the expence of moral ones', *Prose I*, pp.33-34), Wordsworth acutely takes the Bishop to task for his lamentation over the fate of French priests:

I proceed to the sorrow you express for the fate of the French priesthood. The measure by which that body was immediately stripped of part of its possessions, and a more equal distribution enjoined of the rest, does not meet with your Lordship's approbation. You do not question the right of the nation over ecclesiastical wealth; you have voluntarily abandoned a ground which you were conscious was

altogether untenable. Having allowed this right, can you question the propriety of exerting it at that particular period? The urgencies of the state were such as required the immediate application of a remedy. Even the clergy were conscious of such necessity: and, aware from the immunities they had long enjoyed that the people would insist upon their bearing some share of the burden, offered of themselves a considerable portion of their superfluities. The assembly were true to justice and refused to compromise the interests of the nation by accepting as a satisfaction the insidious offerings of compulsive charity. They enforced their right: they took from the clergy a considerable portion of their wealth, and applied it to the alleviation of the national misery. Experience shews daily the wise employment of the ample provision which yet remains to them. (*Prose I*, p.34)

Since this confident statement was written after his return to Britain in the middle of December 1793, it may not have derived from Beaupuy's teaching on this matter. Also, although he generally endorses the use of violence for the progress of the revolution, what he is mainly referring to here is the confiscation of church property, not wholly, but in part, which had already taken place on 2 November 1789, on which date the law for the nationalization of the church lands came into effect. Nevertheless, the discrepancy between the 1850 passages on *La Grande Chartreuse* and the *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*, strongly suggests that in 1793 Wordsworth's belief in the justice of the revolutionary cause must have been preponderant over his human feeling of sorrow at the traces of violence in the ruined convent.

The other item Wordsworth touches on is the political rights of the people. He wants to 'see the people having a strong hand in making their own laws', which is the 'sum and crown of all'. This concerns the question of democratic representation as well as that of the polity. From the fall of the Bastille, the fundamental question of the polity had constantly been raised at every stage of the Revolution. The first and the most significant principle gained expression in the 'Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen' on 27 August 1789; first, the natural and inalienable rights of man were

declared, 'Men are born and remain free and equal in rights'.<sup>26</sup> On the people's legislative rights, article 6 provided that 'Law is the expression of the general will; all citizens have the right to concur personally, or through their representatives, in its formation; it must be the same for all, whether it protects or punishes. All citizens, being equal before it, are equally admissible to all public offices, positions, and employments, according to their capacity, and without other distinction than that of virtues and talents'.<sup>27</sup> This was followed by the 'Decree on the Fundamental Principles of Government' on 1 October which established a constitutional monarchy; it is stipulated here that 'All powers emanate essentially from the nation', not from anything else. Particularly, articles 8 and 9 made it clear that law should be made by the will of the people, not by the monarch: 'The legislative power resides in the National Assembly, which shall employ it as follows.' 'No act of the legislative body may be considered as law if it is not made by the freely and legally elected representatives of the nation and sanctioned by the monarch.'<sup>28</sup> In the following decree on 'Establishing Electoral and Administrative Assemblies' on 22 December 1789, however, a division between active and passive citizens was made, which had the effect of favouring the propertied class in the system of political representation.<sup>29</sup> The bourgeois modification of the principle of democratic representation provoked the protest of Robespierre in his published speech on 22 April 1791 which he was not allowed to deliver in the Constituent Assembly. After reminding the audience of the principles of the fundamental democratic rights of the people, Robespierre continued:

Now, 1. Is the law the expression of the general will when the greater number of those for whom it is made can have no hand whatever in its

---

<sup>26</sup>The details of most important decrees or speeches of the French Revolution are found in *A Documentary Survey of the French Revolution*, edited by John Hall Stewart (New York, 1951). Another useful reference of this kind in English is *The French Revolution*, edited by Paul H. Beik (New York, 1970).

<sup>27</sup>Stewart, p.114.

<sup>28</sup>Stewart, p.116.

<sup>29</sup>Stewart, pp.127-137.



making? No. And yet to deny such men as do not pay a tax equal to three days' wages the right even to choose the elector whose task it is to name the members of the legislative assembly--what is this but to deprive a majority of the French completely of the right to make the laws? This provision is therefore essentially unconstitutional and antisocial. 2. Are men equal in rights when some are endowed with the exclusive faculty of eligibility to the legislative body or to other public institutions, and others merely with that of electing them, while the rest are deprived of all these rights at once? No. Yet such are the monstrous distinctions drawn between them by the decrees that make a man active and passive, or half active and half passive, according to the varying degrees of fortune that permit him to pay three days' wages, ten days' wages in direct taxes, or a silver mark. All these provisions are, then, essentially unconstitutional and antisocial.<sup>30</sup>

In the 1791 constitution ratified by the monarch on 13 September, the limitation of the franchise (a property franchise, the division of passive and active citizens)<sup>31</sup> was kept in its entirety until those limitations were suppressed immediately after the suspension of the monarchy on 10 August 1792. As the comparison between Robespierre and Barnave would indicate, the question of franchise could have been used as a sort of shibboleth by which to tell one's political allegiance particularly during February and July 1792. Although Wordsworth's expression of 1805, 'the people having a strong hand/ In the making their own laws', is not specific enough to demonstrate his political position, it would be possible to align him with Robespierre on this particular matter if Wordsworth wanted the amendment of the existing constitution of 1791 in that way. Probably, Wordsworth in 1805 did not want to be specific about it. But in *A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff* written in early 1793, Wordsworth's position is clearly articulated:

---

<sup>30</sup>Beik, pp.144-145.

<sup>31</sup>One of the champions of this limitation was Antoine Barnave who, though he used to be a fairly determined radical, was beginning to be concerned about the danger of the left by 1791. Compare Robespierre's undelivered speech with his speech of 11 August 1791 on 'Representative Government and the Social Order'. Beik, pp.168-176.

Your Lordship will scarcely question that much of human misery, that the great evils which desolate states, proceed from the governors' having an interest distinct from that of the governed. It should seem a natural deduction that whatever has a tendency to identify the two must also in the same degree promote the general welfare. As the magnitude of almost all states prevents the possibility of their enjoying a pure democracy, philosophers, from a wish, as far as is in their power, to make the governors and the governed one, will turn their thoughts to *the system of universal representation*, and will annex an equal importance to *the suffrage of every individual* (my italics, *Prose I*, pp.36-37).

Wordsworth's declaration of unqualified republicanism in the *A Letter* ('a republic has a manifest advantage over a monarchy', p.39) cannot be said to be necessarily closer than his later equivocal statements in *The Prelude* to what he had believed in the first half of 1792. Republicanism had already been taken for granted by the time he wrote the letter, presumably shortly after February 1793,<sup>32</sup> and it would have been relatively easier to support the doctrine of the dominant political group at that stage of the Revolution. Perhaps it is safer to say that Wordsworth at that stage was contented with a rather vague statement of idealistic revolutionary principles without considering in detail the conflicting interests of different political groups.

The difficulty in identifying the radical ideas Beaupuy is said to have infused into Wordsworth in terms of contemporary revolutionary issues is not decreased by Wordsworth's additional recollection of 'heart-bracing colloquies' with Beaupuy in the earlier part of the book IX of *The Prelude*:

...Oft in solitude  
 With him did I discourse about the end  
 Of civil government, and its wisest forms;  
 Of ancient prejudice, and chartered rights,  
 Allegiance, faith, and law by time matured,  
 Custom and habit, novelty and change;

---

<sup>32</sup>*Prose I*, 'Introduction' pp.20-21.

Of self-respect, and virtue in the few  
 For patrimonial honour set apart,  
 And ignorance in the labouring multitude.  
 (IX. ll.327-335)

It is not surprising at all that 'the end of civil government' was the first in the list of subjects of Beaupuy's political lecture because the question of government, particularly the status of the king in the constitution, was the most important political issue of the middle of 1792, the core of the issues from which the interests of each political group diverge; the more radical elements of the society were increasing day by day the pressure to undermine the king's constitutional authority, eventually aiming at the removal of the king. On 22 June 1792, a petition was published in *Moniteur*, expressing the wishes of the Parisian populace with regard to King:

Reflect carefully upon this matter; nothing can stop you; liberty cannot be suspended...a single man must not influence the will of twenty-five million men. If, out of respect, we maintain him in his position, it is on condition that he will fill it constitutionally; if he deviates from that, he is no longer anything to the French people. We complain, finally, of the dilatoriness of the National High Court. You have entrusted it with the sword of the law; why does it wait to apply it to the heads of the guilty ones? Can it be that the civil list here again had some influence? Can it be that there are privileged criminals whom it can shelter with impunity from the vengeance of the law? Will the people be forced to return to the time of the 14th of July, again to take up that sword itself, to avenge at a single stroke the outraged law and punish the guilty and pusillanimous depositaries of that same law? No, Gentlemen, no; you see our fears, our alarms, and you will dissipate them.<sup>33</sup>

23 July, the people's demand became more specific:

Suspend the executive power as was done last year. Thereby you will cut the root of all our ills. We know that the Constitution does not mention dethronement; but in order to declare that the King has

---

<sup>33</sup>Stewart, pp. 301-302.

forfeited the throne, he must be judged; and in order to judge him, he must be provisionally suspended.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, the Girondin, which was then in power, was mainly concerned to maintain the existing frame of the constitution, securing the fruits of the revolution achieved so far.<sup>35</sup> Although Wordsworth, after 13 years, didn't bother to be specific about what he then thought were 'the wisest forms' of 'civil government', since their discussion took place when the dethronement of the king was very imminent,<sup>36</sup> the question of civil government must have involved the question of how a nation might be governed without a king. In *A Letter*, Wordsworth shows no reservation in arguing for the removal of the king:

At a period big with the fate of the human race, I am sorry that you attach so much importance to the personal sufferings of the late royal martyr and that an anxiety for the issue of the present convulsions should not have prevented you from joining in the idle cry of modish lamentation which has resounded from the court to the cottage. ... If you attended to the history of the French revolution as minutely as its importance demands, so far from stopping to bewail his death, you would rather have regretted that the blind fondness of his people had placed a human being in that monstrous situation which rendered him unaccountable before a human tribunal. (*Prose I*, p.32)

Wordsworth's letter to Mathew on 19 May also shows us that he realized the irrevocability of the process of the revolution leading to the diminution of the king's authority ('It will be impossible to make any material alteration in the constitution, impossible to reinstate the clergy in its ancient splendor, impossible to give an existence to the *noblesse* similar to that it before enjoyed, impossible to add much to the authority of the King: Yet there are in France some [?million]---I speak without

---

<sup>34</sup>Stewart, 'Address of the Federes at Paris', p.305.

<sup>35</sup>For example, Lafayette, on 28 June in the Legislative Assembly called for the suppression of the Jacobin clubs and the punishment of the 20 June demonstrators, Colin, p.20.

<sup>36</sup>Beaupuy's regiment (the thirty-second) left Blois for active service on the Rhine Frontier on 27 July 1792. Reed, p.134. Bussi re and Legouis, p.43, and Louis was dethroned on 10 August 1792.

exaggeration--who expect that this will take place', [EY, p.78]). But neither in the poem nor in the letter to Matthew, does he make it as clear as in *A Letter* whether he was then for or against the removal of the king which was the immediate political agenda.<sup>37</sup>

What *is* made clear both in the passage from *A Letter* and in the poem is what he was against; he shows no reservation in aligning himself with the opposition to the royalists who wanted to recover the ancient regime (IX. ll.191-199). What was politically significant in the spring-summer of 1792, however, was not opposition to the royalists, but the choice of political position in the emerging schism between the Jacobin and the Gironde, about which Wordsworth chose to be reticent after 13 years.

A remarkable aspect of the quoted passage is the expressions of more conservative or anti-democratic sympathy; not only is the description of his 'discourse' with Beaupuy, as James Chandler indicates, set forth in a strikingly Burkean vocabulary<sup>38</sup> ('Allegiance, faith, and law by time matured,/ Custom and habit'), but also it registers deeply anti-democratic elements ('self-respect, and virtue in the few,' 'ignorance in the labouring multitude'). Wordsworth's mistrust of the 'labouring multitude' could have been partisan particularly in the immediate political context of

---

<sup>37</sup>Wordsworth was not at all unique in keeping his political position on that matter vague; Nesta H. Webster notes 'afterwards, when the Republic had become an established fact, all the leading revolutionaries declared they had been Republicans from the beginning, but until that date they not only refrained from admitting to such opinions but indignantly disavowed them'. For example, Camille Desmoulins, a member of the Cordeliers is found to claim on 21 October 1791: 'Let no one slander me again; let no one say that I preach the Republic, and that kings should be done away with. Those who recently called us in the opinion of imbeciles, were not acting in good faith; *they well knew that we are not ignorant enough to make out liberty to consist in having no King.*' (editor's italics) Even Robespierre quibbled on this matter; on 13 July 1791, he argues, 'I have been accused, in the midst of the Assembly, of being a Republican; they do me too much honour, I am not one. If I had been accused of being a monarchist they would have dishonoured me: I am not that either. I would first observe that for many people the words "republic" and "monarchy" are entirely void of meaning. The word republic signifies no form of government in particular; it applies to every government of free men who own a country. Thus one can be just as free with a monarch as with a senate. what is the preset French constitution? It is a republic with a monarch. It is therefore neither a monarchy nor a republic--it is both.' quoted from Webster, p.192, p.194, and pp.199-200.

<sup>38</sup>Chandler, pp. 49-55. He singles out the quoted passages as the first instance of Wordsworthian phrases engraved with the Burkean code words.

the crowd's increasing importance as a political power as illustrated by their invasions of the Tuileries on 20 June and 10 August 1792.

A contradiction of this kind may be brought about by the gap between the 'patriot' Wordsworth and the more conservative Wordsworth of 1805, or perhaps it just indicates the naivety of Wordsworth's revolutionary fervour; but it also reflects the real difficulty of seeing through the confused political situation of the country at that particularly tempestuous moment. ("T was in truth an hour / Of universal ferment; mildest men/ Were agitated; and commotions, strife/ Of passion and opinion, filled the walls/ Of peaceful houses with unquiet sounds./ The soil of common life, was, at that time,/ Too hot to tread upon.'[IX. ll.163-167]).

To explain such confusing experiences in ideologically acceptable terms, Wordsworth narrated them in a particular way. Wordsworth, first of all, distances himself and Beaupuy from the immediate political context; although he 'gradually withdrew/ Into a noiser world' (IX. l.122), he did not want to be 'pressed upon' 'by objects over near', 'nor dazzled or misled/ By struggling with the crowd for present ends' (IX. ll. 345-46). So the ensuing description of their discussion is about the fundamental evil of the ancient regime (IX. ll.351-361), which had already been taken for granted by then, and the familiar Rousseauist argument of 'Man and his noble nature', which is highly abstract and generalized (IX. ll.361-370). They chose to talk about 'the honourable deeds/ Of ancient Story' rather than the present political agenda such as the issues of the non-juring clergy, the war against the foreign powers, etc. (ll.371-386). The result is to confirm their fresh belief in 'a people risen up/ Fresh as the morning star' (IX. ll.390-91), and their highest appreciation of people's virtues('Self-sacrifice the firmest' 'in the rudest men', 'generous love,/ And continence of mind, and sense of right,/ Uppermost in the midst of fiercest strife' [XI. ll.393-95]).

Secondly, Wordsworth's characterization of Beaupuy is carried out in a peculiar fashion. Wordsworth's presentation of Beaupuy foregrounds his personal qualities rather than the significance of his thoughts and actions in the actual political context. Beaupuy's influence on Wordsworth, therefore, seems to depend more on

Wordsworth's fascination with Beaupuy's personality rather than on the validity of his political viewpoints. For example, he is said to be alone in supporting the revolutionary cause in his regiment:

...One, reckoning by years,  
 Was in the prime of manhood and erewhile  
 He had sate lord in many tender hearts;  
 Though heedless of such honours now, and changed:  
 His temper was quite mastered by the times,  
 And they had blighted him, had eat away  
 The beauty of his person, doing wrong  
 Alike to body and to mind: his port,  
 Which once had been erect and open, now  
 Was stooping and contracted, and a face,  
 By nature lovely in itself, expressed  
 As much as any that was ever seen,  
 A ravage out of season, made by thoughts  
 Unhealthy and vexatious. At the hour,  
 The most important of each day, in which  
 The public news was read, the fever came,  
 A punctual visitant, to shake this man,  
 Disarmed his voice and fanned his yellow cheek  
 Into a thousand colours; while he read,  
 Or mused, his sword was haunted by his torch  
 Continually, like an uneasy place  
 In his own body....  
 (IX. ll.142-163)

This is the very first description of Beaupuy who is still anonymous. What is highlighted is 'The beauty of his person' which suffers unwanted change by 'the times' and unjust persecution from others. An interesting point is that through his revolutionary activities Beaupuy's naturally perfect personality has been corrupted rather than improved. Therefore, the new revolutionary political stance is the symptom of 'fever', making his face express 'A ravage out of season, made by thoughts/ Unhealthy and vexatious'. As a result, it becomes unclear whether it was 'the fever' of

the time or his royalist colleagues which is to blame for his change of personality. What is implicitly condemned here seems, therefore, more likely revolutionary politics itself rather than the reactionary attitude of the royalist officers.

The more substantial description of Beaupuy begins at l.293. What makes him a hero is his benign attitude toward people, his royalist colleagues, and the poor people alike, rather than the value of his political thoughts or actions by which Wordsworth is supposed to be influenced:

...By birth he ranked  
 With the most noble, but unto the poor  
 Among mankind he was in service bound,  
 As by some tie invisible oaths professed  
 To a religious order. Man he loved  
 As man; and, to the mean and the obscure,  
 And all the homely in their homely works,  
 Transferred a courtesy which had no air  
 Of condescension;  
 (IX. ll.308-316)

Wordsworth's appreciation of Beaupuy's aristocratic origin, together with Wordsworth's trust in 'the virtue of one paramount mind'(X. l.180) makes his characterization of Beaupuy more dubious. Beaupuy's rejection of privilege could surely be associated with his radical politics, but his aristocratic background also helps the image-making of Beaupuy as a Messianic figure. He is represented not only as a Christ-figure who 'loved man as man', but also as a man of action, 'one devoted,- one whom circumstance/ Hath called upon to embody his deep sense/ In action, give it outwardly a shape,/ And that of benediction to the world' (IX. ll.406-409). In this light, Wordsworth's misunderstanding that Beaupuy 'perished fighting, in supreme command,/ Upon the borders of the unhappy Loire/ For liberty, against deluded men,/ His fellow country-men...' (IX. ll. 430-433) hardly appears to be coincidental because his prestigious military career as a general promoted with incredible speed by the regime Wordsworth soon came to hate is far from acceptable for his hero. Keeping his



moral integrity intact by removing him at the most convenient time, Wordsworth proceeds with the further idealization of Beaupuy by identifying him with Dion, a 'philosophic' warrior (IX. ll.415-425). The overall result of this characterization is the marginalization of contemporary radical politics which is apparently the subject of Book IX.

Roe's description of this period begins with the possibility of Wordsworth's attendance at the meeting of 'The Society for The Friends of Constitution' in Blois on 3 February 1792 and ends with another conjecture of Wordsworth's presence at a meeting of English radicals in November.<sup>39</sup> As a matter of fact, Wordsworth's activities during this period remains as opaque as his affair with Annette Vallon. Considering his political circumstance during the period in question, Wordsworth had no need to have personally involved himself with the actual revolutionary movements to become a sympathiser with the revolution. As he himself admits in Book IX, he enjoyed the freedom as a foreigner to pursue whatever he liked to do, being excused from any moral or political duty to participate in public affairs (IX. ll. 191-195). It is perfectly possible that Wordsworth was preoccupied with his intimate relationship with Annette without any serious commitments to political matters other than understanding the news of the recent big events. What we know for certain, however, is that Beaupuy's education must have been extensive enough to include all the major issues of the period, and effective enough to transform his pupil into the radical who was to write *A Letter* after a few months time. Wordsworth's radical identity emerged more clearly only after he escaped from the place in which 'mildest men/ Were agitated; and commotions, strife/ Of passion and opinion, filled the walls/ Of peaceful houses with unquiet sounds' (IX. ll.164-167).

---

<sup>39</sup>On 18 November 1792, the British radicals who were staying in Paris had dinner at White's Hotel to celebrate the French military success. There are fifty signatures to the address to the National Convention which, however, does not include Wordsworth's name. Roe argues that it is not impossible that Wordsworth was one of fifty other people who were there but did not sign it. Roe, pp.81-82.

### 3. Wordsworth after Beaupuy: Orleans and Paris

As Beaupuy's regiment left for the Rhine frontier on 27 July 1792, Wordsworth's association with Beaupuy came to an abrupt end. Wordsworth was left alone exactly when the revolution started to register its truly radical character. In response to the Brunswick Manifesto issued on 25 July 1792,<sup>40</sup> the Journee of 10 August overthrew the French Monarchy which was followed by a series of revolutionary measures including the establishment of an 'Extraordinary Tribunal' to punish the reactionaries, the abolition of all feudal dues, the expulsion of the non-juring priests from France, house-to-house searches of reactionary suspects, and most significant of all, the September massacres. As a natural conclusion to all this, France proclaimed herself a Republic.<sup>41</sup>

Wordsworth proceeded to Orleans sometime during September for unknown reasons, probably to do with Annette Vallon, and stayed there until he left for Paris at the end of October on his way home to England.<sup>42</sup> It is not possible to ascertain either the exact date of his trip to Orleans or the motivation of his sudden decision to go there. No matter when he moved to Orleans, he had to come to terms with the great public events then taking place almost daily, and to do so without the help of Beaupuy. The most shocking of all were the September massacres in Paris. If he did move to Orleans just after writing a letter to Richard Wordsworth on 3 September, he may have witnessed in Orleans similar massacres, for in Orleans fifty-three political prisoners were butchered by the mob (Moorman, p.201). Whether he personally witnessed these events or not, the massacres must have been the first test of his newly established radicalism because it was the event that is most difficult to justify even for the most

---

<sup>40</sup>For the cause and effect of the manifesto, see Goodwin, pp. 240-242.

<sup>41</sup>Jones, p. 22.

<sup>42</sup>Moorman, pp. 200-202. Reed, p.135. 10n.

extreme radical.<sup>43</sup> The other great public event Wordsworth could not possibly have ignored during his stay in Orleans was the proclamation of the Republic on 22 September. Wordsworth may even have attended the celebration in honour of the Republic at Orleans on 21 September (Reed, p.136).

Wordsworth's immediate response to these events is difficult to recover; after 13 years, the political upheaval between 10 August and 22 September is recollected in *The Prelude*:

...From his throne  
 The King had fallen... the swarm  
 That came elate and jocund, like a band  
 Of eastern hunters, to enfold in ring  
 Narrowing itself by moments and reduce  
 To the last punctual spot of their despair  
 A race of victims, so they seemed, *themselves*  
 Had shrunk from sight of their own task, and fled  
 In terror. Desolation and dismay  
 Remained for them whose fancies had grown rank  
 With evil expectations; confidence  
 And perfect triumph to the better cause.  
 The State, as if to stamp the final seal  
 On her security, and to the world  
 Show what she was, a high and fearless soul,  
 Or rather in a spirit of thanks to those  
 Who had stirred up her slackening faculties  
 To a new transition, had assumed with joy  
 The body and the venerable name  
 Of a Republic. Lamentable crimes,  
 'Tis true, had gone before this hour, the work  
 Of massacre, in which the senseless sword  
 Was prayed to as a judge; but these were past,  
 Earth free from them for ever, as was thought,--  
 Ephemeral monsters, to be seen but once!

---

<sup>43</sup>Even Robespierre showed some reservation about Marat's plan for wholesale massacre though he didn't offer any serious opposition. see Webster, pp. 295-96.

Things that could only show themselves and die.  
(X. ll.8-37)

Defending the revolution - defending it against the threat of invasion from foreign forces and a possible counter-revolutionary revolt of the exiled royalists- was the only justification of the violent revolutionary measures, including the massacres. Wordsworth's description of those events seems to be, by and large, based on the same logic; first, for Wordsworth, becoming a republic is not a political scandal, but the manifestation of France's true nature ('what she was, a high and fearless soul', l.26) as well as an inevitable measure for self-defence ('the final seal/ On her security', ll.24-25).<sup>44</sup> Secondly, republicans like himself ironically had to 'thank' the reactionary enemies who expedited the revolutionary transformation to a republic by threatening to destroy it. The massacres are, therefore, a stern necessity and politically excusable. They are indeed deplorable crimes, but only transitory phenomena, 'Ephemeral monsters' (X. l.36). This is what Wordsworth offered after 13 years as his position on the massacres and the establishment of the French Republic, and it is in accordance with the position set forth in *A Letter*. Against the Bishop's expression of horror at the massacres, Wordsworth retorts:

What! have you so little knowledge of the nature of man as to be ignorant, that a time of revolution is not the season of true Liberty. Alas! the obstinacy & perversion of men is such that she is too often obliged to borrow the very arms of despotism to overthrow him, and in order to reign in peace must establish herself by violence. She deplores such stern necessity, but the safety of the people, her supreme law, is her consolation. ... Political virtues are developed at the expence of moral ones; and the sweet emotions of compassion, evidently dangerous where traitors are to be punished, are too often altogether smothered. But is this a sufficient reason to reprobate a convulsion from which is to spring a fairer order of things? (*Prose I*, pp.34-35)

---

<sup>44</sup>By contrast, Brissot, with whom Wordsworth is known to have himself aligned himself, declared on 25 July 1792 that 'the blade of the law should strike any one who attempted to establish a Republic', though he later on presented himself 'the eternal enemy of the kings'. Webster, p.341.

The radical nature of this is unquestionable. Though written at least 5 months after the actual events, it appears to coincide with the millenarian vision presented at the concluding part of *Descriptive Sketches*, the only contemporary writing of Wordsworth in this period, in which Wordsworth's flaring indignation at political injustice and zealous wish for a new world, though couched in conventional abstractions, are vehemently declared, without any hint of reservation. All this evidence seems to confirm the view that Wordsworth's radical belief was not shaken throughout this period.

Nicholas Roe supposes that Wordsworth must have felt as James Watt, Junior did, another English radical who was then in Paris.<sup>45</sup> In a letter to his father on 5 September, Watt, though completely horrified, acknowledged 'the absolute necessity' of the massacres (Roe, p.72).

Not every British radical, however, was as approving of the massacre as Watt. Samuel Romilly,<sup>46</sup> for example, wrote on 15 May 1792:

My opinion, however, is not in the least altered with respect to your Revolution. Even the conduct of the present Assembly has not been able to shake my conviction that it is the most glorious event, and the happiest for mankind, that has ever taken place since human affairs have been recorded; and though I lament sincerely the miseries which have happened, and which still are to happen, I console myself with thinking that the evils of the revolution are *transitory*, and all the good of it is permanent (my italics).

---

<sup>45</sup>For Watt's activity in Paris in 1792 as a delegate from the Manchester Constitutional Society, see Goodwin, pp. 201-203.

<sup>46</sup>Sir Samuel Romilly (1757-1818) was a law reformer who was once a sympathizer with the radical cause. He had been a friend of Mirabeau since 1784. In the same year, he wrote 'A Fragment on the Constitutional Power and Duty of Juries upon Trials for Libels', which was published anonymously by SCI. After visiting France in 1788 and 1789, he wrote a radical pamphlet 'Thoughts on the probable Influence of the French Revolution on Great Britain' in 1790, along with his correspondence with his life-long friend Dumont containing his criticisms of the Law, Manners, and Institutions of the English from a republican point of view. All these in 1792 were published under the title, *Letters containing an Account of the late Revolution in France, and Observations on the Laws, Manners, and Institutions of the English; written during the author's residence at Paris and Versailles in the years 1789 and 1790*. His revolutionary enthusiasm was soon sobered as is shown in the quoted passages. *Dictionary of National Biography: From the Earliest Times to 1900*, edited by Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee (Oxford, 1921-22), pp.188-189.

After the September massacres, his position was completely reversed:

I observe that, in your letter, you say nothing about France, and I wish I could do so too, and forget the affairs of that wretched country altogether; but that is so impossible, that I can scarcely think of anything else. How could we ever be so deceived in the character of the French nation as to think them capable of liberty! Wretches, who, after all their professions and boasts about liberty, and patriotism, and courage, and dying, and after taking oath after oath, at the very moment when their country is invaded and the enemy is marching through it unresisted, employ whole days in murdering women, and priests, and prisoners!<sup>47</sup>

Samuel Romilly was not alone in dramatically revising his opinion on the French Revolution in the aftermath of the massacres. Although it is not likely that Wordsworth at this stage changed his opinion as forthrightly as Romilly, it is also very improbable that Wordsworth alone was free from any moral dilemma when confronted with the horrible violence committed in the name of Liberty. The subsequent narration of *The Prelude* of 1805 from l.38 to l.188, does present a Wordsworth quite different from the hardline radical whom we have been led to imagine by the previous discussion, suggesting that Wordsworth's initial endorsement of revolutionary violence was at least temporarily weakened to such an extent that he had to redefine his political belief in more detailed, politically practical terms.

When Wordsworth moved to Paris, he was eager to pay a visit to what had already become historic sites, places such as the Tuileries, the square of the Carrousel. What he obtained from this visit to Paris was not a reassuring sense of the triumph of the revolution, but a bewildering sensation which made him question all over again what had seemed self-evident justice:

I crossed (a black and empty area then)  
The square of the Carrousel, few weeks back

---

<sup>47</sup>*The Debate on the French Revolution: 1789-1800*, edited by Alfred Cobban, second edition (London, 1960), p. 354, p. 359.

Heaped up with dead and dying, upon these  
 And other sights looking, as doth a man  
 Upon a volume whose contents he knows  
 Are memorable, but from him locked up,  
 Being written in a tongue he cannot read,  
 So that he questions the mute leaves with pain,  
 And half upbraids their silence....  
 (X, ll.46-54)

Wordsworth's earlier forgiving attitude toward the massacres, which resembles that of Romilly's earlier letter, is here challenged by a vivid physical sense of bloody violence; his painful self-questioning, phrased here in an extended metaphor of the futile wish to understand an unknowable book, arises from the discrepancy between his theoretical understanding of revolutionary ideals and the physical sense of its most brutal practice. Wordsworth's unavailing effort to answer the unanswerable question, however, does not lead to any hasty withdrawal of his support for revolutionary France, but to an ever-sharpening consciousness of the contradiction within his mind which in turn generates an intense feeling of fear:

I thought of those September massacres,  
 Divided from me by a little month,  
 And felt and touched them, a substantial dread:  
 (X. ll. 64-66)

The 'substantial dread' is the result primarily of the still fresh trace of the massacres, but it also suggests his terrifying recognition of the significance of his then political creed in real terms; still more terrifying is the recognition that his political principles have made him complicit in the massacres.<sup>48</sup> The result is the intense feeling of guilt expressed in the allusion to *Macbeth*, 'Sleep no more'.<sup>49</sup> The embodiment of Liberty,

---

<sup>48</sup>For the possible involvement of Englishmen in the September massacres, see 'The English Jacobin' in Webster, pp. 342-48.

<sup>49</sup>For the implication of the allusion to *Macbeth* concerning the theme of regicide and Wordsworth's own memory of his father's death, see Roe, pp. 74-76.

has become 'a place of fear/ Unfit for the repose of night [ ]/ Defenceless as a wood where tigers roam' (X. ll.80-82).

Wordsworth's narrative strategy to deal with this experience of confusion and fear is to insist that his own sympathies were with the Girondins, 'whose aim/ Seemed best' (X. ll.113-14). But their political position was increasingly under attack by the Jacobins after the establishment of the republic, particularly on the main issue of the King's trial. Wordsworth selects a single member of the party to celebrate as a tragic hero whose courageous fight against evil was destined to be defeated despite the good and just cause he represents: Jean-Baptiste Louvet de Couvray (1760-97).

...the day  
 When Robespierre, well knowing for what mark  
 Some words of indirect reproof had been  
 Intended, rose in hardihood, and dared  
 The man who had an ill surmise of him  
 To bring his charge in openness; whereat,  
 When a dead pause ensued, and no one stirred,  
 In silence of all present, from his seat  
 Louvet walked singly through the avenue,  
 And took his station in the Tribune, saying,  
 'I, Robespierre, accuse thee!'...  
 (X. ll. 90-100)

The incident dramatised here occurred on 29 October 1792, about a month after the inauguration of the National Convention. The Gironde initiative to impeach Robespierre was vigorously pursued almost as soon as the National Convention opened. On 24 September, a couple of the Gironde members made a proposal to keep the refractory Paris Commune in control, to make a law against incitement to assassination, and to form an armed force to protect the National Convention. This proposal, though Robespierre's name was not mentioned, was in fact designed to challenge Robespierre and his Parisian supporters who were then out of the control of the Convention. On the next day, Robespierre was openly accused of complicity in an attempted political assassination by Brissot and Vergniaud. Barbaroux and Rebecquy



also denounced Robespierre for a conspiracy to establish a dictatorship. This first wave of onslaughts on Robespierre, however, fizzled out, probably because the ordinary members of the National Convention did not like the personal vindictiveness of the Gironde criticism of Robespierre.<sup>50</sup> About a month later, another wave of attacks on Robespierre began in which Louvet played a leading role. On 29 October, as soon as Roland reported that Robespierre was involved with the contemplated assassination of seven Girondins, intending still to establish a dictatorship, Rebecquy, Barbardoux and Louvet all rose to denounce him. Louvet alone obtained the permission to speak; he made a long, powerful speech impeaching Robespierre as well as Danton and Marat. Louvet's efforts, however, proved futile when Robespierre, on 5 November, replied to Louvet's accusation so successfully that the majority of the Convention, including some Gironde members, swang to the opinion that the Convention should concentrate on matters of public importance rather than personal recrimination.<sup>51</sup>

The discrepancies between Wordsworth's depiction of Louvet's heroic action and the real details of the incident are clear enough. First, Louvet's denunciation of Robespierre was neither the first nor the only attempt to impeach him. Secondly, Louvet's failure was not due to the opportunism of his fellow Girondins, but to the political ineptitude of the Girondins who failed to get even the support of their own members. Thirdly, Louvet's role was neither as consistent nor as heroic as is implied by Wordsworth's idealizing picture; although he bravely challenged Robespierre, he afterwards also voted for the trial of the King and for the execution of the prince. He did not join other Girondins like Lanjuinais, Vergniaud, Gaudet in their vigorous efforts to resist the prosecution of the Girondins within the Convention, but escaped. He survived the reign of terror to recover his seat in the Convention in 1795. Two years later, he was appointed a member of the council of Five Hundred.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup>M.J. Sydenham, *The Girondins* (London, 1961), p.127.

<sup>51</sup>Sydenham, pp.123-32.

<sup>52</sup>John Gorton, *A General Biographical Dictionary*, vol II (London, 1828), p. 373.

The idealization of Louvet as a tragic revolutionary hero serves as an occasion for projecting another kind of imagined radical self; if he saw a military hero of messianic stature in Beaupuy, Wordsworth now finds a revolutionary hero in Louvet, a politician of great oratorical power and political skill who can rival Robespierre, the very incarnation of the revolutionary terror. Louvet is celebrated as the hero that Wordsworth dreamed that he might himself have become:

Yet did I grieve, nor only grieved, but thought  
 Of opposition and of remedies:  
 An insignificant stranger and obscure,  
 Mean as I was, and little graced with power  
 Of eloquence even in my native speech,  
 And all unfit for tumult and intrigue,  
 Yet would I willingly have taken up  
 A service at this time for cause so great,  
 However dangerous. Inly I resolved  
 How much the destiny of Man had still  
 Hung upon single persons;...  
 (X. ll. 129-139)

This rather grandiose suggestion that he was ready to risk his life for the revolutionary cause at that moment does not seem to have much factual basis: for one thing, Wordsworth was unequipped with the necessary linguistic competence, that is, fluency in French (Moorman, p.205). It seems more like an attempt to acquit himself of any moral complicity in the Terror. But it is significant in that it reveals how, in the wake of the massacres, Wordsworth's democratic republicanism drifted into a longing for a hero, 'one paramount mind', with the virtue to 'have abashed those impious crests - have quelled / Outrage and bloody power' (X. ll. 181-82), a mood foreshadowing his subsequent development as a Godwinian (Roe, pp.79-80). As was observed in the previous section, Wordsworth's characterization of Beaupuy was also not immune from his wishful longing for a saviour-hero. The characterizations of both Beaupuy and Louvet emanate from the same frame of mind which chooses to see in the revolutionary activist a Christ-like hero who sacrifices himself to save the world.

Wordsworth's secular new Jerusalem was synonymous with a land of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. The ulterior motivation for this hero-worship is to reconcile the republican hero he imagines he once was and the poet of philosophical wisdom he now wishes to be by defining both in the same terms, 'the virtue of one paramount mind', for the consistency of his own self, after all, was what Wordsworth wants to establish in *The Prelude*.

Wordsworth's French days are recaptured once again in the later part of Book X, ll.658-757:

...It hath been told  
That I was led to take an eager part  
In arguments of civil polity,  
Abruptly, and indeed before my time:  
I had approached, like other youth, the shield  
Of human nature from the golden side,  
And would have fought, even to the death, to attest  
The quality of the metal which I saw.  
(X, ll.659-66)

Although this is a general review of his stay in France, his sanguine republicanism is said to have been kept intact despite the vicissitudes in the course of the revolution; he is once again described as having been willing 'to take an eager part/ In arguments of civil polity', 'even to the death'. Without gainsaying his shock at the massacres, Wordsworth now represents himself more positively. The bloody massacres seem here a stern necessity:

An active partisan, I thus *convoked*  
From every object pleasant circumstance  
*To suit my ends*; I moved among mankind  
With genial feelings *still* predominant;  
When erring, erring on the better part,  
And in the kinder spirit; placable,  
Indulgent oftimes to the worst desires  
As on one side not uninformed that men  
See as it hath been taught them, and that time

Gives *rights to error*; on the other hand  
 That *throwing off oppression must be work*  
*As well of License as of Liberty*;  
 And above all - for this was more than all -  
 Not caring if the wind did now and then  
 Blow keen upon an eminence that gave  
 Prospect so large into futurity;  
 (my italics, X, ll.737-752)

It is impossible to determine the truth of Wordsworth's claim that he was ready to take a leading role in public events, that he was 'an active partisan', or even that he eagerly took part in 'arguments of civil polity', because no other evidence supports Wordsworth's account of his own activities. There has been a suggestion that Wordsworth may have met James Watt, Jr.<sup>53</sup> or may even have lived with Brissot in the same house<sup>54</sup>, but all this remains conjectural. Nicholas Roe has re-examined the possibility of Wordsworth's attendance at the dinner of English radicals in Paris at White Hotel on 18 November 1792. The hypothesis that Wordsworth's name might be found in the list of the people who undersigned the address to the National Convention predictably turns out to be groundless, but remains tantalizing, for the signatures of his acquaintances or his friend's friends are there. Although Roe still wants to make much of a possibility that Wordsworth may have been one of those fifty people who were present, but did not sign the address, he can do nothing to substantiate it (Roe, pp.81-82).

The September massacres were beneficial to Wordsworth in at least one sense: he went back to England not just as a theoretical republican, but with some insight into the way revolutionary politics work in practical terms. This may in itself help to

---

<sup>53</sup>Moorman is quite certain that Wordsworth met Watt in Paris based on James Muirhead's conversation with Wordsworth in which he recollected that he 'found Mr Watt there before him and quite as hot in the same cause'. pp.206-7. Reed, however, does not give much credibility to Wordsworth's own recollection and doubts Wordsworth's meeting with Watt in Paris in late 1792. Reed, p.126, 15n.

<sup>54</sup>For the source of this allegation, see Reed, p.137, 12n.

explain why Wordsworth's subsequent activities in England were so cautious and discreet.

#### 4. Wordsworth, a Republican: 'A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff'

Wordsworth returned to England, according to *The Prelude*, 'reluctantly', only because of 'absolute want of funds' to support himself. Otherwise, he claims, he 'should have made a common cause/ With some who perished' (X, l.190. ll. 195-96) in France. Since we know that there was one British radical who did perish in that way,<sup>55</sup> it is not fair to brush this aside easily as a sentimental self-idealization. But it is also very difficult to accept it as a feasible option for him at that moment because there is no historical evidence with which to establish his then political attitude apart from his own words, and the idea of becoming a political martyr, after all, remains hypothetical even in his own account. The sincerity of the claim, therefore, should be measured by his political activity after his return to England. Did he do something that was as politically significant as 'perishing' with 'some' in France?

In *The Prelude* itself, Wordsworth's own answer seems to be, ironically, 'no'. Although he found his fellow countrymen also vigorously fighting for Liberty in their own way, Wordsworth could not share their enthusiasm for the British democratic movement which was more or less in unison in demanding universal male suffrage and annual parliaments as the most important political objectives.

...For me that strife had ne'er  
Fastened on my affections, nor did now  
Its unsuccessful issue much excite  
My sorrow, having laid this faith to heart,  
That, if France prospered, good men would not long  
Pay fruitless worship to humanity,  
And this most rotten branch of human shame,  
Object, as seemed, of a superfluous pains

---

<sup>55</sup>John Oswald, a poet and republican originally from Edinburgh, having once served in the American war and India, settled in Paris and joined the Jacobin Club. He was killed in 1793 in the Vendee while fighting for the revolution as a volunteer commander of the Revolutionary Army with his two sons, Goodwin, p. 242; Roe, p.64. Also see David Erdman's 'The Man who was not Napoleon', *TWC*, 12 (Winter 1981), pp.92-96. For detailed information of his career, see Stephen, *Dictionary*, p.326.

Would fall together with its parent tree.  
(X, ll. 219-227)

Unlike many British radicals of the day who were still trying to 'restore' their 'lost rights' through petition to parliament, Wordsworth thought that a more fundamental change was needed in Britain and its success depended upon the future of the Revolution which was then taking place in France. Wordsworth's judgment is historically justified to an extent because the British radicals' lingering hope for parliamentary reform through legal means was finally shattered when Lord Grey's reform bill, even after substantial modification,<sup>56</sup> was defeated by an absolute majority in May 1793. There was good reason for Wordsworth's eyes to be fastened on the events in France rather than on the British political scene. But whatever the reason Wordsworth's life in Britain between 1793-1798 is scarcely referred to in *The Prelude* except in a couple of brief summaries scattered within the 'French' books. He seems less interested in what he was doing in Britain than in what he felt about affairs in France. Events in France drove him to confusion and frustration, but such emotions are represented as a necessary stage in his slow progress towards the discovery of his true vocation.

We now know that Wordsworth did write a political pamphlet, 'A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff', shortly after his return to England, which shows that Wordsworth did not think of himself in Britain simply as 'an uninvited guest'. *A Letter* remains the only solid evidence for his alleged radical career and the ultimate reference for his radical ideas.

When Edmund Burke published *Reflections on the Revolution in France* on 1 November 1790, as Sir Philip Francis accurately predicted, a 'war of pamphlets' was immediately started. Within two weeks, the first response to *Reflections*, *A Letter to the Right Hon. Edmund Burke, in Reply to his 'Reflections on the revolution in*

---

<sup>56</sup>Universal suffrage, the single most important demand, was dropped at the final stage by Lord Grey. Goodwin, pp. 280-81.

*France'*, & c. By a Member of the Revolution Society was already on sale. By the end of the year about ten more replies were published including Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Men*.<sup>57</sup> But the most prominent was undoubtedly Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* published on 16 March 1791. In the next three years, some seventy pamphlets emulating the debate between Burke and Paine emerged, representing the British radical movement at every level.<sup>58</sup>

What is most remarkable in this political debate over revolutionary issues in the early 1790s is that it was these ideological confrontations, appropriately termed 'pamphlet wars', that prompted and directed the revolutionary reform movement.<sup>59</sup> The British reformers had every reason to thank Burke for what he had done for them, because it was his *Reflections* which provoked them to define and clarify their radical ideas.<sup>60</sup> The radical societies did not hesitate to take Paine's *The Rights of Man* as their 'new political gospel' though they did not endorse everything set forth there (Goodwin, p.175) It was also Paine's book that provided the occasion for resuscitating the 'Society for Constitutional Information' which had been in decline since 1790. Horne Tooke, the leader of SCI, made strenuous efforts to distribute *The Rights of Man*, and this resulted not only in the revival of SCI, but also of many local radical societies in Sheffield, Manchester, Norwich etc. The distribution of cheap editions, its easy and its 'vulgar' style, and a comprehensive reform program made it an efficient

---

<sup>57</sup>James T. Boulton, *The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke* (London, 1963), Chapter VI, 'The Publication of Burke's *Reflections* and the subsequent controversy: a survey', pp.75-96.

<sup>58</sup>For the titles and the details of publication of these pamphlets, see the appendix in Boulton's book, pp.265-271.

<sup>59</sup>For a short description of the 'pamphlet war', see Carl B. Cone's *The English Jacobins: Reformers in the late 18th century England* (New York, 1968), Chapter V 'The Pamphlet War', pp. 96-113. Marilyn Butler's 'Introductory essay' in her *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy* (Cambridge, 1984), is a concise and useful introduction. But Boulton's *The Language of Politics* still remains the most detailed and reliable account of the revolutionary controversy. Olivia Smith's *The Politics of Language, 1791-1819* (Oxford, 1984) is the most valuable recent addition to Boulton's work with its thorough stylistic analysis of the rhetoric of radicalism.

<sup>60</sup>John Thelwall recognized Burke's unintentional service to the British reform movement by saying 'A book(*A Reflection*), I will venture to say, which has made more democrats, among the thinking part of mankind, than all the works ever written in answer to it'. Quoted in Smith's *The Politics of Language*, p.36.



tool in the hands of the common working people, becoming the chief inspiration behind the renaissance of the radical movement between 1791-93. In 1792, the reform movement orchestrated by a series of radical societies--the existing London Revolution Society an address to which provoked Burke to write *Reflections* in the first place, Horne Tooke's resuscitated SCI which occupied the central place in the reform movement between 1791-92, the London Corresponding Society founded by a shoemaker Thomas Hardy in January 1792 which, as the first and the most significant working-class organization, was to take over from SCI the initiative of the reform movement from the autumn of 1792, and the Friends of the People which was organized by the radical whigs in May 1792-- was in full swing.<sup>61</sup>

Pitt's government was alarmed by this sudden upsurge of radical societies which were marked, despite their denial, by Painite republicanism. Government intervention started with a 'Royal Proclamation against Seditious Writings and Publications' on 21 May 1792 which in itself was ineffectual in stopping the spread of Painite ideas among the common working people. But from then on, the so-called 'Church and King' activity, the notoriety of which was already well known through the mob attack on Priestley's house and laboratory in Birmingham on the Bastille day of 1791, was greatly encouraged and reached its climax with the foundation by John Reeves of the 'Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers' on 20 November 1792.<sup>62</sup> One of the most characteristic activities of this pro-government association was their promotion of short popular pamphlets written in familiar language, a typical and successful example of which was

---

<sup>61</sup>There are many historical accounts of the activities of the British radical societies in the early 1790s: S. Maccoby, *English Radicalism 1786-1832: from Paine to Cobbett* (London, 1955), particularly Chapter III 'The "Republican" Societies'; E.C. Black, *The Association: British Extraparliamentary Political Organization, 1769-1793* (Cambridge, MA, 1963), Chapter VI 'Reformers and Revolutionaries'; Edward Royle and James Walvin, *English Radicals and Reformers 1760-1848* (Brighton, 1982), Chapter 3 & 4 'The Rise of Popular Radicalism, 1791-3' and 'English Jacobin'. But two of the most use are Goodwin's book and E.P. Thompson's *The Making of The English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1968), pp. 19-203.

<sup>62</sup>Goodwin, pp.263-67. For a detailed account of the royalist reaction, see David Eastwood, 'Patriotism and the English state in the 1790s', in *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics*, edited by Mark Philp (Cambridge, 1991), pp.146-168.

Hannah More's *Village Politics; A Dialogue between Jack Anvil the Blacksmith and Tom Hod the Mason*, in order to challenge the popular appeal of *The Rights of Man* in its own terms, just as James Mackintosh, with his *Vindiciae Gallicae*, challenged the *Reflections* in Burke's own dignified and sophisticated language. Extra-parliamentary political activities, at this stage, were mainly ideological conflicts, that is, a propaganda war in which to write and distribute a political pamphlet itself constituted the most important part of political commitment.

In this sense, Wordsworth's *A Letter* might be accepted as a trace of a political action which was in fact much more serious and risky than it seemed. Since the aggressive 'Brunswick Manifesto' was issued, the radical societies' sympathy with the French revolutionary government began to be competitively declared in the form of congratulatory addresses communicated directly to the National Convention. As the French situation became more and more critical, the rhetoric of the British radicals became more extreme (Goodwin, pp.239-67). On the other hand, the British radicals in the domestic political arena came more under more pressure from 'Church and King' activities and governmental repression. The trial of Thomas Paine on 18 December in which he was found guilty of seditious libel was one of the clear signs that the radicals were increasingly on the defence. Furthermore, the outbreak of war on 1 February was a decisive blow to the radical movement as a whole. In particular, the publishers and booksellers who published, sold, or distributed Paineite literature were the first target of the government's intimidation and persecution (Goodwin, pp.268-73). Many reformers took the occasion for deserting the reform movement while some radical societies were taking great care to keep a safe distance from Paineite principles.<sup>63</sup> In this circumstance, writing a pamphlet with an obvious Paineite argument suggests quite

---

<sup>63</sup>For example, Horne Tooke who was not only responsible for the reactivation of SCI, but also instrumental in founding LCS, claimed that he was willing to accompany Thomas Paine some distance in an imaginary stage coach going to reform, but 'When I find myself at Hounslow I get out, others may go further'. Quoted in Gregory Claeys, *Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought* (Boston, 1989), p. 128. For more information about how Paine was received by each faction of reformers, see 'How Paine was read', pp.120-132.

strong political allegiance, and could have been fairly dangerous if it had been made public.

Due to its unique value as the only non-poetic statement of Wordsworth's radical ideas, it has always been an object of special interest, particularly to the students of Wordsworth's politics. The main trend of research on *A Letter* has been to identify the source of its ideas, in an attempt to present a pedigree for Wordsworth's political thought. Emile Legouis, Crane Brinton, and A.V. Dicey have emphasized the influence of French writers, mainly Rousseau, while Arthur Beatty saw Godwin as the main influence.<sup>64</sup> Z.S. Fink's meticulous study of *A Letter* has established seventeenth century English republicanism, particularly Harrington and Milton, as an alternative major source of Wordsworth's radical ideas,<sup>65</sup> and he has been followed by Leslie F. Chard, II.<sup>66</sup> Thomas Paine, of course, has been rightly pointed out as the chief source of the argument of *A Letter* by many people including E.N. Hooker,<sup>67</sup> and W.J.B. Owen and J.W. Smyser, the editors of *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*.<sup>68</sup> James K. Chandler finds in *A Letter* the formidable presence of Edmund Burke, arguing that Wordsworth and Burke shared the 'curious combination of rationalist posture and personal tone' though the latter was the real target of criticism of the former.<sup>69</sup> The wide range of sources of *A Letter* has always been puzzling to the student of Wordsworth's radicalism, leading us to agree with John Williams in his claim that the eclectic nature of *A Letter* indicates 'a continuing ideological confusion' rather

---

<sup>64</sup>Emile Legouis, *The Early Life*, p.227; Crane Brinton, *The Political Ideas of the English Romanticists* (Oxford, 1926), p.52; A.V.Dicey, *The Statesmanship of Wordsworth* (Oxford, 1917), pp.52-53; Beatty, pp.22-32.

<sup>65</sup>Z.S. Fink, 'Wordsworth and the English Republican Tradition', *JEGP*, 47 (1948), pp.107-126.

<sup>66</sup>Leslie F. Chard, *Dissenting Republican: Wordsworth's Early Life and Thought in their Political Context* (The Hague, 1972), pp.65-109.

<sup>67</sup>E.N.Hooker, 'Wordsworth's *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*', *Studies in Philology*, 28 (1931), pp.522-31.

<sup>68</sup>W.J.B. Owen and J.W.Smyser, 'Introduction: General' in *Prose I*, pp.19-25.

<sup>69</sup>Chandler, p.23.

than the expression of a set of coherent ideas from a single philosophical tradition.<sup>70</sup> And that is why the critics' anxious attempts to establish Wordsworth's 'real' political view, the view which had been allegedly distorted or displaced in *The Prelude* has always failed.

*A Letter* is not only ideologically incoherent, but was, after all, also unpublished, and so it could not have had any practical value or political influence, and in this it differs from the other published pamphlets, however trivial they may have been. As a result, Wordsworth's participation in the British democratic movement as an active pamphleteer cannot but be illusory. Also its date of composition cannot exactly be fixed.<sup>71</sup> The uncertain status of *A Letter* encourages researchers to disregard its contemporary political significance in the context of the radical societies' reform movement, preferring an ideological analysis.

But even if the defects of *A Letter* as a political document preclude a proper contextual study, we need to imagine its possible topical significance in early 1793 in order to figure out Wordsworth's place as *potentially* a radical activist whether he was actually one or not.

The questions raised when we begin to see *A Letter* as a public political document are numerous; given that each contribution to the pamphlet war was affiliated with the activity of a particular radical group: Richard Price's *A Discourse on the Love of our Country* - Revolution Society, James Mackintosh's *Vindiciae Gallicae* - the Friends of the People, Paine's *The Rights of Man* - SCI or LCS -- which society could *A Letter* have been associated with? How much does Wordsworth's radical vision have in common with those of other British radicals and in what aspects? How practicable was Wordsworth's political program in the political context of Britain

---

<sup>70</sup>John Williams, *revolution politics*, p.58.

<sup>71</sup>For the split opinions of the critics' on the date of composition of *A Letter*, see *Prose I*, pp. 20-21, n.5. They present some evidence to lead us to believe that it was written in February 1793. Moorman agrees with them(p.255), but Reed(p.142) agrees with C.W.Roberts who dated it as sometime after June.('Influence of Godwin on Wordsworth's *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*', *Studies in Philology*, 29 (1932), pp.588-606[p. 591]).

at that time? All these questions are only various ways of examining the relevance of Wordsworth's political position to the British reform movement of 1792-93. It is a question that can be pursued by an analysis of the pamphlet's handling of three key ideas.

### Defending France

Bishop Watson's panic at the execution of Louis XVI was a common response among many British people. Again after the September massacres, the ruthlessness of the French revolutionary leaders encouraged the traditional anti-Gallican sentiments of the English.<sup>72</sup> On 29 January 1793, William Cowper who had been a supporter of the revolution in its early days said, 'I will tell you what the French have done. They have made me weep for a king of France, which I never thought to do, and they have made me sick of the very name of liberty, which I never thought to be.'<sup>73</sup> Major Cartwright also lamented the execution in a letter written in January of 1793:

I am amongst those who entertained doubts as to the competency of human authority, in any case whatever, deliberately to punish with death. In this particular case(The execution of Louis XVI), I can the less excuse it, as, so far from having been necessary or prudent, it seems to have been in the highest degree impolitic. And when I reflect on the disservice it is likely to do to the cause of freedom, which I must ever hold to be the cause of virtue and of man, most sincerely do I lament it. The true cause of this event I can no where discover, but in the mean, revengeful, murderous spirit of a small faction, the demagogues of an ignorant rabble, contaminated by all the vices which, in a succession of ages, grow out of DESPOTISM, in a vicious and overgrown capital; a

---

<sup>72</sup>P.A Brown, *The French Revolution in English History* (London, 1918), p.90; E.P.Thompson, *English Working Class*, p.125.

<sup>73</sup>Brown, p.89.

faction who are a disgrace to humankind, and the enemies to justice, to humanity and virtue.<sup>74</sup>

As was observed in the previous section, Wordsworth himself, after 13 years, expressed his own feeling of penitence proleptically in the description of the September massacres (X, ll.38-82). A few months later, his position turned out to be as adamant as any revolutionary leader's in France. To Wordsworth, all the fuss is only 'the idle cry of modish lamentation'. The passion of pity, even if it were well meant, should be controlled by 'reason' which makes us recognise 'the disproportion of the pain suffered to the guilt incurred'. The passion of pity is justified only when it is aroused by the monarchical system itself which put a person into such an 'unnatural situation', and by the severe necessity to ignore legality in executing the King: 'any other sorrow for the death of Louis' is, Wordsworth declares, 'irrational and weak.' This rational argument, foreshadowing Godwin's famous example of the rational decision about the priority of rescuing a housemaid and a philosopher in a house on fire, must have sounded extremely cold-blooded in the political atmosphere of 1793 Britain. The closest parallel is perhaps found in Paine when he earlier criticized Burke's misguided sympathy towards the French Royal family by saying, 'Not one glance of compassion, not one commiserating reflection, that I can find throughout his book, has he bestowed on those who lingered out the most wretched of lives, a life without hope, in the most miserable of prisons. ... He pities the plumage, but forgets the dying bird.' (*Reader*, p.213) Nevertheless, even Thomas Paine who was so critical of misguided sympathy, argued, during the King's trial, for the preservation of the King's life in consideration of what he had done for the American people.<sup>75</sup> But within the atmosphere of increasing hostility towards reformers which is symbolized by the burning of the effigy of Paine,<sup>76</sup> Wordsworth's exculpation of the execution of Louis XVI, as he himself admitted in the

---

<sup>74</sup>Cobban, p.360.

<sup>75</sup>Thomas Paine, 'Reasons for Preserving the Life of Louis Capet' in *Reader*, pp.394-98.

<sup>76</sup>E.P.Thompson, *English Working Class*, p.122.

expression '*modish* lamentation', must have aligned him with a small minority in the overall spectrum of public opinion in the first few months of 1793.

This is also true of Wordsworth's view on violence in general as a political means to achieve the revolution. Wordsworth is particularly indignant at the Bishop's hysterical reaction to the violence recently committed in France:

What! have you so little knowledge of the nature of man as to be ignorant, that a time of revolution is not the season of true Liberty. Alas! the obstinacy & perversion of men is such that she is too often obliged to borrow the very arms of despotism to overthrow him, and in order to reign in peace must establish herself by violence. She deploras such stern necessity, but the safety of the people, her supreme law, is her consolation. ... Political virtues are developed at the expence of moral ones (*Prose I*, p.34)

This strong vindication of revolutionary violence is another instance of Wordsworth's unique position in the context of British politics of 1793. The British reform societies started to declare their enthusiastic support for the revolutionary government when it was under the threat of invasion under the terms of the 'Brunswick Manifesto', and the fervour of support was not substantially diminished by the subsequent violent events though the strategy of fraternization was changed after the September massacres from the direct supply of arms or money to the demonstration of sympathy through a series of congratulatory addresses presented to the National Convention (Goodwin, p.244). But there was an exaggeration of the British revolutionary enthusiasm on the part of the British delegates to the National Convention as well as a strategic misinterpretation of the intention of the British radicals on the part of the British Government to prove the 'Jacobin conspiracy' (Goodwin, p.259). This French dimension of the British radical movement does not necessarily mean that the British reformers completely endorsed the violent measures in the course of revolution, and were willing to adopt the same policy in the domestic reform movement. For example, LCS, which occupied the central place in the reform movement from the latter half of 1792, announced in its first address issued on 2 April, 1792:

Resolved,-That this Society do express their Abhorrence of Tumult and violence, and that, as they aim at Reform, not Anarchy, Reason, Firmness, and Unanimity are the only Arms they themselves will employ, or persuade their Fellow-Citizens to exert, against Abuse of Power.<sup>77</sup>

A printed handbill, *Address of the London Corresponding Society, to the other Societies of Great-Britain, united for the obtaining a REFORM IN PARLIAMENT*, issued on 29 November 1792, does not defend the recent violence in France, but argues that the violent faction does not represent the whole revolution, saying that, 'If during this Conflict with military Assassins and domestic Traitors, Cruelty and Revenge have arisen among a few in Paris, let us not attribute their acts to a whole nation.'<sup>78</sup> After the execution of Louis XVI, their policy of non-violent parliamentary petition as the method of the reform movement was consolidated. According to H.T.Dickinson, there were few of the radical societies which were prepared to contemplate a revolution on the French model and even if there were, they did not get much popular support. Almost all reformers rejected violence as a means of reform, including Thelwall and Godwin, even Paine himself.<sup>79</sup> There was one extremist, John Oswald who openly argued for revolution by force:

Let us not be deceived, for it is force alone that can vindicate the rights of the people. Force is the basis of right, or rather right and force are one... whoever shall dare to oppose the reformation of abuse, let him the besom of destruction sweep from the face of the earth; cursed be the eye that taketh pity on the enemy of the people; and may the tongue wither that shall plead in his behalf.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>77</sup>'First Address of the LCS, 2 April 1792' in *Selections from the Papers of the London Corresponding Society 1792-1799*, edited by Mary Thale (Cambridge, 1983), p.10.

<sup>78</sup>Thale, p.33.

<sup>79</sup>H.T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth Century Britain* (New York, 1977), pp. 259-269.

<sup>80</sup>Quoted in Dickinson, p.264. Dickinson, however, confuses James Oswald(1715-1769) a politician and the eldest son of James Oswald, M.P. with John Oswald, a poet and republican mentioned above. For James Oswald, see Stephen, *Dictionary*, p.326.



However sanguinary it may sound, there is no positive evidence of any attempt to put this view into practice in Britain either before or after 1793. Wordsworth's view is much less violent than this. Although he agrees with Oswald in regarding force as an absolute necessity in achieving the revolution, Wordsworth does not think of force as the basis of right, but as a deplorable borrowing of 'the very arms of despotism' which should be eventually rectified by education. And what Wordsworth intended in *A Letter* is not exactly a proposal for the British reform movement, but a defensive commentary on the recent affairs of France.

Nevertheless, his unreserved vindication of the recent violent events, including regicide, must have been understood as treasonable in the context of the Anglo-French war, and might have been much more alarming to the authorities (and much more credible to the British people) than the fraternizing addresses of radical societies sent before the outbreak of war, because he was just returned from France with the fresh first-hand experience that most British reformers lacked. And that could have been the reason why it remained unpublished.<sup>81</sup> What Wordsworth's comparatively radical position in the British contemporary democratic movement tells us, however, is not the possibility of his 'make(ing) a common cause' in a real political movement, but his ignorance of the British political realities of early 1793.

### Defending Equality

The nature of Wordsworth's radicalism could also be measured by its egalitarian claims. Interpretations of equality were as diverse as the interpreters' political objectives. The dissenting radicals, for example, emphasized the equality of man in God's eyes not because they were particularly sympathetic to the lower orders, but because they aimed at the repeal of the 'Test and Corporation Acts' which

---

<sup>81</sup> For the possible reasons why it was not published, see Owen & Smyser's 'Introduction' in *Prose* I, pp. 24-25.

prevented the dissenters from obtaining public offices.<sup>82</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft also argued for the inherent equality of human beings in order to make the case for the equality of women, if not female suffrage. A more politically significant issue of egalitarianism, of course, concerns the traditional social hierarchy which had perpetuated the political and economical oppression of the common people. The nature of the equality secured at each phase of the revolution was the very barometer of the progress of the revolution.

Wordsworth's claim for equality in *A Letter* is clear. Against the Bishop's concept of equality as 'being equally free from the dominion of each other' and as 'being equally subject to, equally protected by the same laws,' Wordsworth argues:

Equality, without which liberty cannot exist, is to be met with in perfection in that state in which no distinctions are admitted but such as have evidently for their object the general good (*Prose* I, p.42).

This is a recapitulation of the first article of 'Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens, 1789': 'Men are born, and always continue, free and equal in respect of their rights. Civil distinctions, therefore, can be founded only on public utility.'<sup>83</sup> With this principle Wordsworth rejected nobility as an encouragement of idleness and hypocrisy, and the other honorary titles as 'absurd, impolitic, and immoral'. Wordsworth's denunciation of hereditary monarchy is based on the same logic. But more controversial was the question of how much equality should be allowed to the common people, and in what way. In terms of political equality, Wordsworth is unequivocal. He not only supports 'universal representation', that is, universal male suffrage, but also believes that:

in the choice of its representatives a people will not immorally hold out wealth as a criterion of integrity, nor lay down as a fundamental rule that to be qualified for the trying duties of legislation a citizen should be

---

<sup>82</sup>Boulton, pp.90-91.

<sup>83</sup>John Hardman, ed. *The French Revolution: The Fall of the Ancien Regime to the Thermidorian Reaction, 1785-1795* (London, 1981), p.114.

possessed of a certain fixed property. Virtues, talents, and acquirements are all that it will look for. (*Prose I*, p. 38)

Wordsworth's rejection of a property-based qualification for the office of legislator was an egalitarian claim which went a step further than the universal male suffrage commonly upheld by most, if not all, radical societies. It met with opposition not only from the conservatives like Burke and Watson but also from many radical Whigs of the 'Friends of People', typically represented by Arthur Young in 1793:

In any representative government, if persons only are represented, -- that is to say, if a man without a shilling deposes equally with another, who has property, and if men in the former situation are ten times more numerous than those in the latter; and if the representatives, so chosen, sit for so short a time as to vote truly the wills of their constituents, it follows, by direct consequence, that all the property of the society is at the mercy of those who possess nothing; and could theory have blundered so stupidly, as to suppose for a moment, that attack and plunder would not follow power in such hands; let it recur to France for *fact*, to prove what reason ought to have foreseen.<sup>84</sup> (the author's own italics)

James Mackintosh did not conceal his opposition to government by the mob or vulgar multitude, and John Thelwall also had some reservations about genuinely democratic government, never expecting the poor to have any important political office. Thomas Paine was of course absolutely opposed to a restriction of political rights based on property, but he also was not completely without concern about the political independence of servants.<sup>85</sup> In short, the radicals' arguments for equal political rights for all men often stopped short of the possibility of empowering those without property. In this context, Wordsworth's clear support of the people's complete political rights, the right to be elected as well as to elect regardless of their property, was the hallmark of the truly democratic character of his radicalism.

---

<sup>84</sup>Cobban, p.404.

<sup>85</sup>Dickinson, p.251.

The radicals' reservation about the equal political rights of poor people is not only the expression of their suspicion of the intellectual quality of the poor, but, more significantly, the reflex of their deep anxiety about the economic equality the poor people might claim, that is, their concern about the security of private property. This issue was a kind of taboo, not to be discussed. Except for one or two extremists such as John Oswald and Thomas Spence, there were no radicals who formally challenged the security of private property.<sup>86</sup> LCS protested in 1795 that 'In our ideas of equality, we have never included...the equalization of property, or the invasion of personal rights of possession'.<sup>87</sup> Most radicals were busy defending themselves from the charge of being a leveller. Joseph Towers dramatises the predicament of the radicals in his *A Dialogue between an Associator and a well-informed Englishman*:

Mr. Grantley: One idea which has prevailed, and which has contributed to enflame the minds of some persons, is, that pains had been taken to propagate among the common people the doctrine of equality: or, that all persons should be rendered equal in point of fortune, or property; a doctrine which would certainly lead to great confusion, and to very serious evils.

Mr. Mordaunt: The doctrine of an equality of property had not been propagated by any of the societies of the friends of liberty in Great Britain....If the doctrine has been by those truly libellous publications, which have been issued by the pretended associators against republicans

---

<sup>86</sup>John Oswald, in his *Review of the Constitution of Great Britain* (Paris, 1792) argued that waste and common land should be divided among the poor. p.59. Thomas Spence was 'the only radical whose concept of natural rights led him to advocate a return to the state of nature when all men had enjoyed an equal claim to the fruits of the earth.' Dickinson, p.267. His position is well displayed in the Preface added in 1796 to *The Meridian Sun of Liberty; or the Whole Rights of Man Displayed and most Accurately Defined*. In the dialogue between 'Author' and 'Reader', 'Author' argues that 'Nobody ought to have right of suffrage or representation in a society wherein they have no property. As none are suffered to meddle in the affairs of a benefit society or corporation, but those who are members, by having a property therein, so none have a right to vote or interfere in the affairs of the government of a country who have no right to the soil; because such are and ought to be accounted strangers.' in Marilyn Butler, *Rebels*, p.191.

<sup>87</sup>Dickinson, p.255.

and levellers. In order to calumniate the real friends of freedom, they have undertaken to refute a doctrine which no man advanced.<sup>88</sup>

Thomas Paine himself was no exception, making it clear that he was not a leveller in an economic sense. But he vehemently criticizes primogeniture(*Reader*, pp.228-29), and argues for a mild form of social redistribution of wealth through his extensive social welfare plan(*Reader*, pp. 307-64). Wordsworth also concedes the importance of the security of private property('It cannot be denied that the security of individual property is one of the strongest and most natural motives to induce men to bow their necks to the yoke of civil government,' *Prose* I, p.42). Wordsworth, however, tries very hard to counterbalance this concession. He justified the confiscation of church property in France claiming that an urgent national interest should have priority over the security of private property. While still evading the charge of being a leveller, Wordsworth emphasized that something should be done for fairer distribution of wealth. On the one hand, he criticizes 'the unnatural monster of primogeniture,' on the other he reminds us of the duty of government to take care of the poor, saying that 'we should be just before we are generous'. Wordsworth's humanitarian concern for the poor is so profound that it is on the verge of contradicting the principle of the security of property when he underlines the need for 'some wise and salutary regulations counteracting that inequality among mankind which proceeds from the present *forced* disproportion of their possessions' (Wordsworth's own italics). Wordsworth was one of the few British radicals who could justifiably be taunted as a leveller.

---

<sup>88</sup>Cobban, p.405.

## Defending Republicanism

What is remarkable about *A Letter* is the explicitness with which Wordsworth vindicates republicanism. Both in its title and in its content, *A Letter* insists on his republicanism. As is suggested by the very name of the Reevite loyalist association, 'Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property against *Republicans and Levellers*' (my italics), the political implications of 'republicanism' became increasingly pejorative after the September massacres and the execution of Louis XVI. Wordsworth seems to be fully aware of his minority position and the risk he is taking in his open support of republicanism when he notes that, 'relying upon the temper of the times, you have surely thought little argument necessary to combat what few will be hardy enough to support: the strongest of auxiliaries, imprisonment and the pillory, have left your arm little to perform'.

Bishop Watson's criticism of republicanism, as Wordsworth recognizes, did not need any theoretical support because it was already taken for granted by pro-government propaganda as well as substantiated by the recent execution of Louis XVI. Instead of making a rational objection to republicanism, Bishop Watson makes much of the emotional reaction to revolutionary violence, criticizing the means for the establishment of a republic rather than the principle of republicanism itself. Wordsworth, however, needed to support his belief in republicanism with a more solid theoretical argument.

Bishop Watson refutes republicanism simply by describing it as 'the tyranny of their equals'. His denunciation of republicanism is based on the classical model of the 'Great Chain of Being' which sees the political participation of 'peasants and merchants' as a disruption of natural order. In his refutation, Wordsworth is flexible and realistic enough to concede the possibility of 'the tyranny of equals' in real politics, but makes it clear that the people's depravity is not the expression of their natural state, but the result of the political oppression under which they have long suffered. The predictable abuse of liberty on the part of the people is no more than transitory, 'the stream will go

on gradually refining itself, just as revolutionary violence, in his view, will eventually bring about 'a fairer order of things'. As to the idea that common people are not intellectually qualified to be a part of government, Wordsworth retorts by asking sarcastically, 'what vast education is requisite to enable him to judge amongst his neighbours which is most qualified by his industry and integrity to be intrusted with the care of the interests of himself and of his fellow citizens?' Participation in government, according to Wordsworth requires only 'a moderate portion of useful knowledge', which is within the capacity of everyone. Wordsworth also scrutinizes Watson's contemptuous definition of a republic, 'the tyranny of their equals' to show that such a tyranny would be self-destructive because a republic by definition is made up of citizens who reserve the power to overthrow any tyranny. Up to this point, Wordsworth has been defending republicanism from the calumny currently prevalent among the general public. But Wordsworth goes on to advocate republicanism more positively.

Wordsworth vindicates the principle of republicanism in two ways; on the one hand he tries to show the advantages of a republic over a monarchy. In his description of an ideal republican government, Wordsworth accommodates a variety of political traditions, including Social Contract theory, Popular Sovereignty, Rights of Resistance, in particular he draws many ideas from the seventeenth century English republicans.<sup>89</sup> On the other, he tries to show the absurdity of monarchy; the inherent instability of monarchical government, the incompatibility of human nature with the office of king, the absurdity of primogeniture, and the evil of titles of nobility. Wordsworth's elaborate exposition of republicanism is notable for the comprehensiveness of its sources, from Rousseau to Paine, implying that it was more a result of academic research into various philosophical traditions than a presentation of a political view formed through his first-hand experience of revolutionary France. It is

---

<sup>89</sup>For the influence of the seventeenth-century Republicans on Wordsworth, see Fink, Chard, and John Williams. A brief, but helpful introduction to the ideology of the seventeenth-century republicans is F.D.Dow, *Radicalism in the English Revolution 1640-1660* (Oxford, 1985).

no coincidence then that *A Letter* does not contain any practical programme to create a republican government in Britain, or a clear stance on the current political issues, even though he reproached the bishop for his silence on the issue of parliamentary reform.

As far as radical ideology is concerned, British radicals in 1792-93 had two clearly distinctive points of references; one is the English republican tradition of the seventeenth-century; the other is of course Thomas Paine's republicanism which inspired the American Revolution as well as the renaissance of the British radical movement in the early 1790s. The two traditions are distinguished by their attitudes towards the tradition of the British Constitution (*Readers*, pp.285-307). While Paine gives an absolute priority to the constitutional decisions of the present generation based on reason over any kind of historical precedence, the seventeenth-century English republicans were not free from the British constitutional tradition whether it takes the form of the myth of the 'Norman Yoke' or the ideal of limited monarchy representing a perfect balance between the King, the House of Lords, and the House of Commons.<sup>90</sup> The natural corollary of this fundamental difference is a difference in the nature of the reform to be pursued. Paine recommends the summoning of a French-style convention to formulate a republican constitution which would replace the existing political institutions once and for all,<sup>91</sup> whereas the political objective of the traditionalist republicans was the introduction of republican elements into the existing system to materialize the traditional British Liberty which the ancient British

---

<sup>90</sup>According to Dow, Sir Edward Coke, who represented 'the standard parliamentary position on the origins and nature of the constitution,' claimed that 'the origins of the law lay in Anglo-Saxon times and that its principles had been maintained against the encroachments of Norman kingship by the vigilance of the English People and their representatives in parliament'(p.13). Even the Levellers, who were the most radical section of the seventeenth century republicans, 'relied on a historical myth to defend their claim to be restoring chosen liberties, but in their case it was the rights of the people, not the privileges of parliament, which principally concerned them. Their attitudes here were in some ways highly ambivalent. On the one hand they appealed to Magna Carta, statute law and the principles of the common law to defend their claims about the legal rights of the individual, yet at the same time they subscribed to the historical myth of the 'Norman Yoke'. ...The Levellers certainly did combine an appeal to history with an appeal to reason, but the emphasis lay most heavily on the latter'(pp.37-38).

<sup>91</sup>A good summary of Paine's ideology is found in Chapter 4 'Paine's achievement' in Claeys, pp.85-106. For Paine's popularity among the radicals and influence in each radical societies, see Chapter 5, 'A Great awakening: the birth of the revolutionary party', pp.110-34.



constitution is supposed to have secured. Despite the immense popularity and influence of Paine's *Rights of Man* among the radical societies of 1792-93, the official policies of the radical societies including LCS and SCI were more traditionalist than Painite. Alfred Goodwin describes the radical societies' reservation about Painism as follows:

Several items of this all-embracing 'revolutionary' programme were cautiously, or even indignantly, repudiated by the radical societies which, in other respects, accepted *The Rights of Man* as their new political gospel. They rejected as absurd Paine's contention that, because it was unwritten and had not been drafted by a national convention, the British constitution did not exist. They did not agree that 'root and branch' reform was indispensable and they did not approve Paine's direct assault on the monarchy and the House of Lords. They saw no reason to abandon the radical myth of Saxon constitutionalism or the Commonwealth ideals of the seventeenth century. They also refused to follow Paine in belittling the contemporary relevance of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, which their French correspondents still venerated. Most of them preferred to seek redress of their grievances by the legal and constitutional method of petitioning Parliament rather than resort to the summons of a National Convention. Few were prepared to advance beyond the traditional radical plea for annual parliaments and universal male suffrage. Little interest was, therefore, displayed in the details of French constitutional reform as models for imitation, though every sympathy was expressed for the revolutionary ideals of fraternity and international concord. (Goodwin, pp.175-76)

Wordsworth's republicanism also belongs somewhere in between. Wordsworth is closer to Paine than to radical societies like LCS in his open declaration that 'a republic legitimately constructed contains less of an oppressive principle than any other form of government', because, particularly after Paine was outlawed in December 1792, radicals became much more cautious in revealing their Painite sentiments. The republicanism, along with his tendency towards 'levelling', were the least popular of

Painite tenets among the radical societies anyway.<sup>92</sup> Another Painite element in Wordsworth's *A Letter* is its extremely rationalistic argument which refuses to invoke the historical precedence of the myth of Norman Yoke or the revolution of 1688. Whereas most radical societies were hoping to 'restore' their supposedly lost ancient rights, Wordsworth resorts not to history, but to nature:

As, from the nature of monarchy, particularly of hereditary monarchy, there must always be a vast disproportion, between the duties to be performed, and the powers that are to perform them, ...And this brings me to my grand objection to monarchy, which is drawn from the eternal nature of man. The office of king is a trial to which human virtue is not equal. Pure and universal representation, by which alone liberty can be secured, cannot, I think, exist together with monarchy. ...They must war with each other, till one of them is extinguished. (*Prose I*, p.41)

Wordsworth's appeal to nature rather than to history enables him to conduct an unreserved opposition to the monarchical institution. The implication is that Wordsworth must have found it difficult to compromise himself to the reality of the British reform movement which did not question the existence of the British monarchy itself. Wordsworth could be said to be in agreement with, for example, LCS, when he claims that 'If there is a single man in Great Britain, who has no suffrage in the election of a representative, the will of the society of which he is a member is not generally expressed; he is a helot in that society'. But the emphasis falls on the principle of universal representation of the general will than on the question of suffrage itself, which remains one of the principles in his republicanism rather than a self-sufficient political objective as it was to most reformers of LCS. Wordsworth, in fact, does not use the word 'reform' at all in the greater part of *A Letter*, perhaps because it implies an improvement of the constitution rather than its replacement. Contrastingly, LCS, the most radical of all radical societies, sets forth their stance as follows:

---

<sup>92</sup>Claeys, p.121.

And whereas, upon inquiry into the Cause of this Grievance, ...we find that the Constitution of our country ( which was purchased for us at the expence of the lives of our Ancestors) has, by the Violence and Intrigue of Criminal and Designing Men, been injured and undermined in its most essential and important parts. (*Address of the LCS to the Nation at Large*, 24 May 1792)<sup>93</sup>

Reform one abuse, and the others will all disappear - if we once regain an Annually elected Parliament, and that Parliament to be fairly chosen by all, the people will again share in the Government of their Country and their then unbought unbiassed suffrages must undoubtedly select a majority of Honest Members....(*Address from LCS to the Inhabitants of Great Britain on the Subject of a Parliamentary Reform*, 16 August 1792)<sup>94</sup>

Although Wordsworth's republicanism is obviously leaning toward Painism in its basic assumptions and orientation, he is not a Painite to the end. Strangely lacking in his republicanism is any practicable programme to materialize his political objectives. In Paine's case, the English constitutional vacuum could be filled only by a general convention in the American or French style(*Reader*, pp.285-307). On the other hand, most English radicals still thought that the best strategy to achieve parliamentary reform was the people's petition to Parliament, at least until Grey's reform bill was defeated. Paine's agitation for a constitutional convention was responded to first by the Scottish radicals who held the first convention in Edinburgh in December 1792. Only after the failure of the reform bill, did the English radicals begin to look for 'some more effectual means' of achieving their purpose and dispatched their delegates to the General Convention in Edinburgh in November 1793. The real nature of the Edinburgh convention, however, was not quite Painite, still retaining the elements of traditionalism. There were, in fact, few radicals who thought that the convention they

---

<sup>93</sup>Thale, p.11.

<sup>94</sup>Thale, p.18.

held could be a serious alternative to the Westminster Parliament (Goodwin, pp. 296-306).

Wordsworth, after completing the main argument, allows some comment upon contemporary topical issues, 'what more immediately relates to this kingdom, at the present crisis'. This is where we might expect to find his own prescription for 'the present crisis'. One difficulty lies in identifying the crisis that Wordsworth had in mind. If *A Letter* was written in February the reference would be to the anti-Jacobin campaign that had intensified after the execution of the King. He certainly seems to denounce those radicals who had deserted the cause in response to that event: 'an enemy lurking in our ranks is ten times more formidable than when drawn out against us'. If it was written in June, he might also be referring to the defeat of Grey's reform bill the previous month. Wordsworth denounces the Bishop for his 'silence respecting the general call for parliamentary reform', which might suggest this. But one might add that Wordsworth's own failure to refer to the Scottish Convention may indicate the limitations of his own republicanism. We are led to suppose that Wordsworth's radicalism contained an element of irreconcilable contradiction between Paineite radicalism in ideology and English constitutionalism in practice. To decide the degree of Wordsworth's sympathy with the current British reform movements is difficult: his conscious self-alignment with the reformers pursuing Parliamentary reform may have been a friendly gesture as one of 'the friends of liberty' in the wider sense, and *A Letter* itself breaks off exactly at the moment when the fundamental difference between himself and the reformers could have been laid bare. Wordsworth, with his vivid memory of the French National Convention, may have perceived the moderate nature of the Edinburgh Convention and thought it unworthy his serious attention. To read Wordsworth's one and only pamphlet that undoubtedly testifies to his radical politics in the context of the ideologies of the contemporary British reform movement, therefore, seems to confirm the truth of Wordsworth's later recollection of these days, that he remained detached from the practical politics of the British reform movement:

An effort, which, though baffled, nevertheless  
 Had called back old forgotten principles  
 Dismissed from service, had diffused some truths  
 And more of virtuous feeling through the heart  
 Of the English people. And no few of those  
 So numerous (little less in verity  
 Than a whole nation crying with one voice)  
 Who had been crossed in this their just intent  
 And righteous hope, thereby were well prepared  
 To let that journey sleep awhile, and join  
 Whatever other caravan appeared  
 To travel forward towards Liberty  
 With more success. For me that strife had ne'er  
 Fastened on my affections, nor did now  
 Its unsuccessful issue much excite  
 My sorrow, having laid this faith to heart,  
 That, if France prospered, good men would not long  
 Pay fruitless worship to humanity,  
 And this most rotten branch of human shame,  
 Object, as seemed, of a superfluous pains  
 Would fall together with its parent tree.  
 (X. ll. 207-227)

### 5. Wordsworth, a Godwinian: 1793-95

Wordsworth's life after the composition of *A Letter* was by no means politically prominent, nor even particularly public. If he was excitingly radical in ideology in his political pamphlet of 1793, Wordsworth was disappointingly obscure in real life. Not much is known for certain about his activities after his return from France until his retreat to Racedown; we know, for example, that he was staying at the Isle of Wight for a month with William Calvert in the summer of 1793, which was followed by his unexpected solitary walking tour to Wales across Salisbury Plain. After staying at Jones's home in North Wales for a while, he visited Whitehaven around Christmas. By 17 February 1794, he was in Halifax reunited with Dorothy at the home of Elizabeth Threlkeld Rawson. From around September 1794, Wordsworth was mainly engaged in giving his companionship to Raisley Calvert who was fatally ill, but generously offering £ 600 (increased to £ 900 afterwards) to Wordsworth to enable him to pursue his poetic career. After he died in early January 1795, Wordsworth came down to London, and resumed his acquaintance with a group of radical intellectuals including William Godwin (Moorman, pp. 211-78; Reed, pp. 139-76).

From these seemingly uneventful records, critics have tried to recover some traces of Wordsworth's activities corresponding to his radical politics. Many regard as a valuable clue his alleged association with London radicals in early 1793 through his publisher Joseph Johnson, particularly with Samuel Nicholson<sup>95</sup> and Joseph Fawcett.<sup>96</sup>

---

<sup>95</sup>Roe, pp. 23-37; Harper, pp. 192-94; Reed, 138-39; Moorman, p. 219. Roe established Nicholson's membership of SCI which makes Wordsworth's possible involvement with a radical society more plausible. His finding is no doubt a valuable addition to the study of Wordsworth's radical circle, but far short of offering any solid evidence of Wordsworth's actual involvement. Roe's dating of the 'Nicholson connection' in the spring of 1791 seems to me too early; the ground for Roe's dating is found in the Fenwick Note on the *Excursion* and contains the two unspecific time posts, 'at the beginning of the French Revolution', and 'when I had not many acquaintances in London'; I don't think there is enough evidence to revise Moorman's dating of the spring of 1793, particularly when we read Wordsworth's own account of his first London residence of 1791 (IX. II.18-25) which characterizes his attitude as aloofness, passive observation, and non-alignment.

<sup>96</sup>Joseph Fawcett, a dissenting minister, gave the Sunday evening lectures for 12 years between 1783 and 1795, which were so popular that they were said to have attracted 'the largest and most genteel audiences that ever assembled in a dissenting place of worship'. For more details, see M. Ray Adams,

Selincourt has even suggested a possible political motivation for Wordsworth's stay in the Isle of Wight, which might have signalled an intention to return to France with a view to joining his Gironde colleagues in counter-attacking the Jacobin-dominated government, but this suggestion was convincingly rejected by Moorman.<sup>97</sup> The famous theory of Wordsworth's third visit to Paris and his presence at the execution of Gorsas belongs to early October of 1793.<sup>98</sup> A still more popular item in the study of Wordsworth's politics is his abortive plan of publishing a political journal that he named *The Philanthropist a monthly Miscellany* which is laid out in a letter to Mathews.<sup>99</sup> Finally, Wordsworth's attendance at the dinner in William Frend's house on 27 February 1795 has been an object of scholarly attention since all the other guests at the dinner were leading contemporary radicals, and more significantly, it marked the beginning of Wordsworth's personal contact with Godwin as is confirmed in Godwin's diary (Moorman, pp. 262-64; Roe, pp. 186-98; Reed, p. 164).

All this evidence does suggest shadowy activities of a political nature. But even the most substantial fact, his dinner at Frend's house, is far short of proving any actual political involvement.<sup>100</sup> Wordsworth almost certainly did nothing to implement the radical views contained in *A Letter*.

---

*Studies in the Literary Backgrounds of English Radicalism with special Reference to the French Revolution* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1947), pp. 191-226, and Arthur Beatty, 'Joseph Fawcett: The Art of War: Its Relation to the earlier Development of William Wordsworth', *University of Wisconsin Studies in Language and Literature*, no. 2 (September 1918), pp. 224-69.

<sup>97</sup>Emile Legouis, *William Wordsworth and Annette Vallon* (1922), p. 35; Moorman, p. 231.

<sup>98</sup>Moorman, pp. 238-42; Reed, p. 147; Todd, pp. 64-65; Gill, pp. 77-79.

<sup>99</sup>The single most detailed study of this abortive project is Kenneth R. Johnston, 'Philanthropy or Treason? Wordsworth as "Active Partizan"', *SIR*, no. 25 (Fall 1986), pp. 371-409. Johnston challenges Moorman's view that Eaton's real *Philanthropist*, published for eleven months between March 1795 and January 1796, 'contained nothing which could have issued from the pen of Wordsworth' (Moorman, p. 256n) arguing that there is in fact a great deal of similarity between Wordsworth's plan of *The Philanthropist* set forth in his letter of 8 June 1794 and the actual contents of Daniel Isaac Eaton's *Philanthropist*, which, in spite of the lack of decisive evidence, seems to him an obvious indication that Wordsworth was actually included on the editorial board or at least as one of the contributors. Nicholas Roe also accumulates his own evidence to make the same point. Roe, 'Appendix', pp. 276-79.

<sup>100</sup>This is the very reason why I am hesitant to accept Roe's argument. The same point is made by Mark Philp about Godwin which is also applicable to Wordsworth; 'Although Godwin had radical sympathies, ... he was not a contentious political figure. ... He thus knew many people with radical sympathies, some of whom were members of radical organizations. But he was not at the centre of

The only reliable piece of evidence showing how Wordsworth's radicalism fared after *A Letter* is the series of letters addressed to Mathews, and their Godwinian content. Although Wordsworth does not refer to Godwin by name in *The Prelude*, it is undeniably true that Wordsworth, for a certain period of time, was fascinated by Godwin's political philosophy. Wordsworth's political sentiments disclosed in a series of letters to Mathews are distinctively Godwinian in their import, and his plan for *The Philanthropist* was also Godwinian in its guiding ideology. Godwin, after all, was the only radical that Wordsworth is known to have met regularly and frequently, at least ten times between 28 February and 18 August 1795 (Roe, p.194). For these reasons, it is reasonably safe to say that after *A Letter* Wordsworth's radicalism is best characterized by its Godwinian elements. The question is, then, what aspects of Godwinism were adopted and why. Why was Wordsworth attracted to Godwinism in the first place and why did he come to disclaim it so soon? This section will examine the significance of Godwin in the development of Wordsworth's radicalism, concentrating mainly on his letters to Mathews of 1794. Before that, it will be useful to take a brief look at how Wordsworth himself gives an account of this part of his life in book X of *The Prelude*.

Wordsworth chooses to organize the story of this period into a pattern of frustration and recovery corresponding to the fluctuation of public events. The first blow was of course the outbreak of the Anglo-French war on 1 February 1793, which 'threw me(him) first out of the pale of love;/ Soured and corrupted, upwards to the source,/ My sentiments' because 'What had been a pride,/ Was now a shame'.(X. ll.761-63, ll. 769-70). He was in a state of deep shock that might be termed 'a revolution' in which he took 'a stride at once/ Into another region'.(X. ll. 241-42) But the 'revolution'

---

the stage of the practical political struggle, even though he knew some of those who was rather closer to it: he was not a member of any radical society, and his attendance at radical dinners should not lead us to think that he played a significant part in them.' Mark Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice*(London, 1986), p.75. Alan Grob also maintains that the evidence of acquaintanceship should not necessarily be understood as the indication of conversion because, as George Sherburn notes,'in a sense he(Godwin) knew everybody'. Alan Grob, 'Wordsworth and Godwin: A Reassessment' *Studies in Romanticism*(1967), pp. 98-119 (pp.98-99).



of mind, in Wordsworth's case, did not mean the desertion of his old beliefs; on the contrary he defined that moment as 'a time/ In which apostasy from ancient faith/ Seemed but conversion to a higher creed'(X. ll. 284-86) revealing clearly his contempt for the turncoats. Horrified as he was, Wordsworth still tended to think that the Reign of Terror was precipitated by the hostility of the allied forces.(X. ll. 308-29) In this light, Wordsworth 'rejoiced' (X. l.259), though with somewhat mixed feelings, at the news of the defeat of the British army at Hondeschoote on 8 September 1793(Reed, p.148). Although more depressing news followed, Wordsworth confidently defined himself as one of 'those few...Who still were flattered, and had trust in man' (X. ll.359-61). Against the accusation of the 'scoffers' who blamed 'popular government and equality' for the bloodshed, Wordsworth argued that the violence was the product of the old regime rather than the new republic.(X. ll. 432-40) Wordsworth's optimism, however, was only precariously maintained. The real relief came when the news of the fall of Robespierre on 28 July 1794 reached him:

Great was my glee of spirit, great my joy  
In vengeance, and eternal justice, thus  
Made manifest.(X. ll. 540-42)

Between l.189 and l. 567 of book X in which Wordsworth describes his state of mind from his return to Britain to the moment when he heard the news of the fall of Robespierre, his message is simple and clear; he was consistently faithful to his political beliefs against all odds. At the beginning of the next passage, Wordsworth claims once again:

The same belief I, nevertheless, retained;  
The language of the Senate, and the acts  
And public measures of the Government,  
Though both of heartless omen, had not power  
To daunt me; in the People was my trust  
And in the virtues which mine eyes had seen,  
And to the ultimate repose of things

I looked with unabated confidence.  
(X. ll. 574-581)

But this optimism proved groundless when General Pichegru launched his conquest of the Low Countries in October 1794 (Reed, p.159), disproving Wordsworth's argument that France was only provoked to war in self-defence. But Wordsworth did not immediately recant:

...I read her doom,  
Vexed inly somewhat, it is true, and sore,  
But not dismayed, nor taking to the shame  
Of a false prophet: but, roused up, I stuck  
More firmly to old tenets...  
(X. ll. 797-801)

In the context of this repeated emphasis on his steadfast fidelity to the radical cause, Wordsworth's conclusion of book X is rather surprising, because his recantation of the 'old tenets' is complete and without reserve:

...I took the knife in hand  
And stopping not at parts less sensitive,  
Endeavoured with my best of skill to probe  
The living body of society  
Even to the heart; I pushed without remorse  
My speculations forward; yea, set foot  
On Nature's holiest places.  
...Thus I fared,  
Dragging all passions, notions, shapes of faith,  
Like culprits to the bar: suspiciously  
Calling the mind to establish in plain day  
Her titles and her honours; now believing,  
Now disbelieving; endlessly perplexed  
With impulse, motive, right and wrong, the ground  
Of moral obligation, what the rule  
And what the sanction;...  
(X. ll. 873-79, ll. 889-897)

Wordsworth's extended metaphor employed here to represent his past ideological commitment to the revolutionary cause is reminiscent of the passage of *Descriptive Sketches* in which he deplored the blasphemous rampage in *La Grande Chartreuse*. (DS, p.44, ll. 60-67). This metaphor is interesting because the figurative representation of radical political theory and its revolutionary implementation as a blasphemous violation of a natural sanctity makes an extreme contrast with his earlier perspective from which he saw the British military offensive upon the French revolutionary government as 'most unnatural strife'(X. l.251). It indicates the extent of Wordsworth's recantation. To recognize the revolutionary nature of Wordsworth's shift of position would lead us to the question how he came to transform himself from a hardcore radical into a Burkean conservative while retaining the consistency and coherence he lays claim to.

Wordsworth himself seems to have felt it problematic because he decides to reverse chronological order and start his story all over again from the moment when his revolutionary fervour was at its zenith. Going back to the moment when he 'was led to take an eager part/ In arguments of civil polity', possibly referring to his discussions with Beaupuy or his experience at the Jacobin Clubs in France, Wordsworth gives the boldest expression to his past commitment to the radical cause. From the point of the outbreak of the Anglo-French war, however, Wordsworth offers another version of the story that is rather different from that given earlier; instead of focusing on his integrity and consistency, his feeling of confusion which keeps intensifying until he 'yields(yielded) up moral questions in despair' becomes the dominant topic of the narration. It is in this context that Godwinism is introduced; at first, the Godwinian element is hardly noticeable:

This was the time, when, all things tending fast  
To depravation, the philosophy  
That promised to abstract the hopes of man  
Out of his feelings, to be fixed thenceforth  
For ever in a purer element

Found ready welcome.

(X. ll. 806-11)

Wordsworth does not bother to specify exactly what is meant by 'the philosophy', but his position is already suggested here; first, 'philosophy' is not seen as any positive program for a better society nor as a timely prescription for 'depravation', but only as an undesirable symptom of the 'depravation'. Secondly, by using terminology like 'philosophy', 'abstract', 'fixed', and 'purer' in an implicitly pejorative sense, Wordsworth is following the same line of argument as Burke who condemns the reformers for fetishising such abstractions as liberty and equality. Thirdly, the Godwinian elements are very delicately employed here so that 'the philosophy', though implying Godwinism, still remains an epithet for all kinds of radical ideologies. The reason for such a canny use of Godwin is probably that the variety of radical ideologies can be more easily discredited through an extreme case like Godwin. The Godwinian content of 'the philosophy' is, however, more clearly revealed in the following passage:

But, speaking more in charity, the dream  
 Was flattering to the young ingenuous mind,  
 Pleased with extremes, and not the least with that  
 Which makes the human Reason's naked self  
 The object of its fervour. What delight!  
 How glorious! in self-knowledge and self-rule,  
 To look through all the frailties of the world,  
 And, with a resolute mastery shaking off  
 The accidents of nature, time, and place,  
 That make up the weak being of the past,  
 Build social freedom on its only basis,  
 The freedom of the individual mind,  
 Which, to the blind restraints of general laws  
 Superior, magisterially adopts  
 One guide, the light of circumstances, flashed  
 Upon an independent intellect.

(X. ll. 815-30)

The Godwinian aspect of 'the philosophy' is concentrated in the phrase 'Build social freedom on its only basis,/ The freedom of the individual mind': one of the most distinctive argument of Godwin is that political justice in society is achieved only through the unrestrained exercise of private judgment.<sup>101</sup> What looks like an oxymoronic expression is the recapitulation of the very essence of Godwin's argument. As is highlighted again in the phrase 'an independent intellect', to secure the independence of private judgment, therefore, is the most important condition in the realization of political justice. As a corollary, Godwin is opposed to any activity which might hamper the unlimited exercise of 'an independent intellect' such as extra-parliamentary agitation or the oppression of the radicals, which marks off Godwin's position in the politics of the reform movement from those of most contemporary reformers.<sup>102</sup> Another key idea of Godwinism is caught up in the words, 'self-knowledge and self-rule': for Godwin, the human mind, as far as it remains independent of any prejudice or pressure, is already equipped with the capability to perceive truth without any input from external sources,<sup>103</sup> and 'self-knowledge and self-rule' is an expression of this self-sufficiency of the human mind. Wordsworth's tone in the above passage, however, is unquestionably satiric. Wordsworth depicts his past revolutionary enthusiasm, particularly his fascination with Godwinism, as a regrettable error from which he was saved only by the 'living help' of Coleridge. In the very next passage, Wordsworth completely withdraws his past support of Godwinism, obliquely condemning his book, *Political Justice*, as 'a work/ Of false imagination' (X. ll. 847-48). The reason for his estrangement from Godwinism, according to him, is that it does not

---

<sup>101</sup>See Chapter VI 'Of the Right of Private Judgement', Book II, *Political Justice*. For the importance of the concept of 'private judgment', see Hieronim S. Kwiatkowski, 'The context of Political Justice: the centrality of "private judgment"', in his unpublished Ph D thesis, *Wordsworth and Godwin: A Study of Influence* (University of Glasgow, 1989), pp.9-13. For its origin in dissenting rationalism, see Philp, pp.16-26.

<sup>102</sup>For Godwin's place in the contemporary reform movement, see Philp, 'Godwin's place in the debate', pp.73-79, and Chapter 5 & 6.

<sup>103</sup>This is the so-called 'perfectability of human mind'. Philp, 'Necessity and Perfectibility', pp.89-95. Kwiatkowski, 'The individual and social reform: necessity and perfectibility', pp.14-24.

'lie in nature', 'placed beyond/ The limits of experience and of truth' (X. l.844, ll. 848-49). Wordsworth's adoption of a Burkean argument here is evident because Godwinism is criticized for being not only against 'nature', but also beyond 'experience' and 'truth'. The casual equalization of 'experience' and 'truth' is remarkable because the antithesis between Experience and Reason as an ultimate test of 'truth' was the pivotal philosophical point behind the revolutionary debates of the first half of the 1790s.<sup>104</sup> And that is why the narrative comes to a conclusion in which Wordsworth's past commitment to the revolutionary cause as a whole, along with his allegedly short flirtation with Godwin, is dismissed as a series of youthful errors. In the account of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth uses Godwin as the back-door through which he escaped from the trap of radicalism in which he had imprisoned himself.

There is no way to validate or invalidate those poetic recollections by reference to biographical evidence; the only thing to be said is that the disruption of the chronological order in the narrative seems to indicate Wordsworth's perplexity even after 13 years in defining his then vacillating political position, and his undue emphasis on his own consistency, paradoxically, seems to testify to his ideological confusion during this period. What seems to be certain, however, is that Wordsworth's affiliation with Godwinianism was, in fact, a much more serious commitment than is suggested here. There must have been much more practical reasons for Wordsworth's adoption and rejection of Godwinism at that particular time.

Wordsworth's political position after the composition of *A Letter* is directly declared in a couple of private letters to Mathews written in 1794. Wordsworth's view, not surprisingly, is not exactly identical with that of *A Letter* written a year earlier. In understanding the change of Wordsworth's political views, we should bear in mind that there are generic differences between the letters to Mathews and *A Letter*. First of all, *A Letter*, though unpublished, was intended as an open letter to a public figure, which made the composition itself an act of political significance in the context

---

<sup>104</sup>Dickinson, pp.232-69.

of the revolutionary debates. The Watson-Wordsworth argument was one of many emulations of the Burke-Paine argument in those days, and it committed Wordsworth to an expression of his alignment within a public debate rather than to a statement of his more private political opinions, hence his description of himself as 'a republican' rather than 'William Wordsworth'. The letters to Mathews, on the other hand, were privately addressed to a friend who shared the same political position. Wordsworth declares his views as a means of initiating a discussion on the editorial policy to be followed by their projected political journal. The letters to Mathews, therefore, are likely to contain ideas not only sifted by Wordsworth's assessment of current political circumstances, but also corroborated by the sense of greater personal responsibility. The letters to Mathews, in short, contain a more self-conscious and calculated definition of his own political position at that moment taking into account both the nature of the journal he had in mind and the political realities of the society in which the journal was to be circulated.

The first significant statement is to be found in a letter dated on May 23. It was a time when the government's resolve to repress the reform movement was becoming clearer day by day; on 12 May, Thomas Hardy, the founder and secretary of LCS was arrested, and was joined in prison by Horne Tooke only a few days later. On 17 May, the Habeas Corpus was suspended (Goodwin, pp.307-58). In these circumstances, Mathews suggested the foundation of a political monthly journal under the common editorship of himself, Wordsworth and one other friend. Wordsworth's response to the suggestion was welcoming and hearty, probably because it appeared to Wordsworth the materialization of their shared hope to make a living, without having to take orders, by committing themselves to some joint adventure in the literary

world.<sup>105</sup> The first question Wordsworth asks is 'what class of readers ought we to aim at procuring; in what do we, each of us, suppose the most able either to entertain or instruct?'. That is, he asks himself what place the new journal should look for in the market:

Of each others political sentiments we ought not to be ignorant; and here at the very threshold I solemnly affirm that in no writings of mine will I ever admit of any sentiment which can have the least tendency to induce my readers to suppose that the doctrines which are now enforced by banishment, imprisonment, &c, &c, are other than pregnant with every species of misery. You know perhaps already that I am of that odious class of men called democrats, and of that class I shall for ever continue. (*EY*, p.119)

The reason why they have to attune their political sentiments in advance is self-evident; being a monthly journal, it would inevitably be required to deal with contemporary political matters and it was important to adopt a consistent viewpoint. Wordsworth's definition of his own political position is here required for practical (rather than moral) reasons. First of all, it was a technical necessity in a co-edited journal. Secondly, as a commercial project, they had to aim at the right market and the markets of political journals were, as always, clearly divided according to the political sentiments of the buyers, particularly in those days of revolutionary debate.<sup>106</sup> Wordsworth's declaration that 'I am of that odious class of men called democrats, and of that class I shall for ever continue' should also be understood as an expression of the strategic consideration to secure a wide readership as well as an intimate confession of his hidden political identity. The tortuous syntax of the first sentence seems to be an expression of

---

<sup>105</sup>Wordsworth wrote to Mathews from France on 19 May 1792, 'The field of Letters is very extensive, and it is astonishing if we cannot find some little corner, which with a little tillage will produce us enough for the necessities nay even the comforts of life. Your residence in London gives you if you look abroad an excellent opportunity of starting some thing or other. ... Would it not be possible for you to form an acquaintance with some of the publishing booksellers of London, from whom you might get some hints of what sort of works would be the most likely to answer?' *EY*, p.76.

<sup>106</sup>For the readership of the 1790s, see Jon P. Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832* (Wisconsin, 1987), Chapter I 'Cultural Conflict, Ideology, and the Reading Habit in the 1790s', pp.18-46.



Wordsworth's tension, for communication by letter was not at all safe in the 1790s.<sup>107</sup> Given the recent arrest of prominent reformers and the suspension of Habeas Corpus, the remarkable thing in the first sentence of the above quotation is not Wordsworth's statement, but the circumlocutional style that filters out the topicality from the phrases to make the message extremely general and unspecific. In this context, his ironic reference to 'that odious class of men called democrats' can be understood as a cautious willingness only to ally himself with those who have been accused, possibly falsely, of being democrats. Wordsworth refuses to define his stance until he hears Mathews's position first. The precautionary rhetoric, however, does not change the fact that Wordsworth still chooses to align himself with the British reformers like Horne Tooke and Hardy, implying that he has maintained his allegiance to the cause of liberty since he composed *A Letter*.

It is in the next letter, dated June 8, 1794, written after the confirmation that he and Mathews were more or less in agreement in their politics that Wordsworth disclosed his position in detail. There is nothing new in his disapproval of 'monarchical and aristocratical governments, however modified', nor in his declaration of being 'not amongst the admirers of the British constitution'. The signs of change begin to appear in his reference to 'the changes of opinion respecting matters of Government which within these few years have rapidly taken place in the minds of speculative men':

I conceive that a more excellent system of civil policy might be established amongst us yet in my ardour to attain the goal, *I do not forget the nature of the ground where the race is to be run*. The destruction of those institutions which I condemn appears to me to be hastening on too rapidly. I recoil from the bare idea of a revolution; yet, if our conduct with reference both to foreign and domestic policy continues such as it had been for the last two years how is that dreadful event to be averted?(my italics, *EY*, p.124)

---

<sup>107</sup>Richard Wordsworth, for example, wrote to William on 23 May: 'I hope you will be cautious in writing or expressing your political opinions. By the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Acts the Ministers have great powers' *EY*, p.121.

Remembering that the foremost concern of *A Letter* was a defence of republicanism, Wordsworth's evasive phrase, 'a more excellent system of civil polity' already smacks of moderation. The decisive comment, however, comes next; 'I recoil from the bare idea of a revolution'. It is a significant revision, though not a complete turnabout, of his earlier opinion that represented revolution, with its attendant violence, as regrettable but, in certain circumstances, necessary. Wordsworth's changed position becomes even clearer when he claims:

After this need I add that I am a determined enemy to every species of violence? I see no connection, but what the obstinacy of pride and ignorance renders necessary, between justice and the sword, between reason and bonds. I deplore the miserable situation of the French; (*EY*, p.124)

Compare the earlier argument:

Alas! the obstinacy & perversion of men is such that she is too often obliged to borrow the very arms of despotism to overthrow him, and in order to reign in peace must establish herself by violence. She deplors such stern necessity, but the safety of the people, her supreme law, is her consolation. ...Political virtues are developed at the expence of moral ones. (*Prose I*, pp.33-34)

Wordsworth's change of position on violence, from a 'stern necessity' that he accepts with some ambiguous feeling to something he can never endorse in any situation, is clear. What is curiously common in these apparently antithetical positions, however, is Wordsworth's somewhat sad recognition of human nature, which is expressed in a strikingly similar vocabulary, 'the obstinacy & perversion of men' and 'the obstinacy of pride and ignorance'. This indicates that Wordsworth's change of opinion on violence is not as antipodal as it apparently seems; insofar as he continues to recognize human 'obstinacy', Wordsworth is virtually reiterating his former position that an equitable government 'in order to reign in peace must establish herself by

violence', because 'obstinacy' still 'render(s)' it '*necessary*' to resort to violence whether Wordsworth likes it or not.

Quite new, though, is Wordsworth's repudiation of the French example. One of the most important motives of *A Letter* was to make a convincing defence of the revolution in France, claiming the authority of a person who has first-hand experience. By 'deploring' the situation of the French, Wordsworth seems to be joining 'the idle cry of modish lamentation' that he had despised so outspokenly in *A Letter*. It is indeed a significant move because it concerns his attitude towards the British revolution as well as the French. It is clear now that he recommends the British to pursue a course quite different from that adopted by the French.

In short, Wordsworth no longer offers republican government as the best alternative to the monarchical government he still denounces. Secondly, he is not hoping for a French-style revolution in Britain. Thirdly, he makes clear his opposition to any kind of violence though still admitting the inevitability of violence in the present corrupt state of the human mind. Lastly, Wordsworth formally withdraws his support for France which is suffering under the Reign of Terror.

Many explanations of this change of mind are possible; the progress of the French revolution, for example, did not match his optimistic expectations, or the severe repression of the reformers in Britain might have moderated his radicalism. His growing sense of his poetic genius, which was obviously spurred by Raisley Calvert's offer of his inheritance, could have led him to rethink the doctrines he had once upheld. But one sentence in the letter seems to provide a decisive clue to the answer; 'I do not forget the nature of the ground where the race is to be run'. The implication is that he has now come to understand better the political reality of Britain. The defeat of Grey's reform bill in May 1793 meant that the legal parliamentary petition was no longer viable as a strategy of reform. More significantly, the break-up of the Edinburgh convention, which is not mentioned anywhere in Wordsworth's writings, demonstrated that the convention option, recommended by Paine, was ineffectual in the British context. A series of arrests and trials of the leading reformers could have been

accepted as the proof of the final defeat of the British reform movement (Goodwin, pp.268-306). The recognition of 'the nature of the ground' may have convinced Wordsworth that an entirely different race should be run in British conditions.

The alternative political ideology that seemed to Wordsworth more suited to the British situation was offered by Godwin. It is not clear exactly when Wordsworth was converted to Godwinism.<sup>108</sup> Seeing that it was only in this letter dated 8 June that some exclusively Godwinian concepts appear and that typically Godwinian arguments such as the enlightenment of individual mind as the only viable method to achieve political justice would have been much more appealing *after* all the other political efforts like the extraparliamentary agitation, the petition to parliament, the summoning of the convention turned out to be futile, it seems more reasonable to assume that Wordsworth's affiliation to Godwinism took place well into 1794, no matter exactly when he read *Political Justice*.

The evidence of Godwin's influence on the letter of June 8 is ample. The overriding rhetoric of the following passage is typically Godwinian:

There is a further duty incumbent upon every enlightened friend of mankind; he should let slip no opportunity of explaining and enforcing *those general principles of the social order which are applicable to all times and to all places*; he should diffuse by every method a knowledge of *those rules of political justice*, from which the farther any government deviates the more effectually must it defeat the object for which government was ordained. *A knowledge of these rules cannot but lead to good*; they include an entire preservative from despotism, they will guide the hand of reform, and if a revolution must afflict us, they alone can mitigate its horrors and establish freedom with tranquillity. (my italics, *EY*, p.124)

---

<sup>108</sup>It is very controversial when Wordsworth became a Godwinian, whether *A Letter* was influenced by Godwin or not. The editors of *Prose*, and Edward Niles Hooker are very reluctant to accept the direct influence of Godwin in *A Letter*, which was strongly refuted by C.W. Roberts who claims the clear presence of Godwin in the same document. Owen & Smyser, *Prose* I, 'Introduction', p.24; Edward Nile Hooker, 'Wordsworth's Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff,' *Studies in Philology*, 28 (1931), p.522-31; Charles W. Roberts, 'The Influence of Godwin on Wordsworth's "Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff,"' *Studies in Philology*, 29 (1932), p.588-606.

The monistic logic that there is only one form of truth universally applicable and the necessitarian argument that to know the truth *necessarily* leads one to practice it, is typically, if not exclusively, Godwinian. In Book IV, Chapter V of *Political Justice* entitled 'Of Cultivation of Truth', Godwin claims:

If men resemble each other in more numerous and essential particulars than those in which they differ, if the best purposes that can be accomplished respecting them, be to make them free, virtuous and wise, there must be one best method of advancing these common purposes, one best mode of social existence deducible from the principles of their nature. If truth be one, there must be one code of truths on the subject of our reciprocal duties. Nor is investigation only the best mode of ascertaining the principles of political justice and happiness; it is also the best mode of introducing and establishing them. (*PJ*, p.314)

It is significant that both Wordsworth and Godwin argue that free enquiry and free expression are the most important conditions to be fulfilled for the realization of political justice. Wordsworth argues:

*Freedom of inquiry* is all that I wish for; let nothing be deemed too sacred for investigation; rather than restrain *the liberty of the press* I would suffer the most atrocious doctrines to be recommended; let the field be open and unencumbered, and *truth must be victorious*. (my italics, *EY*, p.125)

For Godwin, the unrestrained exercise of private judgement is the only way to arrive at truth and virtue ('The universal exercise of private judgment is a doctrine so unspeakably beautiful, that the true politician will certainly feel infinite reluctance in admitting the idea of interfering with it')(*PJ*, pp.181-82). The social implication of this argument will naturally be that one should not be punished for holding any particular opinion. Godwin, in Book VI, Chapter I entitled 'General Effects of the Political Superintendence of Opinion', goes on to argue that:

Nothing can be more unreasonable than the attempt to retain men in one common opinion by the dictate of authority. ... Whenever

government assumes to deliver us from the trouble of thinking for ourselves, the only consequences it produces are torpor and imbecility.  
(*PJ*, II, p.230)

Godwin, however, was not the only one to demand the freedom of enquiry; it was one of the tenets he had inherited from the rational dissenters.<sup>109</sup> The criticism of the monarchic system and the hereditary principle found in both Godwin and Wordsworth was also more or less a common currency of contemporary radical ideologies.<sup>110</sup> Godwin's unique influence on Wordsworth is perhaps to be found in Wordsworth's changed opinion on the question of reform or revolution. Wordsworth's 'recoil(ing) from the bare idea of a revolution' may be understandable without reference to Godwin because 'revolution' by then had come to be a synonym for indiscriminate, systematic massacre. There was a consensus among the British public that it was not, at least, a desirable event to look forward to in Britain. But Wordsworth's condemnation of the activities of radical societies is not easily understood without thinking of Godwin:

...when I observe the people should be enlightened upon the subject of politics, *I severely condemn all inflammatory addresses to the passions of men*, even when it is intended to direct those passions to a good purpose. (*EY*, p.125)

Wordsworth's attitude toward the British reform movement was never enthusiastic in *A Letter*, but the feeling of fundamental solidarity is clear. This condemnation is remarkable particularly when we remember that Wordsworth was eloquently blaming the government for provoking the violent passions of the mass by insisting that it was not the radicals but the 'King and Church' association that incited the mob who destroyed Priestley's house (*Prose* I, p.38). The criticism is now directed to the mass meetings of LCS and Thelwall's successful addresses which were in full

---

<sup>109</sup>Philp, pp.15-37.

<sup>110</sup>Roberts, p.593.

swing until they were curbed by the two 'gagging acts' in late 1795. Godwin allowed a chapter to explain why he was opposed to all kinds of political association. 'Inflammatory addresses' are one of the reasons:

A necessary attendant upon political associations is harangue and declamation. A majority of the members of any numerous popular society will look to these harangues as the school in which they are to study, in order to become the reservoirs of practical truth to the rest of mankind. But harangues and declamation lead to passion, and not to knowledge... Truth can scarcely be acquired in crowded halls and amidst noisy debates. (*PJ*, p.285)

Godwin's peculiar position on the ongoing reform movement, which precluded his personal involvement with any activities of radical societies despite his close friendship with many of its leaders, as well as the high price of his book, must have led the authorities to judge him innocuous. Unlike most of his radical friends, and in spite of his reputation as the author of *Cursory Strictures*, he was free from any threat of prosecution. This might in itself have been an attraction to Wordsworth.

Wordsworth's leaning towards Godwin was practically motivated as well; Godwin's teaching offered him a role that he thought himself fitted for, as a propagandist:

I know that the multitude walk in darkness. I would put into each man's hand a lantern to guide him and not have him to set out upon his journey depending for illumination on abortive flashes of lightening, or the coruscations of transitory meteors. (*EY*, p.125)

Mathews's suggestion of the co-editorship of a monthly magazine seemed to Wordsworth an ideal opportunity to play such a role, not to mention a chance to secure the profession he was looking for. In Godwin's doctrine, an enlightened elite discharge an essential duty in directing the populace towards truth and virtue. As Isaac Kramnick indicates,<sup>111</sup> the literary and intellectual elite, variously named 'men of study

---

<sup>111</sup> Isaac Kramnick, 'Introduction' in *PJ*, pp.49-50.

and reflection', 'liberally educated and reflecting members', or 'people's guides and instructors', seemed to Godwin the only social group that could impartially practice the work of benevolence:

Let us figure to ourselves a number of individuals who, having stored their minds with reading and reflection, are accustomed, in candid and unreserved conversation, to compare their ideas, suggest their doubts, examine their mutual difficulties and cultivate a perspicuous and animated manner of delivering their sentiments. Let us suppose that their intercourse is not confined to the society of each other, but that they are desirous extensively to communicate the truths with which they are acquainted. Let us suppose their illustrations to be not more distinguished by impartiality and demonstrative clearness than by the mildness of their temper, and a spirit of comprehensive benevolence. We shall then have an idea of knowledge as perpetually gaining ground, unaccompanied with peril in the means of its diffusion. Their hearers will be instigated to impart their acquisitions to still other hearers, and the circle of instruction will perpetually increase. Reason will spread, and not a brute and unintelligent sympathy. (*PJ*, pp.289-90)

Godwin did know a lot of contemporary intellectuals including prominent reformers who, he believed, could play such a role alongside himself. Apart from participating in a debating club, Godwin, though detached from the organizational activities of radical societies, was always a fairly outspoken commentator on current topical matters.<sup>112</sup> A few months after Wordsworth wrote the above letter Godwin was to demonstrate by writing 'Cursory Strictures' that the intellectual efforts of a man 'of study and reflection' like himself do work in real politics and could achieve the acquittal of the reformers at the treason trials.<sup>113</sup>

Although Wordsworth dropped his plan for *The Philanthropist* altogether by November 7, the ideal of a literary intellectual delivering the people from the darkness of ignorance and leading them to the world of political justice was to have a lasting

---

<sup>112</sup>Kwiatkowski, pp.60-62.

<sup>113</sup>Philp, pp103-119.



place in Wordsworth's mind; it was to be reincarnated as an old man of moral wisdom and eventually as an ideal self-image of a poet.

Wordsworth met Godwin socially from 27 February 1795 when his reputation as a saviour of the reform movement reached its highest point. Wordsworth's personal contacts with Godwin, as Roe has suggested (p.197), probably prompted estrangement rather than a closer alliance with him. In any case, it must have soon become obvious that Godwin's program did not offer a valid alternative to the reform movement based on the radical societies, particularly after most reformers were effectively silenced by the Two Gagging Acts at the end of 1795. Nonetheless, Wordsworth's affiliation with Godwin gave him a chance to rethink his past revolutionary enthusiasm and reshape his notion of the social role of the intellectual in the harsh political reality of 1790s Britain. Godwin's uncompromising criticism of the existing oppressive political institutions, his not less severe strictures on the radical societies, and his rational and comprehensive program for an ideal society together with his personal demonstration of benevolence at the time of the treason trials, all offered an apposite perspective to Wordsworth who was in need of an alternative principle with which he could review his past radicalism without sacrificing his humanitarian concern, and work out his own positive social role. Wordsworth's parting with Godwin in the autumn of 1795 signals virtually the end of Wordsworth's radical period. And it was also the beginning of the life in which Wordsworth came to regard himself primarily as a professional poet.

### Chapter III: The Poor in the Landscape: *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches*

#### 1. *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches* in the Tradition of Topographical Poetry

Wordsworth was not particularly faithful when he recollected the moment of his 'reluctant' return to England in December 1792, claiming that he was 'an active partisan' (X. l.737) whom only the 'absolute want/ Of funds' prevented from making 'a common cause/ With some who perished' (X. ll.195-96). In a romantic self-portrait, he imagines himself as a revolutionary martyr who sacrifices his literary ambition, dying as 'A poet only to myself(himself)' (X. l.200). In real life, however, Wordsworth was quick and efficient in launching his career as a professional poet by publishing two topographical poems, *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches* on 29 January 1793, only about a month after his return (Reed I, p.140). 'As I had done nothing by which to distinguish myself at the university,' Wordsworth modestly told Mathews, 'I thought these little things might shew that I could do something'(23 May 1794, *EY*, p.120). Wordsworth in 1794, as well as in 1805, wanted to convince people that his first publication had been no more than a result of his improvised efforts to prove himself to those who were worried over his future, or, in hindsight, a fortunate by-product of his political frustration on his return to England. Wordsworth's *debut* as a poet, however, was not really as sudden or unpremeditated as he wanted to suggest. When he returned to England, Wordsworth, already having two publishable poems in stock, had only to find a suitable publisher who could best promote his poetic career, and Joseph Johnson, the publisher of many prominent poets such as William Cowper and Erasmus Darwin, and the editor of the *Analytical Review* (Moorman, pp.218-19), was surely one of the best. Long before his return to England, Wordsworth already had in mind some sort of literary career as a preferable alternative to taking orders, eager to know

what kind of work would suit best the taste of the publishers in London.<sup>1</sup> As is indicated by his response to John Scott's criticism, Wordsworth in 1793-94 was also an enthusiastic learner of his trade who wanted to impress the world with his poetic skill.<sup>2</sup> In this context, it is hardly surprising that *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches*, the first published poems of one of the most renowned rebels in the history of English literature, were written in the most conventional manner available within the contemporary poetic tradition.

The most prominently conventional aspect of *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches* is their topographical or loco-descriptive form.<sup>3</sup> The tradition of topographical poetry has been exhaustively studied by Robert Arnold Aubin.<sup>4</sup> According to him, most of the conventions of topographical poetry originate in Latin literature:

The genre was present in most of its types among the Romans of the Augustan and late classical periods, maintained a dismal existence through the Middle Ages, and, fostered by interest in learning, travel, and pageantry, blossomed during the Renaissance into a truly European growth. Virgil influenced it in his praise of Italy, patriotism, didacticism, and personification of the Tiber; Ovid in his habit of personification and swan device; Horace in his anecdotic report of a journey; and Ausonius in his brief poems on cities and in his journey-river-poem on the Moselle.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Wordsworth's letter to Mathews written on 19 May 1792. *EY*, p.76.

<sup>2</sup>For John Scott's criticism on *An Evening Walk* and Wordsworth's response, see Averill, 'Introduction', *EW*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>3</sup>Paul Sheats, for instance, notes:

It (*An Evening Walk*) is, in the first place, a correct and polished topographical poem, which testifies to the unabated ambitions of its author. It accepts and exploits the conventions common to the genre during the century, and employs the closed heroic couplet, the most obvious vehicle for a demonstration of poetic skill, as well as for the moralization of the octosyllabics of a year before.

Sheats, p.50.

<sup>4</sup>Aubin, Robert Arnold, *Topographical Poetry in XVIII-century Engand* (New York, 1936).

<sup>5</sup>Aubin, p.32.

In England, Micheal Drayton(1563-1631), in his *Polyolbion*, completed in 1622, assembled all those conventions from the classical inheritance, re-establishing the 'stock-in-trade' of topographical poetry in seventeenth-century English literature. It was Sir John Denham(1615-69), however, who should be regarded as 'the father of at least the first generation of those prospect-poets who strew so thickly the stream of English poetry of the next two centuries'.<sup>6</sup> Denham's *Cooper's Hill* was typical of its genre in its 'Draytonian personification of rivers, mountains and other natural objects', 'the fanciful and classical denizens of the district', 'the topical allusions, the reference to an earlier poem, the 'retreat' urged with its usual self-conscious air of superiority to the general, panegyric, invective(carefully masked), the modesty theme, the rural sports motif in the detailed report of the chase, and most important of all, history with exegesis and abundant moralizing'.<sup>7</sup> Aubin's account of the history of topographical poetry makes it pretty clear that *An Evening Walk* is firmly based in a well-defined genre of English poetry. Aubin himself does not ignore its place in the tradition:

*An Evening Walk* is an epistle in verse, "Addressed to a young Lady." Conventionally enough it opens with a statement of the poet's situation far from his friend and proceeds to the early memories theme, moralizing("Alas! the idle tale of man is found Depicted in the dial's moral round," etc.), genre scenes, modesty and local pride("Did Sabine grace adorn my living line, Bandusia's praise, wild stream, should yield to thine"), humanitarianism, prospect, water-mirror, "pensive, sadly-pleasing visions," and retirement. ...Even at the outset of his career, Wordsworth was the greatest topographical poet since Dyer.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup>Aubin, p.34

<sup>7</sup>Aubin, p.35.

<sup>8</sup>Aubin, p.219. In contrast, Aubin's view on *Descriptive Sketches* is not very positive; he argues: '...Wordsworth in his *Descriptive Sketches*...will not submit to the shackles of the versified diary and jumps nimbly from one spot to another, indulging his bent for history, moral and social ideas, and picturesque genre scenes. If to us in our wisdom Wordsworth, by comparison with most earlier travellers, seems radical, his poem is full of the uncertain glory of a "transitional" day'. The different applications of the conventions of topographical poetry to *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches*, and its relation to Wordsworth's political awakening in France is the main interest of this chapter.

*An Evening Walk*, like *Descriptive Sketches*, however, is not just a simple assembly of the stock-in-trade of topographical poetry catalogued by Aubin; more significantly, it also registers the changes within the poetic genre itself, as well as the clashes among the disparate poetic traditions, in the new socio-political atmosphere of late eighteenth-century England. Returning to Aubin's account, the most distinctive feature of the topographical poetry exemplified by Denham's *Cooper's Hill* is said to be two-fold; Instruction and Description. As late as James Thomson, the single most important descriptive poet of the century, 'didactic and descriptive poetry had frequently become inseparable, though each on the whole maintained its integrity'.<sup>9</sup> From the middle of the century, however, topographical poetry tends to become more and more descriptive rather than didactic. This new emphasis on descriptiveness involved a set of diverse and sometimes conflicting guidelines for the poets. Poets, on the one hand, were strongly encouraged to liberate themselves from the principle of realism for the sake of their own creative need.<sup>10</sup> On the other, poets were reproached for remaining within the self-circumscribed domain of the Arcadias which were becoming more and more irrelevant to the reality of eighteenth-century rural England.<sup>11</sup> Along with these antithetical demands, another trend began to appear from

---

<sup>9</sup>Aubin, p.44.

<sup>10</sup>A reviewer in the *Monthly Review* argued in 1758, '...to describe with propriety, minuteness is not so necessary as an enumeration of the more striking, picturesque, and peculiar circumstances: the former is the province of the Naturalist and Philosopher; the latter is the characteristic of a Poet.' quoted in Aubin, p.56.

<sup>11</sup>As Aubin indicates(p.61), George Crabbe's *Village*(1783) is a typical example of the new urge for more realism;

Yes, thus the Muses sing of happy swains,  
Because the Muses never knew their pains:  
They boast their peasants' pipes, but peasants now  
Resign their pipes and plod behind the plough;  
And few amid the rural tribe have time  
To number syllables and play with rhyme;  
...  
But when amid such pleasing scenes I trace  
The poor laborious natives of the place,  
And see the mid-day sun, with fervid ray,  
On their bare heads and dewy temples play;  
While some, with feebler hands and fainter hearts,  
Deplore their fortune, yet sustain their parts:

the mid-eighteenth-century; 'the subjective approach to nature', that is, 'the use of nature to convey the poet's mood more intimately than through mere "syllables of senseless colour"'.<sup>12</sup> This surely evinces the influence of late-eighteenth-century sentimentalism upon topographical poetry. For Averill, the most distinctive quality of sentimentalism is not the dissolute indulgence in sensibility, but its interest in human suffering, and what distinguishes it from tragic literature proper is its 'profound interest in the man looking at the sorrow, in a word, himself'; 'the mind turning from externals to the exciting things happening within', or 'the turn from pathos to the observing self'; in other words, the self-consciousness of the poet is the very essence of sentimentalism.<sup>13</sup>

*An Evening Walk*, a more conventional topographical poem than *Descriptive Sketches*, also reflects in a complex way the conflicts of all those disparate trends within the conventions of topographical poetry. 'Melancholy', a typical theme of eighteenth-century poetry,<sup>14</sup> for instance, evidently finds its expression in the poem; 'Then did no ebb of cheerfulness demand/ Sad tides of joy from Melancholy's hand' (1793, ll.21-22), or 'While, Memory at my side, I wander here,/ Starts at the simplest sight th' unbidden tear,' (1793, ll.43-44). Along with such open acknowledgements of sentimentalism, some descriptions are obviously centred on the poet's consciousness as it is affected by the scenery:

---

Then shall I dare these real ills to hide  
In tinsel trappings of poetic pride?  
(*The Village*, I. ll.20-26, 41-48)

George Crabbe: *The Complete Poetical Works*, edited by Norman Dalrymple-Champneys and Arthur Pollard, 3 vols (Oxford, 1988), vol I, p.158.

<sup>12</sup>Aubin, p.65.

<sup>13</sup>James H. Averill, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Human Suffering* (Ithaca and London, 1980), pp.21-25. Chapter 1 'The Sentimental Background' provides a useful account of Wordsworth's connection to eighteenth-century sentimental literature. For a more general account of Wordsworth's inheritance from eighteenth-century literature, see Chapter II 'Nature, Self, and Imagination' in Jacobus, pp. 38-58.

<sup>14</sup>C.A.Moor, for instance, defines the mid-eighteenth century as 'The Age of Melancholy'. *Backgrounds of English Literature, 1700-1760* (Minneapolis, 1953), p.232.

--No purple prospects now the mind employ  
 Glowing in golden sunset tints of joy,  
 But o'er the sooth'd accordant heart we feel  
 A sympathetic twilight slowly steal,  
 And ever, as we fondly muse, we find  
 The soft gloom deep'ning on the tranquil mind.  
 (EW, 1793, ll. 379-384)

Paul Sheats, in sharp contrast, thinks the exact contrary is the case with this poem, characterising it by its 'passionate objectivity': 'The speaker exhibits no melancholy; he never reflects, never recollects. ... And the landscape itself is largely devoid of subjective references' (Sheats, pp.56-57). But he also admits that there are some exceptions to this 'objectivity', such as the passage quoted above, and more significantly, the episode of the female vagrant, which eventually leads him to a more sensible conclusion, that the 'compulsive naturalism' of this poem is only precariously maintained (Sheats, p.58).

The conflicting trends clustering around the principle of realism are also registered in *An Evening Walk*. Sheats is right when he argues that Wordsworth does not idealize rural life. At the same time, Wordsworth is not particularly realistic in his description of rural reality, either. Wordsworth, for example, does introduce the protagonist of the traditional pastoral, a shepherd:

Far in the level forest's central gloom;  
 Waving his hat, the shepherd in the vale  
 Directs his winding dog the cliffs to scale,  
 That, barking busy 'mid the glittering rocks,  
 Hunts, where he points, the intercepted flocks;  
 (EW, 1793, ll.164-68)

The shepherd in this scene is certainly not one of those who participate in the singing contests of Arcadia; he seems to be rather busy doing his own job. But he is placed at such a long distance that it is not clear what kind of mood he is in, whether he is happy or miserable. The shepherd's remoteness is marked by its contrast with the spirited

movement of his dog, who is more easily assimilated to the preceding picturesque description without breaching the discipline of realism.

The growing emphasis on the descriptive aspect of topographical poetry inevitably brings a new aesthetic dimension into the tradition. The picturesque was a style of description in the eighteenth-century primarily in paintings, but also in gardening and literature.<sup>15</sup> In so much as topographical poetry becomes more and more preoccupied with description as such, it shares with painting the same problems--what are the proper subjects of description in an artistic work, and how should they be depicted? The poet, now mainly an observer of the scenes in front of him, has to ask himself why something is worth describing in his poem; if some political or historical significance attached to a particular place is no longer a good enough reason for a poetic description, if a set of moral instructions derived from certain objects in a certain situation is no more thought to be an acceptable model for topographical poetry, there had to be some aesthetic category that would justify a poetic description by making it artistically significant. That is what the idea of the picturesque offers to topographical poetry.

The picturesque is an aesthetic category determining what is agreeable in a picture.<sup>16</sup> Like any other aesthetic principle, it had to adapt itself in response to socio-political demands. As was the case with topographical poetry, the ever-increasing gap between the ideal description of picturesque paintings and the reality described was the essence of the problem. Since the middle of the eighteenth-century, picturesque paintings, like topographical poetry, were under increasing pressure to accommodate the realities of the rural landscape such as the traces of industrialization, enclosure, and the rural poor's miserable lives. The picturesque eye began to appreciate the British landscape as it is rather than as a British version of Italian pictures. The picturesque

---

<sup>15</sup>The most comprehensive studies of the picturesque as an aesthetic principle are Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View* (London, 1927); Walter John Hipple, Jr., *The Beautiful, The Sublime, & The Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetic Theory* (Carbondale, 1957).

<sup>16</sup>This is William Gilpin's earliest definition. *Essay on Prints*, p.X. quoted in Carl Paul Barbier, *William Gilpin: His Drawings, Teaching, and Theory of the Picturesque* (Oxford, 1963), p.102.



landscape began to assimilate the uncouth shapes of industrialization such as bridges, barges, coal-mines into a natural background, setting a new standard for landscape scenery. The rural poor were also accepted more often as a proper item of description in picturesque paintings, no longer in the unconvincing character of happy shepherds, but as normal British peasants working in the fields. Alternatively, the picturesque eye started to exclude realistic details from the picturesque landscape even more strongly, retreating into more extreme forms of aestheticism intensified by a theory of the picturesque. Paradoxically, the extreme aestheticism was full-blown exactly when the changes of social atmosphere -- the wider spread of enclosure, the increase of factories, mines, and bridges, the clearer visibility of the rural poor and vagrants -- made it most impossible to ignore or hide these unwelcome sights.<sup>17</sup>

*An Evening Walk* came into being at the point when the tension between picturesque aestheticism and realism was unprecedentedly intensified. While the aesthetic viewpoint of the picturesque was being theoretically established by William Gilpin and Uvedale Price in the early 1790s, there was at the same time a deluge of literature which criticised the injustices inflicted upon the poor, calling for humanitarian measures to relieve them from famine. *An Evening Walk*, full of conventionally picturesque descriptions, also exactly mirrors the conflict between the two antithetical tendencies of the picturesque in its descriptions of human figures. Wordsworth's descriptions of figures in *An Evening Walk* are constructed under intense authorial supervision so as not to breach the disciplines imposed by the picturesque conventions. The carefully disguised tension inherent in this attempt is laid bare when the descriptive principle of the picturesque that has controlled the narrative tries to accommodate an episode from an entirely different tradition as in the episode of the female vagrant. Wordsworth's canny handling of figures is telling because it shows not only his poetic

---

<sup>17</sup>Malcolm Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain 1760-1800* (Aldershot, 1989), pp.1-68; John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The rural poor in English painting 1730-1840* (Cambridge, 1980), pp.1-33; Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860* (London, 1987), pp.57-85.

skill but also his ambiguous attitude to the subject he is dealing with. Wordsworth's problem of description, shared by contemporary poets, comes from the fact that he was historically placed at the moment when all the traditional poetic conventions were being called into question, just as the social, political, and economical institutions were being radically re-evaluated in the revolutionary circumstances. In this respect, Wordsworth's first major revision made in 1794 is an interesting test-case to see how his commitment to poetry, a seemingly apolitical project, is influenced by his newly acquired political ideology. Furthermore, Wordsworth's different application of the picturesque principle in *Descriptive Sketches* will also serve to illustrate the significance of his political ideas in his early engagement with poetic traditions. This chapter will be an examination of the two versions of *An Evening Walk*, the one written during 1787-89 and published 1793, and the other revised during his stay at Windy Brow in 1794, and of *Descriptive Sketches* written in 1792 during his stay in France, particularly focusing on Wordsworth's presentation of figures. Throughout the analysis, the evolution of picturesque ideas(or tastes) of the eighteenth-century in response to socio-political pressure, as explained by John Barrell, Malcolm Andrews, and Ann Bermingham, will be consulted, because their arguments seem to give a clue to the question of how Wordsworth sought to mediate between his poetic engagement and his political commitment.

## 2. *An Evening Walk* and the Politics of the Picturesque

In 1843, Wordsworth left an intriguing note on *An Evening Walk*:

It was composed at school, and during my two first College vacations. There is not an image in it which I have not observed; and now, in my seventy-third year, I recollect the time and place where most of them were noticed....I will conclude my notice of this poem by observing that the plan of it has not been confined to a particular walk or an individual place; -a proof(of which I was unconscious at the time) of my unwillingness to submit the poetic spirit to the chains of fact and real circumstance. The country is idealized rather than described in any one of its local aspects. (Grosart III, pp.6-7)

The first thing he dwells upon in this note is that the description of *An Evening Walk* is thoroughly based upon his first-hand personal observations. The impression he got from each place was so strong that even after more than fifty years he was still able to identify the actual places which each passage of description was based on. This claim is borne out by a series of footnotes placed in the original text of 1793. Of the lines about Grasmere, Wordsworth notes, 'These lines are only applicable to the middle part of that lake.' About the cascade scene, he says, 'The reader, who has made the tour of this country, will recognize, in this description, the features which characterize the lower water fall in the gardens of Rydale.' Also, his adoption of dialect words such as 'intake', 'Gill' strengthens the local colour of the description, implying that the poet is talking about a particular place he really knows. All these lead us to think that in the description of the scenery in *An Evening Walk*, Wordsworth rigorously applied the principle of realism. In the later part of the recollection, however, Wordsworth denied exactly the point he has just made; that his poem offered a genuine picture of the particular place that he had actually seen. And then he admits, without hesitation, that he was not then aware of his 'unwillingness to submit the poetic spirit to the chains of fact and real circumstance'. In dramatic contrast to his self-congratulatory footnote in which he proudly declared that his description surpassed even the tour guides in

providing details of local landscape,<sup>18</sup> Wordsworth blandly asserts that 'the country is *idealized* rather than *described*' (my italics).

This recollection is interesting for two reasons. Wordsworth, more than fifty years after the poem's composition, recognizes the schism between his adhesion to the reality of the Lake region and the descriptive style of the poetic tradition he had drawn on in composing *An Evening Walk*, of which he was then not particularly conscious. The old Wordsworth shrewdly understands that the decorum of topographical poetry compels a poet to be highly selective in representing reality, to such an extent that the term 'description' is justifiably abandoned in favour of 'idealization'. When this recollection was made, Wordsworth had no qualms in rejecting the principle of description once and for all, even in a topographical poem, because to him the 'poetic spirit' was in itself incompatible with 'fact and circumstance', and it was an unqualified virtue to 'idealize' the scene rather than 'describe' it. To the younger Wordsworth, however, his knowledge of the reality of the region must have been just as relevant to his poetic description; 'images' were preserved in his memory for the next fifty years. Whether he actually felt it problematic or not, the conflict between the 'poetic spirit' and 'fact and real circumstance' is clearly registered in the uneven flow of descriptions in *An Evening Walk*. Insofar as the problem of poetic description originates in the decorum of the poetic traditions Wordsworth adheres to, it is necessary to put the case of *An Evening Walk* in the wider context of a more fundamental problem inherent in the descriptive art of the late eighteenth-century.

William Gilpin, the founder of picturesque aesthetics, for example, reveals a similar paradoxical position. On the one hand, he encourages artists to depict nature as closely as Nature shows itself: 'the picturesque eye acknowledges everything beautiful in the works of nature. Some objects indeed may please less than others; and

---

<sup>18</sup>Wordsworth's own footnote to 'Druid stones' in line 171: 'Not far from Broughton is a druid monument, of which I do not recollect that any tour descriptive of this country makes mention. Perhaps this poem may fall into the hands of some curious traveller, who may thank me for informing him, that up the Duddon, the river which forms the aestuary at Brougham, may be found some of the most romantic scenery of these mountains', *EW*, p.50.

be less accommodated to the rules of painting. But all objects are best as nature made them. Art cannot mend them. Where Art interferes, picturesque beauty vanishes.'<sup>19</sup> But he also claims that 'Nature gives us the material of landscape; woods, rivers, lakes, trees, ground, and mountains: but leaves us to work them up into pictures, as our fancy leads'.<sup>20</sup> Gilpin even condemns copying nature with 'painful exactness' as 'a sort of plagiarism below the dignity of painting'.<sup>21</sup> The parallel between the young Wordsworth and Gilpin in their contradictory attitude towards the method of description was by no means accidental.

As was the case with the conflicting trends of eighteenth-century topographical poetry surveyed in the previous section, the central question for the landscape artists of the late eighteenth-century was how contemporary reality should be accommodated into artistic works. After the collapse of 'the idea of an absolute standard of taste, governed by rational rules and supported by reference to the example of the ancients',<sup>22</sup> artists necessarily confronted the task of engaging with contemporary reality through their artistic practices. Their general tendencies, according to Marilyn Butler, were towards the exclusion of reality from their art:

The strongest single tendency of late eighteenth-century art was to reject the ephemeral in favour of the essential, and the search for purity often took the form of a journey into the remote. The settings of poems, plays, paintings and even novels evoked a condition of society that was primitive and pre-social, in contrast to the luxuriousness which was seen as the characteristic of contemporary life in Western Europe.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup>William Gilpin, *Remarks on Forest Scenery*, ii, 273-74, quoted in Barbier, p.104.

<sup>20</sup>Gilpin, *Three Essays: on Picturesque Beauty; on Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape; with a Poem, on Landscape Painting. To these are added Two Essays, giving an account of the principles and mode in which the author executed his own drawings. ...Third Edition* (London, 1808), p.159, quoted in Barbier, p.106.

<sup>21</sup>Gilpin, *Five Essays*, p.160, quoted in Barbier, p.106.

<sup>22</sup>Andrews, p.41.

<sup>23</sup>Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760-1830* (Oxford, 1981), p.16.

Picturesque description was by no means an exception: the theory of the picturesque, originally conceived by William Gilpin in the 1770s and theoretically reformulated by Sir Uvedale Price in the first half of the 1790s, is characterized by its extreme aestheticism. The defining quality of the picturesque for them was 'roughness' or 'ruggedness'. In his 'Essay on Picturesque Beauty', originally written in 1776, but not published until 1792 in *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and On Sketching Landscape: to Which is Added a Poem, On Landscape Painting*, Gilpin gives his famous definition of the picturesque:

*Roughness* forms the most essential point of difference between the *beautiful*, and the *picturesque*; as it seems to be that particular quality, which makes objects chiefly pleasing in painting. ---I use the general term *roughness*; but properly speaking roughness relates only to the surfaces of bodies: when we speak of their delineation, we use the word *ruggedness*. Both ideas however equally enter into the picturesque.<sup>24</sup>

Sir Uvedale Price's new formulation of the idea of the picturesque in his *Essays on the Picturesque* (1794), was little different from Gilpin's except that he introduced the role of time in creating picturesque scenery.<sup>25</sup> Behind their definition of the picturesque as 'roughness' or 'ruggedness', was their strong belief that Nature was the archetype of all composition, and that it transcended the art of man. In the conclusion of *Essay on Picturesque Travel*, Gilpin argues:

The more refined our taste grows from the study of nature, the more insipid are the works of art. Few of its efforts please. The idea of the great original is so strong, that the copy must be pure, if it do not

---

<sup>24</sup>Quoted in Hipple, p.194. For details of Gilpin's theory of the picturesque, see Barbier, particularly chapter VIII. 'The Theory of the Picturesque', pp. 98-147.

<sup>25</sup>In his discussion of the classical ruin, Price notes: 'Observe the process by which time, the great author of such changes, converts a beautiful object into a picturesque one. First, by means of weather stains, partial incrustations, mosses, etc., it at the same time takes off from the uniformity of the surface, and of the colour; that is, gives a degree of roughness and variety of tint. Next, the various accidents of weather loosen the stones themselves; they tumble in irregular masses, upon what was perhaps smooth turf or pavement, or nicely trimmed walks and shrubberies; now mixed and overgrown with wild plants and creepers, that crawl over and shoot among the fallen ruins'. Quoted in Andrews, p.58.

disgust. But the varieties of nature's charts are such, that, study them as we can, new varieties will always arise: and let our taste be ever so refined, her works, on which it is formed, at least when we consider them as objects, must always go beyond it; and furnish fresh sources both of pleasure and amusement.<sup>26</sup>

What Gilpin had mainly in mind when he was talking about his disgust at 'the works of art' was the neoclassical art of balance and harmony typically represented by Palladian architecture, which had been a symbol of the 'luxurious' life of the aristocracy.<sup>27</sup> As Malcolm Andrews indicates, Gilpin's ostensibly formalistic approach unwittingly contained 'the sense of iconoclasm'; they implied 'a revolt against the constraints imposed by the commissioned topographical portraits of elegant country seats, where,...the patron required something like a pictorial map of his estate from a viewpoint which would display all its tasteful organisation'.<sup>28</sup> The result is that 'the public taste' of the last part of the eighteenth-century 'draws away from a sophisticated metropolitan, classical culture towards an interest in the humbler, more remote, native ways of life', taking 'humble subjects' such as 'hovels, cottages, dilapidated mills, the interiors of old barns'.<sup>29</sup> The 'humble' subjects also included figures like gypsies and beggars, not with any political intention, but only because of their 'close analogy to the wild forester and the worn-out cart-horse, and again to old mills, hovels, and other inanimate objects of the same kind'.<sup>30</sup> In other words, they are qualified to be picturesque subjects only because they are naturalized or 'ruined' human beings.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup>Quoted in Barbier, p.104.

<sup>27</sup>Gilpin claims: 'A piece of Palladian architecture may be elegant in the last degree. The proportion of it's parts - the propriety of it's ornaments - and the symmetry of the whole, may be highly pleasing. but if we introduce it in a picture, it immediately becomes a formal object, and ceases to please. Should we wish to give it picturesque beauty, we must beat down one half of it, deface the other, and throw the mutilated members around in heaps. In short, from a *smooth* building we must turn it into a *rough* ruin'. quoted in Andrews, pp.57-58.

<sup>28</sup>Andrews, p.64.

<sup>29</sup>Andrews, p.59.

<sup>30</sup>Price's words quoted in Andrews, p.59.

<sup>31</sup>Andrews, p.59.

Gilpin also thought that some human beings should be admitted into picturesque painting in order to characterize a scene, or to give it life and animation. But one particular group of people is not allowed, and even those who are allowed should be allowed only after 'adaptation':

If we introduce *adorned nature* (which the picturesque eye always resists, when it can) we are under a necessity...to introduc(e) such modern figures, as inhabit those walks. But when we open scenes of *wild*, or even of *unadorned nature*, we dismiss all these courtly gentry. No ladies with their parasols--no white-robed misses ambling two by two--no children drawn about in their little coaches, have admittance here. They would vulgarize our scenes. Milk-maids also, ploughmen, reapers, and all peasants engaged in their professions, we disallow. There are modes of landscape, to which they are adapted--loitering idly about, without employment. In wild & desert scenes, we are best pleased with banditti-soldiers, if not in regimentals, and such figures, as coalesce in idea with the scenes, in which we place them.<sup>32</sup> (my italics)

Gilpin is here unreservedly revealing his disgust at the leisurely appearance of the aristocracy in picturesque paintings, simply by expelling them from the scene. Though obviously more generous to the lower orders, he is equally wary of their presence; they are admitted only after they have been stripped of their social identity, in his words, after being 'adapted'. This strictly aesthetic use of the people of the labouring class inevitably presented itself as something problematic; it might be seen as morally callous from a humanitarian point of view. To the upper class, it would seem an irresponsible and dangerous attitude, for the morally sound picture was supposed to present labourers as always industrious and contented. Gilpin himself was not insensitive to the moral implications of his aestheticism:

In a moral light, cultivation, in all it's parts, is pleasing; the hedge, and the furrow; the waving corn field, and rows of ripened sheaves. But all these, the picturesque eye, in quest of scenes of grandeur, and beauty,

---

<sup>32</sup>Gilpin, 'Instructions for Examining landscape', pp.17-18, quoted in Barbier, p.144.



looks at with disgust. It ranges after nature, untamed by art, and bursting wildly into all its irregular forms....It is thus also in the introduction of figures. In a moral view, the industrious mechanic is a more pleasing object, than the loitering peasant. But in a picturesque light, it is otherwise. The arts of industry are rejected; even idleness, if I may so speak, adds dignity to a character. Thus the lazy cowherd resting on his pole; or the peasant lolling on a rock, may be allowed in the grandest scenes; while the laborious mechanic, with his implements of labour, would be repulsed.<sup>33</sup>

Gilpin's answer to the possible moral strictures was two-fold. First, he openly chose to take the side of the upper class from a moral, or more exactly political viewpoint.<sup>34</sup> Secondly, he argued, though without offering any explanation for it, that the aesthetical dimension of the picturesque had nothing to do with, or even somehow reversed its moral dimension.

Gilpin's convenient division between the moral and aesthetical dimensions of the picturesque, however, was not a solution of the problem, but only more emphatically disclosed the problematical status of the picturesque in its political implications. The paradox is that his efforts to liberate art from any political affiliations made it the very reflection of the political ideology of a particular class-- the landed

---

<sup>33</sup>Gilpin, *Tour of the Lakes*, ii, p.44, quoted in Barbier, p.144. Price made a similar point on the strict division of the aesthetic and moral (or practical) value in the theory of the picturesque:

I have read, indeed, in some fairy tale, of a country, where age and wrinkles were loved and caressed, and youth and freshness neglected; but in real life, I fancy, the most picturesque old woman, however her admirer may ogle her on that account, is perfectly safe from his caresses.(Price, *Essay on the Picturesque*, p.91)

quoted in Bermingham, p.69.

<sup>34</sup>Price also wanted to prevent his picturesque preference for humble subjects from being associated with any hint of political egalitarianism. Like Gilpin, Price clearly discloses his political disposition:

A good landscape is that in which all the parts are free and unconstrained, but in which, though some are prominent and highly illuminated, and others in shade and retirement; some rough, and others more smooth and polished, yet they are all necessary to the beauty, energy, effect and harmony of the whole. I do not see how a good government can be more exactly defined.(Price, *An Essay on the Picturesque*, p.39n.)

quoted in Andrew, p.65.

aristocracy whose political hegemony was constantly threatened by the newly-arising industrialists. Ann Bermingham rightly notes:

In its(the picturesque's) celebration of the irregular, preenclosed landscape, the picturesque harkened back nostalgically to an old order of rural paternalism. In its portrayal of dilapidation and ruin, the picturesque sentimentalized the loss of this old order. And in its emphasis on the erosions of time, it not only doomed the old order but also obliquely reorganized the precariously temporal nature of the new order that replaced it.<sup>35</sup>

But the complexity of the economico-political interest of the landed aristocracy also oriented the seemingly innocent picturesque art in a quite contrary direction in its political implications. A section of the landed aristocracy that were transforming themselves from landowners to managers of large-scale farming on the enclosed lands not only required a nostalgia for their paternalistic rule of the rural region, but also needed to endorse the agrarian revolution of which their self-transformation was a part.<sup>36</sup> In response, the picturesque, quite contrary to Gilpin's wish, did endorse not only the agrarian revolution visualized as enclosure, but also, in due course, emerging sights of industrializations like coal-mines, quarries, bridges, and barges.<sup>37</sup>

The question of the figures in the landscape, particularly the rural poor who were the real inhabitants of the rural landscape, were also not resolved by Gilpin's aesthetic prescription. Rather, Gilpin's dehumanization of those figures itself

---

<sup>35</sup>Bermingham, p.70.

<sup>36</sup>For a brief account of the agrarian revolution in the eighteenth-century and the upper-class's enthusiasm for the new farming, see Kenneth MacLean, *Agrarian Age: A Background for Wordsworth* (New Haven, 1950), particularly, chapter I, pp.1-26. John Barrell also noted the change of the economic and political interest of the landed aristocracy and its impact on the art of picturesque. Barrell, *The darkside of landscape*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>37</sup>Bermingham, p.75. For more detailed historical facts about the reflection of the enclosure and the industrialization of the English landscape, see W.G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape*, a Pelican Book (Harmondsworth, 1955, reprinted 1979), Chapter 6 & 7, 'Parliamentary Enclosure and the Landscape', 'The industrial Revolution and the Landscape', pp.177-232. For a detailed study of the picturesque's accommodation of industrialization, see Francis D. Klingender, *Art and the Industrial Revolution*, edited and revised by Arthur Elton (Chatham, 1947, revised and extended 1968), Chapter 5 'The Sublime and the Picturesque', pp.83-103.

constitutes a part of a long history of the artists's responses to the contradictory requirements from the aristocracy, still the main consumers of their paintings. The painters of the latter half of the eighteenth-century always found themselves, as John Barrell aptly put it, in a 'continual struggle, at once to reveal more and more of the actuality of the life of the poor, and to find more effective ways of concealing that actuality -- to present... only "half an image" of rural life'. Barrell summarizes a variety of technical inventions exploited to meet these contradictory needs:

As the rustic figures become less and less the shepherds of French or Italian Pastoral, they become more and more ragged, but remain inexplicably cheerful. The effort is always to claim that the rural poor are as contented, the rural society as harmonious, as it is possible to claim them to be, in the face of an increasing awareness that all was not as well as it must have been in Arcadia. The jolly imagery of Merry England, which replaced the frankly artificial imagery of classical Pastoral, was in turn replaced when it had to be by the image of a cheerful, sober, domestic peasantry, more industrious than before; this gave way in turn to a picturesque image of the poor, whereby their raggedness became of aesthetic interest, and they became the objects of our pity; and when that image would serve no longer, it was in turn replaced by a romantic image of harmony with nature whereby the labourers were merged as far as possible with their surroundings, too far away from us for the questions about how contented or how ragged they were to arise.<sup>38</sup>

The description of agrarian reality - the traces of agrarian revolution, the sights of industrailization - and of figures, particularly the impoverished rural poor, was always the hot potato in the artistic practice of the picturesque because these are the subjects that, however purified, tend to re-introduce the socio-political dimension which was in theory disentangled from the picturesque landscape. They mark the very point of convergence of the explicit aestheticism and and the implicit politics of the picturesque vision. The essence of Wordsworth's contradiction disclosed in his recollection of *An*

---

<sup>38</sup>Barrell, *The Dark Side of Landscape*, p.16.

*Evening Walk* is explicable in the same terms. And the same contradiction is also registered in the description of *An Evening Walk* which is characterized by an anxiety and depression that have no explicit references.

### 3. *An Evening Walk* and the Principle of Picturesque Description.

Paul Sheat's perceptive remark that 'the objectivity of this poem(*An Evening Walk*) is unstable' touches on the essence of *An Evening Walk*. The 'unstable' flow of the poem's description, which is full of unexplained tension and anxiety, is so conspicuous that we tend to become suspicious of the young Wordsworth's poetic skill. The poem opens conventionally; the narrator is in 'retreat' from the world into 'pastoral' nature, nostalgic for his youth and in a melancholy mood. The 'returning' to nature is nothing but a recognition of the vanity of human life (ll. 1-52). The first proper description of noon after such a sentimental and moralizing opening, however, is not exactly what is expected in such a poem.

When, in the south, the wan noon brooding still,  
Breath'd a pale stream around the glaring hill,  
And shades of deep embattl'd clouds were seen  
Spotting the northern cliffs with lights between;  
Gazing the tempting shades to them deny'd,  
When stood the shorten'd herds amid' the tide,  
Where, from the barren wall's unshelter'd end,  
Long rails into the shallow lake extend.  
(*EW*, 1793, ll. 53-60)

This description of the natural landscape at noon is crowded with the vocabulary of human emotion, particularly that of aggressive desire and passion together with that of frustration and distress. Just as the sun is at its zenith, standing still, everything seems arrested as if under the suppression of 'the wan sun'. Even the wind around the hill appears 'pale' and the sheep also simply 'stood'. But the silence and standstill is far from a leisurely repose; the intimation of passionate desire ('glaring', 'Gazing', 'tempting shade') along with an image of hostility ('embattl'd clouds') makes one feel as if an outburst of subdued desire is imminent and the present equanimity only temporary and insecure. But the sign of frustration is also obvious; the denial of 'the tempting shades' to the naked sheep leaves them exposed to the tyranny of the sun and their distress is

obliquely evinced in epithets like 'barren' and 'unsheltered'. The feeling of distress seems to be lightened a little in the following passage where 'school-boys' are seen to repose on the green making themselves 'a glimmering scene'. But this lightening of mood is soon to be submerged by a scene inscribed with even clearer signs of suffering and distress:

In the brown park, in flocks, the *troubl'd* deer  
 Shook the still twinkling tail and glancing ear;  
 When horses in the wall-girt intake stood,  
 Unshaded, eying far below, the flood,  
 Crouded behind the swain, *in mute distress*,  
 With forward neck the closing gate to press;  
 And long, *with wistful gaze*, his walk survey'd  
 'Till dipp'd his pathway in the river shade;  
 (EW, 1793, ll.63-70, my italics)

The unspecified feeling of frustrated desire and silent suffering is even more clearly evoked in the representation of the animals here; vivacious movements of tail and ear, with the animating epithets of 'twinkling' and 'glancing', in sharp contrast with 'mute distress' and 'wistful gaze' only deepen the misery of the 'troubl'd' deer and 'unshaded' horses. Whatever may have been here intended, it seems more painfully depressing than is usually required by the ostensible subject of the poem, 'sad tides of joy from Melancholy's hand'. The description of the scenery, from the very outset, is filled with the tension between upsurging desire and tyrannical suppression, which is certainly produced by the interference of the poet's subjective mood rather than the display of the natural objects themselves. Whatever the reason for such a mood, this is the very moment when the 'passionate objectivity' of the poem is shaken and the order and balance of the scenery, only precariously maintained, seems to crumble at the slightest external impact. What relieves the tension of the scene is the following picturesque image of a cascade:

--Then Quiet led me up the huddling rill,  
 Bright'ning with water-breaks the sombrous gill;

To where, while thick above the branches close,  
 In dark-brown bason its wild waves repose,  
 Inverted shrubs, and moss of darkest green,  
 Cling from the rocks, with pale wood-weeds between;  
 Save that, atop, the subtle sunbeams shine,  
 On wither'd briars that o'er the craggs recline;  
 Sole light admitted here, a small cascade,  
 Illumes with sparkling foam the twilight shade.  
 (EW, 1793, ll. 72-80)

As if he himself feels that he had indulged in self-projection upon the scenery, he turns to external nature which is expressed in the most densely woven texture of natural images in this poem; the dramatic contrast of movement and standing ('huddle/'repose', 1.71, 1.74), and the effect of diminuendo of light ('Brightening'- 'sombrous'- 'dark brown'- 'darkest green', 1.72, 1.74, 1.75) builds up the tension until 'sole light' is 'admitted' and 'a small cascade' splashes with 'sparkling foam'. It looks as if the suppressed emotion in the previous passages is allowed to explode in the form of natural images. This scene of the cascade is, in fact, organized in a fashion typical of the picturesque as formulated by Gilpin and Price. The general impression of the picture, first of all, is thoroughly that of 'roughness' and 'ruggedness' as Gilpin defined the picturesque. The shapes of the objects constituting the picture - 'water breaks', 'wild waves', 'Inverted shrubs', 'pale wood-weeds', 'wither'd briars', 'craggs', and 'sparkling foam' - show themselves intricate and various in the extreme. The cascade, the focus of the scene, had been enumerated by Gilpin as one of the ideal picturesque objects that the Lake District offers.<sup>39</sup> What is most striking in this description, however, is the compelling effect produced by the control of light and shade, 'light and shade', being according to Barbier, 'the life and soul of landscape painting' for Gilpin. Barbier summarizes Gilpin's view as follows:

---

<sup>39</sup>Gilpin, *Tour of the Lakes* (1772), i, 113-24, quoted in Barbier, pp.123-25. Along with the cascade, he also listed, 'broken grounds', 'rocks', and a 'narrow contracted valley'. He thought all these were suitable for appearance in the foreground of the picture, interestingly, except the cascade because of the technical problems.

The landscape is divided into large contrasting areas of light and shade which soften into each other. This gradation adds variety to the broad masses of light and shade, 'by mitigating the glare of the one, and the gloom of the other'. Shaded areas should predominate, and the light which 'is too often scattered on a variety of objects' should in the main be concentrated in the middle distance. In addition, features are blurred by haze or picked out by catching lights to ensure harmony, variety, and contrast.<sup>40</sup>

The chiaroscuro, naturally producing the effect of variety and intricacy, was for Gilpin the most important skill to be employed by picturesque painters. The careful control of light and shade in the above scene seems to correspond to Gilpin's guideline almost word by word.

The picturesque style adopted here is by no means accidental; in the same Fenwick Note concerning lines 193-94 'And, fronting the bright west in stronger lines,/ The oak its dark'ning boughs and foliage twines', Wordsworth recollected:

This is feebly and imperfectly expressed, but I recollect distinctly the very spot where this first struck me. It was in the way between Hawkshead and Ambleside, and gave me extreme pleasure. The moment was important in my poetical history; for I date from it *my consciousness of the infinite variety of natural appearances* which had been unnoticed by the poets of any age or country, so far as I was acquainted with them; and I made a resolution to supply, in some degree, the deficiency. I could not have been at that time above fourteen years of age. (my italics)

Considering that (by an interesting coincidence, since *An Evening Walk*[1793] precedes Price's *Essays on the Picturesque*[1794] in publication) Price offered as an example of picturesque trees 'the rugged old oak, or knotty wych elm', it is not unreasonable to say that Wordsworth's 'extreme pleasure' at the sight of the oak tree is the same sort of pleasure that Price wanted to reproduce in his picturesque aesthetics.

---

<sup>40</sup>Barbier, p.134.



And Wordsworth's ambition to grasp the same pleasure would be likely to produce a poem based on the same aesthetics of the picturesque. But more definite evidence of Wordsworth's acquaintance with the idea of the picturesque is given by his expression, 'my consciousness of the infinite variety of natural appearances', which is nothing but what Gilpin would call perception through the picturesque eye. He even used the same expression:

Nature is always great in design; but unequal in composition. She is an admirable colourist; and can harmonize her tints with *infinite variety*, and inimitable beauty: but is seldom so correct in composition, as to produce an harmonious whole. (my italics)<sup>41</sup>

Wordsworth's knowledge of picturesque theories is further evidenced by his bold rejection of the 'cold rules of painting' in the note attached to the 1793 version of *Descriptive Sketches* (Moorman, p.145). Wordsworth, then, is as good as saying that his first poetic ambition was to compose a poem of picturesque landscape, and *An Evening Walk* was its fully fledged offspring.

Wordsworth's picturesque description of a cascade, a proof of considerable poetic skill in itself, does achieve here at least one thing that is not precisely the expected effect of the picturesque. 'The eye', which has just surveyed the distressing sight of the silently suffering animals, now 'reposes' on another picturesque object 'a secret bridge/ half grey, half shagg'd with ivy to its ridges' after escaping from the excessive effusion of feeling in the previous scene. As a result, 'the huddling rill' at the head of the scene(1.71) is now transformed into a 'Sweet rill'. The therapeutic function of the picturesque images, preshadowing Wordsworth's future dependence on 'Nature' for his 'restoration' from degrading experience in society, is in this poem employed to regain the stability of the poet's aesthetic sensibility that is constantly disturbed by glimpses of the social and economical life of people.

---

<sup>41</sup>William Gilpin, *Wye Tour* (1770), p.18, quoted in Barbier. Wordsworth carried a copy of this book with him when he made tour to the Wye with Dorothy in July 1798 which occasioned *Tintern Abbey*. Moorman, p.402.

In addition to the poet's preoccupation with picturesque scenery, the other devices of picturesque painting are also adopted to restrain the moral implication of the images of human life. For instance, the representation of people within picturesque scenery :

Th' unwearied glance of woodman's echo'd stroke;  
And curling from the trees the cottage smoke.  
(*EW*, 1793, ll.107-108)

The physical presence of the 'woodman' is replaced by a forced synaesthesia('glance' of 'echo'd stroke') and another picturesque image 'the cottage smoke'.<sup>42</sup> The invisible reality surrounding the 'woodman' is therefore only obliquely (and deceptively) implied by the peaceful image of 'the cottage smoke'. But this is only an introduction to a more comprehensive presentation of the labouring people:

Their pannier'd train a groupe of potters goad,  
Winding from side to side up the steep road;  
The peasant from yon cliff of fearful edge  
Shot, down the heading pathway darts his sledge;  
Bright beams the lonely mountain horse illume,  
Feeding mid' purple heath, "green rings," and broom;  
While the sharp slope the slacken'd team confounds,  
Downward the pond'rous timber-wain resounds;  
(*EW*, 1793, ll.109-16)

The presence of 'a group of potters', 'the peasant', and 'timber-wain' is not important in itself. What is prominent instead in this picture is their rapid movements and the implication of noises which, however, tend to be subdued by the tranquillity of 'the lonely mountain horse' placed in the centre of the scene. Rather, all these movements of the figures do not constitute a scene of the busy life of working people, but only

---

<sup>42</sup>The country cottage, according to Malcolm Andrews, was an 'emblem of rural tranquillity' representing 'a happy blend of pastoral and Horatian aspirations'. The image of the cottage, therefore, in itself provides an illusion in which the labouring poor, the inhabitant of the cottage, are not only industrious, but also somehow cheerful, too. Andrews, p.7. Barrell, p.16.

help to highlight the repose of the mountain horse. A strategic placement of 'the mountain horse' in the middle of these figures is one of the tactics. But more importantly, the movements of 'a group of potters', particularly of 'the peasant', seem rather irrelevant to their normal working lives, and to that extent they are *not* 'engaged in their own professions', which means that they are successfully 'adapted' to landscape in Gilpin's sense.

The application of picturesque technique in the presentation of figures is also found in the description of the quarry:

Bright'ning the cliffs between, where sombrous pine  
 And yew-trees o'er the silver rocks recline,  
 I love to mark the quarry's moving trains,  
 Dwarf pannier'd steeds, and men, and numerous wains;  
 How busy the enormous hive within,  
 While Echo dallies with the various din!  
 Some, hardly heard their chissel's clinking sound,  
 Toil, small as pigmies, in the gulph profound;  
 Some, dim between th' aerial cliffs descry'd,  
 O'erwalk the viewless plank from side to side;  
 These by the pale-blue rocks that ceaseless ring  
 Glad from their airy basket hang and sing.  
 (EW, 1793, ll.139-150)

This is more properly a picture of 'industrial landscape'. By Wordsworth's time, it was no longer feasible to avert the eyes from the signs of industrialization. The spread of quarries, coal-mines, factories over the rural landscape was characteristically lamented by poets, but some of them also found in the industrial scene a sort of sublimity.<sup>43</sup> The general policy of the picturesque school, however, was still a kind of adaptation of the

---

<sup>43</sup>For instance, Arthur Young, who was also a witness to the French Revolution and an expert on the reformed agriculture, once said, 'That variety of horrors art has spread at the bottom (of Coalbrookdale); the noise of the forges, mills, etc., with all their vast machinery, the flames bursting from the furnaces with the burning of the coal and the smoke of the lime kiln, are altogether sublime'. quoted in Hoskins, p.217. See also Klingender, 'Coalbrookdale and the sublime', pp.86-93. Klingender suggested F.L.T. Francis's painting of the copper-mines in the Parys Mountain on Anglesey, opened in 1768, as a reasonably good illustration of the quarries in *An Evening Walk*, in 'Images of Industry', pp. 93-96.

industrial objects to the natural landscape through technical devices rather than a whole-hearted appreciation of the industrial scene as such. One of these devices was to keep them in the distance.

The poet's distance from the quarry is immediately indicated by the observer hearing 'blasted quarry thunders...remote'. The working people are seen only as 'pigmies' while 'pannier'd steeds' are dwarfed, for there lies 'the gulph profound', which implies an insurmountable distance, between them. Unlike the previous passage, their movements too could be 'descry'd' only 'dim'. The workers' hard labour is represented only as 'the various din' and 'chissel's clinking sound'. In the end, the noises the workers make during their labour, by virtue of distance, are unnoticeably superseded by their singing voices which make them even 'Glad'.

The devices of picturesque description to 'adapt' the figure to the natural landscape are typically and successfully applied in this poem. But the last item in the catalogue of the figures in the poem raises a problem that cannot easily be settled by those devices, for it is a female vagrant and war widow who has no place at all in the landscape of the picturesque except as an aesthetic object, a ruined human being with a 'rugged' appearance. It is clear that Wordsworth did not even attempt to present this figure in that way because the preceding episode of the swan, consciously offers itself as a contrast to the story of the female vagrant, and the swan is presented not as a picturesque object, but as an emblem of 'tender Cares and mild domestic Loves'. It is, therefore, not surprising to see J.R. Watson dismiss this story as a deplorable exception, declaring, 'This episode is not integrated into the poem, and clearly belongs to an entirely different set of beliefs and traditions'.<sup>44</sup> Watson is obviously right in the sense that Wordsworth here draws on a different convention of eighteenth-century poetry, but he seems unaware of the fact that the picturesque tradition that he identified as the main background of the poem, was in fact adapting itself to accommodate these very

---

<sup>44</sup>J.R. Watson, *Picturesque Landscape and English Romantic Poetry* (London, 1970), p.71.

social realities that the 'other' traditions this episode derives from are concerned to represent, and the result of that adaptation is already reflected in *An Evening Walk*.

The 'other' traditions this episode may have been affiliated with are by no means unitary.<sup>45</sup> In so far as it describes the pathetic scene of her dying from 'arrowy fire' and 'bitter shower', it inherits the convention of human suffering amid inclement weather which was exploited to evoke the feeling of pathos by many eighteenth-century poets; typical examples may be found in James Thomson's *The Seasons*. The tale of *Celadon* and *Amelia* in *Summer* and the story of a man perishing in snow in *Winter*, give 'variety and piquancy' to the descriptions of the poem.<sup>46</sup> The exaggerated indulgence in horrible experience ('Led by Fear's cold wet hand, and dogg'd by Death;/ Death, as she turns her neck the kiss to seek,/ Breaks off the dreadful kiss with angry shriek.'(ll.286-88)) is associated with Erasmus Darwin's *The Botanic Garden*.<sup>47</sup> Both types of human sufferers are strictly literary in their nature because the significance of their presence in a poem does not come from human suffering itself or the circumstance in which the suffering is brought about, but from its expected psychological effects on the readers' mind, such as pathos, sublimity, or even fear. As far as it remains a literary device with which to provoke a set of human emotions rather than conscious moral reflection, its poetic function is basically aesthetic rather than moralistic, even though the description inevitably contains objects with the potential to provoke moral reflections. On that account, this episode does not necessarily clash with the aesthetic dimension of the picturesque, for the picturesque, deploying a series of technical devices, also aims at manipulating the readers' perception of a scene, so that it induces a series of pre-set emotions from them.

---

<sup>45</sup>For the literary background of this episode, see Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Music of Humanity* (London, 1969), pp.50-67; Jacobus, pp.133-48; Averill, pp.61-68; Robert Mayo, 'The Contemporaneity of the *Lyrical Ballads*', *PMLA* 69 (1954), pp.494-506.

<sup>46</sup>Averill, p.63. Averill gives further examples of topographical poems which use this convention for a similar purpose; James Grainger, *The Sugar Cane*, Book II; Joseph Cottle, *Malvern Hill*; Cowper, *The Task*, I: 534-56.

<sup>47</sup>Jonathan Wordsworth, pp.50-51; Jacobus, pp.136-38.

But the heroine's marital status as a widow inevitably enrolls it as an example of another type of conventional poetry. 'Bereaved mothers and deserted females', Mayo notes, 'were almost a rage in the poetry departments of the 1790s'.<sup>48</sup> Oliver Goldsmith's 'The Deserted Village' (1770) is a prominent example because it includes the suffering of a female beggar and a deserted woman in its realistic description of the destruction of a rural community:

...All the bloomy flush of life is fled.  
 All but yon widowed, solitary thing  
 That feebly bends beside the plashy spring;  
 She, wretched matron, forced, in age, for bread,  
 To strip the brook with mantling cresses spread,  
 To pick her wintry faggot from the thorn,  
 To seek her nightly shed and weep till morn;  
 She only left of all the harmless train,  
 The sad historian of the pensive plain.  
 ('The Deserted Village', ll.128-36)<sup>49</sup>

Deserted, or widowed women with fatherless children are the natural recipients of humanitarian sympathy. Here in this poem, the heroine's status as a beggar provides the humanitarianism with a social background, making it a humanitarian poem of social protest. Although there is no direct mention of the woman's begging in *An Evening Walk*, it may be taken for granted, because vagrancy was virtually synonymous with begging. Wordsworth, however, particularly specified another aspect of the heroine's social identity in *An Evening Walk*: she is the widow of a soldier, a victim not only of poverty, but more fundamentally, of war:

--With backward gaze, lock'd joints, and step of pain,  
 Her seat scarce left, she strives, alas! in vain,

---

<sup>48</sup>Mayo goes on to explain, 'the subjects are all miserable, grief-stricken, and unhappy women, they are objects of sympathy and (very commonly) of humanitarian feeling, and their suffering is frequently rendered with great "simplicity" of manner and sentiment', Mayo, p.493.

<sup>49</sup>*Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, edited by Arthur Friedman, 5 vols (Oxford, 1966), vol 4, p.292.

To teach their limbs along the burning road  
 A few short steps to totter with their load,  
 Shakes her numb arm that slumbers with its weight,  
 And eyes through tears the mountain's shadeless height;  
 And bids *her soldier* come her woes to share,  
 Asleep on *Bunker's charnel hill* afar;  
 For hope's deserted well why wistful look?  
 Chok'd is the pathway, and the pitcher broke.  
 (EW, 1793, ll.247-256, my italics)

Wordsworth's allusion to the Battle of Bunker Hill in the American Revolution, which is the one and only topical reference in the poem, is by no means made casually; 'Bunker's charnel hill' was originally 'Minden's charnel plain' referring to the Seven Years' War, which had been made familiar by John Langhorne in his *The Country Justice* ('Cold on Canadian Hills, or Minden's Plain').<sup>50</sup> And that is by far the likeliest immediate source of this episode:

Perhaps on some inhospitable Shore  
 The houseless Wretch a widow'd Parent bore;  
 Who, then, no more by golden Prospects led,  
 Of the poor Indian begg'd a Leafy bed.  
 Cold on Canadian Hills, or Minden's Plain,  
 Perhaps that Parent mourn'd her Soldier slain;  
 Bent o'er her Babe, her Eye dissolv'd in Dew,  
 The big Drops mingling with the Milk He drew,  
 Gave the sad Presage of his future Years,  
 The Child of Misery, baptiz'd in Tears!<sup>51</sup>

Wordsworth's revision demonstrates how anxiously he wanted to avoid any direct echoing of Langhorne, ironically showing that he was certainly conscious of a different poetic tradition, the poetry of social protest whose moralizing rhetoric was based on the author's humanitarian impulse. The stock situation of this kind of poetry

<sup>50</sup>Jacobus, p.144. n.1. See also Roger Sharrock, 'Wordsworth and John Langhorne's "The Country Justice"', *Notes & Queries*, New Series, i (1954), pp.302-4.

<sup>51</sup>John Langhorne, *The Country Justice* (London, 1774-77), i, pp.17-18.

is that the poet's humanitarian moral is openly drawn in the hope of extracting the readers' sympathy. But the author's condescending moral advice does not usually lead to the kind of self-conscious moral reflection which would eliminate the distance between the poet and his poetic subject. That is why Jacobus argues that 'it is difficult to think of Langhorne as in any real sense the poet of "common life"; though enlightened and conscientious, his stance is scarcely one of identification' (Jacobus, p.144). Wordsworth's attitude to the object of human suffering in *An Evening Walk* is commonly thought to be similar to Langhorne's.<sup>52</sup>

Downright commiseration or conventional moral preaching is of course found nowhere. It is, however, questionable whether Wordsworth is quite detached from the suffering of the vagrant woman. For instance, the passage just following the above quotation shows that Wordsworth's objective stance has been significantly shaken:

*I see her now, deny'd to lay her head,  
On cold blue nights, in hut or straw-built shed;  
Turn to a silent smile thier sleepy cry,  
By pointing to a shooting star on high:  
I hear, while in the forest depth he sees,  
The Moon's fix'd gaze between the opening trees,  
In broken sounds her elder grief demand,  
And skyward lift, like one that prays, his hand,  
If, in that country, where he dwells afar,  
His father views that good, that kindly star;  
--Ah me! all light is mute amid the gloom,*

---

<sup>52</sup>Jacobus claims, 'The snatch of dialogue, later to be used with such poignant restraint in Wordsworth's narrative poetry, at this stage reveals only his distance from his subject' p.137. Jonathan Wordsworth also notes, 'No doubt both[Langhorne and early Wordsworth] are genuinely humanitarian, but their poetry stoops self-consciously to take account of common life, and never for a moment seems identified with the suffering it describes'. p.54. Both of these believed that the woman vagrant of *An Evening Walk* had nothing to do with his personal humanitarianism which started to show itself on the surface of his poetry only from 'Salisbury Plain Poems'. My argument is that the poetic tradition of humanitarian poetry Wordsworth drew on in this episode, apparently only in the spirit of literary experimentation, had already been engaging the moral and political questions its subjects had necessarily raised, and stood in a state of significant contradiction with the other poetic traditions amalgamated into *An Evening Walk*, which, I think, is the reason for the tension and anxiety inscribed in the descriptions of *An Evening Walk*.



*The interlunar cavern of the tomb.*

(EW, 1793, ll.257-268, my italics)

Wordsworth's response is, conventionally enough, sentimental, but surely not imperturbably objective. Wordsworth's much later gracious appreciation of Langhorne's and Goldsmith's merits in a letter to S.C.Hall is regarded by Jonathan Wordsworth as an oblique acknowledgement of his debt to them in the past, particularly in this episode:

I do not wonder that you are struck with his poem of the Country Justice--You praise it, and with discrimination--but you might have said still more in its favour. As far as I know, it is the first Poem, unless perhaps Shenstone's Schoolmistress be excepted, that fairly brought the Muse into the Company of common life, to which it comes nearer than Goldsmith, and upon which it looks with a tender and enlightened humanity... It is not without many faults in style...but these are to me trifles in a work so original and touching.<sup>53</sup>

If this could be read as Wordsworth's belated acknowledgement of his indebtedness to Langhorne in *An Evening Walk*, it is also a testimony of the depth of his early commitment to the poetry of humanitarianism and social protest. Wordsworth's strong interest in the subject of human suffering, particularly the figure of the female vagrant, even at this early phase is demonstrated at least by two more facts. One is that his tinkering with the figure of the female beggar goes back as early as 1788, even preceding much of the manuscript of *An Evening Walk*.<sup>54</sup> The other is the self-parody of his earliest poetic projects in book VIII of *The Prelude* of 1805, even if the social

---

<sup>53</sup>quoted in Jonathan Wordsworth, p.54.

<sup>54</sup>Jonathan Wordsworth, p.50. For the details about the process of composition of *An Evening Walk*, see Averill's 'Introduction', EW, p.5. According to Averill, the passage about the female vagrant was one of the three passages that had been transcribed into DC MS 7. For a more detailed account of the earliest passages of female vagrant, see Carol Landon, 'Some Sidelights on *The Prelude*', in *Bicentenary Wordsworth Studies in Memory of John Alban Finch* (Ithaca, 1970), pp.373-74.

dimension of the female vagrant passage was not exactly the target of the later Wordsworth's rather priggish strictures.<sup>55</sup>

Nevertheless, Wordsworth's self-conscious compassion for the female vagrant is undoubtedly suppressed in this poem, as Wordsworth's fastidious avoidance of any direct allusion to Langhorne significantly illustrates.<sup>56</sup> The most obvious evidence of the suppression is the abrupt change of scene from the pathetic scene of the female vagrant's death to the ostensibly peaceful description of the lake where the flock of swans are still peacefully floating on the water completely impervious to the frantic human suffering just described:

Sweet are the sounds that mingle from afar,  
 Heard by calm lakes, as peeps the folding star,  
 Where the duck dabbles mid the rustling sedge,  
 And feeding pike starts from the water's edge,  
 Or the swan stirs the reeds, his neck and bill  
 Wetting, that drip upon the water still;  
 And heron, as resounds the trodden shore,  
 Shoots upward, darting his long neck before.  
 While, by the scene compos'd, the breast subsides,  
 Nought wakens or disturbs it's tranquil tides;  
 (EW, 1793, ll.301-10)

---

<sup>55</sup>Wordsworth, in fact, was not quite covering all the aspects of the female vagrant passage in *An Evening Walk*. What is mainly parodied are its Gothic exaggeration of suffering such as the one illustrated from Erasmus Darwin:

Then, if a Widow, staggering with the blow  
 Of her distress, was known to have made her way  
 To the cold grave in which her Husband slept,  
 One night, or haply more than one, through pain  
 Or half-insensate impotence of mind  
 The fact was caught at greedily, and there  
 She was a visitant the whole year through,  
 Wetting the turf with never-ending tears,  
 And all the storms of Heaven must beat on her.  
 (*The Prelude*, VIII, ll.533-541)

<sup>56</sup>Wordsworth was not so reluctant to acknowledge allusions in the other parts of the poem; Beattie, Greewood, Tasso, M. Rossuet, Thomson, James Clark, Gilpin, Spencer, Young, even 'one of our older poets' were all acknowledged. In sharp contrast, Wordsworth was so suspiciously anxious to suppress his allusion to Langhorne that he even used the 'Errata' to make sure that the passage was revised. Jacobus, p.144. n.1.

This sudden shift has been puzzling to many critics; Sheats called it 'the most violent transition in the poem' (Sheats, p.57), while Geoffrey Hartman saw it as an illustration of Nature's lack of 'real harmony'.<sup>57</sup> Averill also found it extraordinary that the story of the female vagrant ends 'without editorial upon the tale, or transition to the narrative present', making the lake scene 'more pronounced, eerie, and moving'.<sup>58</sup> Alan Liu, after aptly describing the swan scene as 'at once supremely reposed and full of hidden disturbance', saw behind that 'hidden disturbance' the threat of the re-emergence of the female vagrant's pathetic tale 'through the surface of repose' like the char leaping for the may-fly.<sup>59</sup> To me also, the description of the swan in the lake seems to express 'a more covert eloquence of intent'.<sup>60</sup> It is to me the visual trace of Wordsworth's self-conscious moral involvement with the story of the female vagrant vaguely registered within the picturesque vision that subsumed it. The scenery of depressed and frustrated animals at noon with which this section opened, I think, betrays the same kind of submerged conflict revealed here between the aesthetic vision of the picturesque and a moral compassion for suffering people like the female vagrant.

The most obvious reason for Wordsworth's sudden retreat from moral involvement to picturesque objectivity must lie in Wordsworth's artistic need for a reconciliation of the disparate principles of the various poetic traditions he drew on. The instability inherent in the descriptions of this poem is evidence of the incompleteness of the attempted reconciliation, and it is also a reflection of the unstable status of the literary disciplines which were transforming themselves in response to the demand of the changed society.

Wordsworth's interest in suffering people, therefore, seems to precede his political awakening to radical politics; it originated in his poetic commitment to the tradition of humanitarian poetry and was temporarily defeated by his adhesion to

---

<sup>57</sup>Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry*, p.96.

<sup>58</sup>Averill, pp.62-63.

<sup>59</sup>Liu, pp.124-25.

<sup>60</sup>Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry*, p.97.

another discipline of poetry. But his subsequent commitments to radical politics were to make him perennially return to this same subject with different attitudes at each phase of his political engagement, at least during the last decade of the eighteenth-century. The first major political influence upon poetry in Wordsworth's case is expressed in his choice of suffering people in contemporary society as the most important subject of his poetry.

#### 4. *Descriptive Sketches* and the Rejection of the Picturesque

Wordsworth's commitment to the tradition of topographical poetry continues in *Descriptive Sketches*, published with *An Evening Walk*, but composed two years later during his stay in France in the autumn of 1792, the year in which Wordsworth was awakened to radical politics. The new poem, though belonging to the same *genre* as *An Evening Walk*, is entirely different; the scenery, first of all, is not the English Lake District, but the Swiss Alps. The structure of the poem is more or less, if not strictly, based on the more extensive tour he actually made. The poetic narrator is much less restrained in expressing his own opinion or mood. But more significantly, Wordsworth describes the landscape of the Alps in a completely different manner in *Descriptive Sketches*. Wordsworth's different approach to the landscape is most clearly signalled by his open rejection of the picturesque. To an impressive sunset scene (ll. 332-47), he appends the following footnote:

I had once given to these sketches the title of Picturesque; but the Alps are insulted in applying to them that term. Whoever, in attempting to describe their sublime features, should confine himself to the cold rules of painting would give his reader but a very imperfect idea of those emotions which they have the irresistible power of communicating to the most impassive imaginations. The fact is, that controuling influence, which distinguishes the Alps from all other scenery, is derived from images which disdain the pencil. Had I wished to make a picture of this scene I had thrown much less light into it. But I consulted nature and my feelings. The ideas excited by the stormy sunset I am here describing owed their sublimity to that deluge of light, or rather of fire, in which nature had wrapped the immense forms around me; any intrusion of shade, by destroying the unity of the impression, had necessarily diminished its grandeur.

In strictly technical terms, Wordsworth's application of his terms is accurate; the stormy sunset scene, flooded by the streams of light, can be more appropriately called 'sublime' than 'picturesque', for Price himself notes, distinguishing the two, that 'the

picturesque requires greater variety, and does not show itself till the dreadful thunder has rent the region, has tossed the clouds into a thousand towering forms, and opened, as it were, the recesses of the sky. A blaze of light unmixed with shade, on the same principles tends to the sublime only'.<sup>61</sup> But when he claims that the Alps is 'insulted' by 'the cold rules of painting', it surely suggests a more substantial review of his former position on the idea of the picturesque as a descriptive method. Ostensibly, the rule of picturesque description is rejected not by the poet who describes the Alps, but by the Alps themselves. The scenery of the Alps is fundamentally unsuitable for picturesque description. It is not a matter of replacing 'the picturesque' with 'the sublime' as Price would have defined them. The sublimity of the Alpine landscape not only rejects picturesque description, but also directs the way in which it should be described, for what Wordsworth consulted in *Descriptive Sketches* in lieu of the principle of the picturesque was simply 'nature' and his own 'feeling' towards it, not an alternative aesthetic category like the 'sublime', whether it derived from Burke or Price.

But we have to remember that this poem was written two years after the journey was made, which means that the new guidance of 'nature' and his own 'feeling' must have had to be reconstructed from memory. And to that extent, the guidance was not as spontaneous as Wordsworth sought to suggest in his note. Although Wordsworth was truly overwhelmed by the beauty and sublimity of the Alpine scenery,<sup>62</sup> that rapturous experience itself does not seem to have led him to feel the incompatibility of the beauty of Alps and the idea of the picturesque, nor does it seem to have prevented him from applying 'the cold rules of painting' to the description of other parts of the journey; the scenery of Lake Como, for instance, still remains a

---

<sup>61</sup>Uvedale Price, *Essays on the Picturesque*, 3 vols (London, 1810), vol I, p.85.

<sup>62</sup>Wordsworth wrote to Dorothy during the journey, for example: 'Ten thousand times in the course of this tour have I regretted the inability of my memory to retain a more strong impression of the beautiful forms before me, and again and again in quitting a fortunate station have I returned to it with the most eager avidity, with the hope of bearing away a more lively picture. At this moment when many of these landscapes are floating before my mind, I feel a high [enjoyment] in reflecting that perhaps scarce a day of my life will pass [in] which I shall not derive some happiness from these images'. *EY*, pp.35-36.

classic example of picturesque description (ll.80-119). That Wordsworth saw the scenery with a picturesque eye is even more clearly revealed in his earlier description of the same scene in his letter to Dorothy written during the journey itself:

The lake is narrow and the shadows of the mountains were early thrown across it. It was beautiful to watch them travelling up the sides of the hills for several hours, to remark *one half of a village covered with shade, and the other bright with the stongest sunshine*. It was with regret that we passed every turn of this charming path, where *every new picture was purchased by the loss of another which we would never have been tired of gazing at*. The shores of the lake consist of steeps covered with *large sweeping woods of chestnut spotted with villages*, some clinging from the summits of the advancing rocks, and others hiding themselves within their recesses. Nor was the surface of the lake less interesting than its shores; part of it glowing with the richest green and gold the reflexion of the *illuminated woods and part shaded with a soft blue tint*. *The picture was still further diversified* by the number of sails which stole lazily by us, as we paused in the woods above them. (EY, pp.33-34, my italics).

This is the only detailed description devoted to one place in the whole letter which consists mainly of a mechanical summary of their trips. It is a beautiful and well-balanced description in itself, but more remarkably it is packed with the routine items of picturesque description such as the contrast of the sunny and the shaded, the intricate display of various objects, and so on. Still more significantly, it clearly shows us that Wordsworth saw the scenery literally as a series of pictures, as if with a Claude glass.

Although this impressive description of picturesque beauty was transferred to the poem without much modification, most other descriptions of the Swiss Alps, except that of the stormy sunset, were actually drawn from Raymond de Carbonnieres's commentary on the Swiss included in his translation of William Cox's *Sketches of the Natural, Civil, and Political State of Swisserland*, as Wordsworth himself admitted. In other words, Wordsworth is heavily dependent on a secondary

literary source rather than his own personal observations for a general picture of the Alps,<sup>63</sup> which further undermines Wordsworth's claim of having consulted only his own 'feeling' and 'nature' to describe the landscape of the Alps. Wordsworth's open rejection of the picturesque, therefore, should not be taken literally.

But Wordsworth's contemptuous reference to the picturesque does seem to betoken his wish to distance himself from a certain descriptive principle he respectfully followed two years before, while composing *An Evening Walk*. For instance, Wordsworth's choice of the verb 'walk' to describe the movement of the sun ('Till the Sun walking on his western field', l.335) as in Thomson's *Summer*, ll.1620 ('Low walks the sun, and broadens by degrees'), an item of diction that had been criticized by John Scott, is another indication of Wordsworth's resolve to leave behind the descriptive restraint that he had imposed on *An Evening Walk*. Wordsworth's direct allusion to Langhorne's *The Country Justice* l.161 ('Cold on Canadian hills, or Minden's Plain'), in l.356 ('Say, who, by thinking on Canadian hills') which he had so nervously revised into 'Bunker's charnel hill afar'(l.254) in *An Evening Walk* to avoid the direct echo, also suggests how self-consciously Wordsworth intends to defy the descriptive discipline of his earlier poem. All this indicates that Wordsworth's rejection of the picturesque, in fact, is not just a matter of ignoring its technical prescriptions, but an oblique expression of Wordsworth's new attitude towards the poetic tradition he was still working in.

What Wordsworth is actually opposing here, in short, is the aesthetic ideal of the later eighteenth-century topographical poetry of which *An Evening Walk* was an example. If *An Evening Walk* faithfully followed an implicit decorum of the picturesque principle that tends to displace or 'adapt' socio-political reality in poetic description, *Descriptive Sketches* consciously violates the same decorum by loading the descriptions of natural landscape with socio-political or historical meanings

---

<sup>63</sup>Leslie Chard identified another source of idealization of the Swiss; in Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*. For the tendency to idealize the peasant Swiss, see Harrison's note 20 Chapter I, p.88.



attached to the particular places described. This meant returning to the original spirit of topographical poetry represented by Denham's *Cooper's Hill* or Pope's *Windsor Forest*, where the objects in the landscape exist only to prompt the poet's reflection on the historical or topical events associated with the objects.<sup>64</sup> Wordsworth's primary concern in composing another topographical poem was no longer to impress the critics by his expertise in handling a variety of poetic conventions in an original way, but to employ the same poetic conventions in order to communicate the poet's moral, and political message most effectively.

It is not difficult to supply the background for this change of direction; by the autumn of 1792 Wordsworth had become an enthusiastic supporter of the French Revolution freshly equipped with the idea of republicanism. Keeping this in mind, the date of composition is particularly significant in defining the nature of *Descriptive Sketches* because it was *after* his separation from Beaupuy, his political mentor, but *before* the beginning of the September Massacres, the first serious test for his newly acquired political ideas. The date would lead us to expect that an unqualified revolutionary idealism provided the framework for Wordsworth's new poetic venture. In this respect, Wordsworth's comment on *An Evening Walk* that 'the country is idealized rather than described' is more appropriate to *Descriptive Sketches* than to the earlier poem.

Revolutionary idealism is indeed at the centre of the poetic description of *Descriptive Sketches*, not only in the apostrophe to France in the last part of the poem (ll. 740-813), but also in the general perception of the landscape;<sup>65</sup> Wordsworth is

---

<sup>64</sup>See John Wilson Foster, 'A Redefinition of Topographical Poetry', *JEGP*, 69 (1970), pp. 394-406. In this article, Foster, revising Aubin's definition of topographical poetry as 'a species of composition... of which the fundamental subject is some particular landscape, to be poetically described, with the addition of such embellishment as may be supplied by historical retrospection or incidental meditation', takes Denham's *Cooper's Hill* and Pope's *Windsor Forest* as the classic examples of topographical poetry for the reason that the author's 'moral reflection is given free rein against a rural setting'. Although both Aubin and Foster saw topographical poetry as a marriage of morality and the pictorial design, Foster takes the former as the defining quality of the genre, whereas Aubin thinks the opposite.

<sup>65</sup>Eric Birdsall, 'Nature and Society in *Descriptive Sketches*', *Modern Philology* (August 1986), pp. 39-52 (p. 42).

'humanizing' the landscape in his new 'revolutionary style' as Sheats appropriately put it (Sheats, pp.60-61). What he is aiming at in his description of landscape is no longer the morally dubious indulgence in 'natural' beauty, but the discovery of natural images that correspond to his political ideal. His intent is made clear even in the opening passages:

Were there, below, a spot of holy ground,  
By Pain and her sad family unfound,  
Sure, Nature's GOD that spot to man had giv'n,  
(*DS*, 1793, ll.1-3)

Wordsworth, from the very outset, is looking for 'a spot of holy ground/ By Pain and her sad family unfound'; still conventional in its use of personification and of a terminology with religious implications, still drawing on the traditional theme of 'retirement' into nature, Wordsworth's journey has a very specific goal ahead--the discovery of an ideal human community that he believed to have existed among the Swiss Alps. Wordsworth's quest for an ideal human existence in nature, however, is not an expression of disillusionment in society, as is so often the case with his later poetry, but of a positive wish to justify his revolutionary values through the image of Nature. What he wanted to achieve in the poem was to establish that the Swiss Alps - its sublime beauty of natural landscape and its inhabitants' way of life - as a natural counterpart to the revolutionary government of France, which was trying to defend itself from the neighbouring monarchies. To find an ultimate reference for the revolutionary government of France in Nature was to endow her with moral superiority over the alliance of the monarchies, which may well have seemed to Wordsworth his own contribution to the struggle to defend the Revolution.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, Wordsworth's appeal to Nature also embodied the millenarian hopes for the

---

<sup>66</sup>To draw on natural law was the common tactic to defend the revolution among political theorists including Rousseau and Paine.

Revolution which were then commonly held by the oppressed.<sup>67</sup> The landscape of the Alps, where the ideal human community is located, should therefore be at once a natural prototype of the revolutionary ideal and the projection of its ultimate materialization.

Wordsworth's inclination towards idealization is most typically found in his descriptions of the figures in the landscape; they are either idealistic or too conventionally literary. Wordsworth's presentation of the people in the Alps begins with an unearthly image of an old man playing 'an aged lyre' surrounded by his grandchildren (ll. 168-175). This rough sketch, however, is more significant as a contrasting introduction to the story of the Grison Gypsy, one of the two counterparts of the female vagrant story of *An Evening Walk*. Wordsworth's political motivation, however, does not seem to make the story of human suffering more interesting. Wordsworth did not choose to develop its thematic potential as political propaganda as he was to do in a couple of years' time in the 'Salisbury Plain Poems' or in his memorable encounter with the 'hunger-bitten girl' of book IX of *The Prelude*. He offers it only as another example of a conventional pathetic story in a topographical poem.<sup>68</sup> Emphasis falls on exposure to the elements, while its Gothic character is strengthened by their bloody death at the hand of 'the famish'd wolf' which was attracted by the baby's cry. The atmosphere of horror, artificially created by 'the Water-spirits', 'death-dog', and 'Havoc', is evidence of the critical distance strictly kept between the poet and his suffering objects. The poet's objective stance is undisturbed throughout the story.

The situation is only slightly different in the second story of human suffering, the episode describing the death of the chamois-chaser (ll. 366-413). The gothic cliché, the personification of natural objects in the Grison Gypsy episode, is here replaced by

---

<sup>67</sup>J.F. Turner, "'Various Journey, Sad and Slow': Wordsworth's *Descriptive Sketches* (1791-2) and the Lure of Pastoral", *Durham University Journal*, 69 (New Series 38), pp. 38-51 (p. 46).

<sup>68</sup>Birdsall dismisses the story of Grison Gypsy, along with that of the Chamois-chaser, as 'excessive gothic horror', whereas Averill finds in it something of 'sublime experience' in a Burkean sense. Birdsall, p. 42. Averill, pp. 68-70.

a more realistic description of the painful experience of dying in snow. The addition of his family's suffering also makes the story more credible. The gothic elements remaining in the suggestion of the bloody death of the Chamois-chaser at the hands of the eagle and his son's future discovery of his father's bones also suggest that Thomsonian realism was not sought for here. A seemingly casual simile in the earlier passage ('Shy as the jealous chamois, Freedom flies,' l.326) makes us even consider the possibility of a sort of political allegory. But the Chamois-chaser episode, on the whole, does not seem to have been intended as more than a conventional vignette of a pathetic object. If these episodes have any significance more than their conventional counterparts, it would be as a foil to highlight the ideal human existence that Wordsworth is looking for in the Alps, for Wordsworth's main concern lies in offering a positive demonstration of revolutionary virtue rather than in demonstrating social evils and economic hardship.

What is interesting in the sequence of the description of figures is that the ideal scenes and the negative scenes are presented alternately;<sup>69</sup> a rough sketch of an old man(l.168-175) is followed by the story of Grison gypsy. After 'a sober scene' from 'a softer prospect'(l.263, l.268) that follows the gypsy scene, there appears a scene of a small cottage which is located 'mid savage scene':

There with his infants man undaunted creeps  
 And hangs his small wood-hut upon the steeps.  
 A garden-plot the desert air perfumes,  
 Mid the dark pines a little orchard blooms,  
 A zig-zag path from the domestic skiff  
 Threading the painful cragg surmounts the cliff.  
 (DS, 1793, ll. 293-298)

What is striking in this picture is the contrast between the image of domesticity and that of untamed wild nature; wood-hut/ the steeps, a garden-plot/ the desert, orchard

---

<sup>69</sup>Birdsall also underlines the 'repeated pattern of hope and disappointment' as the central structure of the poem that marks the ambivalence of Wordsworth's political optimism. p.44-47.

blooms/ the dark pines, the domestic skiff/ the painful cragg. The contradictory need is to place the human community in wild nature in such a way that allows it to preserve its distinctive social nature without infringing the wildness of nature. The combination of the normally incompatible images is rather violently effected here. The balance of man and nature is so precariously maintained that it is far short of being an example of a universally applicable form of human existence in nature that can be offered as an illustration of the Revolutionary ideal.<sup>70</sup> The human beings of the scene are presented as absolutely aloof from the rest of society, free from any social influence:

--Before those hermit doors, that never know  
 The face of traveller passing to and fro,  
 No peasant leans upon his pole, to tell  
 For whom at morning toll'd the funeral bell,  
 Their watch-dog ne'er his angry bark forgoes,  
 Touch'd by the begger's moan of human woes,  
 The grassy seat beneath their casement shade  
 The pilgrim's wisful eye hath never stay'd.  
 (DS, 1793, ll.299-306)

What this reveals, ironically, is how close Wordsworth stayed to the society he had supposedly left behind even when looking at 'the savage scene', or how deeply 'the savage scene' is coloured by Wordsworth's memory of the human evils it is supposed to be completely immune from. It is strange that Wordsworth's persistent social consciousness as exemplified here is unconnected with his story of human suffering, and both episodes of human suffering are not fuelled by the humanitarian passion that had been tantalizingly suppressed from the surface of the poem in *An Evening Walk*. Wordsworth's description of the Alps is dominated instead by his strong desire for

---

<sup>70</sup>Birdsall consistently emphasizes the precariousness of Wordsworth's political optimism in comparison with Virgil, Denham, and Pope. p.49. Turner also makes a similar point: 'the rosy summits may glow but the valleys in which we live and move are sombre. The journey has been an education to the man who set out, following the lure of hope, merely to ease the sorrows of his heart; hope is not so easy to satisfy as the creators of pastoral might fancy'. Turner, p.47.

natural objects which would counterbalance all human evils. After the chamois-chaser episode, passages of similar intent follow:

--And sure there is a secret Power that reigns  
 Here, where no trace of man the spot profanes,  
 Nought but the herds that pasturing upward creep,  
 Hung dim-discover'd from the dangerous steep,  
 Or summer hamlet, flat and bare, on high  
 Suspended, mid the quiet of the sky.  
 How still! no irreligious sound or sight  
 Rouzes the soul from her severe delight.  
 (DS, 1793, ll.424-431)

As far as the descriptive presentation of the figures is concerned, *Descriptive Sketches* does not go further than this. The two stories of suffering figures are presented in a rather more conventional way, while the other descriptions of figures are deeply overshadowed by the poet's desire for the ideal human community as the natural justification of his revolutionary ideals.

Without being mediated through the conventions of topographical poetry, Wordsworth's moral message is straightforwardly conveyed in the later part of the poem. From l. 442, perhaps with the exception of the description of the 'Abbey of Einsiedlen' (ll.643-679), Wordsworth's narration is by and large irrelevant to the main body of the topographical description. What is offered instead are the poet's moral reflections on binary oppositions of blessed past/ miserable present, human vice/ natural virtue, the millenarian expectation of the future, the benevolence of natural law, all of which are the common currency of contemporary political philosophy, and may well have constituted the agenda of his recent discussions with Michel Beaupuy.

What is interesting in the context of the topographical poetry, however, are the topical allusions in relation to particular places. The reference to the heroic battle of the Swiss against the invading Austrians is particularly apt, because France was then under threat from Austria. The passage reflects Wordsworth's anxious support for the civil government of France. The allusion to the enslaved Savoyards is also significant

in that it sheds light on Wordsworth's new attitude towards the landscape. After vivid descriptions of Monc Blanc, he says:

At such an hour I heav'd the human sigh,  
 When roar'd the sullen Arve in anger by,  
 That not for thee, delicious vale! unfold  
 Thy reddening orchards, and they fields of gold;  
 That thou, the slave of slaves, art doom'd to pine,  
 While *no Italian arts their charms combine*  
*To teach the skirt of thy dark cloud to shine;*  
 For thy poor babes that , hurrying from the door,  
 With pale-blue hands, and eyes that fix'd implore,  
 Dead muttering lips, and hair of hungry white,  
 Besiege the traveller whom they half affright.  
 (DS, 1793, ll. 702-712, my italics)

Wordsworth no longer restrains himself from revealing his emotion towards the objects being described. But he goes further than that in this passage; he wants to demonstrate that 'the human sigh' he utters has nothing to do with the indulgence in melancholy in a conventional poem of sentimentalism such as Gray's *Elegy*. His feeling of sadness is clearly directed towards the deplorable reality of the political suppression the Savoyards are subjected to, which could not possibly be eclipsed by the beauty of the landscape. Wordsworth's 'picturesque eyes' of *An Evening Walk* are now replaced by his politically awakened eyes, which even the 'charm' of 'the Italian arts' cannot deceive. What should be seen in the landscape are not the deceptive images of affluence on the surface of the landscape, but the reality of abject poverty hidden behind it. In this moment he reconfirms his earlier rejection of the picturesque descriptive principle, but with much clearer understanding of the real reason for it. It was not because the landscape of the Alps was aesthetically unsuitable for picturesque description in the first place, but because the poetic impulse behind *Descriptive Sketches* is now driven by a revolutionary enthusiasm that refuses to be confined within the constraints of the picturesque discipline.

His quest for an ideal human existence in nature, however, turns out to be a failure. What he was looking for in the Alps was in fact to be found in the France he left behind. Crossing France, he had already encountered an example of an ideal human community:

Kind Nature's charities his steps attend,  
 In every babbling brook he finds a friend,  
 While chast'ning thoughts of sweetest use, bestow'd  
 By Wisdom, moralize his pensive road.  
 Host of his welcome inn, the noon-tide bow'r,  
 To his spare meal he calls the passing poor;  
 He views the Sun uprear his golden fire,  
 Or sink, with heart alive like Memnon's lyre;  
 Blesses the Moon that comes with kindest ray  
 To light him shaken by his viewless way.  
 With bashful fear no cottage children steal  
 From him, a brother at the cottage meal,  
 His humble looks no shy restraint impart,  
 Around him plays at will the virgin heart.  
 While unsuspected wheels the village dance,  
 The maidens eye him with inquiring glance,  
 Much wondering what sad stroke of crazing Care  
 Or desperate Love could lead a wander there.  
 (DS, 1793, ll.27-44)

The journey through the Alps traces the gradual recognition that such a community cannot be discovered in the Alps. Just as he crosses the Alps unknowingly in book VI of *The Prelude*, he has already found the ideal society unwittingly even before he started his journey.<sup>71</sup> It is therefore not surprising to see Wordsworth fervently celebrate France as mankind's best hope for the future:

---

<sup>71</sup>This is borne out by Wordsworth's immediate observation during the journey. In the letter to Dorothy already quoted above, Wordsworth writes:

My partiality to Swisserland excited by its natural charms induces me to hope that the manners of its inhabitants are amiable, but at the same time I cannot help frequently contrasting them with those of the French, and as far as I have had opportunity to observe they lose very much by the comparison. We not only found



--And thou! fair favoured region! which my soul  
 Shall love, 'till Life had broke her golden bowl,  
 Till Death's cold touch her cistern-wheel assail,  
 And vain regret and vain desire shall fail;

...

Lo! from th' innocuous flames, a lovely birth!  
 With it's own Virtues springs another earth:  
 Nature, as in her prime, her virgin reign  
 Begins, and Love and Truth compose her train;  
 With pulseless hand, and fix'd unwearied gaze,  
 Unbreathing Justice her still beam surveys:  
 (DS, 1793, ll. 740-43, 782-87)

Wordsworth's failure in his quest for an ideal human community in the Alps seems to parallel his failure to accommodate his new poetic impulse within the tradition of topographic poetry. It induces him, first of all, to reject the discipline of the picturesque. Inevitably, Wordsworth tends to come closer to the tradition of topographical poetry in which the author's social, political reflection is given priority over the natural description itself, the tradition represented by Denham's *Cooper's Hill* and Pope's *Windsor Forest*. Another possible option for Wordsworth was to exploit the thematic possibility of the stories of human suffering as political propaganda. But none of these possibilities was fully explored, for his new political motivation required fundamentally a whole new form of poetry rather than further adaptation of existing traditions. Wordsworth's journey, in the light of his poetic history, was an educational process during which he recognized the fundamental unsuitability of topographical poetry as a poetic form that could accommodate his already awakened political idealism.

---

the French a much less imposing people, but that politeness diffused thro the lowest ranks had an air so engaging, that you could scarce attribute it to any other cause than real benevolence. (EY, p.36)

### 5. The 1794 Revision of *An Evening Walk*

In the letter addressed to Mathews written on 23 May 1794 where he declared himself a member 'of that odious class of men called democrats', Wordsworth also made a brief comment on the two poems published in the previous year:

I am at present nearly quite at leisure, so that with industry I think I can perform my share. I say nearly at leisure, for I am not quite so as I am correcting and considerably adding to those poems which I published in your absence. It was with great reluctance I huddled up those two little works and sent them into the world in so imperfect a state. But as I had done nothing by which to distinguish myself at the university, I thought these little things might shew that I could do something. They have been treated with unmerited contempt by some of the periodical publications, and others have spoken in higher terms of them than they deserve. (*EY*, pp.119-20)

Wordsworth's negative reference to the two published poems is neither a pretentious gesture of modesty, nor a self-consoling defence against their lukewarm reception among the critics. That Wordsworth by then was genuinely unhappy with the state of the two poems is evidenced by the extent of the revisions made to the two poems, particularly *An Evening Walk*, which was doubled in length after the revision. It may seem rather strange that *An Evening Walk*, not *Descriptive Sketches*, was the poem which received the more substantial correction and addition, for the former can be credited with a more solid structure and more consistent style of description as a topographical poem than the latter. It implies that the motivation for his revision was not exactly its lack of literary merit as a topographical poem. As is shown in the 'Salisbury Plain poems', the first version of which was already finished by then, Wordsworth was already moving towards a narrative poetry of social protest from a topographical poetry of picturesque description. It was an inevitable consequence of his realization that the political message he now wanted to articulate through poetic compositions was in principle suppressed within the formula of topographical poetry.

If *Descriptive Sketches* was an attempt to compose another kind of topographical poem that would embrace his already awakened revolutionary idealism, the 1794 revision of *An Evening Walk* is an attempt to voice the subdued moral passion in the 1793 text through a clearer understanding of the social context in which it is placed. Wordsworth does not deny the picturesque as a descriptive discipline as he did in *Descriptive Sketches*, but he recasts each description to maximize its potentially moral elements; 'landscape', in Averill's words, 'becomes *paysage moralise*'.<sup>72</sup> What controls the narration, therefore, is no longer Wordsworth's aesthetic sensibility, but his sense of moral, political responsibility.

The revision, thus oriented, brought about, first of all, a significant change in the status of the poetic narrator. The narrator of *An Evening Walk* of 1793 was no more than an observer, a describer with picturesque eyes, a spectator *ab extra*. His emotion at the opening, 'Sad tides of joy from Melancholy's hand' (*EW*, 1793, l.22) was no more than a conventional device of the poetry of sentimentalism, and was in fact irrelevant to the subsequent descriptions themselves. The 'wounded heart' of the narrator who 'plods o'er hills and vales his road forlorn' (*DS*, 1793, ll.14-15) does not really fit well with the following rhetoric of political idealism. But the introduction of the 'oppressed and foiled' traveller makes a significant difference, creating a new context for the following descriptions:

When he who long with languid steps had toiled  
 Across the slippery moor, oppressed and foiled,  
 Sunk down and found no rest, while as he turns,  
 The fervid earth his languid body burns,  
 Nor can his weak arm faintly lifted chase  
 The insect host that gather round his face,  
 And join their murmurs to the tedious sound  
 Of seeds of bursting furze that crackle round,  
 While his faint dog extended on the heath  
 Pants in his ear as he has heard the breath

---

<sup>72</sup>Averill, 'Introduction', *EW*, p.14.

Of cool gales palpitate where Darkness weaves  
 O'er the brown pool a shade of alder leaves;  
 (EW, 1794, ll.57-68)

Obviously, it is more than possible to connect this description of gloomy frustration and irritating anxiety with Wordsworth's sense of political frustration in 1794, for British radicals were then under the severest persecution from the Government while France was going through the nightmare of the Reign of Terror, and Wordsworth had failed so far to find a suitable place for himself in the British reform movement. This was exactly the moment his volatile republicanism was being sobered by Godwinism after witnessing the practical results of republicanism in the real politics of both France and Britain. In this light, 'an awful grief', 'of wider range' felt by a 'tamed heart', and the representation of the narrator as one 'oppressed and foiled', may well be understood as the expression of Wordsworth's political mood. More significant as a revision, however, is that the traveller's feeling of frustration and anxiety is placed just before the description of the 'troubled' animals 'in mute distress', smoothly mediated by another animal, 'his faint dog'. Furthermore, the depiction of the suffering animals is immediately followed by the italicized 'I' who is wandering around with his 'devious feet', hoping that 'morbid passion' would be sanctified by benevolent nature. The effect of the revision is clear enough; the narrator or 'the poet' who is wandering around with no definite purpose or destination has become the more personal 'I' who is consciously looking for a sort of therapy in Nature. The sequence that begins with the conventional 'I wander'(l. 23) and ends with another 'I' affected by 'morbid passion' makes the whole passage, which had been only vaguely presented as an oblique projection of the poet's feelings, more plainly an effusion of Wordsworth's subjective state of mind whether political or not. In so doing, Wordsworth managed to transform the conventional device of the wandering poet's 'Melancholy' into something more personal, and possibly more political as well.

Wordsworth's efforts to endow the scenes with moral significance may be compared with the similar attempts made in *Descriptive Sketches*, and eventually with

the tradition of topographical poetry represented by Denham and Pope. What *Descriptive Sketches*, *Windsor Forest*, and *Cooper's Hill* have in common is that contemporary topical meaning or historical significance are attached to the particular places the narrator happens to see. What differentiates the revision of 1794 from these poems is that the Wordsworth of 1794 is trying to transform what were originally presented simply as aesthetic objects into something morally significant, rather than simply recovering the hidden meaning from the landscape. The cascade scene, for instance, had been used to resolve the unidentified tension of the narrative in the 1793 version. In 1794, apart from exercising a clearer balming effect upon the 'T's troubled mind, it is now followed by some moral reflections that are pretty independent of the scene itself:

Harmonious thoughts, a soul by Truth refined,  
 Entire affection for all human kind;  
 A heart that vibrates evermore, awake  
 To feeling for all forms that Life can take,  
 That wider still its sympathy extends,  
 And sees not any line where being ends;  
 Sees sense, through Nature's rudest forms betrayed,  
 Tremble obscure in foundation, rock, and shade;  
 And while a secret power those forms endears  
 Their social accents never vainly hears.  
 (EW, 1794, ll.123-132)

This clearly foreshadows the natural world of 'Tintern Abbey' in which Wordsworth finds 'one life' encompassing (or forgetting) all natural and social phenomena. Wordsworth's view on nature in the above, of course, is as yet far short of the intensity and depth of the later natural philosophy, but it shows a significant advance in that direction. Natural landscape is no longer merely a display of aesthetically interesting objects, but the receptacle of moral philosophical ideas, and those ideas are deeply tinted with his humanitarian impulse.

More prominent in the revision than the natural philosophy is the tendency to moralize natural objects, particularly the objects that could be associated with human life if divorced from the descriptive discipline of the picturesque. The description of a cock is one of the objects that is given some moral significance. It was originally drawn from a literary source as Wordsworth himself noted in the text. A cock may well be affiliated with the farming life of the rural poor as the horses, sheep, and deer were in an earlier scene. But its unusually close-up description had presented it strictly as an aesthetic object drawn from literary sources. Wordsworth does not make it a more realistic object, but makes it something of moral value by presenting the 'floating pomp of plumage Nature gave'(l. 260) as the emblem of 'Love of Nature'. At the end of the scene, we come across what are to become very familiar phrases, 'From love of Nature love of Virtue flows,/ And hand in hand with Virtue Pleasure goes' (ll. 261-62).

Wordsworth's desire to 're-humanize' the landscape which had been 'de-humanized' by the picturesque discipline is also found in the revision of the quarry scene (ll. 263-87). The long distance between the narrator and the labourers remains unchanged, but an entirely new story of human suffering is added:

At the still entrance, when the moon-beams smile  
 And gild the scattered instruments of toil,  
 And far within, from black gigantic walls  
 O'er the sharp craggs in masses darkness falls,  
 There, led by Sorrow, does a maiden go  
 Through sightless gulphs, in audible and slow,  
 To that sad spot her bosomed pain to tell  
 Where, crushed by falling rocks, her lover fell,  
 Fell while all warm with passion's thrilling fires;  
 She chid the slow moon, "lingering her desires,"  
 That very moon which, ere she reached her wane,  
 Led her to these deep clefts to break the reign  
 Of Peace with anguish exquisite as vain.  
 (EW, 1794, ll. 275-287)

Interestingly, the added passage itself is a typical example of the sentimental story of a deserted woman so common in eighteenth-century sentimental literature, the most fitting object for Wordsworth's parody of his past commitment to the convention of human suffering in *The Prelude*. But its effect in this particular context is by no means conventional. What is significant, first of all, is the presence of a woman in the 'sightless gulphs' (in the earlier lines, 'the gulph profound') which appeared to separate the people working in the quarry from the narrator observing the scene so decisively. Beyond the 'gulph', the working people existed only as the spots and sounds that made an illusory scene of 'Glad' atmosphere. But the introduction of a woman who knew one of the 'spots' into that very 'gulph' suddenly eliminates the psychological distance between the narrator and the working people. Accordingly, the light, even frivolous image of 'the enormous hive' in which 'Echo dallies with the various din' abruptly becomes unsustainable and metamorphoses itself into an antithetically grim and hostile image of 'black gigantic walls/ O'er the sharp craggs'. More importantly, it is no longer possible to camouflage the pain and danger of their labour with the delusively merry sounds so that the reality of their painful business shockingly re-emerges on the surface of the text in the death of her labourer lover.

Wordsworth's bold juxtaposition of two different conventional descriptions, as violent as the one in the swan-female vagrant scene, produces an effect that is mutually beneficial; the two conventional sequences, very unrealistic in their own right, are combined to bring back the dimension of social, domestic reality to each sequence, with the result that the descriptive constraint of the picturesque applied to the quarry scene is completely neutralized. The addition of another story of human suffering also strengthens the position of the female vagrant story in the overall structure of the poem, for the presence of the suffering people is no longer easily dismissable as a technical mistake that disturbs the unity of the poem.

Another interesting deployment of literary convention is found in the episode of the local ghost, which had been no more than a familiar Gothic element in topographical writings such as James Clarke's *Survey of the Lakes of Cumberland*,

*Westmoreland, and Lancashire*. Apparently, its sole function was to 'amuse the reader'. What the revision, or rather the addition in this case, of 1794, did, however, is not only to 'amuse the reader', but more significantly to convey Wordsworth's anti-war sentiment. Wordsworth, first of all, introduces the shepherd who is scared at the strange noises made by 'A desperate form'. Secondly, the violent movements and noises of the 'apparitions' are presented as the shadow image of fighting warriors, a lingering memory of the past war. The point of the revision is concentrated in the poet's question, repeated twice like a refrain; 'Why, shepherds, tremble thus with new alarms/ As if ye heard the din of civil arms?'. This is certainly a paradoxical comment because the rural poor like the shepherd were by no means excused from the crimping and impressment, the most immediate threat to their normal lives the war has brought about.<sup>73</sup> The point of the whole episode is to disclose the evil of the Anglo-French war now in progress by the contrast of the pastoral world of the shepherd and the destructive realm of 'A horseman skeleton of giant mould'. The poet's reassuring words, - 'Peace now is yours; the brother swains that view/ Romantic Tiviot's rocks are still as you./ Lighted by flames flushed from the torch of War,/ No more that beacon sends dismay afar' (ll. 368-71) - however, turn out to be illusive when the ghost of the 'horseman', the vengeful spirit of war, returns to claim his realm:

There rent the fen before him and --behold,  
 A horseman skeleton of giant mould  
 Half-shown, erect, his mighty bones he rears,  
 An unknown being of forgotten years,  
 Or of that race who, ere these mountain shades  
 Called Joy and Beauty to their watry glades,  
 Rushed o'er the billowy swamps like Tempests, born  
 On steeds that trampled to the bugle horn  
 And with one [    ] groan in armies sunk.--  
 Mute Havoc smiling grimly backward slunk.  
 Low-muttering o'er the earth that gasped beneath,

---

<sup>73</sup>For the impressment during the 1790s, see Clive Emsley, *British Society and the French Wars 1793-1815* (London, 1979), pp. 33-40.



Hung the dim shapes of Solitude and Death,  
 And all was theirs save that the plover passed  
 With screams and bittern blew his hollow blas(t).  
 (EW, 1794, ll.396-409)

Wordsworth is here effectively employing the conventional theme of a local ghost and an equally conventional personification to create a powerful anti-war message. But the greater significance of this addition in the context of this poem comes from its placement just before the swan-female vagrant sequence; preshadowing the abrupt transition from peaceful nature to the destructive social reality of the female vagrant. This episode provides the context in which the following allusion to Langhorne, 'Bunker's charnel hill afar', is given a much stronger place. The result is that all those fluctuation between peace and violence, which had been no more than a symptom of an uncomfortable combination of disparate poetic conventions, are now established as a legitimate structure that presents the whole sequence as an unmistakable articulation of anti-war propaganda.

Wordsworth's revisions so far seem to be made consistently in order to justify and strengthen the status of the female vagrant story in the general configuration of the poem. In other words, the ultimate aim of the revision was to re-introduce into the landscape the social reality of the poor such as their suffering from poverty, painful labour, the danger of impressment. Wordsworth's superfluous pretence of factuality in the footnote added to the female vagrant story, which is in fact groundless, is yet another sign of the self-same tendency. And this tendency did change the nature of the poetical landscape in a fundamental way. The ambivalent and melancholy ending of the original *An Evening Walk* has become the heart-warming sketch of a variety of domestic sights concerning 'the cottage poor' that is deeply coloured by the poet's humanitarian passion. What he sees and thinks about in the landscape is not picturesque beauty but 'human being's various state'. Ultimately, most of the revisions were discarded in the subsequent edition of 1815. After the experiment with *Descriptive Sketches*, he had already reached a more direct form of social protest

poetry and the first version of the 'Salisbury Plain poem' had long been finished by the time this revision was made.

## Chapter IV: The Poetry of the Poor(I), 'A Soldier's Wife': from Political Protest to the Politics of Nature

### 1. Wordsworth and the Contemporary Debates on War

Wordsworth's publication of the two topographical poems was an ambitious start to his literary career and marked a significant literary achievement, but he did not find it satisfactory for long. He soon revised the poems realizing that his political passion had been strapped within the constraints of a poetic genre and must now be released and accommodated into his literary project more fully. His radical politics, not surprisingly, prompted him to pick up the story of a soldier's widow from *An Evening Walk* and take it as the main subject of the next project. Wordsworth's choice is understandable because the suffering of the poor, a traditional subject of humanitarian verse in itself, was particularly severe after the outbreak of war, epitomizing social and political problems brought about by the war. If he wanted to articulate his political sentiments through his literary projects, the story of a soldier's widow must have seemed the most convenient vehicle to hand.

If Wordsworth failed to find a place for himself in the current parliamentary reform movement either in terms of his political theory or through his actual participation in radical societies, Wordsworth's poetic treatment of a war-widow led him closer to the main-stream political debates of that time. In the last decade of the eighteenth century, there were four main political issues; the abolition of the slave trade, the repeal of the Test act, parliamentary reform, and the war. After the outbreak of war in February 1793, however, the war itself constituted the predominant agenda for political debates. The ideological confrontation over the French Revolution during 1791-92, typically represented by the Burke-Paine debate, was virtually replaced by the debate on the lawfulness of the war as soon as it broke out.

At the beginning of 1793, the British parliamentary reform movement was in disarray; the activities of the radical societies such as SCI and LCS were effectively

suppressed by pro-government organizations like the 'Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers' and Thomas Paine was outlawed in December 1792. Grey's motion on 6 May 1793 for parliamentary reform, which was representative of all the petitions organized by the liberal and radical societies during the preceding months, was overwhelmingly defeated, which proved their official strategy, the petition to parliament, ineffective. The sole option left for the reformers was a National Convention, which was subsequently summoned in December 1793, but soon dispersed by the authorities without having any significant political effect. As far as the reform movement was concerned, the first year of the Napoleonic war was characterized by repeated frustration and irrevocable decline (Goodwin, pp.268-306). The only way for the reform movement to regain the momentum in this hostile atmosphere was to conduct an anti-war campaign which would justify their ideological position and keep alive the cause of parliamentary reform.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the focus of the political debate, on the part of the reformers, was shifted from the question of whether or not the British political system needed reform to the more practical question of whether or not the current war was really 'just and necessary'.

The anti-war arguments, however, were offered in a defensive manner from the very start because they were framed in response to pro-government propaganda; reformers responded to them more for political survival rather than with the positive belief that they could actually stop the war. Neither were they well served by the current political situation both in Britain and in France.

The present war, according to the advocates of the war, was 'the war of principle'; the primary aim of military action was to stop the spread of the vicious ideas of republicanism and restore legitimate monarchical government to France. 'It is most

---

<sup>1</sup>Goodwin notes, 'The only outlet for radical activity seemed to be the organization of public meetings of protest against the economic privations of the poor resulting from the war against France', p.282. The public meetings of that kind, however, did not take place until 1795 when the radical movement was resuscitated by the triumph at the Treason Trial and the economic consequence of the war was more vividly felt through the scarcity brought about by the poor harvest.

manifest,' Pitt argued on the day of declaration of war, 'they(the French government) mean to carry their principles into every nation, without exception, subvert and destroy every government, and to plant on their ruins their sacred tree of liberty.'<sup>2</sup> The point of his argument is two-fold. First, the French revolutionary principle is anarchistic and subversive in itself, and incompatible with 'all laws, human and divine'. This purely ideological definition of the war was given in a more typical form by Burke when he claimed: 'If I conceive rightly of the spirit of the present combination, it is not at war with France, but with jacobinism...We are at war with a *principle*, and with an example, which there is no shutting out by fortresses, or excluding by territorial limits. No lines of demarcation can bound the Jacobin empire. It must be extirpated in the place of its origin, or it will not be confined to that place.'<sup>3</sup> Secondly, the French government, according to Pitt, was trying to impose its principles upon other nations by military force, so that the security of the European countries including Britain was being seriously threatened. This implies the principle of self-determination and independence; the people of a nation have a right to choose their form of government, and the internal affairs of a nation should not be interfered with. If this is threatened, any country has a right of self-defence, and the present war could be represented as a self-defence of the European monarchical countries against the expansionism of revolutionary France. The evidence for this particular argument was 'The Decree of Fraternity' issued on 19 November 1792 in which the French government offered 'aid' to all oppressed peoples in their struggles to recover their liberty. Apparently, this was an obvious expression of expansionism on the part of the French revolutionary government. But when we remember that 'The Decree of Fraternity' was preceded by the 'Brunswick Manifesto' issued on 25 July 1792 that constituted a straightforward

---

<sup>2</sup>William Pitt, 'Speech on the King's Message for an Augmentation of the Forces, House of Commons', quoted in Cobban, p.455.

<sup>3</sup>Edmund Burke, 'Letter to the Comte de Mercy', *Correspondence*, IV, pp.138-40. quoted in Cobban, pp. 458-59.

military threat to the French government, it is not easy to decide which was self-defence and which was aggrandizement.

Pitt's theory of French expansionism was quickly rebutted by Fox who argued in his speech to the House of Commons that 'it is not for the honour or interest of Great Britain to make war upon France on account of the internal circumstances of that country, for the purpose either of suppressing or punishing any opinions and principles, however pernicious in their tendency, which may prevail there, or of establishing among the French people any particular form of government.'<sup>4</sup> Fox went on to argue in the same speech that any complaint against the French government was not a good enough justification of the war unless it was preceded by a serious negotiation,<sup>5</sup> and pointed out also the inconsistency of the government in its sudden concern for the security of Europe in contrast to its silence about the invasion of Poland in the previous year. Absent from Fox's refutation is any statement of his position on the revolutionary principle itself. One of the main strategic aims in the ideological onslaught of the pro-war lobby was to discredit the reformers' belief that the origin of the revolutionary principle was Britain herself and that fraternity with the French revolutionary government was in fact a gesture of support for the propagation of the British liberty that they had been proud of since the Glorious Revolution.<sup>6</sup> Fraternity with a foreign government which was engaged in war with Britain, for whatever reason, naturally became something very close to treason, and the series of violent events in France from the September massacres to the purge of the Girondins in May 1793 also strengthened the pro-war argument. Fox's argument was by no means

---

<sup>4</sup>Charles James Fox, 'Resolutions against the war with France' 18 Feb. 1793, in *English Historical Documents: 1783-1832*, edited by A. Aspinall, A. and E. Smith (London, 1959), p. 885.

<sup>5</sup>Samuel Taylor Coleridge reiterated the same point after 3 years in his lecture 'On the Present War', saying 'no war could be just, unless it had been preceded by sincere negotiation for the permanence of Peace', *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Lectures 1795; On Politics and Religion*, edited by Lewis Patton and Peter Mann, (London, 1971), p. 58.

<sup>6</sup>An anonymous author, probably Daniel Isaac Eaton, claimed 'when the combined Powers shall have established what they call Order and Tranquillity in France, they will probably discover that there is too much Jacobinism in the English Constitution and lend their human interference to relieve us also from this dangerous evil'. quoted in Emsley, p. 19.

representative of all the opposition to the war, but his understandable silence on the revolutionary principle itself is typical of all subsequent anti-war arguments; most of the anti-war protests stick to the position that the French military initiative was a form of self-defence rather than aggrandizement, trying to put the strictest possible limitations on the conditions in which war could be justified,<sup>7</sup> and choose not to engage with the value of the revolutionary principles themselves.<sup>8</sup>

The other equally important aspect of the debate is its economic dimension. The motivation of the war on the British side was not exclusively ideological even from the start; when war was declared, the acquisition of the French colonies in the West Indies was an objective as important as the overthrow of the revolutionary government of France. The British military operation, therefore, was divided into two, one for the offensive on the frontline of France and the other for the conquest of the French colonies in the West Indies, neither of which were quite as successful as the British government would have hoped. Pitt and Dundas originally planned an intensive and short military operation with maximum political and economical gain. Pitt's covert motivation was testified to by Wilberforce later on:

I am myself persuaded that the war with France, which lasted so many years and occasioned such an immense expense of blood and treasure,

---

<sup>7</sup>An anonymous author who called himself J.H. in the *Monthly Magazine* put a common case on this point;

The plea of necessity can never be urged in justification of wars by nations enjoying plenty, whose territories have not been invaded; and whose unoffending subjects have not been willfully outraged in their persons and property. Nor does any plea of necessity exist in regard to wars undertaken on grounds which arise out of hypothesis and contingencies; or in support of theoretical and problematical points of policy; the public importance of all which depend on the fallibility of human judgment and prescience, and on data often misapplied by passion, ignorance or pride.

quoted in J.E. Cookson, *The Friends of Peace: Anti-war Liberalism in England, 1793-1815* (Cambridge, 1982), p.38.

<sup>8</sup>Cookson notes, 'Above all, it was sufficient for them that France was fighting a war of self-defence because the Allies had commenced hostilities and invaded French territory. There was never any suggestion that war could be defensive on both sides if the interests of the belligerent states were also threatened. In short, their judgment of the moral case and the justification of their own position rested on their identification of the cause of 'liberty and humanity' with the interests of the sovereign French republic.' p. 121.

would never have taken place but from Mr. Dundas's influence with Mr. Pitt, and his persuasion that we should be able with ease and promptitude, at a small expense of money or men, to take the French West India islands, and to keep them when peace should be restored: in truth, but for Mr. Dundas's persuasion that the war would soon be over.<sup>9</sup>

Pitt's covert expectation of a profitable war of short duration, though hardly admitted in public, gave rise to a protest from Fox in early 1794 when he asked Pitt to make it clear what the real aim of the war was, the overthrow of the French government or the acquisition of the French colonies.<sup>10</sup> Pitt replied by defining the former as 'the main aim', but did not forget to add, 'It is of little consequence to us in the prosecution of a war for which we do not ourselves possess sufficient military force, and in aid of which we must have recourse to our pecuniary resources, thus to procure the means of increasing these resources, by extending our commerce, and opening new sources of industry.'<sup>11</sup> Although the economic interest associated with the war was deliberately played down in Pitt's answer, his optimistic expectation about the economic consequence of the war was shared by the other pro-war pamphleteers, and provoked a variety of opposition; the question was whether the present war was beneficial to the British economy or not, or whether the British economy could afford to conduct the war without facing total collapse.

The middle-class liberals' argument were particularly strong in this respect. Adam Smith, for example, had argued in Book V of the *The Wealth of Nations* that labour and capital are employed by war in an unproductive way, and contemporary economic theory represented the war as 'a growth-retarding activity and positive danger for the stability of the economy'.<sup>12</sup> The 'political arithmetic' which calculated

---

<sup>9</sup>Aspinall, p.886.

<sup>10</sup>Emsley, p.23.

<sup>11</sup>quoted in Emsley p.23.

<sup>12</sup>Cookson, pp.55-56.



the actual cost of the war was also pessimistic about the economic effect of the war.<sup>13</sup> The middle class was particularly indignant at the disruption of commerce caused by the war. Cookson summarizes their view:

War caused the destruction of shipping and other property; it raised costs and weakened business confidence; the loss and disturbance of markets led to wage reductions and unemployment among the industrial workers. There was little recognition of the growth promoting effects of war, and where these were recognised it was always insisted that they were anomalous in the general experience of adversity and distress. Even where colonial acquisitions were concerned, it was accepted that the value of their trade would be insignificant after the expense of their government and defence had been deducted. Similarly, the growth of war industries was held to be 'artificial', in the sense that it was based on temporary, aberrant demand. The general prediction remained that the end of the war would first bring a period of painful adjustment, followed by a tremendous leap in prosperity.<sup>14</sup>

The middle class opposition to the war was not limited to its economic consequences. They believed that the wealth they had been deprived of was going to the small number of people who profited from the war situation and that it seriously undermined the superiority of the British social system, which was founded on the relatively equal distribution of wealth, and had the result of strengthening the oligarchy of the aristocracy.<sup>15</sup> In this light, the war was also regarded as a kind of social disease, or moral retrogression.<sup>16</sup>

Their moral condemnation of the war was obviously based on their class interest, but it was easily generalized into the moral discourse of the anti-war arguments when it was combined with the religious rhetoric of Christianity. The usual

---

<sup>13</sup>William Morgan, for example, presented the typically pessimistic result of 'political arithmetic'; his calculation of the cost of war between 1796-1800 showed 'the signs of serious economic strain' in many accounts. Cookson, p.57.

<sup>14</sup>Cookson, p.63.

<sup>15</sup>Cookson, p.118.

<sup>16</sup>Cookson, p.61.

point made by the religious critic of the war was, first of all, that war is contrary to the will of God because it disrupts and harms the creation of God. War, therefore, is not 'natural'. Whatever the occasion of the war may be, it is almost impossible to justify it in God's eyes. Mrs Barbauld's fast sermon, however, goes beyond the religious rhetoric of middle-class anti-war protest:

War is a state in which all our feelings and our duties suffer a total and strange inversion...A state in which it becomes our business to hurt and annoy our neighbour by every possible means; instead of cultivating, to destroy; instead of building, to pull down; instead of peopling, to depopulate: a state in which we drink the tears, and feed upon the misery of our fellow-creatures. Such a state, therefore, requires the extremest necessity to justify it; it ought not to be the common and usual state of society.<sup>17</sup>

Mrs Barbauld in the same sermon bitterly criticizes the exploitation of religious precepts to uphold the state interest. There hardly exists, in her opinion, any historical precedent for the war of self-defence. She does not hide her resentment of the cold calculation behind the rhetoric of pro-war arguments, warning against the 'selfish monopolizing spirit'. Whereas the middle class liberals were usually indifferent to the hardship of the poor,<sup>18</sup> she showed her genuine concern for the poor through a concrete understanding of their suffering:

We must fix our eyes, not on the hero returning with conquest, nor yet on the gallant officer dying in the bed of honour, --the subject of picture and of song,--but on the private soldier, forced into the service, exhausted by camp-sickness and fatigue; pale, emaciated, crawling to an hospital with the prospect of life, perhaps a long life, blasted, useless and suffering. We must think of the uncounted tears of her who weeps alone, because the only being who shared her sentiments is taken from her; no martial music sounds in unison with her feelings; the long day

---

<sup>17</sup>'Sins of Government, Sins of the Nation; or A Discourse for the Fast, appointed on April 19, 1793', in *The Works of Anna Laetitia Barbauld with a Memoir*, edited by Lucy Aikin, 2 vols (London, 1825), vol II, pp. 399-400.

<sup>18</sup>Cookson, p.28.

passes, and he returns not. She does not shed her sorrows over his grave, for she has never learnt whether he ever had one.<sup>19</sup>

Since most discourses of anti-war protest were produced by middle-class liberals,<sup>20</sup> the sacrifices that war demanded of the poor were more or less ignored; most poor men were in constant danger of being impressed, or forced to volunteer by the inducement of bounty money. Although many people admitted that the present war aggravated their hard lot, it was by and large taken for granted, for the lives of the poor had always been hard anyway. In addition, humanitarian concern for the poor, unless it was well disguised with the religious rhetoric of charity and benevolence, was in constant danger of being labelled as 'levelling', particularly between 1793-94 when reformers were the target of a witch-hunt. In this hostile atmosphere, William Frend's short article 'The Effect of War on the Poor', attached to the anti-war pamphlet 'Peace and Union' as an appendix, was exceptionally brave in its sympathy with the economic hardship of the poor. It consisted of a short description of the author's chance encounters with poor people (particularly 'poor market women') complaining about their reduced income, which prompted the author to reflect on the gap between the actual lives of the poor and the political discourse supposedly intended for the betterment of their lives:

Oh! that I had the warning voice of an antient prophet, that I might penetrate into the inmost recesses of palaces, and appall the haranguers of senates. I would use no other language than that of the poor market women. I would cry aloud in the ears of the first magistrate, we are sconded three-pence in the shilling, the fourth part of our labour, for what?...Is there a man, that could stand out against this eloquence? Yes. Thousands. Three-pence in the shilling for spinning conveys no ideas to them. They know not what a cottage is, they know not how the poor live, how they make up their scanty meal.... And should any grave courtier pitying the distresses of the poor be anxious to relieve them,

---

<sup>19</sup>Barbault, p. 402.

<sup>20</sup>Cookson, p.41.

say to him; there is an easy method: let the first magistrate, the peers, the representatives of the people, the rich men of the nation, all who are for war, be sconded one fourth part of their annual income to defray the expence of it. Let them be the first sufferers, let the burden fall on them, not on the poor. Alas! my poor countrymen, how many years calamity awaits you before a single dish or a glass of wine will be withdrawn from the tables of opulence.<sup>21</sup>

In view of the author's exceptionally strong indignation at the upper-class's imperviousness to the suffering of the poor expressed in a provocatively egalitarian rhetoric, it is not surprising that Frend was expelled from the University on account of this pacifist pamphlet, the main argument of which was, in fact, quite moderate.<sup>22</sup>

Frend's anti-war argument is distinctive in two respects; one is that he protests against war from the standpoint of the poor who suffered most as a consequence of war. The other is that his protest touches on the poor's economic hardship aggravated by the war. Such a combination of humanitarianism and concrete social criticism was a minor voice in 1793 when the ideological interpretation of war was predominant. But it was to gain strength as the ideological dimension of the war gradually receded.

The controversy about self-defence, for example, was muted after 1794 when the French army invaded the Low Countries, and virtually came to an end after 1796. The anti-war argument collapsed almost completely when General Hoche actually attempted to invade Britain, even though both attempts fizzled out, which seemed to prove that the national security had indeed been threatened by France.<sup>23</sup> Wordsworth, who is supposed to have maintained his support of France longer than most reformers,<sup>24</sup> is said to have finally surrendered early in 1798 when Switzerland was

---

<sup>21</sup>William Frend, *Peace and Union 1793* (Revolution and Romanticism, 1789-1834: A series of facsimile reprints chosen and introduced by Jonathan Wordsworth), (Oxford and New York, 1991), pp.48-49.

<sup>22</sup>Jonathan Wordsworth, 'Introduction' in *Peace and Union*.

<sup>23</sup>The first attempt, made on 15 December 1796, was thwarted by severe gales, and the second one, organized two months later, got through to the Pembrokeshire coast, but only to surrender themselves after three days. Emsley, pp.56-57.

<sup>24</sup>E.P. Thompson, 'A Lay Sermon', p.155.

invaded by France.<sup>25</sup> The ideological aim to 'extirpate Jacobinism in its origin' proved itself a more difficult task after the defeat of the Allied forces in 1794, which paradoxically served to demonstrate the legitimacy of the Revolutionary government in France because its military strength was an undeniable indicator of popular support. After 1795, as the idea of restoring the monarchy to France proved practically impossible, the ideological dimension of the debate became irrelevant.<sup>26</sup> The prolonged war meant the increase of war expenses which undermined the pro-war argument for the profitability of war;<sup>27</sup> the increased taxation and the disruption of commerce and industry in the first two years of the war badly served the pro-war camp.<sup>28</sup> The scarcity resulting from the poor harvests of 1794, and the ensuing food riots seemed a conclusive proof of the economic disaster brought about by the war.<sup>29</sup> Prophecies of the imminent collapse of the economy, however, were not fulfilled in spite of the continuation of the war, which discredited the economic argument of the opponents of the war.<sup>30</sup> The scarcity and the food riots temporarily boosted the activities of the radical societies in 1795, but it was not proved in the end that the war was the cause of the scarcity, and the result was eventually the triumph of the pro-war argument that Britain could afford to carry on the war without jeopardizing the economy.

Within this fluctuating political atmosphere, Wordsworth's representation of a soldier's widow, from the two versions of the Salisbury Plain poems to *The Ruined Cottage*, illustrates the trajectory of Wordsworth's adjustment of anti-war arguments, which progressed from an ideological criticism of war to a stoic acceptance of it as an

---

<sup>25</sup>Reed I, pp.213-14. The controversy over the date of Wordsworth's change of mind concerning France is described in detail in J.C. Maxwell, 'Wordsworth and the subjugation of Switzerland', *Modern Language Review* 65 (1970), pp.16-18.

<sup>26</sup>Emsley, p.41.

<sup>27</sup>Emsley, p.22, pp.49-56.

<sup>28</sup>Emsley, pp.28-33.

<sup>29</sup>Emsley, pp.41-47.

<sup>30</sup>Cookson, pp. 68-69.

inevitable aspect of the human condition by way of a comprehensive social criticism. Wordsworth's various representations of a soldier's widow are not only a series of literary experiment, but also reflect his changing perspective on the ongoing war in response to the changing political circumstance of the 1790s.

## 2. 'Salisbury Plain' (1793-94): a Poem of Anti-war Protest

If *Descriptive Sketches* was composed at the height of Wordsworth's revolutionary enthusiasm, 'Salisbury Plain'<sup>31</sup> was produced as the same political idealism went through its first serious test. The outbreak of war with France inevitably brought his natural affection for his own country into conflict with his political convictions. Even without the pro-government ideological propaganda which amplified the problem by identifying any opposition to the government as deriving from the 'Jacobin' fraternity, Wordsworth's confidence in 'French principles' was increasingly undermined by the conduct of the French government itself, particularly when it purged from the Convention and the government the Girondins 'whose aim seemed best' to Wordsworth (*The Prelude*, X, ll.113-14).<sup>32</sup> The ensuing Reign of Terror must have done further damage to his allegiance to the revolutionary principles represented by the French government. Wordsworth's revolutionary fervour was also dampened by domestic politics during 1793. The government's attitude towards the reformers became increasingly hostile, and neither Grey's motion for reform in May nor the Edinburgh Convention in December succeeded in providing any sign of hope for the reformers. All these depressing developments in the reform movement took place in the context of the war with France, the opposition to which, therefore, was the most urgent item on the political agenda, and was shared by the reformers of all denominations. There is no doubt that 'Salisbury Plain' was Wordsworth's own

---

<sup>31</sup>Stephen Gill offers three reading texts in the Cornell Wordsworth, the first of which is usually called 'Salisbury Plain', though Wordsworth once used an alternative title, 'A night on Salisbury plain' in his letter to Mathews dated 7 November 1794. I use 'Salisbury Plain', 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain', and 'Guilt and Sorrow' for the titles of the three versions offered by Gill. For the textual history and the biographical details concerning the composition of 'Salisbury Plain', see Gill's 'Introduction' in *SP*, pp.3-18; Reed, Appendix XII, 'The Dates of *Salisbury Plain* and Some Early Work on the *The Prelude*', pp.333-36; Stephen Gill, 'The Original Salisbury Plain: Introduction and Text' in *Bicentenary Wordsworth Studies in Memory of John Alban Finch*, edited by Jonathan Wordsworth (Ithaca and London, 1969), pp.142-79.

<sup>32</sup>On 2 June, twenty-nine Girondin deputies of the National Convention and two Girondin ministers were arrested at a popular demonstration. Colin Jones, *The Longman Companion to the French Revolution* (London and New York, 1988), p.29.

contribution to the anti-war efforts of the reformers.<sup>33</sup> Wordsworth's anti-war arguments implicit in the poem are apparently as confident and vigorous as any other contemporary pamphleteer's, but they are inevitably and understandably accompanied by his bitter sense of crisis in his private life, as well as in the British reform movement as a whole. The contradiction between the confident voice of protest and the sceptical mind that questions the validity of that protest is reflected in the fragmentary structure of the poem,<sup>34</sup> which makes it unique in a host of anti-war poems produced during the 1790s.<sup>35</sup>

If Wordsworth's anti-war message is delivered in the voice of the narrator as well as through the story of the female vagrant itself, his pessimistic understanding of current political circumstances is represented by the least noticeable figure of the poem, 'the traveller' who listens to the story of the female vagrant. The role of this ostensibly minor character in the poem seems to me surprisingly significant; he is, first of all, the character who ties together the narrator's political exhortation and the narrative of the female vagrant. The narrator's rationalistic argument and the moralistic appeal of the female vagrant's story would have been even more independent

---

<sup>33</sup>Mary Jacobus also sees anti-war protest as 'the chief impulse' behind 'Salisbury Plain', Jacobus, pp.142-43.

<sup>34</sup>It has been repeatedly noted that 'Salisbury Plain' is the product of Wordsworth's divided mind after the outbreak of war and that this is somehow reflected in the structure of the poem. F.W. Bateson, for example, noticed the lack of unity in the poem saying that 'A Night on Salisbury Plain' is similar to 'The Vale of Esthwaite' in its 'unco-ordinated collocation of supernatural horror and sober eye-on-the-object realism...', *Wordsworth, A Re-interpretation* (London, 1954), p.110. Geoffrey Hartman thought that the poet's shock at the outbreak of war was represented in 'images of schism, of violent rift, and uprooting'. Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry*, pp. 116-17. Enid Welsford, on the other hand, sees the same elements as an artistic failure: 'As a work of art "A Night on Salisbury Plain" is very imperfect. Its exaggerated Gothic gloom and ghostliness, its frequently awkward syntax, its outbursts of pseudo-poetic diction are such glaring faults that comment is unnecessary. Nor is its structure flawless. The reader has a right to feel aggrieved when the Traveller who has evoked his sympathetic curiosity becomes merely a passive listener to his fellow-outcast's story--especially as the poet obviously knows all about him and can tell us that 'He too had withered young, in sorrow's deadly blight'. *Salisbury Plain: A Study in the Development of Wordsworth's Mind and Art* (Oxford, 1966), pp.16-17. For a summary of other opinions, see Leslie F. Chard, II, *Dissenting Republican: Wordsworth's Early Life and Thought in their Political Context* (The Hague, 1972), pp.171-72.

<sup>35</sup>For the general tendency of anti-war poems of the 1790s, see the extensive introductory essay in Betty T. Bennett, *British War Poetry in the Age of Romanticism: 1793-1815* (New York, 1796), pp.1-67.



of each other without the structural liaison of 'the traveller'. Besides his technical function in the structure of the poem, the traveller is also important because he embodies Wordsworth's current state of mind, particularly in relation to his ideological alienation in the ongoing war with France. Wordsworth wanted to understand his solitary wandering on Salisbury Plain in July 1793 as a painful but rewarding experience through which he recovered confidence in life and humanity, overcoming his ideological confusion.

With full awareness of the poem's fragmentary status and the multiplicity of the issues involved, the following analysis of 'Salisbury Plain' will deal primarily with the anti-war arguments implicitly or explicitly presented in the poem. But an equally important point to make is how such arguments are imperceptively marginalized in Wordsworth's poetical practice, particularly in response to Wordsworth's self-conscious perception of his own place in society under increasingly hostile political circumstances.

Wordsworth's most immediate response to the outbreak of war is, as always, recorded in *The Prelude*; the war was 'most unnatural' strife (X. l.251). From a revolutionary point of view, the war must have seemed 'unnatural' in that it was trying to block the 'natural' progress of human history from monarchy and aristocracy to democracy.<sup>36</sup> In Wordsworth's particular situation, the war was also 'unnatural' because it forced Wordsworth to become an enemy to his own country. Wordsworth's consciousness of his 'unnaturalness' resulted in a sharp sense of alienation, 'A conflict of sensations without name'. But in *The Prelude* Wordsworth does not offer his opinion of the war itself, explaining only the traumatic shock he had received at the

---

<sup>36</sup>One has to be very careful about the ideological bias of some political concepts such as liberty, patriotism, nature etc. because they serve the purposes of both conservatives and radicals; both Burke and Paine, for example, drew on 'nature' or 'natural law' to make their political points; for the Burkean concept of nature and its relevance to Wordsworth, see Chandler, particularly, Chapter 4 'The Uses of Second Nature', pp.62-92. Godwin regarded war as one of the essential elements of monarchy and aristocracy, saying 'it is perhaps impossible to show that a single war ever did or could have taken place, in the history of mankind, that did not in some way originate with those two great political monopolies monarchy and aristocracy'. *PJ*, p.506.

outbreak of the hostilities. A more rational expression of Wordsworth's view on the war is found in 'A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff'. After reproaching the Bishop for omitting to declare his position on the present war, he describes the war as 'an infatuation which is now giving up to the sword so large a portion of the poor and consigning the rest to the more slow and more painful consumption of want' (*Prose I*, p.49). Two things are noticeable in this description. One is that Wordsworth viewed the war as a mental aberration that could be associated with passion, superstition, even some sort of supernatural magic. A description such as this already suggests the cure, the recovery of sober rationality. The reformer closest to such a view is William Godwin. Godwin, who believed that historical progress can be made only by the propagation of the principle of reason, also believed:

If expedients can be devised for maintaining this species of government in its purity, or if there be anything, in the nature of wisdom and intellectual improvement, which has a tendency daily to make truth more prevalent over falsehood, the principle of offensive war will be extirpated.<sup>37</sup>

Secondly, Wordsworth defined the present war in relation to its effect on the poor. Just as Beaupuy explained the revolutionary ideal in humanitarian terms when he declared, "Tis against that/ Which we are fighting' (*The Prelude*, IX, l.518), Wordsworth's opposition to the war is founded on his humanitarianism. Wordsworth's adoption of the poor's point of view is a natural expression of his democratic sympathy, but quite rare in the anti-war discourses of the day.<sup>38</sup> 'Salisbury Plain' is Wordsworth's poetic substantiation of these two lines of anti-war argument. But since it was a 'poetic' substantiation and composed under entirely different political circumstances, the anti-war arguments in 'Salisbury Plain' are developed in a significantly different way.

---

<sup>37</sup>Godwin, *PJ*, Chapter XVI 'Of the Causes of War', p.507.

<sup>38</sup>The liberal reformers, who dominated the anti-war campaign, were generally indifferent to the hardship of the poor. Cookson, p.28.

Wordsworth's rationalistic view of the war is represented by the assertive voice of the narrator who begins and ends the poem. Formally, the narrator is the mouthpiece of Wordsworth's anti-war message. Accordingly, the structure of the poem is designed to follow more or less the sequence of his argument; the presentation of the agenda( his reflection on the inequality of society and the hellish vision of the Druids), an illustrative case( the story of the female vagrant), and the conclusion ( his passionate declamation). But the narrator's argument itself is not evidently supported by each section of the poem, nor always consistent within each phase of the argument.

The poem begins with the narrator's philosophic reflections on the inequality of human life in which he compares the fate of the contemporary poor with that of 'the hungry savage'.<sup>39</sup> Both suffer on the battlefield, but the suffering of the contemporary poor in the present war is much severer because of the inequality of society. The narrator's primary concern in this historical perspective does not lie in the idealization of the pastoral life of the 'noble savage',<sup>40</sup> but in highlighting the class divisions of modern Britain that are displayed much more manifestly in war. The lot of the poor is made the more bitter by 'reflection on the state/ Of those who on the couch of Affluence rest/ By laughing Fortune's sparkling cup elate,/ While we of comfort reft, by pain depressed,/ No other pillow know than Penury's iron breast' (ll.23-27).

This egalitarian appeal finds its counterpart in the liberal anti-war argument. The liberals complained about the social consequences of the war, arguing that

---

<sup>39</sup>The moralistic opening, according to Schulman, is in fact a convention of 'complaint' commonly employed by the eighteenth-century poets such as Thompson, Shenstone, Bedingfield. This pattern of opening is usually required to make clear the general theme of morality in the main narrative. But the moral lesson in the opening is quite often merely 'a gesture toward a didactic justification for his poem' allowing the poet to do in the main narrative whatever he likes to do. Schulman's point is that in Wordsworth's case the convention of 'complaint' is more significantly employed in that it is symptomatic of 'a continuous pressure on the reader to look backward in time' with the result of weakening 'the poet's swagger at the end of the poem when he calls upon his readers to "uptear" the Bastilles of oppression'. Samuel E. Schulman, 'Wordsworth's "Salisbury Plain Poems" and Their Spenserian Motives', *JEGP* 84 (1985), pp.221-42 (pp.226-29). I agree on his general point that the retrospection tends to weaken the moral preaching at the end of the poem, but various kinds of 'retrospections' do not function in the same way and Wordsworth's responses to them differ from each other and are often ambiguous in themselves.

<sup>40</sup>Paul Kelley, 'Rousseau's "Discourse on the Origins of Inequality" and Wordsworth's "Salisbury Plain"', *Notes and Queries* 24 (July-August 1977), p.323.

Britain's 'relatively even distribution of wealth', the very evidence of the superiority of the British system, was being undermined by the war. The point of their protest was, of course, to show that the chief victim of the social polarization was the middle-class, the soundest element of society. Their argument therefore centred on an opposition to the enrichment of the aristocratic oligarchy.<sup>41</sup> The narrator's egalitarian 'complaint', however, is differentiated from the liberal argument by its concern for the poor, though it shares a strong antipathy for the class that enriches itself at the expense of other classes in the present war. But this egalitarianism does not seem to be particularly subversive despite its 'levelling' point of view. It is mainly motivated by Wordsworth's moral disgust at the cold materialistic calculation behind the ideological veneer of the war which completely disregards the actual suffering of the poor on the battlefield. This moral indignation was shared by Mrs Barbauld when she said:

Our wars have been wars of cool calculating interest, as free from hatred as from love of mankind; the passions which stir the blood have had no share in them. We devoted a certain number of men to perish on land and sea, and the rest of us sleep sound, and, protected in our usual occupations, talk of the events of war as what diversifies the flat uniformity of life.<sup>42</sup>

Godwin also criticized the absurdity of modern war which forces individuals to murder each other without any personal motivation. The barbarity of modern war is that it has lost contact with the natural reasons for conflict, say anger or disagreement, and has become a way of doing business, sacrificing a certain number of human lives as an investment:

Men are induced deliberately to seek each other's lives, and to adjudge the controversies between them, not according to the dictates of reason and justice, but as either should prove most successful in devastation and murder. This was no doubt in the first instance the extremity of

---

<sup>41</sup>Cookson, p.61. Godwin also made a similar point: 'War and conquest cannot be beneficial to the community. Their tendency is to elevate a few at the expense of the rest.' *PJ*, p.507.

<sup>42</sup>Barbauld, pp.400-401.

exasperation and rage. But it has since been converted into a trade. One part of the nation pays another part, to murder and be murdered in their stead; and the most trivial causes, a supposed insult, or a sally of youthful ambition, have sufficed to deluge provinces with blood.<sup>43</sup>

This absurdity is sustained, according to Godwin, by the ideology of patriotism which is to him nothing but 'a deceitful principle'.<sup>44</sup> The most effective strategy of the pro-war argument was in fact to appeal to the patriotism of the people. Wordsworth's sense of himself as 'unnatural' testifies to the power of the appeal. To Godwin, patriotism was only a fiction imposed on an unenlightened people:

Society was instituted, not for the sake of glory, not to furnish splendid materials for the pages of history, but for the benefit of its members. The love of our country, as the term has usually been understood, has too often been found to be one of those specious illusions, which are employed by imposters for the purpose of rendering the multitude the blind instruments of their crooked designs.<sup>45</sup>

'Those specious illusions', 'infatuation' in Wordsworth's terms, are very often correlated with the religious authority of the Established Church to the indignation of the Dissenters. Mrs Barbauld was outspoken in her anger at this sinful confederation of 'King and Church':

In this guilty business there is a circumstance which greatly aggravates its guilt, and that is the impiety of calling upon the Divine Being to assist us in it. Almost all nations have been in the habit of mixing with their passions a show of religion, and of prefacing these their murders with prayers and the solemnities of worship.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup>Godwin, p.510.

<sup>44</sup>Godwin, p.509.

<sup>45</sup>Godwin, p.508.

<sup>46</sup>Mrs Barbauld, p.403.

Mrs Barbauld was not alone in being incensed by the conduct of the Anglican priests who unashamedly justified the war in the name of patriotism. Coleridge, in his lecture 'On the present War' given in 1795, exclaimed:

It is recorded in the shuddering hearts of Christians, that while Europe is reeking with Blood, and smoaking with unextinguished Fires, in a contest of unexampled crimes and unexampled calamities, every Bishop but one voted for the continuance of the War. They deemed the fate of their Religion to be involved in the contest!<sup>47</sup>

The religion of Christianity politically abused like this seems to Coleridge nothing but 'the Religion of Mitres and Mysteries, the Religion of Pluralities and Persecution'.<sup>48</sup> Wordsworth's anti-war message implicit in the opening egalitarian reflection is informed by the rationalistic and dissenting anti-war arguments which were framed in response to the government propaganda that represented opposition to the war as disloyalty not only to King and country, but also to God and the church. To anti-war protesters, such an argument was an insult to human reason as well as a blasphemy. This is the context in which Wordsworth defines 'infatuation' in a series of images of the barbaric religious practices of the Druids. At first, it appears as 'a hideous dream' of 'the traveller' in the Plain:

"For oft at dead of night, when dreadful fire  
Reveals that powerful circle's reddening stones,  
'Mid priests and spectres grim and idols dire,  
Far heard the great flame utteres human moans,  
Then all is hushed: again the desert groans,  
A dismal light its farthest bounds illumines,  
While warrior spectres of gigantic bones,  
Forth-issuing from a thousand rifted tombs,

---

<sup>47</sup>Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures 1795: On Politics and Religion*, eds. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann (Princeton and London, 1971), p. 66. The one priest who voted against the war, interestingly enough, was the Bishop of Llandaff who was reproached for omitting to declare his position on the war by Wordsworth. For details, see note 3 in the same page.

<sup>48</sup>Coleridge, pp. 66-67.

Wheel on their fiery steeds amid the infernal glooms."  
(*SP*, 1793-94, ll.91-99)

Again, it is presented as the vision of 'a swain':

...  
It is the sacrificial altar fed  
With living men. How deep it groans--the dead  
Thrilled in their yawning tombs their helms uprear;  
The sword that slept beneath the warrior's head  
Thunders in fiery air: red arms appear  
Uplifted thro' the gloom and shake the rattling spear.  
(*SP*, 1793-94, ll.184-89)

These gothic elements, familiar items in contemporary poems,<sup>49</sup> have traditionally been regarded as an unfortunate intrusion into the poem.<sup>50</sup> But the representation of the cruelties and violence of war in a series of gothic images is not inconsistent with Wordsworth's purpose here. The Druids, whose religious practice is supposed to have made of living man a prey, seem hardly more barbaric than modern warfare in which mass murder is justified with religious language. Schulman rightly associates the gothic materials employed in the poem with its Spenserian background. Challenging Stephen Gill's view that 'the visionary and prophetic aspects' were usually ignored by the eighteenth-century Spenserian poets,<sup>51</sup> Schulman argues that Wordsworth can be placed within the contemporary fashion for Spenserianism precisely because of the contemporary interest in these aspects. He not only adopted Spenserian visionary elements for the sake of artistic unity, but also because they suited his argument. The gothic images of Druids constitute 'a terrible vision of war'. The swain's vision, according to Schulman, almost ceases to be supernatural or figurative in its vivid

---

<sup>49</sup>For the gothic materials used for the theme of human suffering in contemporary poems, see Jacobus, pp.134-48.

<sup>50</sup>Enid Welsford, for example, believed that the fact that 'the poet fails badly in his handling of the supernatural is not to be denied', though refusing to agree with Bateson on its redundancy from an artistic point of view. Welsford, p.17.

<sup>51</sup>Gill, 'Introduction', *SP*, p.6. note 13.

representation of the horrible violence of the battlefield.<sup>52</sup> Wordsworth's intention to turn the gothic material to topical use is borne out by another reference to the religious practice of the Druids:

Though from huge wickers paled with circling fire  
 No longer horrid shrieks and dying cries  
 To ears of Daemon-Gods in peals aspire,  
 To Daemon-Gods a human sacrifice;  
 Though Treachery her sword no longer dyes  
 In the cold blood of Truce, still, reason's ray,  
 What does it more than while the tempests rise,  
 With starless glooms and sounds of loud dismay,  
 Reveal with still-born glimpse the terrors of our way?  
 (SP, 1793-94, ll.424-32)

The narrator's comparison of the present with the past reveals his pessimism even more clearly: 'Reason's ray' has not been strong enough to 'dispel' the 'infatuation'. But the direction to reach the goal is already apparent, and his anti-war message is delivered in a more straightforward manner:

...  
 Say, rulers of the nations, from the sword  
 Can ought but murder, pain, and tears proceed?  
 Oh! what can war but endless war still breed?  
 Or whence but from the labours of the sage  
 Can poor benighted mortals gain the meed  
 Of happiness and virtue, how assuage  
 But by his gentle words their self-consuming rage?  
 (SP, 1793-94, ll.507-13)

The narrator's prescription to cure the disease of war is clearly Godwinian; human society can be saved from the scourge of the war only by 'the labours of the sage'.

---

<sup>52</sup>Schulman, pp.224-25. He argues, 'The shepherd's vision merely recapitulates the Woman's actual experience, when she had followed her husband to war, only to see him perish, along with her children. Her experience of battle is a modern type of the ancient Druid sacrifice, and at times it is difficult to tell ancient legend from modern war-reporting'. p.225.



But such a summary does not fully represent the anti-war message in the poem: if the narrator's Godwinian argument was based on contemporary *ideas* of the war, the argument implicit in the story of the female vagrant concerns the practical *effects* of the war, particularly upon the life of the poor. If the narrator's voice represents Wordsworth's ideological answer to the propaganda of the pro-war campaigners, the vagrant's narrative gives the anti-war arguments an economic and moral dimension.

The female vagrant's life story is an exemplary history of the rural community that has been devastated by the war. The story of her suffering is that of poverty and alienation. What the war did to the poor is succinctly told in a few lines:

...My happy father died  
Just as the children's meal began to fail.  
For War the nations to the field defied.  
The loom stood still: unwatched, the idle gale  
Wooed in deserted shrouds the unregarding sail.  
(*SP*, 1793-94, ll.293-97)

This was what Wordsworth meant by 'the more slow and more painful consumption of want' in his *A Letter*. The most visible effect of the war was that fathers and husbands were taken away from their workplace and home; the result is the destruction of their domestic lives, and poverty for the deserted families. Their misery is concentrated in the powerful symbolism of the idle loom, which defines another important aspect of Wordsworth's criticism of the war in this poem; the war as the cause of economic disaster, particularly in regard to its catastrophic effect on the rural economy. The destruction of the rural community and the economic difficulty of the rural labourers cannot entirely be attributed to the outbreak of war, for enclosure and industrialization had already begun destroying the traditional rural community as had been deplored by

poets like Goldsmith and Crabbe.<sup>53</sup> The liberal anti-war arguments on the economic consequence of the war concentrated on the disruption of trade and commerce rather than its damage to the rural economy.<sup>54</sup> The agricultural labourers, however, were recruited in greater numbers than the industrial workers<sup>55</sup> so that the diminishment of the labour force led the author of *Report on Waste Lands* published in 1795 to point out the problem of land left uncultivated because of the recruitment of agricultural labourers by the Army.<sup>56</sup> Wordsworth's implicit protest, therefore, is a rare example of an argument founded on the current economic reality of the poor. The closest parallel is perhaps found in William Frend's 'The Effect of War on the Poor'. After the coincidental encounter with a group of poor women who complained about the reduction of their wages as a consequence of the war, he indignantly protests:

What is all this for? I did not dare to tell them what is all this for, nor to add insult to misery. What is the beheading of a monarch to them? What is the navigation of the Scheldt to them? What is the freedom of a great nation to them but reason for joy? Yet the debating only on these subjects has reached their cottages. They are already sconced three pence in the shilling. What must be their fate, when we suffer under the most odious scourge of the human race, and the accumulation of taxes takes away half of that daily bread, which is scarce sufficient at present for their support?<sup>57</sup>

Wordsworth's protest is not as specific as this, but shares Frend's perception.

Obviously the economic deprivation of the poor was aggravated by the present war, but the war could not be represented as its root cause. More serious was its

---

<sup>53</sup>For the eighteenth-century poetic description of the rural poor, see Norman Field Winn, *The Treatment of Humble life in the Poetry of George Crabbe and William Wordsworth*, Unpublished Ph D dissertation (University of Washington, 1955), particularly Chapter I, 'Some Developments in Poetry of Humble Life', pp.16-41; Roger Sales, *English Literature in History, 1780-1830: Pastoral and Politics* (London, 1983), part I. 'The Politics of Pastoral', pp.15-109.

<sup>54</sup>Cookson, pp.63-68.

<sup>55</sup>W. Hasbach, *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer*, translated by Ruth Kenyon (London, 1908), p.136.

<sup>56</sup>Hasbach, p.175.

<sup>57</sup>Frend, pp.47-48.

moral effect on the poor. The female vagrant has been deprived in the battlefield not just of her husband and children, but her humanity itself:

Oh dreadful price of being! to resign  
 All that is dear in being; better far  
 In Want's most lonely cave till death to pine  
 Unseen, unheard, unwatched by any star.  
 (SP, 1793-94, ll. 307-11)

Her experience in the battle-field is not represented in the poem except in the form of capitalized words like 'Disease and Famine, Agony and Fear'. But a concrete social reality underlies these abstractions. The army's treatment of newly-widowed women was by no means considerate.<sup>58</sup> It is quite possible that the 'dreadful price of being' is a euphemism for the prostitution she had to rely on for survival.<sup>59</sup> But what she deplores most is not her physical suffering itself, but the loss of her human dignity. Many anti-war campaigners shared the view that war, in which one body of men is forced to murder another body of men without any motivation, was in itself inhumane. Godwin, for example, imagines very graphically the scene of a battle-field in which 'Towns are burned; ships are blown up in the air, while the mangled limbs descend on every side; the fields are laid desolate; the wives of the inhabitants exposed to brutal insult; and their children driven forth to hunger and nakedness', summing it up as 'the subversion

---

<sup>58</sup>Paul E. Kopperman describes the situation the female vagrant must have been in after her husband died: 'As a rule, the Army did little for the soldier's widow and orphans. Although as was noted earlier the military appears to have felt some sense of obligation to the Army wife, this concern ceased on the death of her husband. Some widows kept their place by again marrying within the ranks. For the rest the Army had little use. Generally they and their children were soon shipped home, there to fend for themselves in a world that to many long-time Army women must have seemed quite alien. All that the government provided for the women who departed from America was a token sum, usually a half-guinea, which was intended to get them back to their place of origin.' 'The British High Command and Soldiers' Wives in America, 1755-1783', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, vol. 60(1982), pp.14-34 (p.34).

<sup>59</sup>D.D. Maitland transcribes a witness's description of the suffering of soldier's wife in the battle-field: 'Hunger, dysentery and fever had reduced men and horses to bundles of bones and the soldiers' wives, usually decently clad and faithful to their husbands went around on starved donkeys offering themselves to anyone for half a loaf.' 'The Care of the Soldier's Family', *Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps*, 94, no.3 (March 1950) pp.107-25(p.110).

of all idea of moral justice'.<sup>60</sup> Mrs Barbauld also describes war in similar terms, 'a state in which all our feelings and our duties suffer a total and strange inversion'.<sup>61</sup> The Rev. Robert Hall's argument is typical:

It(war) is a system out of which almost all the virtues are excluded, and in which nearly all the vices are incorporated. What-ever renders human nature amiable or respectable, whatever engages love or confidence, is sacrificed at its shrine. In instructing us to consider a portion of our fellow-creatures as the proper objects of enmity, it removes, as far as they are concerned, the basis of all society, of all civilization and virtue;...The sword, and that alone, cuts asunder the bond of consanguinity which unites man to man.<sup>62</sup>

In this context, it is not surprising that the war is shown to have resulted in the vagrant's sense of absolute alienation:

And homeless near a thousand homes I stood,  
And near a thousand tables pined and wanted food.  
(*SP*, 1793-94, ll. 386-87)

What the female vagrant had to endure after her return to Britain is not only abject poverty, but also alienation from society, or an irrevocable loss of her sociability. Her situation is represented in the text by the act of 'wandering'. The problem with the poem as an anti-war argument is that the narrator's Godwinian declamation at the conclusion, despite its ostensibly optimistic tone, is not supported by the argument implicit in the story itself.

Wordsworth's failure to offer a coherent anti-war argument is not solely the result of his own artistic or ideological failure, for no contemporary anti-war argument can be said to have been effective in the immediate political context. One of the reasons for his failure might be found in his own ambivalent attitude to the historical

---

<sup>60</sup>Godwin, p.510.

<sup>61</sup>Barbauld, p.399.

<sup>62</sup>*The miscellaneous works and remains of the Rev. Robert Hall*, p. 308. quoted in Cookson, p.42.

past of Britain which the narrator represents by the barbarism of the Druids. Wordsworth clung to the idea that Britain was originally the champion of Freedom as well as the very source and model of French revolutionary principles. Even the description of the Druids is not entirely negative:

Not thus where clear moons spread their pleasing light.  
 --Long bearded forms with wands uplifted shew  
 To vast assemblies, while each breath of night  
 Is hushed, the living fires that bright and slow  
 Rounding th'aetherial field in order go.  
 Then as they trace with awe their various files  
 All figured on the mystic plain below,  
 Still prelude of sweet sounds the mood beguiles  
 And charmed for many a league the hoary desert smiles.  
 (SP, 1793-94, ll. 190-98)

How this congenial picture of a benign landscape is relevant to the preceding horrible vision of 'the sacrificial alter fed with/ Living man'(Stanza 21) is inexplicable within the text itself. It becomes clear only when this Druid scene was transferred to *The Prelude* that what Wordsworth was reflecting upon amid the relics of the Druids was not merely the immediate position of the British government on the war, but the significance of the whole of British history:

While through those vestiges of ancient times  
 I ranged, and by the solitude o'ercome,  
 I had a reverie and saw the past,  
 Saw multitudes of men, and, here and there,  
 A single Briton in his wolf-skin vest,  
 With shield and stone-axe, stride across the wold;  
 ...the work, as some divine,  
 Of infant science, imitative forms  
 By which the Druids covertly expressed  
 Their knowledge of the heavens, and imaged forth  
 The constellations; I was gently charmed,  
 Albeit with an antiquarian's dream,  
 I saw the bearded teachers, with white wands

Uplifted, pointing to the starry sky,  
 Alternately, and plain below, while breath  
 Of music seemed to guide them, and the waste  
 Was cheered with stillness and a pleasant sound.  
 (*The Prelude*, XII, ll.318-323, 343-53)

The second possible explanation for his failure is that the political atmosphere at the moment of the composition of the poem was extremely unfavourable to any belief in the triumph of reason and truth: France was suffering under the Reign of Terror while Britain competed with France in her 'white terror' against the reformers. In these circumstances, it is understandable that even the most enlightened man might question the power of reason and the validity of political justice in politics. Wordsworth's predicament as a Godwinian anti-war protester is tellingly illustrated by the last stanza of the poem, which is usually regarded as its most unqualified statement of Godwinian ideas. The appeal for the peaceful reign of reason is paradoxically couched in the most violent images('uptear/ Th'Oppressor's dungeon from its deepest base', 'let foul Error's monster race/ Dragged from their dens start at the light with pain/ and die'), and voiced in the most passionately militant tone('Heroes of Truth pursue your march', 'Resistless in your might').

A sign of a more convincing optimism is found in an unexpected place. The story of the female vagrant finds at least one sympathetic listener, 'the traveller', and the power of her 'tale of woe' not only prompts his tears, but also leads him to 'half forgot(forget) the terrors of the night'. By virtue of her tale of human suffering, her seemingly absolute alienation from both man and nature is alleviated:

But now from a hill summit down they look  
 Where through a narrow valley's pleasant scene  
 A wreath of vapour tracked a winding brook  
 Babbling through groves and lawns and meads of green.  
 A smoking cottage peeped the trees between,  
 The woods resound the linnet's amorous lays,  
 And melancholy lowings intervene  
 Of scattered herds that in the meadows graze,

While through the furrowed grass the merry milkmaid strays.  
(*SP*, 1793-94, ll. 406-14)

This is, of course, not presented as an adequate solution to human suffering because the world is still 'but a shed/ And a green spot 'mid wastes interminably spread' (*SP*, 1793-94, ll. 422-23). The female vagrant's recovery from her absolute alienation seems precarious and temporary,<sup>63</sup> but an optimistic vision is persuasively offered, not by the following Godwinian appeal, but by the relationship between 'the traveller' and the vagrant, a relationship characterized, as Jacobus puts it, by 'mutual compassion'<sup>64</sup> among the poor. In this context, 'the traveller' plays a significant role in making this limited optimism plausible.

The presence of 'the traveller' is pivotal because it allows not only Wordsworth's manoeuvre to extract a hint of hope from the apparently hopeless situation of the female vagrant, but also his tactic to save himself from his own personal sense of frustration at the moment of the composition of this poem. Wordsworth's own frustration in July 1793 is not very difficult to imagine; he found himself politically ostracized from society, unemployed, cut off from his French lover and new-born daughter. He must have felt a need to make more bearable not only the story of the female vagrant, but the story of his own life too.

Wordsworth's recipe to create a 'system of optimism'<sup>65</sup> was to endow with a sort of therapeutic effect the several layers of terrible 'tales' narrated in this poem; a tale of 'a voice', a tale of a shelter seeker, a tale of 'an old man', and eventually the tale

---

<sup>63</sup>Enid Welsford, by contrast, thinks that this 'paradise regained' was the final solution which was made possible by Wordsworth's Godwinian belief in 'a true, lasting reform brought about by the educational labours of rational and benevolent men'. Welsford, p.20. But that 'Salisbury Plain' is finished with a conventional happy ending is supported neither by the main narratives of the poem, nor by the concluding part itself. I tend to agree with Jacobus in her thinking that only 'an obscure comfort' is offered, which is implied by the benign landscape even though irrelevant to the unconvincing Godwinian exhortation. Jacobus, p.152.

<sup>64</sup>Jacobus, p.145.

<sup>65</sup>Cookson used this expression to refer to the theological rhetoric to explain the existence of war in God's 'grand design' which presupposes 'an inexorable movement towards an 'ultimate felicity'. Cookson, pp.46-48.

of the female vagrant herself. The common experience of hearing these tales provides the ground for the mutual understanding of 'the traveller' and the female vagrant. After exchanging all these stories associated with the plain, they start to trust each other:

While thus they talk the churlish storms relent;  
 And round those broken walls the dying wind  
 In feeble murmurs told his rage was spent.  
 With sober sympathy and tranquil mind  
 Gently the Woman gan her wounds unbind.  
 (SP, 1793-94, ll. 199-203)

The mental tranquillity they achieve after hearing the gothic stories is further developed after the main story of the female vagrant into a mutual compassion strong enough to make them keep each other company for the rest of the journey.

The female vagrant's step towards reconciliation with society, implied by her companionship with the traveller, is made convincing by the fact that the traveller had lived an equally painful life: 'He too had withered young in sorrow's deadly blight' (l. 405). The actual content of 'sorrow's deadly blight' is unspecified, which prompted Wordsworth to create another story for him in the next version of the poem, 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain'. The absence of the traveller's past in 'Salisbury Plain', however, is imaginatively associated with Wordsworth's own life story which also remains untold. If the sequence of the narrator's anti-war argument provided the plot of this fragmentary poem, the stories within the plot are structured by another plot in which the traveller comes to terms with the painful experiences of his own life as he listens to all these terrible tales culminating in the life story of the female vagrant.

The introduction of Wordsworth's current personal concerns into the poem can be detected early on. In the narrator's protest about the inequality of modern society, Wordsworth confidently places himself together with the poor by contrasting '*those* who on the couch of Affluence' (my italics, l.24) with '*we* of comfort reft, by pain depressed' (l.26, my italics). But this self-alignment with the poor becomes problematic in the next stanza where he juxtaposes 'the sweet tear of Love and Friendship' in a



merely sentimental poem and the weeping of 'many thousands' who are 'Beset with foes'. It is this moment when 'I' is split away from 'we' that the class conflict between 'those' and 'we' is transferred into the inner conflict of 'the traveller' who is like himself wandering on Salisbury Plain:

No shade was there, no meads of pleasant green,  
 No brook to wet his lips or soothe his ear,  
 Huge piles of corn-stack here and there were seen  
 But thence no smoke upwreathed his sight to cheer;  
 And see the homeward shepherd dim appear  
 Far off--He stops his feeble voice to strain;  
 No sound replies but winds that whistling near  
 Sweep the thin grass and passing, wildly plain;  
 Or desert lark that pours on high a wasted strain.  
 (SP, 1793-94, ll. 46-54)

The emphasis on absence in the series of negatives, as Sheats indicates, demonstrates the strength of the traveller's desire for them.<sup>66</sup> The feeling of alienation deepens with the lack of communication between man and man as well as between man and nature because 'the traveller's' shout is 'wasted', failing to reach the shepherd just as the voice of the lark is 'wasted', failing to reach 'the traveller'. It is still further intensified when he fails to find 'any trace of man':

He stood the only creature in the wild  
 On whom the elements their rage could wreak.  
 (SP, 1793-94, ll. 66-67)

This sublime portrait of the traveller, reminiscent of King Lear who exposes himself to the elements in bitterness and frustration,<sup>67</sup> shows that his alienation from society and

---

<sup>66</sup>Sheats analyzes the above stanza, 'Each negative statement names an image that the traveller seeks, but denies its objective existence. Imagery imitates desire, and syntax the force with which the object-world denies that desire.' p.91.

<sup>67</sup>Sheats's analysis of this scene seems very perceptive and deserves a full quotation: 'What is clear, however, is that the effect of natural violence on the traveller is indeed moral: he is driven with irresistible and "unwilled" force toward man(1.146 app.crit.). If the traveller's confrontation with the elements is naked and fearful, it is also indubitably authentic, and it compels a quest for human fellowship that is stripped by extremity of all dissimulation and pride. Put into the context of

nature has become as absolute as that of the female vagrant. His state of mind parallels the female vagrant's when she returned to Britain:

And homeless near a thousand homes I stood,  
 And near a thousand tables pined and wanted food.  
 (*SP*, 1793-94, ll. 386-87)

The gradual intensification of his feeling of alienation to tragic proportions implicitly foreshadows the emotional movement of the female vagrant's story. The most obvious role this parallel plays in the text is to provide the foundation for the mutual trust and compassion the traveller and the female vagrant are to achieve. When the traveller is viewed as an embodiment of Wordsworth's contemporary state of mind at the moment of the poem's composition, his experience of an absolute alienation becomes even more significant. By implicitly overlapping the traveller's untold past with that of the female vagrant, Wordsworth surreptitiously assimilates his own sense of alienation -- both physical alienation in the walking tour of Salisbury Plain and ideological alienation in the contemporary political situation, and even the baffling consciousness of his unfixed position in the confrontation between 'those' and 'we' in the narrator's opening reflection-- to that of the female vagrant. In a symbolical dimension, therefore, it may well be described as an imaginative gesture of fraternity with the lowest class, a gesture made in order to consolidate his political allegiance in response to the government's ideological propaganda.

Wordsworth's memories of this period, natural power humbles the proud isolation that was forced on him by his allegiance to the Revolution, and restores the possibility of a social communion as authentic as the meeting between the traveller's senses and the natural world. Nature forces a compulsive flight from isolation, exposure, and violence toward man, and toward a pastoral landscape that embodies the possibility of harmony with nature.' p.89. I accept his view in that the traveller's suffering under the elements induces him to restore a relationship with a fellow human being which is also accompanied by his reconciliation with nature. Accepting his general argument, I intend to focus on its extra-textual significance as Wordsworth's tactic with which to come to terms with the hostile political atmosphere and his dubious position in terms of his class status in relation to the problem of the poor.'

That Wordsworth's extra-textual intention was fulfilled is indicated by two different pieces of evidence. Within the text of 'Salisbury Plain', the traveller's reconciliation with nature is clearly suggested by the landscape of stanza 46. Whereas there was 'no brook to wet his lips, or soothe his ear' in l.47, now 'a winding brook/ Babbling' (ll. 408-409) has returned; the absence of human labour implied with 'wastes of corn' (l. 44) is now replaced by 'the furrowed grass' with 'the merry milkmaid' (l. 414); the 'wasted' strain of the lark (l. 44) is replaced by 'the linnet's amorous lays' (l. 411). Most significantly, his desperate search for 'smoke' from 'some cottage' (l. 56) comes to an end when he sees 'A smoking cottage' (l. 410).

The second piece of evidence is the significance for Wordsworth of his actual walking-tour through Salisbury plain. It was a 'recall to Nature' according to Moorman, and Paul Sheats too stresses its restorative aspect:

Wordsworth was flying from a landscape that embodied alienation from both man and nature to another that offered the hope of reconciliation with both, and the restoration of the cosmic and psychic integrity that had been destroyed by the "sunset cannon" of war. (Sheats, p.90)

There is no first hand record to show in what state Wordsworth finished his journey across Salisbury Plain, but it was a significant moment in his poetic history, the very moment that he was to recollect after five years on his second visit to Tintern Abbey.

But neither Wordsworth's main anti-war argument nor the precarious happy ending of the traveller's quest should be exaggerated. Wordsworth's efforts to maintain the reformer's hope for the amelioration of society are fully articulated in 'Salisbury Plain' both on an ideological and personal level, but the poem convinces more of the urgency with which Wordsworth sought a solution than of the happiness of the solution that it finds.

### 3. 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain'(1795): a Social criticism vs. an Ideology of Penal Law

Wordsworth's revision of 'Salisbury Plain' was so wide-ranging that it became, in his own words, 'almost...another work'.<sup>68</sup> The differences between the two versions, therefore, have always been the focus of scholarly attention. The most noticeable result of Wordsworth's revision is the restructured narrative framework; the narrator's indignant protest against the inequality of contemporary society and passionate prayer for the advent of the reign of Reason which provided the narrative structure of the anti-war argument in 'Salisbury Plain' is removed in the new poem. The poet's protest against the war is still an issue in the revised poem, but his protesting voice is now immersed in a more neatly woven narrative framework rather than straightforwardly delivered as a first-person oration. Wordsworth's move toward a more impersonal style reflected the changing literary fashions of the middle of the 1790s.<sup>69</sup>

Concomitant with the elimination of the first-person narrator is the addition of the traveller's story. The traveller's textual status in the previous poem was pretty obscure; apparently, his textual function was no more than as a sympathetic listener to the female vagrant's story. Since there was no explanation of his past except a vague suggestion that 'He too had withered young in sorrow's deadly blight'(*SP*, 1793-94, l. 405), his intense feeling of alienation ('He stood the only creature in the wild/ On whom the elements their rage could wreak'(*SP*, 1793-94, ll. 66-67)) was inexplicable within the text. My argument in the previous section was that the traveller adumbrates aspects of Wordsworth's personal experience during his walking tour on Salisbury Plain, undermining the coherence of the narrator's rationalistic anti-war argument. This obscurity surrounding the traveller had to be sorted out in the new narrative

---

<sup>68</sup>Wordsworth's letter to Francis Wrangham on 20 November 1795, *EY*, p.159.

<sup>69</sup>Schulman notes that the rhetoric of exhortation in the last stanzas of 'Salisbury Plain' was no longer the mode by 1795 due to the changed taste of readers as well as the changed political atmosphere. Joseph Cottle's poems, according to Schulman, are typical of this change 'from exhortation to fable'. See pp.230-31.

framework; his feeling of alienation, in other words, had to be supported within the text. The result is that Wordsworth's implicit projection of his personal feelings upon the traveller is withdrawn, and a new story of the traveller's past is introduced to take its place:

--A Sailor he, the sailor's evils shared,  
 For when from two full years of labour hard  
 Home he return'd, enflamed with long desire,  
 Even while in thought he took his rich reward  
 From his wife's lips, the ruffian press gang dire  
 Hurried him far away to rouse the battle's fire.  
 (SP, 1795, ll. 76-81)

By making the traveller a press-ganged sailor, Wordsworth begins to address a more practical aspect of the social injustice the war has been inflicting upon the lives of the poor. The recruitment of soldiers by impressment was the evil of war the poor had to face most immediately in their lives, for it not only put their lives at risk, but also drove the rest of the family into abject poverty. It was the most naked expression of the oppression of the poor without the disguise of minimum legality, and it sometimes provoked violent resistance.<sup>70</sup> Sailors were the main victims of impressment because the navy was always in need of experienced seamen. 'The ruffian press gang', therefore, was by no means a literary exaggeration, but an apposite expression of the poor's actual resentment at the government. Wordsworth's political protest against the war is now more solidly rooted in the immediate social circumstances under which the poor are living.<sup>71</sup> But the point of the traveller's story is not just to demonstrate the evil of

---

<sup>70</sup>Emsley, p.35; Pamela Horn, *The Rural World, 1780-1850: Social Change in the English Countryside* (London, 1980), pp.60-68.

<sup>71</sup>John Rieder has also pointed out the poem's evolution from political protest to social protest: 'The poem clearly remains critical of the established order, but now it seems to be defining itself less against a defense of political inequality and more against an apology for social inequality...', 'Civic Virtue and Social Class at the Scene of Execution: Wordsworth's Salisbury Plain Poems', *SIR*, 30 (Fall, 1991), pp.325-43 (p.332).

impressment, but lies more significantly in the whole chain of events leading to his murder of 'a traveller':

He urged his claim; the slaves of Office spurn'd  
 The unfriended claimant; at their door he stood  
 In vain, and now towards his home return'd,  
 Bearing to those he loved nor warmth nor food,  
 In sight of his own house, in such a mood  
 That from his view his children might have run,  
 He met a traveller, robb'd him, shed his blood;  
 And when the miserable work was done  
 He fled, a vagrant since, the murder's fate to shun.  
 (*SP*, 1795, ll.91-99)

The murder, prompted by 'the ruffian press gang' and 'the slaves of Office', introduces an entirely new dimension to a poem of anti-war protest. The incident establishes the moral depravity of the poor and the disruption of social order as the most important theme of 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain'. The new social dimension of the revised poem is also noted by Wordsworth himself:

Its object is partly to expose the vices of the penal law and the calamities of war as they affect individuals<sup>72</sup>

Whereas the focus of 'Salisbury Plain' fell on 'the calamities of war' in general, the main concern of 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain' narrows to a more specific instance of 'the calamities of war', 'the vices of the penal law'. The social injustice of the English criminal law had long been thought of as demanding reform, even if not as urgently as the system of parliamentary representation. Wordsworth's social protest in this regard, however, is less important in 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain' than he himself implied: although society is represented as ultimately responsible for the Sailor's crime, the fundamental justice of the penal law system itself is not questioned. On the contrary, the penal law system, as the following analysis will show, is implicitly

---

<sup>72</sup>Wordsworth's letter to Francis Wrangham on 20 November, 1795, *EY*, p.159.

endorsed, even justified by the moral vision offered at the poem's conclusion. The new emphasis on the individual has something to do with the newly introduced discipline of realism that dwells upon the actual experiences of each individual character, but its implication goes beyond that. Attention is diverted from the nature of social injustice to its catastrophic effect upon the moral integrity of the characters; their painful consciousness of their own lost humanity in the turmoil of the war is now far more important than their physical suffering from hunger and cold. The germ of this idea was already present in 'Salisbury Plain'. In the later part of the female vagrant's story, she exclaims:

"Oh dreadful price of being! to resign  
 All that is dear in being; better far  
 In Want's most lonely cave till death to pine  
 Unseen, unheard, unwatched by any star.  
 (SP, 1793-94, ll. 307-10)

These phrases are not only preserved in the new version with italicized emphasis on 'in' ('All that is dear *in* being'), but also strengthened with an even more straightforward explanation:

But, what afflicts my peace with keenest ruth  
 Is, that I have my inner self abused,  
 Foregone the home delight of constant truth,  
 And clear and open soul, so prized in fearless youth.  
 (SP, 1795, ll. 546-49)

Wordsworth's social protest, although presented more realistically, is almost eclipsed by his increased concern for the moral effect on the individual; the loss of a 'clear and open soul' is seen to be a graver catastrophe than that of 'warmth and food'.

The principal objective of reshaping the narrative framework of 'Salisbury Plain' was to prompt in the traveller a moment of moral self-recognition through his various encounters with people, or their tales of human suffering. The basic premise of the sailor's story--that the criminality of the poor is the result of the government's failure to

provide an adequate provision for those who were employed in the war efforts, and that the government has lost moral authority to exact punishment for their crimes--was common enough at the time. Coleridge, as Stephen Gill notes,<sup>73</sup> set out in 1795 what could have been an outline of the sailor's history:

And if in the bitter cravings of Hunger the dark Tide of Passions should swell, and the poor Wretch rush from despair into guilt, then the GOVERNMENT indeed assumes the right of Punishment though it had neglected the duty of Instruction, and hangs the victim for crimes, to which its own wide wasting follies and its own most sinful omissions had supplied the cause and the temptation.<sup>74</sup>

The philosophical ground for this commonly held criticism, as is well known, is the Godwinian necessitarian doctrine that 'the actions and dispositions of men are not the offspring of any original bias that they bring into the world in favour of one sentiment or character rather than another, but flow entirely from the operation of circumstances and events acting upon a faculty of receiving sensible expressions'.<sup>75</sup> Godwin's analysis is in the same spirit as Coleridge's:

A numerous class of mankind are held down in a state of abject poverty: and are continually prompted by disappointment and distress to commit violence upon their more fortunate neighbours.<sup>76</sup>

Moreover, the theme of psychological torment in the Sailor's story undoubtedly has a lot in common with Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, published also in 1795.<sup>77</sup> But what has been conceived as a Godwinian formula is not in the end corroborated by the moral vision offered at the end of the poem. The sailor achieves moral regeneration by

---

<sup>73</sup>Stephen Gill, '"Adventures on Salisbury Plain" and Wordsworth's Poetry of Protest', *SIR*, 11 (1972), pp.48-65 (p.56).

<sup>74</sup>Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'On the Present War', p.70.

<sup>75</sup>William Godwin, *PJ*, Book I, Chapter IV, 'The Characters of Men originate in their external circumstances', p.98.

<sup>76</sup>Godwin, *PJ*(1793), Book I, Chapter IX, quoted in Kwiatkowski, p.154.

<sup>77</sup>On the influence of *Caleb Williams* on 'Adventures on Salibury Plain', see Kwiatkowski, pp. 141-150.



submitting himself to authority, and this would not be endorsed by Godwin, who insists that capital punishment is always unnecessary and irrational as well as immoral.<sup>78</sup>

What is unique in Wordsworth's elaboration of the Sailor's story is that Wordsworth dwells upon the inner feelings of 'the poor Wretch' rather than the incident itself.<sup>79</sup> After a very brief description of the circumstances in which the sailor was driven to the crime of murder, the rest of the poem is wholly devoted to demonstrating how the sailor is tormented by fear and guilt, and how he eventually regains his moral integrity through various experiences during his journey with the female vagrant. In this new context, therefore, 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain' is, above all, the story of the sailor's moral victory over an unjust society, and all the episodes are strategically deployed to substantiate the moral triumph he achieves at the end of the poem. My primary concern in this section is to examine how the sailor's moral regeneration is enacted within the text in order to examine its ideological implications in the contemporary socio-political atmosphere.

'Adventures on Salisbury Plain' opens with the traveller's encounter with an old man, an ex-soldier, who is roaming through the plain in search of his daughter who has been 'driven/ By circumstance which did all faith exceed/ From every stay but him' (*SP*, 1795, ll.24-25). The traveller's brief encounter with the debilitated old man, which replaces the narrator's abstract reflections on inequality in the earlier version, is not only rather abruptly introduced, but also dissevered from the main story.<sup>80</sup> But its

---

<sup>78</sup>Godwin notes, 'To deprive an offender of his life in any manner will appear to be unjust, as it seems always sufficiently practicable, without this, to prevent him from further offence. Privation of life, though by no means the greatest injury that can be inflicted, must always be considered as a very serious injury; since it puts a perpetual close upon the prospects of the sufferer as to all the enjoyments, the virtues and the excellence of a human being', Godwin, *PJ*, Book VII, 'Of Crime and Punishments', p.672.

<sup>79</sup>For a variety of critical opinions among Wordsworthian scholars on Wordsworth's shift of interest from the external circumstances to the inner feelings of the character, see Gill, p.49.n.4.

<sup>80</sup>Wordsworth also felt that this opening episode was structurally alien to the main body of the narrative because the old man at one point of the revision was made the father of the dying woman at the end of the poem (that is, the traveller's father-in-law) in MS 2(DC MS 16) to give 'a physical

significance in the characterization of the traveller is clear enough; it is a demonstration of the traveller's benevolence:

"And dost thou hope across this Plain to trail  
That frame o'ercome with years and malady,  
Those feet that scarcely can outcrawl the snail,  
These withered arms of thine, that faltering knee?  
Come, I am strong and stout, come lean on me."  
(*SP*, 1795, ll.10-14)

The old man's debilitated body is still in keeping with Wordsworth's anti-war propaganda, but the old man's function as an embodiment of the human calamities of war is here subservient to his role as the recipient of the traveller's charity, because Wordsworth's real concern lies in illustrating the traveller's frame of mind rather than using the old man's case as a vehicle for social criticism. What really matters is that the traveller's charitable action towards the helpless old man is a proof of his benevolent mind.

The sight of the old man's decayed body, at first, elicits the traveller's pity, but a kind of pity that lacks a deeper understanding of the object of pity. What is highlighted is not their identity, but their difference, as is implied by the traveller's good-natured, but light-hearted words, 'Come, I am strong and stout, come lean on me.' The traveller's offer of help 'touched his(the old man's) melting heart', but not vice versa. The traveller's condescending attitude is changed by the old man's 'tale', a tale which shows to the traveller that the old man and himself, sharing the same military background, are in fact common victims of the present war. The effect of the old man's tale is to deepen the traveller's pity into a genuine feeling of mutual compassion, even a strong sense of solidarity:

---

totality to the piece'. Gill, 'Introduction', *SP*, p.11. 'A physical totality to the piece' was the expression which appeared in Wordsworth's letter to Coleridge on 27 February 1799 to explain his plan for another revision to make the female vagrant 'the widow or sister or daughter of the man whom the poor Tar murdered'. *EY*, pp.256-57.

He said that on his comrade's road there lay  
 One lonely inn upon the wilder moor.  
 But entrance none there for such as they,  
 No board inscribed the needy to allure,  
 The grapes hung glittering at the gilded door.  
 (*SP*, 1795, ll. 28-32)

As soon as they establish a friendship based on a deeper mutual understanding, the first thing they recognize is that people 'such as they' are excluded from the care of society, for 'the gilded door' is closed to 'the needy' like themselves. So the world is to them a desert without an oasis in which their mutual support is the only consolation. And that 'consolation' is actually given to the old man when the traveller exclaims to 'a post-boy'; 'Have mercy on this broken Soldier's plight;/ Deed of such sort shall well itself requite'(*SP*, 1795, ll. 40-41). This recapitulates the cautiously optimistic prospect allowed to the traveller and the female vagrant in 'Salisbury Plain':

Adieu ye friendless hope-forsaken pair!  
 Yet friendless ere ye take your several road,  
 Enter that lowly cot and ye shall share  
 Comforts by prouder mansions unbestowed.  
 ...  
 And think that life is like this desert broad,  
 Where all the happiest find is but a shed  
 And a green spot 'mid wastes interminably spread.  
 (*SP*, 1793-94, ll. 415-18, 421-23)

'Adventures on Salisbury Plain', in this context, may well be said to begin where 'Salisbury Plain' ends, because the effect of the old man's tale upon the traveller is very reminiscent of that of the female vagrant's tale. What is different in 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain', however, is that the traveller-old man episode shows a clearer understanding that consolation of such a kind is limited and transitory, for they know that 'their short-lived fellowship must end'. The traveller is not rewarded for his charity by finding himself a similar comfort, but travels on into 'the far-extended waste'.

If the opening episode establishes a brighter side of the traveller's character, it is only to present the other extreme more dramatically in the following episodes. The traveller, now identified as a sailor, turns out to be a fugitive murderer. But unlike the female vagrant in both versions, his innate goodness, demonstrated in the opening episode, is affected neither by 'Death's worst aspect' that he daily observed at war, nor by his own experience of murdering a fellow human being:

Yet oft when Fear her withering grasp forgoes,  
Such tendency to pleasure loved before  
Do life and nature shew, that common cares  
Might to his bosom hours of joy restore.  
(*SP*, 1795, ll. 100-103)

That he had 'a heart to life's best ends inclined' is exactly why his mental conflict keeps intensifying. The first thing he comes across in 'this wild waste' after leaving the old man is the corpse of a criminal hanging on the gibbet-mast:

He looked, and saw on a bare gibbet nigh  
A human body that in irons swang,  
Uplifted by the tempest sweeping by,  
And hovering round it often did a raven fly.  
(*SP*, 1795, ll. 114-17)

It is 'a spectacle' which would be extremely disturbing to anyone who happened to come across it alone in that 'savage' place, which was the point in exhibiting the body of executed criminals for an extended period of time.

The execution of a criminal in the eighteenth-century was performed to evoke among the poor the maximum amount of 'terror', terror being the very foundation of the system of criminal law of eighteenth-century Britain. Justice Nares, for example, sentencing a murderer at Gloucester in 1772, made it clear that his gibbeted bones would never be allowed a Christian burial, but would hang 'as a dreadful spectacle of

horror and detestation, to caution and deter the rest of mankind'.<sup>81</sup> To a runaway murderer like the sailor, it is an even more terrifying reminder of his own future fate. The sailor's response to the gibbet, therefore, is not surprising; the hanging corpse not only reminds him of 'All he had feared from man', but also 'rouzed a train/ Of the mind's phantoms; horrible as vain':

The stones, as if to sweep him from the day,  
Roll'd at his back along the living plain;  
He fell and without sense or motion lay,  
And when the trance was gone, feebly pursued his way.  
(*SP*, 1795, ll. 123-26)

The sailor's intense sense of fear is visualized as 'the rolling stones' which seem to pursue him. The sailor's response to the terrible scene is a physical, without any moral or political reference;<sup>82</sup> his sense of fear has not developed into a feeling of remorse as the government would have hoped. Neither does it provoke an indignant defiance of the barbaric practice of the penal law as it might have done in 'Salisbury Plain'. Wordsworth offers no precise explanation of how the sailor was affected by the 'spectacle', he is shown simply to faint, recover, and resume his journey. During 'the trance', his soul 'in such anguish' is tormented by 'a terrific dream' and 'dire phantasma', but is somehow restored, when he awakens, into a peaceful state 'still as a deep evening stream'.

The incident of the sailor's encounter with the hanging corpse does not in itself seem to offer any clear criticism of the penal law, but Wordsworth's message is implicitly delivered by the series of gothic images included in the following stanzas. The supernatural elements which had haunted the dreary plain through many 'tales' are

---

<sup>81</sup>Douglas Hay, 'Property, Authority and the Criminal Law', in *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England*, edited by Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh, John G. Rule, E.P. Thompson, Cal Winslow (London, 1975), p.30.

<sup>82</sup>Karen Swann identifies the same pattern of the sailor's responses to the objects or tales of human suffering as the influence of 'gothic romance', the formalistic discipline of which serves the ends of social protest in 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain'. see 'Public Transport: Adventuring on Wordsworth's Salisbury Plain,' *ELH* 55(1988), pp.811-34.

either eliminated or placed in a more realistic context; 'a terrible dream' and 'the dire phantasma' in stanza 15, for example, are the obscure traces of the gothic spirits of 'Salisbury Plain', but are now presented in terms of hallucination rather than as supernatural satanic images beyond human reason. The gothic images are employed specifically to embody the sailor's feeling of fear. Since his fear was artificially produced by the judicial authorities, the gothic images may well be said to be symbolic of the government as the executioner of the penal law. The morally negative connotation of the gothic images, therefore, obliquely articulates Wordsworth's opposition to the practice of the penal law. The different use of the gothic materials in 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain' is more clearly evident in the revised version of the Druids scene:

Thou hoary Pile! thou child of darkness deep  
 And unknown days, that lovest to stand and hear  
 The desert sounding to the whirlwind's sweep,  
 Inmate of lonesome Nature's endless year;  
 Even since thou sawest the giant Wicker rear  
 Its dismal chambers hung with living men,  
 Before thy face did ever wretch appear,  
 Who in his heart had groan'd with deadlier pain  
 Than he who travels now along thy bleak domain?  
 (*SP*, 1795, ll. 154-62)

The Druids' barbaric practice of human sacrifice, which had been compared to the massacres of modern warfare, is now used more specifically to underline the barbarities of the practice of the penal law; to exhibit the hanged body of a criminal in contemporary penal practice is as barbaric and cruel as to burn 'the giant Wicker' crowded with living men in the ancient Druids' ritual.

Even this criticism of the penal law, however, is much less important than the development of the sailor's moral vision through his painful journey. His purely physical reaction to the gibbet-mast is interestingly repeated after hearing the female vagrant's story:

She paused--or by excess of grief oppress'd,  
 Or that some sign of mortal anguish broke  
 In strong convulsion from her comrade's breast--  
 She paused and shivering wrapp'd her in her cloak  
 Once more a horrid trance his limbs did lock.  
 Him through the gloom she could not then discern  
 And after a short while again she spoke;  
 But he was stretch'd upon the wither'd fern,  
 Nor to her friendly summons answer could return.  
 (*SP*, 1795, ll. 397-405)

This is a radical revision of the previous version where 'the smiling morn/ All unconcerned with their unrest' (*SP*, 1793-94, ll. 327-28) dawned as she ended the first part of her story. Then he gave her comfort and encouraged her to resume her story, for he was not involved in the terrible hardship she had just narrated. Apparently, the physical response to the female vagrant's story here seems to imply that the sailor has come to understand the wider social significance of his own unfortunate fate as a murderer. He has identified the common principle of terror which unites the government's war policy with its imposition of the penal law. His own impressment, the carnages on the battlefield, the corruption of the officials, and his own crime of murder, are all united in his response to the public demonstration of a corpse on the gibbet-mast.

To the sailor and the female vagrant, there is no difference between the dreadful spirits of the Druids haunting the plain and their own terrible experiences; both are nightmares from which they wish to awaken. That is why the female vagrant, when she describes how she found herself on a British ship, says 'I waked, as from a trance restored'. The same restoration is allowed to the sailor, but with a self-reproaching moral recognition that 'I am a wretched man'. The sailor's self-knowledge is obviously a product of his recognition of the similarity of his own history and the female vagrant's. But to relive a painful life through 'a tale' produces contrasting effects on the female vagrant and the sailor respectively; whereas the vagrant's

confidential 'tale' 'eases' her 'burden'd mind', the same tale intensifies the sailor's dilemma, particularly when she observes ironically that 'Your heart is kind'. The different effect of the female vagrant's tale on herself and the sailor become even clearer when the vagrant's story comes to an end:

"But come," she cried, "come after weary night  
Of such rough storm the breaking day to view."  
So forth he came and eastward look'd: the sight  
Into his heart a [     ] anguish threw;  
His wither'd cheek was ting'd with ashy hue.  
He stood and trembled both with grief and fear,  
But she felt new delight and solace new,  
And, from the opening east, a pensive cheer  
Came to her weary thoughts while the lark warbled near.  
(*SP*, 1795, ll. 568-76)

The Sailor does not faint this time, but 'trembled both with grief and fear'. There seems no reason for his 'grief and fear' since he has been cheered by a 'comrade' who has gone through a life as hard as his own. What afflicts him now is not the fear of being caught and hanged like the corpse on the gibbet-mast, but his sense of guilt, his loss of a moral integrity which the female vagrant has managed to preserve in her equally desperate situation. Although she reproaches herself, exclaiming that 'I have my inner self abused', and lost her 'clear and open soul', the later part of her story, newly extended, relates how her moral integrity was preserved rather than damaged.

The sailor had been driven to murder by his lack of the means to provide his family with 'warmth' and 'food': 'Bearing to those he loved nor warmth nor food,/ In sight of his own house, in such a mood/ That from his view his children might have run,/ He met a traveller, robb'd him, shed his blood;'(SP, 1795, ll. 94-97). This was also the essence of the vagrant's problem when she returned to Britain, the lack of provision after all her suffering: 'And homeless near a thousand homes I stood,/ And near a thousand tables pined, and wanted food'(SP, 1795, ll. 467-68). But she is not driven to violence by her plight. Her predicament is the more desperate because she is



too proud to beg: she could not frame her tongue 'to the beggar's language'. She first finds relief in hospital; 'Recovery came with food'. But the 'careless cruelty' with which she is treated persuades her to leave. It is from a group of gypsies that she receives not only 'food' but also more humane care: 'The wild brood saw me weep, my fate enquired,/ And gave me food, and rest, more welcome, more desired'(SP, 1795, ll. 503-504). They seemed to her 'a shed/ And a green spot 'mid wastes interminably spread', a small paradise regained:

"My heart is touched to think that men like these,  
 The rude earth's tenant's, were my first relief:  
 How kindly did they paint their vagrant ease!  
 And their long holiday that feared not grief,  
 For all belonged to all, and each was chief.  
 No plough their sinews strained; on grating road  
 No wain they drove, and yet, the yellow sheaf  
 In every vale for their delight was stowed:  
 For them, in nature's meads, the milky udder flowed.  
 (SP, 1795, ll. 505-13)

At first sight, it seems a restoration of a pastoral world which is free from the evils of the outside world-- from war, hunger and social inequality, even the toil of labour. It is a 'life of happier sort' indeed. But as soon as she realizes that the economic basis of this seemingly pastoral society is theft, all feeling of joy and relief evaporates at once:

"But ill it suited me, in journey dark  
 O'er moor and mountain, midnight theft to hatch;  
 To charm the surly house-dog's faithful bark,  
 Or hang on tiptoe at the lifted latch;  
 The gloomy lantern, and the dim blue match,  
 The black disguise, the warning whistle shrill,  
 And ear still busy on its nightly watch,  
 Were not for me, brought up in nothing ill;  
 Besides, on griefs so fresh my thoughts were brooding still.  
 (SP, 1795, 523-31)

It is an extraordinary demonstration of moral courage by the female vagrant to refuse all this comfort only because it is wrong to steal somebody else's property even in extreme poverty. To the female vagrant, the right of private property is so absolute that nothing can possibly justify theft. After she voluntarily leaves the gypsies, she regrets the abuse of her 'inner self' and the loss of her 'clear and open soul', which may vaguely imply her resort to prostitution when 'the mercy of the fields' was refused. If that is the case, it seems that it is more important for her to respect the right of property than to defend her chastity as a widow. In contrast, the sailor, when he is unjustly refused his reward by the government, chooses to rob a stranger of his money and kill him. Whether he actually murdered a man or just wounded him does not make any difference, for he would be hanged anyway on the charge of theft. What distinguishes the female vagrant's 'new delight and solace new' and the sailor's 'grief and fear' is the sanctity of private property, the protection of which was in fact the most important objective of the criminal law system.

The year 1795 was a time of scarcity; the extremely bad harvest of 1794-95 brought a steep increase in the price of corn, giving rise to a bread crisis.<sup>83</sup> The food riots<sup>84</sup> were the natural reaction to the crisis: the shopkeepers were forced to sell bread at a 'just' price rather than simply being robbed. The social and economic crisis of 1795 made it particularly urgent for the ruling class to re-establish the principle of the inalienable right of private property and to inculcate it among the poor. For example, Edmund Burke argues in his pamphlet published in November 1795:

The labouring people are only poor, because they are numerous. Numbers in their nature imply poverty. In a fair distribution among a vast multitude none can have much. That class of dependent pensioners

---

<sup>83</sup>For details about the crisis, see Walter M. Stern, 'The Bread Crisis in Britain, 1795-96', *Economica*, New Series, 31 (May 1964), pp.168-87.

<sup>84</sup>For details about the food riots, see E.P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present*, no.50 (Feb.1971), pp.76-136; 'Food Riots in England, 1792-1818', in *Popular Protest and Public Order* edited by J.Stevenson and R.Quinault (London, 1974), pp.36-45; Alan Booth, 'Food Riots in the North-West of England 1790-1801', *Past and Present* 77 (November, 1977), pp.84-107.

called the rich is so extremely small, that if all their throats were cut, and a distribution made of all they consume in a year, it would not give a bit of bread and cheese for one night's supper to those who labour, and who in reality feed both the pensioners and themselves. But the throats of the rich ought not to be cut, nor their magazines plundered; because in their persons they are trustees for those who labour, and their hoards are the banking-houses of these latter. ... When the poor rise to destroy the rich, they act as wisely for their own purposes, as when they burn mills, and throw corn into the river, to make bread cheap.<sup>85</sup>

If it was the business of ideologues like Burke to establish the irrationality of the food riots, it was the job of the government to punish the poor very severely for infringing other people's right of property. But in such a crisis, people's natural right to live and the law of property come into conflict.<sup>86</sup> Supporters of the status quo such as Blackstone thought that want could not justify the violation of the law of property because 'men's properties would be under a strange insecurity, if liable to be invaded according to the wants of others; of which wants no man can possibly be an adequate judge, but the party himself who pleads them'.<sup>87</sup> This argument was generally accepted by the eighteenth-century English courts, but more reliance was placed on a practical argument to justify severe punishment for petty crime:

Rather than acknowledge an archaic, alien and dangerous legal doctrine, the bench stressed their deep concern for the little personal property that the ordinary Englishman did have. From time to time they passed harsh sentences for certain crimes, such as the theft of clothes, which they proclaimed in court to be particular misfortunes of the poor. A great many words were lavished also on particular statutes for the

---

<sup>85</sup>Edmund Burke, 'Thoughts and Details on Scarcity', in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, edited by R.B. McDowell, 9 vols (Oxford, 1991), vol 9, pp.119-45.

<sup>86</sup>Hay notes, 'In times of dearth, when the rulers of England were faced with food riots by men desperate with hunger and convinced of the rights of their case, the contradiction could become acute. At such times two conceptions of justice stood in sharp opposition: an older, Christian version of natural rights, which guaranteed even the poorest man at least life; and the justice of the law of property, sanctioned by the settlements of the seventeenth century', p. 35.

<sup>87</sup>quoted in Hay, p.36.

same reason. An act of 1713 punished with death any housebreaker who stole goods worth forty shillings or more.<sup>88</sup>

In this immediate social context, the female vagrant's good conscience is not innocent of the ideological propaganda designed to indicate that the ruling class did care for the poor, and were motivated in the defence of private property by their concern that it was the property of the poor that was most at risk from theft.<sup>89</sup> The female vagrant's constant efforts to cheer up the sailor, 'Come let us be... of better heart', for example, encourages him to accept the same principle by confessing his crime. That the price of a good conscience in his case is death does not make any difference because 'a little while/ and we(they) shall meet in heaven'.

It is, however, in the cruel father scene that such a moral point is made straightforwardly. The cruel father who batters his own son for a trivial disobedience, unlike the other characters so far, has no part in their common experience of hardship at war. His family is also intact unlike the other characters. In other words, he has not been affected by the present war in the way the others have. This is a moral fable to sum up the moral lesson Wordsworth wanted to formulate out of the Sailor's narrative; the most immediate role the cruel father plays in the context of the sailor's moral struggle is that of letting him confront his own action of murder without succumbing to 'trance':

No answer made, but stroked the child, outstretch'd  
His face to earth, and as the boy turn'd round  
His batter'd head, a groan the Sailor fetch'd.  
The head with streaming blood had dy'd the ground,  
Flow'd from the spot where he that deadly wound  
Had fix'd on him he murder'd. Through his brain  
At once the griding iron passage found;  
Deluge of tender thoughts then rush'd amain

---

<sup>88</sup>Hay, p.36.

<sup>89</sup>Propaganda such as this was not without grounds in eighteenth century Britain; Hay notes that 'the poor suffer from theft as well as the rich, and in eighteenth-century England probably far more poor men lost goods to thieves, if only because the rich were few and their property more secure'. p.37.

Nor could his aged eyes from very tears abstain.

(*SP*, 1795, ll. 640-48)

The blood from the boy's 'batter'd head' merges with that of the man he has murdered, and so identifies the murder with the cruel father's almost motiveless violence. The effect of this implicit identification is two-fold; because the murder is associated with a trivial example of domestic violence, the social background of the murder is displaced, and the moral aspect of the murder alone is highlighted. In other words, the social dimension of his crime -- the conflict between the natural right of man to survive and the penal law, and the official injustice that the sailor has suffered -- is completely overridden by the purely moral implication in this episode.

The other problem in identifying the sailor with the cruel father is that it reverses the direction of his self-projection onto the people he meets. The sailor's encounters with a variety of people-- the old man, the hanged man on the gibbet mast, the female vagrant -- have been accompanied by a sympathetic empathy with the victims of social injustice rather than their oppressors. Even the hanged man was represented as a victim of an unjust penal law. But in this episode, the sailor is identified with the cruel father who embodies evil and unjust authority. This father-son relationship might well have been offered as an analogy of the government-people relationship in which the latter is unjustly persecuted by the former. But the reversed direction of the sailor's identification with persecutor rather than persecuted makes this analogy impossible. On the contrary, the interchangeability of the persecutor and the persecuted surreptitiously implies that there is no real division of society between the persecutors and the persecuted, that all of us play both roles in the present hardship. The mutual affection and understanding among common sufferers becomes still more important in times of hardship, which makes the sailor's sin of murdering a fellow human soul more deplorable, more unforgivable:

"'Tis a bad world, and hard is the world's law;  
Each prowls to strip his brother of his fleece;  
Much need have ye that time more closely draw

The bond of nature, all unkindness cease,  
 And that among so few there still be peace:  
 Else can ye hope but with such num'rous foes  
 Your pains shall ever with your years increase."  
 While his pale lips these homely truths disclose,  
 A correspondent calm stole gently on his woes.  
 (*SP*, 1795, ll. 658-66)

Even while condemning the corrupt world, the earlier indignation at the social injustice committed by 'the ruffian press gang', 'the slaves of Office', or the greedy master who had driven the female vagrant's father away from his home, is evaporated by the disclosure of 'these homely truths'. What might have been called a class conflict is now transposed into the brawls within one class, the poor. How can they be saved from the damnation of living in such a hell? It is certainly not by food riots, but through the ultimate supervision of God. In the meantime, the poor should endure even the severest hardship patiently until they 'see each other in heaven' rather than seek to solve an unsolvable problem in an improper way, for 'Suffering not doing ill' is 'fate far more mild' (*SP*, 1795, ll. 652). More importantly, the penal law, however barbaric its practice may be, should be strictly observed because it is designed to protect the poor themselves. This moral lesson, offered as a conclusion to the sailor's moral education, and wholeheartedly accepted, happens to coincide precisely with the ideological demands of the ruling class upon the poor at a time of scarcity.

In this context, the cottage people's callous attitude towards the sailor's criminal action, which may seem to be inconsistent with their otherwise benevolent feelings, is actually the final and decisive confirmation of this point: the crime of murder (implicitly the crime of theft as well) can never be justifiable in whatever situation:

But they, alone and tranquil, call'd to mind  
 Events so various: recollection ran  
 Through each occurrence and the links combin'd  
 And while his silence, looks, and voice they scan,  
 And trembling hands, they cried, "He is the man!"

Nought did those looks of silent woe avail.  
 "Though we deplore it much as any can,  
 The law," they cried, "must weigh him in her scale;  
 Most fit it is that we unfold this woful tale."  
 (SP, 1795, ll. 802-10)

The sailor's heroic confession of his own crime only strenghtens the moral position announced by the village people, and his stoic reception of his own death is not only encouraged by the female vagrant and the village people, but is also an attitude compatible with the interests of the ruling class:

Confirm'd of purpose, fearless and prepared,  
 Not without pleasure, to the city strait  
 He went and all which he had done declar'd:  
 "And from your hands," he added, "now I wait,  
 Nor let them linger long, the murderer's fate."  
 Nor ineffectual was that piteous claim.  
 Blest be for once the stroke which end, tho' late,  
 The pangs which from thy halls of terror came,  
 Thou who of Justice bear'st the violated name!  
 (SP, 1795, ll. 811-19)

At the very last, an element of social criticism seems to revive with the definition of the courts as 'halls of terror', of the judicial sentence as the 'violated name' of 'Justice', but this is far short of reversing the general logic of the poem, that Justice is being *achieved* rather than *violated*. As long as the sailor's choice of death is described as a liberation from the 'pangs' of a guilt-stricken conscience rather than an ultimate defiance, Wordsworth's last minute gesture towards social criticism is easily neutralized.<sup>90</sup>

The evolution of 'Salisbury Plain' into 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain' is marked by two consecutive transitions of its topical focus; the enthusiasm of the anti-war

---

<sup>90</sup>John Rieder also noticed a contradiction in the conclusion of the poem, saying: '...the poem's final moments present a contradiction between the critical perspective offered upon public justice at the scene of execution, and the complete acquiescence to that same justice--indeed even the salvational power of such acquiescence--in the private judgment of the sailor'. p. 342.

argument, first of all, has more or less faded, and is succeeded by a social criticism of a practical nature.<sup>91</sup> The new realistic narrative style manages to accommodate into the poem many concrete instances of social injustice--impressment, lack of provision for the retired soldiers and their families, the corruption of government officials, the oppression of the overseer--narrated from the poor's perspective. All these entitle it to be called a poem of social protest.<sup>92</sup> But the alternative value offered by its social protest is not positive at all.<sup>93</sup> The lack of positive vision encourages him to assume a moral point of view.<sup>94</sup> This second move to create a moral perspective, which becomes increasingly dominant in the later part of the poem, induces the poet inadvertently to duplicate the logic of the contemporary ideological campaign of the ruling class to pacify the poor, and ultimately comes close to invalidating the preceding social criticism.

---

<sup>91</sup>Rieder, p.335.

<sup>92</sup>For a detailed analysis of the poem as a social protest, see Gill, "'Adventures on Salisbury Plain" and Wordsworth's Poetry of Protest', *SIR*, 11 (1972), pp.48-65.

<sup>93</sup>Enid Welsford distinguished 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain' from the previous version by its 'increased passivism', p.145.

<sup>94</sup>Welsford notes, 'An increasing desire to indict society coinciding with a decreasing faith in political panaceas led him to seek for sources of good and evil in the recesses of the human heart, and for its manifestations in the conduct of individuals.' p.26.



#### 4. 'The Ruined Cottage'(1797): Social Criticism and the Politics of Nature

The moral vision offered at the end of 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain' was by no means Wordsworth's final answer to the social issues associated with a soldier's wife. Although the sailor and the female vagrant accept their undeserved suffering with calmness, it does not necessarily mean that the preceding social protest has entirely lost its validity. On the contrary, the unprecedented social crisis of 1795, marked by the food riots and the repressive two 'gagging acts', proved the inadequacy of Wordsworth's moral vision in reality, which may have prompted Wordsworth to go back once again to the same character, a soldier's wife, within less than two years.

The first stage of 'The Ruined Cottage', preserved in MS A, the Racedown Notebook, and the excerpted lines copied in Coleridge's letter to John Estlin on 10 June 1797, is for the most part a product of the first half of 1797. Although the existing manuscripts are fragmentary, it is generally assumed that Wordsworth must have completed a unified version of 'The Ruined Cottage' at latest by the second week of July 1797. According to James Butler, the editor of the Cornell Wordsworth edition of 'The Ruined Cottage', the first complete version of the poem comprised most of Margaret's story and at least some of the pedlar's four visits to the cottage.<sup>95</sup> Since we are primarily concerned with the characterization of a soldier's wife and its socio-political implications in the immediate political context, the first complete text of 'The

---

<sup>95</sup>Of the 1797 text, Butler concludes, 'The 1797 poem must have begun abruptly, omitted much scene-setting and description of the Pedlar, and skipped the moral transition between Parts One and Two. But the probability is that at least some of the Pedlar's visits go back to 1797. As early as MS A, the narrator is "A Wanderer among the cottages"(l.191); he is with Margaret when she tells of her husband's illness, and the Racedown fragment shows that he knows Margaret's reaction on finding the purse of money. The fair copy in the Christabel Notebook also indicates that some of the Pedlar's visits were early. Without doubt, though, Wordsworth expanded this section of the poem in 1798, so the number of visits (and the detail with which they were treated) in 1797 remain uncertain. ...most probably the poem was longer than 200 lines, but the drafting in the Alfoxden Notebook suggests that it was not long enough to include most or all of the visits to the cottage and reach 370 to 400 lines. Whatever its length, the surviving parts of the original work of 1797 are a powerful representation of a domestic tragedy, stark in its bare essentials. Margaret declines and dies--'Last human tenant of these ruined walls'(MS B, l.528)--with little editorial commentary', 'Introduction', *RC*, p.14.

'Ruined Cottage' of 1797 containing another story of a soldier's wife would have been an ideal text to discuss here. Without a complete text of the first poem produced in 1797, however, we have no choice but to use the first available fair copy of the whole poem, MS B made early in 1798. The introductory description and the pedlar's personal history (ll.1-103), and the moral transition (ll.243-296), however, will be excluded here, for they not only belong to a later date in their composition, but they are concerned with the question of the proper response to a story of human suffering, and it is the question of response that is to become the dominant issue in the next stage of Wordsworth's revision. Wordsworth's revisionary efforts in this regard will be discussed in the following chapter. But all of the pedlar's four visits to the cottage, no matter when exactly they were composed, will be considered here because they constitute the crucial aspect of Wordsworth's new narrative strategy one and half years after completing the second version of the 'Salisbury Plain poems'. This stage of the text of 'The Ruined Cottage', which was equipped with all the basic elements of Margaret's story, but still without the pedlar's moralistic commentary, is the text to be analysed, and, for convenience, will be hereafter referred to as MS I.

MS I is undoubtedly a direct descendant of the 'Salisbury Plain poems', sharing with them the same social context, the context of war and poverty. It is another story of a soldier's wife's suffering amid 'the plague of war' in 'Two blighting seasons when the fields were left/ With half a tillage' (MS B, ll.186-87). But it is also a significantly different version of the story. First of all, Margaret's situation is not identical with that of the female vagrant; whereas the female vagrant was a camp follower who experienced the war at first hand, Margaret is a soldier's wife who is left behind, like the sailor's wife in 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain'. Accordingly, whereas the female vagrant's suffering is more immediately caused by the war, still a vivid reality in her memory, Margaret's life is indirectly affected by a war that she experiences only through Robert's absence rather than by any actual experience. War is still the most important social background for Margaret's suffering in MS I, but it is distanced both from her life and from the narrative situation.

This displacement of the war from the surface of the text, in fact, reflects the changed political atmosphere of 1797. By 1797, the anti-war argument had become almost irrelevant. The confrontation between the anti-war opposition and the pro-war government became meaningless because Pitt himself wanted peace, realizing that the present war was neither profitable nor justifiable. He dispatched Lord Malmesbury to negotiate peace with France twice in October 1796 and July 1797, though both of the attempts were unsuccessful. Instead of responding to the British peace initiative positively, France dispatched an army of convicts under Colonel William Tate to land on the British mainland only to surrender themselves after three days, having achieved nothing except alarming the British people. In 1797, the French invasion became an imminent threat to many British people as is well illustrated by the Spy Nozy episode in *Alfoxden* (Roe, pp.243-62), and the concern for national security was further intensified by the naval mutinies at the Spithead and the Nore. Although LCS was still trying to orchestrate an anti-war movement as late as March 1797, the anti-war camp lost ground completely in the new wave of anti-Gallic sentiment among the British people.<sup>96</sup>

What distinguishes MS I from 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain', secondly, is that MS I goes further than 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain' in its development of a dramatic narrative style that excludes any authorial intervention. Not only the Godwinian exhortation for the advent of the Reign of Reason in 'Salisbury Plain', but also the Sailor's moral vision achieved at the end of 'Adventures of Salisbury Plain' are now eliminated, and the poet's moral position in this story of undeserved suffering is no longer directly articulated in the text. Considering the political atmosphere between 1796-97, Wordsworth's withdrawal of moral commentary from his poem at this particular moment is entirely understandable. During a period in which he was reviewing his political perspective, it must have seemed wise to reserve his opinion on

---

<sup>96</sup>Emsley, Chapter 3. 'Crisis upon Crisis: 1795-7', pp.41-64; Goodwin, 'The Rise of the protest movement; Pitt's 'Reign of Terror' and the decline of the popular societies', pp.359-415.

a topical matter such as the suffering of a soldier's wife. The paradox is that he is still dealing with the most topical social problem of the time as the theme of his poem: the uniqueness of the new poem lies in the fact that the new narrative style accommodates the most political theme in the most apolitical way without having to resort to any explicit authorial intervention. Wordsworth, in MS I, manages to create an image of the soldier's wife which is still pathetic, but also inexplicably heart-warming so as not to provoke any subversive feeling of indignation from his readers.

Wordsworth's narrative technique, in fact, has much to do with the critical acclaim which distinguishes 'The Ruined Cottage' from all the other poems concerning the character of a soldier's wife. F.R. Leavis's commendation of it as an 'utterly convincing creative achievement'<sup>97</sup> is typical of the critical consensus among traditional Wordsworthians that 'The Ruined Cottage' is the very first poem to show Wordsworth's 'maturity' as a poet.

Jonathan Wordsworth is chiefly responsible for the propagation of this critical position. His *The Music of Humanity* is a classic study which established the separate identity of 'The Ruined Cottage' and 'The Pedlar' as well as their artistic status in the corpus of Wordsworth's poetry, and he offers 'The Ruined Cottage' as an exemplar of Wordsworth's poetry; that is, of Wordsworth's poetry as it should be. It is on this account that all the earlier works tend to be classed as literary experiment important only in charting Wordsworth's progress towards the poetic maturity first achieved in 'The Ruined Cottage'.

It is therefore not surprising that Jonathan Wordsworth is extremely ungenerous in giving critical credit to the 'Salisbury Plain poems', the most substantial predecessors of 'The Ruined Cottage'. To him Wordsworth's overt motivation - 'partly to expose the vices of the penal law and the calamities of war as they affect individuals' - is 'inexplicable', for 'there is no feeling that his(the Sailor's) punishment is

---

<sup>97</sup>F.R. Leavis, *Revaluation: Tradition and Revaluation in English Poetry* (London, 1936), p. 179.

undeserved.<sup>98</sup> The only thing that deserves our attention is 'the cruel father scene' which is not a part of the main story of the poem, 'which has no importance to Wordsworth at all in its own right', because it appears to him to present the 'quite unliterary emotion which is the greatness of the later poetry.'<sup>99</sup> Jonathan Wordsworth seems to presuppose different stages in Wordsworth's poetic development in which he shows different attitudes to human suffering:

Suffering, interesting at first merely for its sentimental value, later for didactic and political reasons, has now the quality of permanence which was to become Wordsworth's theme in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. It has "the nature of infinity" --in a later phrase, of "that infinity without which there is no poetry".<sup>100</sup>

Ostensibly, this description appears to correspond to the evolution from *An Evening Walk* to 'The Ruined Cottage' via the 'Salisbury Plain poems', and that evolution is obviously assumed to be a process of improvement culminating in a golden decade of prolific composition, the opening of which was signalled by 'The Ruined Cottage'. This position has long served as a paradigm of the development of Wordsworth's poetry. What matters, then, in the final stage of 'The Ruined Cottage' is 'the quality of permanence'. The same point is reiterated by a more recent critic, Mary Jacobus:

Wordsworth is now concerned with states of being rather than the state of society, and the significance attached to suffering is imaginative and philosophic rather than simply humanitarian. It is not that he has become a less humane poet, but that his vision is directed beyond topical issues to the *permanent* themes of loss, change, and mortality.<sup>101</sup>  
(my italics)

---

<sup>98</sup>His reading itself coincides with our argument in the previous section in that it touches on the contradiction between the moral solution and the indignant social protest in 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain'. But he blindly sticks to the division between social protest and the study of the human mind simply giving priority to the latter.

<sup>99</sup>Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Music of Humanity*, p.57.

<sup>100</sup>Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Music of Humanity*, p.59.

<sup>101</sup>Jacobus, p.159.

According to this position, 'the quality of permanence' which has 'the nature of infinity' is something non-social, non-humanitarian, non-topical, in other words, something beyond history. The prerequisite of a 'good' poem, in fact, is that it transcends the socio-political. The implicit, but fairly obvious, contempt for the kind of poetry which openly professes its political intention, and the implicit assumption that the aesthetic value of a literary work is entirely free from, or even incompatible with, any political implications,<sup>102</sup> is clearly an inheritance from the New Criticism, and Jonathan Wordsworth's monumental study is a frank reflection of the depoliticizing ideology of that criticism.

The implication of this position is that Wordsworth's poetic maturity was achieved only at the expense of his political motivation.<sup>103</sup> Putting aside the theoretical problem of value-judgement in literary criticism - what comprises artistic value? - Wordsworth's poetic practices before and after the composition of the main body of 'The Ruined Cottage' do not quite fit this paradigm; for example, he was still at work, surprisingly, with the 'Salisbury Plain poems' long after finishing what we know as 'The Ruined Cottage', and he withheld 'The Ruined Cottage' when he had the first major chance of publishing his own poems, releasing instead 'The Female Vagrant',

---

<sup>102</sup>Stephen Gill, 'Wordsworth's Breeches Pocket: Attitudes to the Didactic Poet', *Essays in Criticism*, 19 (1969), pp.385-401. Cleanth Brooks's article 'Wordsworth and Human Suffering: Notes on Two Early Poems'(in *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle*, edited by Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom(1965), pp.373-387) is a typical New Critical reading of 'The Ruined Cottage' in which he justifies Wordsworth's aesthetic vision at the conclusion of the poem. Brooks's reading is critically reviewed by Alan Liu in his *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*. pp. 320-25.

<sup>103</sup>E.P. Thompson, more than anybody else, articulated his reservations about this tendency within Wordsworthian scholarship in his classic article on Wordsworth's poetry and politics: 'The restoration has done much already to dispel one critical stereotype--that Wordsworth the poet begins at the moment when Wordsworth the politically committed man ends....In more recent years there has been a tendency to press the moment of political disenchantment further and further back, and to present it in a catastrophic manner, as if, as each area of Wordsworth's political beliefs suffered disenchantment, it became available to the poetic sensibility--very much as if his mind were a country occupied by an oppressive mechanical philosophy, in which one province after another was liberated for "maturity"'. Thompson's own view on this matter is that Wordsworth's political passion is not in itself inimical to his art as long as it remained 'disenchantment', but when it became 'apostasy', it brought about both 'moral failure' and 'imaginative failure', 'Disenchantment or Default? A Lay Sermon' in *Power and Consciousness* edited by C.C.O'Brien and W.D. Vanech (London and New York, 1969), pp. 149-81 (pp.149-51).

which is commonly held to be not only poetically inferior to 'The Ruined Cottage', but also politically unacceptable to the Wordsworth of 1798.

No matter what kind of relationship might be established between Wordsworth's politics and poetic achievement in theoretical terms, it seems to be clear that the critics' general appreciation of 'The Ruined Cottage' as a work of art, particularly their preference of 'The Ruined Cottage' to the 'Salisbury Plain poems', encourages readers to ignore its undeniable topical relevance in its contemporary political context. Our concern in this section is not to discount the artistic merit generally attributed to 'The Ruined Cottage', but simply to read MS I of 'The Ruined Cottage' as another story of a soldier's wife which takes its place within a series of literary experiments dealing with that same character that had begun with the first version of *An Evening Walk*. The point of such a reading is to show this: Wordsworth's new narrative technique which endows the same old theme of social protest with the air of 'infinity' was not simply the result of improvement in Wordsworth's technical skill, which is usually described as the condition of his attainment of poetic 'maturity', but was also a result of responding to the same social problem within a different political atmosphere. From such a point of view, I will argue that the seemingly apolitical rendering of the story of a soldier's wife is in fact deeply political in its ramifications.

In this light, De Quincey's reading of 'The Ruined Cottage' is salutary in its refusal to disengage the poem's character from a particular historical and political context.<sup>104</sup> What is peculiar about De Quincey as a critic of 'The Ruined Cottage' is that he is immune from the poetic authority that 'The Ruined Cottage' has enjoyed since its publication: he, for example, would not take it for granted that MS I of 'The Ruined Cottage' is necessarily a 'better' poem than 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain'. Also, he is more familiar with the experiences of Robert's and Margaret's real life than modern

---

<sup>104</sup>Thomas De Quincey, "On Wordsworth's Poetry", *The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. David Masson (Edinburgh, 1890), pp. 294-325. Originally, it was published in *Tait's Magazine* in September 1845.

critics. In Margaret's case, for example, he argues that her slow disintegration into nature, which is presented as inevitable, could well have been avoided if the pedlar has been more attentive to practical possibilities.

Not surprisingly, Jonathan Wordsworth names De Quincey's as an example of the kind of criticism which refuses the poet's reasonable demand that his poem 'be read on his own terms', and therefore achieves only a 'destructive' result.<sup>105</sup> If what is 'destroyed' by De Quincey's criticism is that deceptive idea, 'the quality of permanence', which is barely sustained by Wordsworth's( William's own as well as Jonathan's) stern insistence on prescribing a particular interpretative direction, his literal-minded argument is all the more advantageous to us because we also want to show the artificiality of Margaret's slow and supposedly inevitable decline to death. Whether his argument is factually correct or not, De Quincey's sober interpretation of Margaret's actual situation encourages us to rethink what has long been taken for granted in 'The Ruined Cottage'.

---

<sup>105</sup>Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Music of Humanity*, p.85.



### Robert, an unemployed weaver

Robert, who is hardly present in the poem, is still a crucial character because, as De Quincey rightly indicated, 'from the act of enlistment is derived the whole movement of the story'.<sup>106</sup> He is a direct victim of the decline of the domestic weaving industry as well as an actual participant in the Napoleonic wars. In the context of the poems we have been discussing, Robert is also the successor to the sailor of 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain'. In MS I, he is very much a part of Margaret's story, but hardly present in the narrative in the way that Margaret is present. Although his social identity as a weaver, along with his enlistment, constitutes the social context in which all the actions of the poem take place, he is the person who is most completely displaced from actual representation within the poem.

First, his story is removed in time from the narrative present to 'some ten years' ago. Although there is no way of disproving this chronology, the pedlar's reference to 'Two blighting seasons' and his judgement that the disaster of the bad harvest was worsened by war suggest that he is in fact talking about the current situation, and Wordsworth's own claim for the non-fictional status of his story strengthens the suspicion that Wordsworth has deliberately removed the story to the past of some ten years before.<sup>107</sup>

Secondly, the complicated narrative frame, which Wordsworth took great pains to develop over the whole process of revision, is a structural device generating displacement; Robert remains only in the memory of Margaret, who is now also dead,

---

<sup>106</sup>De Quincey, p.306.

<sup>107</sup>In the I.F.Note Wordsworth recollected, '(These lines) faithfully delineate, as far as they go, the character possessed in common by many women whom it has been my happiness to know in humble life; and ... several of the most touching things which she is represented as saying and doing are taken from actual observation of the distresses and trials under which different persons were suffering, some of them strangers to me, and others daily under my notice' (Grosart III, p.199). Also, Wordsworth actually did confess that the story was constructed on the social reality in Britain after the outbreak of Anglo-French War: 'I was born too late to have a distinct remembrance of the origins of the American war, but the state in which I represent Robert's mind to be I had frequent opportunities of observing at the commencement of our rupture with France in '93, opportunities of which I availed myself in the story of the Female Vagrant, as told in the poem on Guilt and Sorrow' (Grosart III, p.200).

existing in the memory of Pedlar. As a result, his flesh and blood presence, along with the social implications of his actions, are doubly distanced and bedimmed through the process of these doubled recollections. In the poem, the focus of the narration falls on Margaret's response to Robert's actions rather than the actions themselves, as if what is *poetically* important were the response to an event that is now, as it were, inevitable and irrevocable.

This constitutes a parallel to the pedlar's advice elaborated later on that we should not think too much about the story itself, but make much of what is left behind in our minds after attending to the pathetic story of Margaret. The reason for this is simple; no matter how pitiful and pathetic the story might be, there is no point in grieving because it is not possible to rectify what has already happened. Even if it were possible, it should not be the business of poetry. This will be formulated as a firm theoretical position in *Lyrical Ballads*, and in fact, will become the main ideological content of Romantic poetics.

But at the time when Wordsworth wrote 'The Ruined Cottage', the shadow of Robert's presence could not be entirely erased, and his unemployment still constituted an apparent social base upon which the plot of the poem is constructed. But the social reality his existence embodies is suppressed, modified, or at least moderated on the surface of the narrative:

--You may remember now some ten years gone,  
Two blighting seasons when the fields were left  
With half a tillage. It pleased heaven to add  
A worse affliction in the plague of war:  
A happy land was stricken to the heart;  
'T was a sad time of sorrow and distress:  
(MS.B. II. 185-190)

The reason for 'sorrow and distress' is clearly stated; poverty brought about by successive bad harvests such as actually occurred in 1794-95 and 1795-96, and the Napoleonic War which aggravated rural poverty. In fact, the question of poverty was

not only the most urgent social problem, but also a central issue in public debate in the latter half of the 1790s --what poverty is, why it exists, whether it is man-made or God-given, whether it is justifiable or even desirable.<sup>108</sup>

What is striking in the quotation is that 'sorrow and distress' are attributed to natural causes solely, giving the impression that there is no human culpability in poverty. The metaphor, 'the *plague* of war' implies that even human warfare is in fact supervised by 'heaven', and is an affliction for which there is no human solution. War is, therefore, a disease with no known remedy. There is no point, in this sense, in differentiating the poor from the rich, for they equally suffer from that particular kind of 'plague', war. 'The hardships of that season' are so severe that 'many rich/ Sunk down as in (a) dream among the poor' (MS B, l.194). Furthermore, poverty is not even the main reason for the suffering of Margaret, because she was willing to reduce 'daily comforts' and to be 'gladly reconciled/ To numerous self-denials', and ready to encounter the pedlar 'With chearful hope' (MS B, l. 198-200). Her real suffering begins when the metaphorical 'plague' is transformed into a real disease contracted by Robert, 'A fever', with the result that the war, even in its 'naturalized' metaphor, is marginalized to just one of the subordinate causes of her misfortune.

Robert's timely fever provides a plausible reason for his financial collapse immediately after his loss of work. At the same time, it is instrumental in attributing Robert's decline to a natural cause, implicitly legitimizing the industrialization taking place in the textile industry by presenting his decline as a weaver as an unavoidable natural phenomenon. Although the pedlar once again defines the condition of society as 'A time of trouble', and the content of the 'trouble' such as the artisans' loss of employment ('shoals of artizans/ Were from their daily labour turned away')(MS B, ll.

---

<sup>108</sup>For contemporary attitudes toward poverty, see Dorothy Marshall, *The English Poor in The Eighteenth Century: A Study in Social and Administrative History* (London, 1926), Chapter 1 'The Contemporary Attitude Towards The Problem of Poverty- Opinion'. For a full-scale study of the contemporary discourse which informed Wordsworth's poems of human suffering, see Gary Lee Harrison's unpublished Ph D thesis, *Wordsworth and the Itinerant Poor: The Discourse On Poverty* (Stanford University, June 1987). Wordsworth's 'poetic' contribution to the public debate on poverty will be examined in the analysis of 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' in the next chapter.

206-207) emerges as a purely social phenomenon, the social mechanism by means of which the artisans are 'turned away' from 'their daily labour' is not represented at all. According to E.P. Thompson, between 1788 and 1803, years described by Radcliff as 'the golden age' for the weaving communities, the weavers' status was significantly lowered:

But the prosperity induced by the soaring output of machine yarn disguised a more essential loss of status. It is in the 'golden age' that the artisan, or journeyman weaver, becomes merged in the generic 'hand-loom weaver'... Reduced to complete dependence upon the spinning-mill or the 'putters-out' who took yarn into the uplands, the weavers were now exposed to round after round of wage reductions.<sup>109</sup>

Thompson goes on to argue that the wage reductions were not enforced by a few greedy employers, but based on a widely-accepted theory that the industry of the labouring class was promoted by poverty. During the Napoleonic wars, in particular, wage reductions were imposed by large manufacturers who dominated the textile market so that hand-loom weavers were impoverished to an unprecedented extent. It seems fairly obvious how the artisans were 'turned away' from their jobs. What is missing in Wordsworth's description, however, is the weavers' reaction to this difficult situation. The weavers had never silently submitted to the reduction of their wages and to the decline in their status that was precipitated in the aftermath of the war and with the introduction of new technology. John Stevenson describes the weavers' activities to defend their rights at the beginning of the nineteenth-century:

Wartime fluctuations and the impact of technological change also affected the textile districts of Lancashire. The major focus of activity was in the weaving branch of the trade where handloom weavers, still outnumbering factory operatives by two to one in 1816, were being undermined by the introduction of the power loom and by the flooding of the labour market with immigrant labour. The weavers petitioned parliament for a Minimum Wage Bill in 1799 and 1800, and again in

---

<sup>109</sup>E.P. Thompson, *English Working Class*, pp. 305-306.

1807, when they secured 130,000 signatures from Lancashire, Cheshire, and Yorkshire. The news of the rejection of their Bill in May 1808 led to serious rioting. The Manchester weavers assembled near St George's Church on 24 May and sent delegates to the principal manufacturers and town officials to demand redress of grievances. A distribution of bread, ale, and butter milk did not prevent 10,000 or 15,000 assembling on the next day. Taking fright the magistrates read the Riot Act and the crowd was dispersed by soldiers, killing one man and wounding several. The weavers started a strike, which gradually spread through the cotton district, demanding an increase of wages by a third.<sup>110</sup>

Exactly at the point when this kind of event might have been mentioned, Wordsworth refuses to proceed: instead of dwelling upon the resistance of the weavers, Wordsworth, after briefly mentioning the poor relief available to them, suddenly jumps into a highly implausible contrast between the hard lot of the unemployed artisans and the comparatively happy fate of birds. Without asking the reason for their unfortunate situation, he simply laments that Robert was not a kite fed by heaven:

...As I have said, 'twas now  
 A time of trouble; shoals of artizans  
 Were from their daily labour turned away  
 To hang for bread on parish charity,  
 They and their wives and children--happier far  
 Could they have lived as do the little birds  
 That peck along the hedges, or the kite  
 That makes her dwelling in the mountain rocks.  
 (MS B, ll. 204-212)

The very first description of Robert, 'an industrious man,/ Sober and steady' (MS B, l.173), indicates that Robert, before these calamitous years, embodied the ruling class's ideal image of the labouring class.<sup>111</sup> Being 'sober' is inseparably

<sup>110</sup>John Stevenson, *Popular Disturbances in England 1700-1870* (New York, 1979), p.154.

<sup>111</sup>John Barrell's proposition about the constraint of landscape painting regarding the rural poor seem to be relevant here: 'That labourers in agriculture be presented as honest and laborious is a constraint which operates in our tradition throughout the period I shall be discussing, in landscape and genre painting, though it comes to be more urgent in the 1770s. It does not of course always mean that they must never be shown at rest, though it comes to mean something very near that, but it does prescribe

connected to being 'industrious' or 'steady', which implies that, at least in the case of the labouring class, industry and sobriety are almost interchangeable. It is not surprising to see the ruling class identify the 'sobriety' of the labouring class with their 'industry' because their habit of drinking was thought to be the evidence of their idleness and moral depravity. Robert's case is distinctive in that his unemployment, his unwanted idleness, is not associated with drunkenness, but with a more serious form of physical disablement, mental derangement. Whatever the reason for his unemployment, Robert is not allowed to remain sound both in body and mind as long as he is 'idle'.

The implicit assumption maintained consistently in the description of Robert is that the lost paradise was possible to the labouring class only when work and play were harmonised; that is, their hard labour was an indispensable element in their lives not only because it was the only means to earn bread, but also because it maintained the normality of their lives. Hard labour itself, no matter to whom the profit of their labour eventually went, was regarded as the prerequisite for both physical *and* mental health. So, Robert's unwanted extended leisure can never be a time for 'repose' as it might have been for a member of the aristocracy, which is why 'many a snatch of merry tune' when sung by Robert never manage to express 'mirth':

Ill fared it now with Robert, he who dwelt  
 In this poor cottage; at his door he stood  
 And whistled many a snatch of merry tune  
 That had no mirth in them, or with his knife  
 Carved uncouth figures on the heads of sticks,  
 Then idly sought about through every nook  
 Of house or garden any casual task  
 Of use or ornament, and with a strange,  
 Amusing but uneasy novelty

---

the terms on which they may relax - in the evening, after a hard day's work; after the harvest, on their way to the ritual feast; during the harvest, at meal-breaks, but never far from the hooks and scythes which indicate that they are resting only for a moment; never in the alehouse, if they are not to attract the disapprobation that Morland's labourers attracted, who change from 'hinds' to 'boors' as soon as they reach for a drink', *The dark side of the landscape*, p.21.

He blended where he might the various tasks  
 Of summer, autumn, winter, and of spring.  
 (MS B. II. 213-223)

Robert is not allowed to remain 'idle' long without being introduced to, if not productive labour, some gesture of labour. Carving 'uncouth figures' and 'casual task/ Of use or ornament' can be neither as productive nor profitable as weaving. Since it is neither productive nor profitable, it is represented simply as morally degrading, as an indication of incipient mental instability. When the absence of 'mirth' gives place to a 'wild freak of merriment' in Robert, it clearly implies that Robert's sanity is on the verge of collapse:

...his good-humour soon  
 Became a weight in which no pleasure was,  
 And poverty brought on a petted mood  
 And a sore temper: day by day he drooped,  
 And he would leave his home, and to the town  
 Without an errand would he turn his steps  
 Or wander here and there among the fields.  
 One while he would speak lightly of his babes  
 And with a cruel tongue: at other times  
 He played with them wild freaks of merriment:  
 (MS B. II. 230-39)

The focus here is on the process by which Robert's 'sober and steady' personality is destroyed under the pressure of poverty. Two symptoms are marked out; his habit of leaving home 'without an errand', and uncontrollable fluctuations of temper, and both of these symptoms strongly suggest that he is almost driven to madness. But his wandering 'without an errand' might well be seen in other terms. For example, as his desperate efforts to get another job. But the emphasis on the disintegration of his personality makes it extremely implausible that Robert was trying to find some other way of making a living. His wandering away from home is a pitiable thing not just because Margaret and the little babies are left alone without knowledge of Robert's whereabouts, but because it signifies that he is off the track of his normal

way of life in which he worked at home as a weaver employed in the domestic textile industry. As soon as he ceases to be a weaver, his other activities are easily dismissed as 'idleness' or 'madness'.

De Quincey was right when he argued that Robert 'had not gone off...as a heartless deserter of his family, or in profligate quest of pleasure' and 'cheerfully he would have staid and worked, had trade been good'. He recognizes that Robert was formally a volunteer, and if he had been forced to volunteer, it was not evidence of derangement, but because of the bad state of trade. De Quincey's religious tendency, however, leads him to make a rather irrelevant moral accusation against Robert of 'the worst form of cowardice', by which he means Robert's lack of courage to endure his 'household suffering' 'as a secret call from Heaven'.<sup>112</sup>

A careful attention to Margaret's own statement shows us that Robert's action, though a desperate last resort, was thoroughly premeditated, and on the whole, very practical, judicious, and caring. First of all, he did inform his wife of his whereabouts by sending a messenger. Secondly, his volunteering made more sense because in rural areas there was always the danger of impressment which would deprive him even of a chance to get the bounty and the freedom to choose the unit he would serve in.<sup>113</sup> Thirdly, his leaving without explanation is not just a matter of emotional weakness, but a careful arrangement because, as Margaret herself explains, if he had revealed his

---

<sup>112</sup>De Quincey, p.305.

<sup>113</sup>For the impressment during in the 1790s, see Clive Emsley, *British Society and the French Wars 1793-1815*, pp. 33-40. On the attraction of the recruiting bounty to weavers, and the actual amount of the bounty, Emsley writes: 'The recruiting bounty continued to attract many impoverished and unemployed Birmingham artisans and Lancashire weavers, as well as men from other districts and other walks of life. In spite of the unpopularity of the army it became a refuge for many of the unemployed; and the demand for men was enormous...the government was, whether it knew it or not, making provision for having about one in every ten men of military age in the United Kingdom under arms...On 1 December 1792 a royal proclamation offered bounties to volunteers: 3 pounds to an able seaman and 2 pounds to an ordinary seaman between the ages of twenty and fifty, and one pound to a landman between twenty and thirty-five. Several towns offered money in addition to the royal bounty. Some men accepted; many of these probably reasoned that it was better to volunteer and collect the bounty than run the risk of probable impressment later, possibly receiving no bounty. But many more men were reluctant to volunteer. Some claimed that they had still not received all of their entitlements from the American War'. For more detailed information, see N.A.M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy*, Chapter V. 'Manning' pp. 145-204.



intention of volunteering, she would have insisted on accompanying him. Even if he had agreed, there was a very scanty chance of getting official permission,<sup>114</sup> and if Margaret had accompanied the troops, as the fate of the Female Vagrant illustrates, she might have lost not only her husband, but also her own humanity.<sup>115</sup> So, Robert might have judged quite reasonably that it was better to leave his family at home so that they could be cared for by the parish,<sup>116</sup> as parish paupers, than to let Margaret endure 'the misery of a soldier's wife'.

In short, an excessive emphasis on Robert's derangement, with a strong suggestion that it may have been an after-effect of 'fever', covers up the real social reasons for his plight; that is, the harsh economic reality which, particularly during the Napoleonic wars, entailed the impoverishment of weavers in general. Moreover, despite the contemporary social facts about the weavers's resistance which ranged from

---

<sup>114</sup>Only limited number of soldiers' wives were allowed to accompany their husbands with the troop, which was selected by a kind of lottery instituted in the 18th century. Veronica Bamfield, *On the Strength: The story of the British Army Wife* (London, 1974), p.41.

<sup>115</sup>The state and the function of the soldier's family is well documented in Paul E. Kopperman, 'The British High Command and Soldiers' Wives in America, 1755-1783', already cited in the previous section. Also, in D.D. Maitland 'The Care of the Soldier's Family', some vivid details of the suffering of the soldier's family are quoted; 'The fate of those wives who were fortunate enough to accompany their husbands to the Iberian Peninsula is revealed in the many accounts of the Peninsular Wars'. 'The soldiers' wives,' writes Oman, 'were indeed an extraordinary community'-- as hard as nails, expert plunderers, furious partisans of the supreme excellence of their own battalion, much given to fighting. Many of them were widows twice or thrice over, for when a husband was killed and his wife was a capable and desirable person, she would receive half a dozen proposals before her husband was forty-eight hours in his grave.' Rifleman Harris recalls, 'watching the newly-made widows of the company huddling together for comfort on the battlefield, with the sky for a canopy and the turf for a pillow'. On another occasion an officer of General Moore's staff, finding a dying woman at the roadside with a living infant at her frozen breast, wrapped it up in his cloak and took it with him. Schaumann records an incident during the shambles of the retreat into Portugal: 'hunger, dysentery and fever had reduced men and horses'--and presumably the soldiers' families--'to bundles of bones and the soldiers' wives, usually decently clad and faithful to their husbands went around on starved donkeys offering themselves to anyone for half a loaf'.

<sup>116</sup>Elmsly, pp.39-40: 'Following the precedent of the American war Parliament authorised a weekly allowance of one day's labour at the local rate for the wife, and each lawful child under ten years of age, of a militia man, if they did not follow the regiment. This allowance came out of the rates, and the resentment which it provoked among ratepayers was noted from the outset. The departure of married men for the regular army or the navy could also put additional burdens on the poor rate. When the principal breadwinner was gone and once any bounty money left them (and a substantial part of the bounty was often required for necessities in the army) had been spent, many families had no other recourse but the parish. ... Unlike the specified allowance for militia families, the rate and nature of relief granted to the impoverished families of other servicemen was the same as that granted to ordinary parish paupers'.

petition to riot, implications of positive action on the part of Robert, which De Quincey so wanted to see, are completely overshadowed by Robert's alleged 'madness'. Without visibly distorting the facts, Wordsworth is surreptitiously offering an alternative picture in which Robert, under the pressure of poverty, is 'seized by fever' and subsequently goes almost crazy, crazy enough to desert his home and family, at first, for a day, and eventually for good. In this ostensibly inevitably process, the efficacy of human efforts to solve social problems is covertly denied, and we are led to feel that each step of Robert's degeneration is naturally determined rather than socially enforced.

### Margaret, a soldier's wife

But Margaret, after all, is the central figure of 'The Ruined Cottage'. Although she is one of the soldiers' widows who populated so many magazine poems, including Wordsworth's own 'The Female Vagrant', it is Wordsworth's unique characterization of her which has secured the privileged status of 'The Ruined Cottage'. First, unlike 'The Female Vagrant', there is no detailed documentation of her personal history of suffering. Her actions in the poem are simplified to one single action --making futile inquiries for her husband's whereabouts. As a result, her character is represented only as a series of still pictures in which no significant action takes place. Accordingly, her actual situation as an unsupported soldier's wife is almost forgotten. Despite a very specific social identity, she becomes simply a deserted woman who is hopelessly looking for her runaway husband, closely approaching the conventional type of 'deserted woman' which was to be criticised by Wordsworth himself in *The Prelude*.<sup>117</sup> The abstraction and generalization of her social existence is more thoroughly carried out by Wordsworth's identification of Margaret and her cottage, both of which are being ruined by nature without, apparently, any human intervention.

As a matter of fact, the decline of the domestic weaving industry left not only Robert but also Margaret unemployed. The happy balance between work and play was broken in Margaret, too. Margaret, however, had not had a passive character before Robert left her:

...Meanwhile, abridged  
Of daily comforts, gladly reconciled  
To numerous self denials, Margaret  
Went struggling on through those calamitous years  
With chearful hope: ...  
(MS B, ll.196-200)

---

<sup>117</sup>see Chapter 3-3, note 58.

The decisive blow for her, according to the narrator, was not poverty itself, but the subsequent change in her husband's character which leads him to enlist without Margaret's knowledge. In the poem's second part, which is made up of the pedlar's observations based on four consecutive visits, her determination, self-restraint, and optimism gradually disappear, and she simply vegetates. She surrenders herself to nature. In the meantime, her only concern is to look for her husband rather than to struggle for survival, which invites De Quincey's accusation of 'criminal self-indulgence'.<sup>118</sup>

As De Quincey has convincingly shown, Margaret's inquiries are not practical, nor even serious. In fact, Margaret should have known that the pedlar would never have had a chance of coming across Robert, because she knows that Robert 'had joined a troop/ Of soldiers going to a distant land', and she should have had some idea where Robert was.

What made her life hard in fact was not so much Robert's absence itself as more practical worries about their own subsistence. The government bounty was too small to be a proper provision for the soldier's family left behind. Before more systematic provision was made for the soldier's family in the 19th century,<sup>119</sup> the family was supported only by being legally eligible for poor relief like the village paupers;<sup>120</sup> Since the poor-rate was ever increasing, it was the most important concern of local administrations to reduce the burden of relief by all possible means, and the simplest way to reduce the burden was to keep out of their territory vagrants or other village paupers, or even to smuggle their own paupers out of the parish. The war widows

---

<sup>118</sup>De Quincey, p.307.

<sup>119</sup>See Maitland's article for a history of the government's provision for the soldier's family at home.

<sup>120</sup>Emsley, p.54: 'Legislation in 1795 attempted to clarify the confusion which still existed over the payment of the militia allowance. The act emphasised that the families of substitutes, hired men and volunteers for the militia were all entitled to relief. ... Other legislation introduced during 1795 and 1796 was designed to make servicemen and their families more amenable to life in the armed forces. Seamen and marines of non-commissioned rank and below were permitted to allocate part of their pay for the maintenance of their wives and families. The content of the act was to be made known to ship's companies by the captain when he read them the articles of war'.

were both the most legitimate claimants for poor-relief and the most vulnerable to the parish officer's illegal expulsions. So, Robert's absence is not just a cause of loneliness, but a crisis of subsistence. Margaret's widowhood means that she is always in danger of being reduced from the status of a normal villager to that of a rootless vagrant like the Sailor's wife.<sup>121</sup>

In the pedlar's first visit, Margaret seemed quickly to recover from the initial shock of discovering Robert's enlistment, and 'words of hope' came from 'her own mouth'. That is, the disintegration of her own sober and steady personality was not an automatic result of Robert's enlistment. The real change in her manifests itself on the second visit:

Her face was pale and thin, her figure too  
 Was changed. As she unlocked the door she said,  
 'It grieves me you have waited here so long,  
 But in good truth I've wandered much of late  
 And sometimes, to my shame I speak, have need  
 Of my best prayers to bring me back again.'  
 While on the board she spread our evening meal  
 She told me she had lost her eldest child,  
 That he for months had been a serving-boy  
 Apprenticed by the parish. 'I am changed,  
 And to my self,' said she, 'have done much wrong,  
 And to this helpless infant. I have slept  
 Weeping, and weeping I have waked; my tears  
 Have flowed as if my body were not such  
 As others are, and I could never die.  
 (MS B. II. 396-410)

The apparent changes that have taken place in her since his last visit are that she has been separated from her eldest child after he had been taken as an apprentice

---

<sup>121</sup>Since the only concern of the parish officers was to keep the poor rate low, they were usually callous enough to drive away burdensome women out of the territory particularly when they were about to add to the burden by delivering a baby. So, vagrancy was virtually encouraged by the selfish parish officers. Marshall, pp. 161-224.

like many other children of the poor,<sup>122</sup> and that she is no longer 'busy with her garden tools', but 'used to ramble far', as Robert had done before he enlisted in the army. Although De Quincey is indignant at her 'Sloth, and the habit of gadding abroad', it is clear that her financial situation has worsened, and the gardening itself is not profitable enough to feed herself and babies. In fact, what De Quincey called her 'sloth' is aptly reflected in the preceding description of her changed cottage and garden which are now covered with '*worthless* stone-crop' and '*unprofitable* bindweed' respectively (MS B, l.368. l.372, my italics). Considering that she is still reasonable enough to come home in good time for dinner(eight o'clock) and to prepare dinner for a visitor, her 'habit of gadding abroad' does not seem to be an expression of irresponsible self-abandonment, but a desperate effort to make a living. How could one make money simply by 'rambling'? If it was to make money to survive, why is she feeling guilty about it?

If it was to make a living, Margaret's choices would not have been many. First, she might claim poor relief from the parish or some kind of special provision available to a soldier's family. If this was the case, there would be no reason to leave home for so long, and no reason not to take the infant with her, and since poor relief was given within the parish, an expression like 'rambling' is inappropriate. Begging might offer a better reason for her absence, and be more likely to explain her 'rambling'. But even in that case, she had no reason to leave her baby behind since it was not impossible to go begging with a baby. The presence of a baby with a beggar, as a matter of fact, was an advantage rather than a disadvantage; being accompanied by as many infants or children as possible was so common a professional skill that some beggars even borrowed other people's children to accompany them, paying a certain rate of money

---

<sup>122</sup>For details on the apprenticeship of the poor's children, see Marshall, pp.182-199. According to him, there were two types of child apprenticeships, compulsory and voluntary, the former of which was more common in rural areas.(p.184) The expression that 'she had lost her eldest child' makes it more probable that he(or she) was compulsorily taken away from her.

to their parents.<sup>123</sup> Daily labour was not likely to be available to a woman such as Margaret.<sup>124</sup>

So, the most probable guess is that 'rambling' away from her own infant is in fact a euphemism for prostitution. Above all, Margaret's unexplained guilty feeling, expressed in her moral self-reproach in front of a father figure, confirms this: 'I am changed,/ And to myself', said she, 'have done much wrong, And to this helpless infant. I have slept/ Weeping, and weeping I have waked; my tears/ Have flowed as if my body were not such/ As others are, and I could never die'. When the pedlar looks at her with sympathy, 'Her eye-lids drooped, her eyes were downward cast' and 'she did not look at me'. Receiving the best comfort and hope the pedlar was capable of giving, Margaret does not express gratitude, because even the return of Robert, which had been the best hope for Margaret, would not undo her moral degradation or enable her to regain her moral integrity.<sup>125</sup>

---

<sup>123</sup>J.W.von Archenholz in his *A Picture of England* published in 1791(p.73) notes: '...The female beggars generally hire infants from those who are poorer than themselves, to rouse, by that means, the charity of the passengers. They pay various prices for these children, from sixpence to two shillings a day, according as they are more or less deformed. A child that is very crooked and distorted generally earns three shillings, and sometimes even more. I happened once to overhear the conversation of two women who were talking concerning their profession. One of them informed the other that she paid two shillings for the child in her arm: 'What!' replies her companion, 'are you a fool? Two shillings for that charming baby!--I would not give more for a monster.' Quoted in Bridget Hill, *Eighteenth-Century Women: An Anthology* (London, 1984), p.159. Chapter 9 of Hill's book provides various details of the eighteenth-century literature on the lives of the female poor including beggars and widows.

<sup>124</sup>On the opportunity for employment for women in the eighteenth century, see chapter 11 of Hill's anthology, 'Women in Industry and Other Occupations', pp. 197-228. Arthur Young, for example, recorded in 1770 that 'In this country the poor have no other employment than that what results from a most imperfect agriculture; consequently three-fourths of the women and children were without employment', *A Six Months' Tour through the North of England*, vol. 1, pp.239-40, quoted in Hill, p.203. As was mentioned above, the war and the introduction of newly invented machines made the situation much worse in the 1790s, as F. M. Eden shows: 'As the chapelry consists almost entirely of dairy farms, and consequently affords very little employment in husbandry, except during the hay-harvest, the labouring poor are very dependent on the neighbouring towns where the cloth manufacture is carried on; but unfortunately, since the introduction of machinery, which lately took place, hand spinning has fallen into disuse, for these two reasons: the clothier no longer depends on the poor for the yarn which they formerly spun for him at their homes, as he finds that fifty persons (to speak within compass), with the help of machines, will do as much work as five hundred without them; and the poor, from the great reduction in the price of spinning, scarcely have the heart to earn the little that is obtained by it.' quoted in Hill, p.205.

<sup>125</sup>According to Dorothy Marshall, the moral standards of the poor were very low, partly due to their inadequate living conditions (for example, the workhouse which accommodated both sexes), but more significantly due to the fact that the government damaged the marriage institution of the poor by

Margaret's possible prostitution is never openly admitted, but her moral degradation has been obliquely suggested in the natural description itself, particularly that of the 'change' in her garden: 'It was changed:/ The unprofitable bindweed spread *his* bells/ From side to side, and *with unwieldy wreaths/ Had dragged the rose from its sustaining wall/ And bowed it down to earth*' (MS B. ll. 371-375, my italics). In part one, Margaret's physical death is announced also in a bizarre erotic metaphor, implying that her death is the culmination of her moral deterioration: 'She is dead,/ The worm is on her cheek, and this poor hut,/ *Stripped of its outward garb* of household flowers, /Of rose and jasmine, *offers to the wind/ A cold bare wall whose earthly top is tricked/* with weeds and the rank spear-grass' (MS B. ll.157-162, my italics).

In the pedlar's third visit in the late winter, there is a suggestion that Margaret has quit her habit of 'rambling' to come back to her baby. Perhaps the winter season was not favourable for 'rambling'. Again, possibly because she has now quit the job of prostitution, she treasures her baby again whom she had neglected. At the same time, the absence of Robert is once again remembered ('Yet I saw the idle loom/ Still in its place', MS B, ll. 470-71). But it is no more than a preparation for the final catastrophe in which everybody meets an undeserved death, the infant, most probably Robert, and eventually Margaret herself after 'Five tedious years' of hopeless waiting 'in unquiet widowhood'.

The final part of the poem is not concerned so much with the narration of the pedlar's own observations on his fourth visit, but what he heard of Margaret subsequently. The pedlar summarises the 'five tedious years' of 'unquiet widowhood' in an arrested image of Margaret who, half-crazy, sits listlessly for hours until she makes the same 'fond inquiry' for the fate of Robert:

---

denying them a fair opportunity for normal marital lives. pp. 221-24. J. W. von Archenholz also makes this observation about prostitutes: '...Many married women who live in the distant parts of the town, prostitute themselves in Westminster, where they are unknown.' quoted in Hill, p.43.



...I have heard, my Friend,  
 That in that broken arbour she would sit  
 The idle length of half a sabbath day,  
 There--where you see the toadstool's lazy head--  
 And when a dog passed by she still would quit  
 The shade and look abroad. On this old Bench  
 For hours she sate, and evermore her eye  
 Was busy in the distance, shaping things  
 Which made her heart beat quick. ...  
 (MS B. ll. 485-93)

In this final description of Margaret, she is reduced to the status of natural objects, she has no human volition, sitting idly like 'the toadstool' or quitting the shade with a passing dog. All practical worries are forgotten and her only significant action is to make 'a fond inquiry' about her husband to whomever she comes across. Interestingly, this final image of Margaret comes very close to the contemporary stereotype of 'a Widow' who haunts the grave of her dead husband, 'One night, or haply more than one, through pain/ Or half-insensate impotence of mind', which was to be satirised by Wordsworth himself in *The Prelude* (ll.536-37). Wordsworth may then be accused of having retreated to the conventional characterization of a soldier's wife he had started from in *An Evening Walk*. This accusation is justified in that Margaret's suffering, still rooted in contemporary social problems, is de-socialized and summed up in terms of a traditional sentimentalism.

But there is also a fundamentally different element in 'The Ruined Cottage'. The conventional widow story was usually introduced with a clearly didactic purpose, and frequently accompanied by the narrator's explicit demand for the reader's sympathy.<sup>126</sup> In 'The Ruined Cottage', the narrator's explicit didactic demand is absent;

---

<sup>126</sup>For instance, in Southey's 'The Complaint of the Poor':

We saw a woman sitting down  
 Upon a stone to rest  
 She had a baby at her back  
 And another at her breast

the narrator's advice, elaborated into MS I later on, is quite at odds, dismissing such sympathy as completely pointless, even morally wrong:

"My friend, enough to sorrow have you given,  
 The purposes of wisdom ask no more;  
 Be wise and chearful, and no longer read  
 The forms of things with an unworthy eye.  
 She sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here.  
 (MS D, ll. 508-12)

But even before a clear articulation of this moral was introduced, such a message had already been inscribed in the narrative of MS I itself, for the pedlar's narration presents the course of Margaret's hard life as an inevitable and irrevocable natural process rather than as the result of rectifiable social injustice. On the one hand, the pedlar's undue emphasis on Margaret's romantic obsession with Robert's whereabouts precludes the reader's attention to practical social measures that could have relieved Margaret's hardship. On the other, Margaret is implicitly identified with natural objects, so that the vicissitudes of her hard life are seen in terms of the fluctuations of natural phenomena. It may have been for the same purpose that the pedlar's four visits are quietly affiliated with a full cycle of the four seasons (Spring-

I ask'd her why she loiter'd there  
 When the night-wind was so chill;  
 She turn'd her head and bade the child  
 That scream'd behind, be still;

Then told us that her husband served,  
 A Soldier, far away,  
 And therefore to her parish she  
 Was begging back her way.

...  
 I turn'd me to the Rich Man then,  
 For silently stood he,  
 You ask'd me why the Poor complain,  
 And these have answer'd thee!  
 (ll.25-36, 45-48)

First published in *The Morning Post*, 29 June 1798; *Poems of Robert Southey*, edited by Maurice H. Fitzgerald (London, 1909), pp.387-88.



In the last visit, this process of assimilation is completed in the final description of the cottage:

...Meanwhile her poor hut  
 Sunk to decay, for he was gone whose hand,  
 At the first nippings of October frost,  
 Closed up each chink and with fresh bands of straw  
 Checquered the gree-grown thatch. And so she sate  
 Through the long winter, reckless and alone,  
 Till this reft house by frost, and thaw, and rain  
 Was sapped; and when she slept the nightly damps  
 Did chill her breast, and in the stormy day  
 Her tattered clothes were ruffled by the wind  
 Even at the side of her own fire....

(MS B. II. 512-522)

What is most noticeable in this last description is that the cottage is no longer just a metaphorical figure for its owner's deteriorating life, but has become in itself an integral part of her deterioration. The humanization of the cottage, as well as the de-humanization of Margaret and Robert, are so thoroughly carried out that they are inseparably entangled with each other, sharing the common lot of decay in the form of the inexorable assaults of the elements. Beginning with the personalization of 'her poor hut', Robert, Margaret, and the cottage take turns to expose themselves to the elements, 'the first nippings of October frost', 'frost, and thaw, and rain', 'the nightly damps, and 'the wind' of 'the stormy day'. At the conclusion of 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain', the mutual affection among the poor who are the common victims of social injustice is offered as the only consolation. In MS I, the mutual affection among the poor is transposed into a non-human emotional attachment between Margaret and the cottage, which makes Margaret's tragic fate of decaying with the cottage less painful and less objectionable: 'She loved this wretched spot, nor would for worlds/ Have parted hence' (MS B, ll. 523-24).

The effect of this identification of the cottage and Margaret is obvious; as Margaret's tragic fate came to be a part of an irrevocable natural process, any social

protest against her undeserved suffering in society becomes pointless, because nobody is independent of the great leveller Nature,<sup>127</sup> and Margaret's suffering in human society may well be compensated for by Natural providence. This is the implicit moral message inscribed within the narrative itself.

But this narrative strategy is not sufficient completely to suppress the socio-political implications associated with the character of the soldier's wife. The idea of 'natural decay' that is applied to both Margaret and the cottage, for example, can easily be shown to be illusory when examined in the light of knowledge of contemporary society. It may not have been an accident that Margaret became the 'Last human tenant of these ruined walls', because as soon as Margaret died, the parish officers would have demolished the cottage to prevent it from being occupied by other burdensome poor people trying to get a settlement within the parish. The parish officers waged 'an open war against cottages'.<sup>128</sup> So, even 'the decay of her poor hut' may not have been the result of natural erosion, but the outcome of a social measure administered by the parish officers. However strictly the narrative may be controlled, there is always potential for a theme such as a soldier's wife to re-emerge on the surface of the narrative with its full load of socio-political implications. Perhaps it was this that made clear to Wordsworth the necessity for a further revision to reinforce the existing narrative strategy, to accommodate the story of a soldier's wife in an even safer way.

---

<sup>127</sup> Wordsworth's implicit moral point is covertly strengthened by the status of 'the ruin' in picturesque aesthetics. According to Andrews, the ruin sometimes served as visual evidence of 'the Vanity of Human Wishes' and at other times it offered itself as 'an image of Nature's levelling of haughty tyranny', Andrews, p.44. Wordsworth's more humble version of domestic ruin seems to benefit from the moral implication of ruins in the existing tradition of poetry. For the tradition of 'ruin' poems in English poetry particularly in regard to their political implications, see Anne Janowitz, *English Ruins: Poetic Purpose and the National Landscape* (Oxford, 1990).

<sup>128</sup> 'The overseers, however, remained impervious to blame, and continued to regard the marriage of a poor labourer a menace to the rates, because of the large family which might result. It was to avoid this contingency that the parishes removed so drastically any married labourer who attempted to gain a settlement within their boundaries. But, not content with this legal protection, the vestry actively encouraged the demolition of cottages, with the intent to debar marriage, even among the settled Poor.', Marshall, p.206.

## Chapter V: Poetry of the Poor(II), the 'Old Man': from Social Protest to Moral Wisdom

### 1. Wordsworth's 'Old Man': Human Suffering and the Role of the Poet

Also important in Wordsworth's poetic representation of the poor is a series of old men. Like the soldier's wife figures, the earlier versions of old men were represented as social victims who prompted Wordsworth's philanthropic impulse. A typical example is the old retired soldier in the opening of 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain' who briefly seems to benefit from the Sailor's benevolence:

Propp'd on a trembling staff he crept with pain,  
His legs from slow disease distended were;  
His temples just betrayed their silver hair  
Beneath a kerchief's edge, that wrapp'd his head  
To fence from off his face the breathing air.  
Stuck miserably o'er with patch and shred  
His ragged coat scarce showed the Soldier's faded red.  
(*SP*, 1795, ll.3-9)

As Robert Mayo shows in his study of the literary context of *Lyrical Ballads*, an old, infirm man, frequently a former soldier or sailor, was one of the stereotypical characters of social protest poems at the time.<sup>1</sup> Wordsworth's description of a former soldier is much more impressive than many contemporary poems in a similar vein, but the significance of the 'old man' character in Wordsworth's poetry goes beyond its stylistic merits. The series of 'old man' characters, from the soldier of 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain' to the pedlar of *The Excursion*, are of great importance because they

---

<sup>1</sup>Mayo notes: 'Many of the pariahs of the magazine poets are pathetically old and sick, and some of them are soldiers and sailors who have fallen on evil times. In various ways this class of poems makes contact with other verses in the *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth's "Old Man Travelling" is not a mendicant figure, but he is poor. He would be viewed by contemporary readers as a study partly of old age, and partly of the effects of war, which were very much the literary fashion in the 1790's.' 'The Contemporaneity of the *Lyrical Ballads*,' *PMLA* 69(1954), pp.494-506 (pp.501-502).

reflect Wordsworth's distinctive way of responding to the fluctuating political and social atmosphere of the 1790s, and it is this pattern of response that best registers the trajectory of his 'growth' into what we know as the 'mature' Wordsworth.

As I have argued earlier, the British democratic reform movement was in steady decline after the outbreak of war with revolutionary France, particularly after the two 'Gagging' acts came into effect at the end of 1795. By 1797, most radicals had recanted their former sympathy with the cause of the French Revolution and retired from politics altogether. Wordsworth, like many others, had to review and revise his radical politics at each stage of the political development leading to the downfall of the democratic movement at the end of the century. Wordsworth's political adjustments were naturally reflected in his poetry, one expression of which, as we saw in the series of poems on the soldier's wife theme, was that the social and political implications of the poetic theme were gradually diluted, displaced, or suppressed. The evolution of the 'old man' character followed more or less the same direction. Wordsworth's poetic representation of the 'old man', however, is not simply another version of the soldier's wife story; if the soldier's wife theme culminated in 'The Ruined Cottage'(1797) with the most sophisticated narrative strategy for historical displacement, Wordsworth's treatment of the 'old man' begins with a poem which illustrates how flimsy such a strategy actually is.

'Old Man Travelling' is the first major poem in the series of 'old man' poems. Although Wordsworth recollects that it was 'an overflowing' from 'The Old Cumberland Beggar',<sup>2</sup> 'Old Man Travelling' was published first in the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798. The poem appears with its additional title, 'Animal Tranquillity and Decay', in the same notebook which contains 'The Ruined Cottage' MS.A, and, therefore, can be dated between the latter half of 1796 and early June 1797.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, 'Old Man Travelling' seems to share the narrative strategy which was employed in 'The Ruined

---

<sup>2</sup>Grosart, p.187.

<sup>3</sup>Butler, 'Introduction', *RC*, p.7; for more detailed textual information on 'Old Man Travelling', see Reed, Appendix XV 'Dates of "The Old Cumberland Beggar" and "Old Man Travelling"', pp.342-43.

Cottage'(1797). The old man in 'Old Man Travelling', particularly when compared with the old man in 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain', is noticeably stripped of his social identity. He is stripped, however, not just of his social identity, but also, as with Margaret of 'The Ruined Cottage', of his humanity itself. The old man is moving, but hardly disturbs anything in nature, like the breeze in the air or the flow of a brook; there is no expression of human volition in his movement at all. His various appearances all cooperate to offer only 'one expression':

A man who does not move with pain, but moves  
 With thought--He is insensibly subdued  
 To settled quiet: he is one by whom  
 All effort seems forgotten, one to whom  
 Long patience has such mild composure given,  
 That patience now doth seem a thing, of which  
 He hath no need. He is by nature led  
 To peace so perfect, that the young behold  
 With envy, what the old man hardly feels.  
 ('Old Man Travelling', ll. 6-14)

The description begins with the denial of a self-evident fact. The slow-motion of the old man must, in our normal understanding, be an indication of his physical atrophy, registering his past painful life. The narrator, however, substitutes 'pain' with 'thought' as though they were antithetical. This 'shift from the physical to the abstract', Jacobus argues, is 'disconcerting', but 'disguised by Wordsworth's reflective tone'.<sup>4</sup> As soon as we wonder what kind of 'thought' it can be, we are checked by a dash; then it is suggested by the adverb 'insensibly' and the passive verb that the 'thought' has nothing to do with the old man's own will. As his physical existence is reduced into a half-absence, the old man's volition is nullified by a certain power outside himself. There is a certain illogical coercion which suspends temporarily all down-to-earth considerations about the old man in question. This effect is sustained solely by the

---

<sup>4</sup>Jacobus, p.197.



intensity of the narrator's contemplation of the old man. What is eventually imposed on the old man by the narrator's concentrated reflection is 'mild composure', only to be reached through 'long patience', that is, the uncomplaining submission to the pain itself. The physical pain is sublimated into 'peace so perfect' mediated by 'thought'; but it is not the old man, but the narrator (and, if Wordsworth is successful, the reader) who is actually 'thinking', for the old man neither thinks nor feels anything at all. The ambiguity of the actual subject of 'thought' in line 7 serves as the linguistic device by which the narrator and the old man can be unobtrusively identified, suggesting the possibility that the narrator himself shares 'peace so perfect' with the old man. In this way, the narrative tactic for historical displacement which has been developed over the series of 'soldier's wife' poems is effectively and intensely at work, and the social aspect of the old man's suffering is rigorously suppressed.

The contemplation of human suffering as the imaginative mechanism of converting 'pain' into 'peace', or as the means of overcoming frustration in reality, was to be the fundamental ground for Wordsworth's poetic optimism. Together with this, he takes as his own vocational duty the role of the interpreter of suffering people who otherwise would remain inarticulate, and the role of a witness to their indestructible human dignity. But in this poem, this new idea is not yet fully formed; the moment the narrator asks the old man for his destination, the elaborate structure of contemplation is instantly shattered, and the suppressed reality of the socio-political world comes back dramatically:

"Sir! I am going many miles to take  
 "A last leave of my son, a mariner,  
 "Who from a sea-fight has been brought to Falmouth,  
 And there is dying in an hospital."  
 ('Old Man Travelling', ll. 17-20)

First of all, the very fact that the old man speaks in direct speech is extraordinary, for the description of him has been carefully arranged to give us 'one expression', reducing him to an existence so shadow-like that even a bird fails to

recognise him as a human being. The present progressive tense of 'travelling' in the main title, and the adverb 'on' in line 3 give us the impression that he is 'travelling' without any specific destination or purpose, like the winds or a rivulet. But he is actually travelling to a real place, 'Falmouth', with the specific and urgent purpose of seeing his dying son who has been wounded in a sea-fight, which indicates that the old man's journey was directly occasioned by the ongoing war. The startling re-appearance of the old man as a social being existing within social boundaries sharply reminds us (and the narrator as well) that his 'settled quiet' cannot be absolute or permanent and that the 'peace so perfect' which the narrator seemed to have found in the old man could only exist in the narrator's imagination. This abrupt transition has been noted by many critics; to Mary Jacobus, it is 'incongruous' because the old man 'is given precisely those articulate human involvements from which he should be exempt'.<sup>5</sup> John Beer thinks that this sudden transition suggests 'the operation of another law in the universe, a magnetic pull between life and life'.<sup>6</sup> To Leslie Chard, it seems an indication of Wordsworth's 'healthy sense of otherness'.<sup>7</sup> In my view, this abrupt shift underlines the unsteadiness of the vision through which Wordsworth is trying to transcend the social problems insoluble within his current political perspective. The contradiction in the description of the old man reflects Wordsworth's own state of mind in 1796-7: while longing for a 'perfect peace' free of all kinds of socio-political involvement, Wordsworth is also the one who breaks the dignified image of the old man by asking restlessly what the old man's practical business in society might be. Wordsworth himself must have been conscious of this contradiction; in 1800, he substituted for the main title the subtitle 'Animal Tranquillity and Decay', transferring the emphasis from the 'old man' to his imagined inner state. At the same time, he tried to reduce the vividness of the old man's words by converting them to indirect speech.

---

<sup>5</sup>Jacobus, pp. 180-181.

<sup>6</sup>Beer, p.71.

<sup>7</sup>Chard, p.222.

By 1815, Wordsworth must have decided that the narrator's question was an irrelevant intrusion into the old man's sanctuary, for the dialogue was dropped altogether. The textual history of 'Old Man Travelling' is a telling illustration of Wordsworth's anxiety to accommodate the story of human suffering in a positive way, which, however, contrives only to offer evidence of the vulnerability of the poetic vision he was trying to achieve through an intense reflection on an old man's suffering.

As has already been hinted in the above analysis, another thing that distinguishes Wordsworth's representation of the 'old man' from that of 'soldier's wife' is that Wordsworth's self-consciousness as a disillusioned radical and as a poet begins to involve itself with the social theme of the suffering of the poor more substantially in the 'old man' poems. The emergence of Wordsworth's self-consciousness on the surface of the poetic text is an understandable development under the changed political atmosphere of the latter half of the 1790s. The total failure of the democratic reform movement in British domestic politics could be virtually taken for granted from 1796, which drove many reformers to ask themselves a hard question; if the radical political program is no longer considered as a viable option for the solution of the poor's suffering, what should be done for them? And more significantly, who are we who have regarded ourselves as fighters for the cause of the poor if we are not capable of winning the fight? Wordsworth was one of those who questioned themselves most vigorously, and, in the poems, the self-questioning is articulated as a serious question about the moral duty of a socially responsible poet.

The series of 'old man' poems discussed in this chapter illustrates Wordsworth's distinctive ways of asking and answering the same question, showing how such a self-scrutiny is affected by Wordsworth's ever growing self-consciousness as a poet. In the course of Wordsworth's poetic efforts to engage with the moral dilemma of being a poet in a repressive society, two things about the 'old man' poems become self-evident. One is that Wordsworth's loss of political confidence is compensated for by his increasing belief in the moral function of poetry as well as the moral authority of the poetic narrator. The other is that, as will be clearly shown in the relationship between

the narrator and the pedlar of 'The Ruined Cottage'(1798), the didactic function of poetry is emphasized, whereas the content of the poetry becomes increasingly irrelevant to the moral lesson attached to it.

The discrepancy between the didactic narrative framework and the de-socialized, even de-humanized version of the poor's story provided the impulse for Wordsworth's next move. Wordsworth's need to reinforce the moral authority of the poetic narrator combined itself with his deepening political pessimism to point him towards the autobiographical project that would occupy him to the end of his life.

In short, the various roles of the 'old man' characters in Wordsworth's poetry are worthy of close review because they illustrate the way Wordsworth gets to grips with his political frustration in the course of establishing his identity as a poet. The aim of this chapter is to show how Wordsworth's poetic identity developed amidst his anxious efforts to represent another representative of the poor, an impotent old man, in a morally acceptable way, and to show, too, how the haunting memory of his past radical years and his developing sense of poetic vocation came together in the series of the 'old man' poems produced between 1796-98.

## 2. The Old Man and Wordsworth's Contribution to the Poor Law Debate: 'The Old Cumberland Beggar'

Wordsworth's elaborate celebration of 'perfect peace' in the old man is not simply a hypocritical gesture to excuse his covert escapism, but the outcome of a constructive attempt to re-establish his own position on social problems in the different political atmosphere of the latter half of the 1790s. Wordsworth's political intention, which was disclosed in such an uncomfortable way in 'Old Man Travelling', is openly articulated in 'The Old Cumberland Beggar'.<sup>8</sup>

'The Old Cumberland Beggar', despite Wordsworth's much earlier dating,<sup>9</sup> is believed to have been completed in its present form between 25 January and 5 March, 1798 (Reed, p.342). According to Reed, the earliest surviving text of this poem--'Description of a Beggar', which appears in the same notebook containing 'Old Man Travelling'--suggests that his original intention was no more than another conventional description of a beggar. Apparently, the old man described in 'The Old Cumberland

---

<sup>8</sup>The politics of the system of charity implicitly assumed or explicitly supported by Wordsworth in 'Old Cumberland Beggar' has already been studied exhaustively by many scholars, and my view on this poem has been shaped particularly by the following studies: Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature*, pp.84-92; Simpson, *Historical Imagination*, pp.162-74; Gary Harrison, 'Wordsworth's "The Old Cumberland Beggar": The Economy of Charity in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain', *Criticism*, 30, no.1 (Winter 1988), pp.23-42; Mark Koch, 'Utilitarian and Reactionary Arguments for Almsgiving in Wordsworth's "Old Cumberland Beggar"', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 13 (November 1989), pp.18-33; and Robin Jarvis, 'Wordsworth and the Use of Charity', in *Beyond Romanticism: New Approaches to Texts and Contexts 1780-1832*, edited by Stephen Copley and John Whale (London and New York, 1992), pp.200-217. Note 2 of Koch's article usefully summarises the variety of critical attitudes towards Wordsworth's problematic treatment of the old man in Wordsworth scholarship. Chandler's main point is that Wordsworth's harsh treatment of the old man virtually justifies 'a hierarchical social structure'(p.90) and approaches a Burkean argument. Gary Harrison also indicates that Wordsworth's argument, despite his strong oppositional stance, is in fact firmly founded on the conventional view of the late eighteenth-century reproducing the ideology of the ruling class. Koch, dwelling upon the contradiction between Wordsworth's paternalistic contention and his Utilitarian rhetoric, argues that Wordsworth's view on the poor is indeed reactionary, but makes a strong criticism of a monetary, capitalist economy, too. Jarvis, on the other hand, plays down the polemical element of Wordsworth's argument arguing that Wordsworth is not so much opposing the poor law administration, or utilitarian proposals as advocating the convention of 'private charity'. Simpson's argument, however, is that 'Wordsworth might have been unable to resolve his poem in terms of its precise ideological affiliation'(p.173) and Wordsworth's position on this matter remains 'somewhat open and unresolved'(p.174).

<sup>9</sup>Wordsworth recollected in the Fenwick Note that it was 'written at Racedown and Alfoxden in my 23rd year', that is, 1793. Grosart, p.185.

'Beggar' seems almost identical in his outward features with his forerunner in 'Old Man Travelling', even though the old man's 'one expression' of 'settled quiet' is now substantiated by naturalistic details. The old Cumberland beggar is still a solitary old man travelling without any specific destination, but there are some markedly different elements in Wordsworth's characterization of the old man of the new poem. Most significantly, the social attributes of the old man which Wordsworth suppressed so tenaciously in 'Old Man Travelling' have become the very focus of Wordsworth's characterization of the old man. Wordsworth, for instance, replaces the old man's conversation with the narrator, which had dramatically revealed his suppressed social being in 'Old Man Travelling', with a heart-warming scene showing the old man's social relations with the other people in the community. Most members of the community, including the 'horseman-traveller', the toll-gate keeper, and the post-boy, are described as being kind and caring to the 'aged Beggar'. The old man in this poem, unlike his predecessor, does not seem to be alienated from society, for he is not only adequately fed by the people's generous charity, but also graciously respected as a fellow human being (ll. 26-43).

What is curious about the old man's social relations, however, is that they appear to work in an entirely unilateral way, from the people of the community to the old man, not vice versa.<sup>10</sup> The people's extraordinary care and respect for an impotent old beggar fails to elicit any response, not to mention any appreciation, from the old man. It does not even disturb his absolute solitude, for the description of his solitariness in line 24('He travels on, a solitary man') is reiterated in exactly the same words in lines 44-45('He travels on, a solitary Man,/ His age has no companion') without being qualified by the intervening encounters with charitable people.

This suggests that Wordsworth's engagement with the social issue in 'Old Cumberland Beggar' is not a simple recapitulation of the humanitarian argument

---

<sup>10</sup>Simpson notes, 'what is most striking about it is the total absence of expressed articulation or interaction between givers and receiver', *Historical Imagination*, p.171.

articulated in the series of 'soldier's wife' poems, but something more complicated and problematic. In the relationship between the discharged soldier and the sailor of 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain', for example, the soldier's suffering is mainly physical in its nature; physical disablement, lack of food and shelter, and the sailor's offer of help is not only readily accepted and appreciated, but also *does* solve the problem once and for all. The satisfaction that the charity gives rise to, therefore, is mutual; the sailor is satisfied with the confirmation of his own good heart while the former soldier 'trembled with delight'.

The mechanism of charity linking the old Cumberland beggar with the people is very different from this conventional formula. Under the constant protective care of the villagers, the beggar does not seem to be alienated from society and does not have to worry about his own subsistence. But the fact is that the people's care and respect does not make any difference to the old man's life, and his social alienation is even intensified rather than alleviated. So what is the point of the charity, if any? It is exactly when such a question raises itself that Wordsworth's 'argument' is introduced:

But deem not this man useless -- Statesmen! ye  
 Who are so restless in your wisdom, ye  
 Who have a broom still ready in your hands  
 To rid the world of nuisances; ye proud,  
 Heart-swoln, while in your pride ye contemplate  
 Your talents, power, and wisdom, deem him not  
 A burthen of the earth....

('The Old Cumberland Beggar', ll. 67-73)

The 'Statesmen' warned by Wordsworth are, as is well known, the contemporary utilitarian thinkers. Along with many other social reformers, they proposed the reform of the existing system of poor relief according to a principle of productivity. Above all, Jeremy Bentham, who published 'Outline of a Work Entitled Pauper Management Improved' as a part of *Annals of Agriculture* in 1798, was a

typical example of what Wordsworth later pejoratively termed 'political economists'.<sup>11</sup> The essence of his 'utilitarian' scheme was concentrated in two proposals. One was the centralized control of all the workhouses<sup>12</sup> nationwide through one company, a 'National Charity Company', and the refusal of all outdoor relief so that the strict discipline of the workhouse might be coercively implemented; 'No relief but upon the terms of coming into the *house*'.<sup>13</sup> The principle behind Bentham's proposal was very simple; 'utility is that property which tends to increase pleasure and decrease pain', and beggars and vagrants increase pain rather than give pleasure.<sup>14</sup> In general, the fundamental political aim of the utilitarian theorists such as Bentham was to secure a constant supply of labour from a potentially subversive class. In the immediate political circumstances, they had two interrelated targets: one was legislation based on the principle that the state has the duty to provide basic subsistence to all people;<sup>15</sup> the other was to counteract the idleness of the labouring class which they assumed was encouraged by indiscriminate relief to the poor. If it was practically impossible to abolish the present parochial poor relief system itself, the next best method was to

---

<sup>11</sup>In his Fenwick note, Wordsworth made it clear that he intended the poem as a criticism of the proposals by the political economists who eventually inspired the major amendment of the Poor Law in 1835: 'Observed, and with great benefit to my own heart, when I was a child. Written at Racedown and Alfoxdon in my 23d year. The political economists were about that time beginning their war upon mendicity in all its forms, and by implication, if not directly, on alms giving also. This heartless process has been carried as far as it can go by the AMENDED Poor Law Bill, tho' the inhumanity that prevails in this measure is somewhat disguised by the profession that one of its objects is to throw the poor upon the voluntary donations of thier neighbors, that is, if rightly interpreted, to force them into a condition between relief in the Union Poor House and alms robbed of their Christian grace and spirit, as being forced rather from the avaricious and selfish; and all, in fact, but the humane and charitable are at liberty to keep all they possess from their distressed brethren' (Grosart, pp.185-86).

<sup>12</sup>For a historical account of the workhouse system in Britain, see Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *English Local Government: English Poor Law History: Part I. The Old Poor Law* (London, 1927), pp.215-64.

<sup>13</sup>Koch, pp.20-21; Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age* (London and Boston, 1984), pp.78-85.

<sup>14</sup>Bentham notes, 'The multitude of the persons subject to this pain of sympathy, or to this disgust, considered, there can be little doubt but that the sum of these pains taken together is greater than the difference to the beggar in point of comforts between begging and working', quoted in Koch, p.20.

<sup>15</sup>Edmund Burke shared the same objective for a more conservative political reason: 'To provide for us in our necessities in not in the power of government. It would be a vain presumption in statesmen to think they can do it. The people maintain them, and not they the people.' 'Thoughts and Details on Scarcity', McDowell, p.120.



make sure that a suitable form of relief was given only to the deserving poor.<sup>16</sup> They did not want the labouring class to perish in absolute want, but it was not desirable for them to be too well-off, either. The poor relief must be *productively* given so as to encourage industry among the labourers.<sup>17</sup>

There is little doubt that Wordsworth was opposed to the utilitarian theorists, particularly to their mercantile point of view.<sup>18</sup> What is interesting in this poem, however, is that Wordsworth makes his oppositional case not by means of a familiar eighteenth-century humanitarian rhetoric, but in the same utilitarian terms.<sup>19</sup> The old man, Wordsworth contends, is indeed of 'use'.

The old man's 'use' asserted by Wordsworth is located first of all in his moral effect on the people who give charity; the presence of the old man solely maintained by almsgiving is 'a record which together binds/ past deeds and offices of charity/ Else unremember'd, and so keeps alive/ The kindly mood in hearts...' (ll.81-84). The people

---

<sup>16</sup>The term 'deserving poor', virtually synonymous with 'industrious poor' or 'labouring poor', is of course a concept based on the principle of productivity and class interest. For the origin of such an ideological definition and its representation in eighteenth century literature, see Irvin Ehrenpreis, 'Poverty and Poetry: Representations of the Poor in Augustan Literature', in *The Modernity of the Eighteenth Century* (Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture) edited by Louis T. Milic (Cleveland and London, 1971), pp.3-35. Also, Harrison's Ph D thesis 'Wordsworth and the Itinerant Poor' contains a succinct description of the ideological implications of the term: 'One determining feature of the late 18th-century discourse on poverty is its emphasis upon productivity. ...In debating how best to alleviate the miserable conditions of the poor--or the miserable condition of having to assist the poor--middle-class reformers, Radicals, economists, and philanthropists clearly divide the poor into two categories: the industrious and the idle, equivalent respectively to the deserving and the undeserving poor. The poor are thereby placed under the "sign of production" inasmuch as common assumptions about the poor and the definition of poverty itself were formed in relation to productivity.' p.8.

<sup>17</sup>J.D. Marshall, *The Old Poor Law, 1795-1834* (London, 1968) and for a more detailed study of the political economists' thought on the reform of the Old Poor Law, J.R. Poynter, *Society and Pauperism: English ideas on Poor Law, 1795-1834* (London, 1969); Himmelfarb, pp.64-132.

<sup>18</sup>Jarvis, on this point, offers a different opinion: 'It is mistaken to argue that Wordsworth's invective in this poem is aimed primarily at the engineers of a system of poor relief which held to the workhouse as the best way of discouraging the irresponsible and the work-shy', because, according to him, the general tendency of the 1790s was not the adoption of their proposals, but 'the expansion and diversification of outdoor relief'. Wordsworth's condemnation of the political economists was provoked not because their views were currently influential, but because it propagated 'sinister implications for the practice of *private* charity.' pp.204-205.

<sup>19</sup>Koch rightly observes that 'his (Wordsworth's) argument for an outmoded form of poor relief, almsgiving, is informed by modern economic discourse. The poet responds to the utilitarian war on mendicity not by challenging the dogma of utility and contending that a man's worth is not determined by his usefulness, but rather by adopting the language of utilitarianism and defending the mendicant on the grounds of his utility,' p.23. Harrison has also made the same point, p.26.

are thus 'compel(led)' to 'acts of love', and 'insensibly disposed/ To virtue and true goodness' (ll.91-92, ll.95-96). There is nothing remarkable in representing the old man as the living record of humanitarian sympathy, which is in fact in tune with the conventional humanitarian claim of eighteenth-century sentimental literature.<sup>20</sup> But the next item of the old man's 'use' begins to carry a rather sinister moral implication:

...The easy man  
 Who sits at his own door, and like the pear  
 Which overhangs his head from the green wall,  
 Feeds in the sunshine; the robust and young,  
 The prosperous and unthinking, they who live  
 Shelter'd, and flourish in a little grove  
 Of their own kindred, all behold in him  
 A silent monitor, which on their minds  
 Must needs impress a transitory thought  
 Of self-congratulation, to the heart  
 Of each recalling his peculiar boons,  
 His charters and exemptions; and perchance,  
 Though he to no one give the fortitude  
 And circumspection needful to preserve  
 His present blessings, and to husband up  
 The respite of the season, he, at least,  
 And 'tis no vulgar service, makes them felt.  
 ('The Old Cumberland Beggar', ll.108-124)

This raises the question of what 'a transitory thought/ Of self-congratulation' might be. The gist of the argument is that the old man's extreme misery offers itself as a foil for the less unfortunate lives of many people who, as the result of such a comparison, become contented with their 'peculiar boons'. But such a feeling of self-satisfaction is no more than 'a transitory thought' because it is derived from such an unusual comparison with an impotent old beggar. As Jarvis rightly observes, the old man's 'social use' in this regard 'widens, rather than closes, the gap between the villagers and

---

<sup>20</sup>Ehrenpreis, pp.15-18; Averill, pp.21-45.

the beggar' by confirming 'his inferior social position'.<sup>21</sup> The ideological import of such an argument is contingent upon the social identity of the people referred to as 'the robust and young, /The prosperous and unthinking', for this loose definition may include the whole spectrum of society from the upper class to the village poor. If it embraces the upper class, Wordsworth's argument offers a conventional moral warning against their avarice and complacency. But if it refers to the poor such as the 'toll-gate guard' or the 'post-boy', its ideological import is obviously reactionary in that it inculcates the virtue of self-contentment at a time when the demands of the poor were becoming more and more threatening to the upper class. But it seems that it is the poor rather than the rich who are addressed here. After reproaching the middle-class for their lack of charity, Wordsworth implies that such a spirit of charity is most likely to be found among the poor themselves:

...the poorest poor  
 Long for some moments in a weary life  
 When they can know and feel that they have been  
 Themselves the fathers and the dealers out  
 Of some small blessings, have been kind to such  
 As needed kindness, for this single cause,  
 That we have all of us one human heart.  
 ('The Old Cumberland Beggar', ll.140-146)

The idea that charity is most likely to be found in the poor,<sup>22</sup> at first sight, appears to reiterate the familiar Christian commonplace that the poor are closer to heaven. The point of Wordsworth's argument, however, is not the moral superiority of the poor, but the fact that the old man's misery puts them in the position where they can patronize somebody else rather than be patronized themselves, and this provides them with a feeling of self-esteem otherwise unavailable to them. The pleasure of self-satisfaction

---

<sup>21</sup>Jarvis, p.211.

<sup>22</sup>Harrison observes that this is another tenet of the eighteenth-century ideology of the poor, 'an ideology of self help' which was adopted 'to justify a laissez-faire attitude toward poor-relief'. The true aim of such an ideology, as Harrison indicates, was simply to reduce the burden of the poor rate that was dramatically increasing in the latter half of the 1790s. pp.32-33.

is further developed into the luxury of self-respect in a recognition of their own social superiority. Leave alone the ideological import of such feelings, what is morally questionable in Wordsworth's argument is that such benefits are obtained only at the expense of the old man's suffering. To make himself socially 'useful', the old man *necessarily* has to locate himself at the lowest stratum of society, and submit to an extremity of suffering.<sup>23</sup>

What is at issue here, therefore, is not the relief of the old man's physical suffering and hunger, but *exclusively* the people's moral satisfaction, which is in fact parasitically contingent on the existence of suffering people. In this mechanism of charity, the old man is completely excluded, and that exclusion is made less painful by the assumption that the old man's suffering might be beyond any human solution.<sup>24</sup> This mechanism of charity, therefore, perpetuates not only the old man's suffering but also the present social order which is based on the division between the charity-giver and the charity-recipient, which is why Wordsworth's argument, as many critics agree, can be understood as an endorsement of the present hierarchical social system.<sup>25</sup>

Wordsworth's callous attitude toward the old man is also justified by the utilitarian logic that the pleasure the old man's misery makes available to others is greater than the pain he himself has to endure.<sup>26</sup> Not surprisingly, this comes into

---

<sup>23</sup>Jarvis also notes, 'Unfortunately, this humane affirmation carries with it the implication that there must always be some who cannot enjoy such voluntary charities; the spiritual uplift of those who can afford to give of their own modest means is parasitic on the need and importunity of those who have nothing to give.' p.212.

<sup>24</sup>This is, according to Harrison, also related to an ideological tenet at the time that the poor's suffering in this world is ultimately compensated for in the afterlife. p. 35.

<sup>25</sup>Chandler, p.92; Harrison,p.23.

<sup>26</sup>This uncaring attitude was, in fact, quite widely shared by many commentators at the time. Frederick Morton Eden, for instance, opens his study by saying, 'The natural produce of the soil is not fully adequate to our subsistence, and a portion of society must be indefatigably employed to supply the necessary wants of the whole. Of the others, some, at least, who can abundantly command all the necessaries of life, owe their superior advantages to the industry of others.' *The State of the Poor*, abridged edition, A.G.L. Rogers (London, 1928), p.1; Harrison, p.26; Simpson also notes that 'extremes of hard-heartedness seem to have been more common than excesses of tenderness' at the time. p.167. According to Marshall, the main stream of public opinion of the eighteenth-century was that the poor themselves were to blame for their own poverty: 'It was claimed that the Poor were poor because they would neither work nor save, and because they were at once lazy and extravagant. Consequently, the first part of the eighteenth century was a time when severe discipline was

conflict with Wordsworth's anti-utilitarian polemics in which he condemns the Statemen's utilitarian proposals for workhouses. The contradiction is well explained by Koch:

Of the beggar's pain the poet says nothing. Wordsworth adopts a utilitarian posture by suggesting that the pleasure that the beggar brings to the people overrides his pain. Like Bentham, Wordsworth implies that utility is that good which allows the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Unlike Bentham, however, Wordsworth, with his Burkean sense of pathos, views the sympathy evoked from an encounter with a beggar not as painful but, by an offering of alms, as pleasurable. Thus Bentham argues as adamantly against almsgiving and free-wandering mendicants as Wordsworth argues against confining indoor relief and the incarceration of vagrants.<sup>27</sup>

Wordsworth's 'complex and even confused position'<sup>28</sup> in the spectrum of contemporary opinions on poor relief becomes even clearer when we consider what he *did* offer as an alternative to the workhouse system he was so emphatically against. In terms of policy, private, volutary charity is the only thing Wordsworth clearly defends here.<sup>29</sup> But his position on this matter is problematic enough; as Simpson's meticulous analysis shows, Wordsworth's stance in this poem is 'open and unresolved'.<sup>30</sup> He does

---

advocated. Both in theory and in practice workhouses and contractors were the expedients advocated and employed.' *English Poor in the 18th Century*, p.14. For a more detailed account of the eighteenth-century fluctuating opinions on the poor, see pp.15-56.

<sup>27</sup>Koch, p.24.

<sup>28</sup>Simpson, *Historical Imagination*, p.167.

<sup>29</sup>There is no disagreement on the point that what is supported by Wordsworth is the sort of voluntary, private charity which had long been practiced within the Old Poor Law system, Harrison, pp.28-32; Koch is also making a similar point when he names Wordsworth's scheme as 'a gift-exchange economy,' which is 'a virtuous foil' to the capitalist monetary economy; Jarvis puts a particular emphasis on the point that this poem should be read as Wordsworth's positive advocacy of private charity rather than a criticism of the utilitarian proposals for poor relief, p.203-204. But as Jarvis rightly indicates, contemporary opinions were not only overlapping but also contradicted each other so that it is difficult to identify exactly the nature of a particular proposal in the matrix of the discourse on poor relief, of which Wordsworth's version of 'private charity' is a typical example.

<sup>30</sup>Simpson, *Historical Imagination*, pp.162-174.

not demand a more positive, and more efficient interference by government, nor does he explicitly argue for the abolition of the institutionalised relief system. He seems to be just vaguely supporting the present parochial relief system within a parish autonomy. In so far as he defends voluntary charity, he echoes the abolitionists like Thomas Alcock or Joseph Townsend.<sup>31</sup> In his criticism of the 'statesmen's' presumptuous, coercive scheme of poor relief in the name of 'Nature's law', he resembles Burke<sup>32</sup>, or even tends towards a *laissez-faire* policy. But in his argument for the people's inviolable right to subsistence, he remains by and large a supporter of the Old Poor Law.

As far as a feasible policy is concerned, Wordsworth's proposal contains little to affect the tide of public opinion on poor relief. In a sense, Wordsworth did not engage with the major issues of the current debate (the increasing gap between the wage of labourers and the price of provision, the reduction of the ever-rising poor rate, and the most productive method of poor relief). At the centre of the contemporary controversy always lay the question of labour; how to prevent the potential loss of labour at a time of scarcity, how to organize labour in the most productive way. In other words, the focus of the proposals always fell on the able poor rather than the

---

<sup>31</sup>The logic of abolitionism is that the poor law exacerbates the indigence of the poor rather than relieves it. Alcock indicated the demoralising effects of institutional relief: 'As Force tends to destroy Charity in the Giver, so does it Gratitude in the Receiver...where no Will was concerned in the Deed, no Return can be expected. The pauper thanks not me for any thing he receives. He has a right to it, he says, by law, and if I won't give, he'll go to the Justices, and compel me. So that, what is still more provoking to the Contributor, he's forced to pay largely to the Poor, and at the same time sees them ungrateful and saucy, affronting and threatening, and looking upon themselves as equally good, if not better Men than their supporters, without Dependency or Obligation...', *Observations on the Defects of the Poor Laws and on the Causes and Consequences of the Great Increase and Burden of the Poor* (1752), quoted in Poynter, p.40. Apart from its moral repugnance to enforced relief, the abolitionists shared the Utilitarian belief that indiscriminate relief discouraged industry. Townsend observes: 'Hope and fear are the springs of industry. It is the part of a good politician to strengthen these: but our laws weaken the one and destroy the other. For what encouragement have the poor to be industrious and frugal, when they know for certain, that should they increase their store it will be devoured by the drones? or what cause have they to fear, when they are assured, that if by their indolence and extravagance, by their drunkenness and vices, they should be reduced to want, they shall be abundantly supplied...In general it is only hunger which can spur and goad them on to labour...', *A Dissertation on the Poor Laws* (1786), quoted in Poynter, p.42.

<sup>32</sup>Wordsworth's affiliation with Burke is most vigorously argued by Chandler, pp.84-89, and Chandler's point was accepted, although with much qualification, by Simpson (pp.172-73) and Koch (p.21). For Burke's ideas on poor relief, see Poynter, pp.52-55; Himmelfarb, pp.66-73.

disabled mendicant like the old Cumberland Beggar. The relevance of Wordsworth's argument to the actual poor law debates of 1796-98,<sup>33</sup> therefore, is minimal.

What Wordsworth is really concerned about, in fact, is not the institution of the Old Poor Law as such, but its educational effect upon the people, who would be 'insensibly dispos'd/ To virtue and true goodness'. Whatever that 'virtue and true goodness' may have meant in the real lives of the poor, the foremost beneficiary of this convention of charity is one who is himself not directly involved in the action of charity:

...Some there are,  
By their good works exalted, lofty minds  
And meditative, authors of delight  
And happiness, which to the end of time  
Will live, and spread, and kindle; minds like these,  
In childhood, from this solitary being,  
This helpless wanderer, having perchance receiv'd,  
(A thing more precious far than all that books  
Or the solitudes of love can do!)  
That first mild touch of sympathy and thought,  
In which they found their kindred with a world  
Where want and sorrow were. ...  
(*'The Old Cumberland Beggar'*, ll.97-108)

As Koch indicates, the narrator's attitude toward the old man is shockingly unsympathetic, far aloof from the situation where the charitable actions are taking place between the people and the beggar.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, the narrator's social position among the characters is not possible to determine.<sup>35</sup> But curiously enough, this poem begins, 'I saw an aged Beggar', and the second paragraph opens similarly, 'Him from

---

<sup>33</sup>For a detailed account of the poor relief debates between 1795-98, see Poynter, Chapter III 'Lessons of Scarcity', pp.45-105.

<sup>34</sup>Koch, p.22.

<sup>35</sup>Simpson notes, '...it seems as if the Wordsworthian speaker is located in some ambiguous middle ground between the village poor, of whom he approves, and the socially distant 'statesmen', of whom he does not approve. In his analysis of the moral and social benefits of the old beggar's role, the speaker does not situate *himself*.' p.164.

my childhood have I known', so that the narrator's personal knowledge of the poetic figure is peculiarly emphasized. This discrepancy seems a reflection of the contradiction in Wordsworth's attitude toward the old beggar; he wants at once to distance himself from and to assimilate himself with the old man.

The passage quoted above is digressive from the main movement of the poem. The narrator's concern is unwittingly switched to himself, and he is not an integral part of the situation.<sup>36</sup> As soon as the narrator's attention is withdrawn from the social scene of almsgiving taking place between the old beggar and the village people and focuses on himself, all the social, and economic problems that group themselves around the old Cumberland beggar suddenly become less urgent and less painful because the old man is distanced from the present social reality not only by Wordsworth's mystifying characterization of him<sup>37</sup> but also by the time setting. At the same time, the question of how to solve the social problem of charity or mendicancy in real life is overridden by the question of how best to contemplate such an instance of human suffering, as if the old man were only an object in a picture or a tale. The narrator's real concern at this moment is to 'read' the 'tale' of the old Cumberland beggar's suffering to his best advantage rather than to propose a way of giving poor relief to the old man to the maximum benefit of society. Wordsworth's argument for the old man's 'utility' was based upon a division between the old man and the rest of us. Wordsworth's personal motivation implicitly presupposes another division between himself and all the rest of society including the old beggar, the villagers, and even statesmen, and this 'self-seclusion' is in fact the foundation on which Wordsworth

---

<sup>36</sup>The evasive 'some', not 'I', is not surprising if we remember this passage was written at the peak of his communion with Coleridge; by then, he had got somebody that he could call a 'fellow labourer' ('Inscription: For the Spot Where the Hermitage Stood on St. Herbert's Island, Derwent-Water' l.10, 'joint labourer' in *The Prelude*, XIII. l.439) in his trade. Although those 'some' are limited to a few persons at this stage, Wordsworth's eventual aim must have been to propagate the same 'mind' to the readers of his poems.

<sup>37</sup>In addition to the old man's dehumanized 'half-absence' inherited from 'Old Man Travelling' (ll.59-66), Wordsworth deliberately blurs his age ('Him from my childhood have I known, and then,/ He was so old, he seems not older now;/ He travels on, a solitary man...', ll.22-24). Koch also notes that Wordsworth characterized the old Cumberland beggar as 'the unknown and the mystic' drawing upon the medieval view of mendicancy as 'a potential agent of God', p.29.



begins to build up his own sense of poetic identity. But as has already been noted, Wordsworth also associates himself with the old man figure. His impulse in that direction is perceived by Harrison:

That Wordsworth saw the beggar's role and position in society as a metaphor for the poet's role--a marginal one whose questionable value to society needed to be justified--is quite apparent. Wordsworth was convinced that poets, like the old Cumberland beggar, provided the community with "a record which binds/ Past deeds and offices of charity,/ Else unremembered"(88-90). Indeed, assigning the beggar an important, if not crucial, role in society was no doubt motivated by Wordsworth's own need to come to terms with being a poet.<sup>38</sup>

Wordsworth's self-assimilation with the old man is even clearer in the reference to 'authors of delight' quoted above. The old man in these lines is approved for having given to the narrator 'That first mild touch of sympathy,' enabling him to become one of the 'authors of delight/ And happiness'. If the old Cumberland beggar offers to the village poor a feeling of self-satisfaction and self-esteem, what he offers to Wordsworth is the very first inkling of his own calling as a poet, to 'live, and spread, and kindle' 'to the end of time.' Wordsworth, in short, presents the old beggar as the very origin of his poetic imagination. In Wordsworth's contradictory treatment of the old beggar, two things seem to be happening at the same time; Wordsworth, on the one hand, keeps alive, though in a subdued manner, his early idea of a poet as an enlightened political leader of benevolent mind<sup>39</sup>; on the other, he surreptitiously excuses the ideal poet from the obligation to engage with the social problems in the society in which he is actually living.

Wordsworth's engagement with the old Cumberland beggar on this personal level, however, remains marginal to the overall intention of the poem, which is

---

<sup>38</sup>Harrison, p.25.

<sup>39</sup>Wordsworth wrote to Mathews on 8 June 1794, 'I know that the multitude walk in darkness. I would put into each man's hand a lantern to guide him and not have him to set out upon his journey depending for illumination on abortive flashes of lightning, or the coruscations of transitory meteors', *EY*, p.125.

designed to offer Wordsworth's own contribution to the current public debate on poor relief. Wordsworth's argument in the context of the contemporary discourse on the poor is contradictory in itself as well as by and large conventional. If his poetic argument in the context of the public debate was rather disappointingly insignificant, his personal concern as a poet disclosed in the reference to 'authors of delight' is surprisingly significant in the context of Wordsworth's developing awareness of himself as a professional poet. The old man figure is no longer simply the embodiment of social injustice, but marks the very point at which Wordsworth's socio-political concern and his poetic self-consciousness converge. Wordsworth's more personal encounters with other old man figures in 'Simon Lee' and 'A Narrow Girdle...' reveal still more clearly the old man's 'use' to Wordsworth himself.

### 3. The Old Man and a Defence of Poetic Profession: 'Simon Lee' and 'A Narrow Girdle of Rough Stones and Crag'

Wordsworth's preoccupation with an impressive old man continues in one of the proper 'ballad' experiments of *Lyrical Ballads*, 'Simon Lee', which was composed just after 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', between early March and 16 May 1798 (Reed, p.221). Despite its stylistic difference, 'Simon Lee' shares the same preoccupations as the earlier poem; the central issue is still the poverty of an impotent old man. The old man in 'Simon Lee', unlike the old Cumberland beggar, owns a scrap of land and is living with a wife, which, however does not strikingly qualify his solitude and helplessness. More significantly, 'Simon Lee' is structured in the same way as the two previous 'old man' poems; the description of a debilitated old man and the narrator's interference in the situation which abruptly diverts the flow of the poem into another direction. In 'Old Man Travelling', it was the narrator's question about the purpose of the old man's journey; in 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', it took the form of an argument. Here, the narrator's 'interference' is presented as a more self-conscious address to the readers plus an episode in which the narrator is himself involved in the narrative situation. This bifurcated structure that 'Simon Lee' shares with the earlier 'old man' poems implies that it is a continuation of Wordsworth's poetic experiments to elaborate his own poetic mode of accommodating the misery of the poor in a morally sound and poetically productive way.

Unlike the old beggars in the previous poems, Simon Lee's background is described in detail. The description is characterized by the contrast between the world of the good old days in which he was a young, competent, and cheerful huntsman, and the present bleak reality where he is old, poor, and inadequate for any kind of labour. If 'pleasant Ivor-hall' is the symbol of a lost paradise remembered with sad nostalgia, his 'swoln and thick' ankles are the living evidence of present misery. Just as in 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' the more generous social relations of the old order were yearned for, here the world he has survived is recollected with attachment. But the

complacent endorsement of the value of the old order in 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' is decisively undermined in this poem by the sense of the irrevocable change brought about by age. There is no consolation that can relieve the 'burthen weighty' of the old man's painful life: he is half-blind, childless; he is not only 'the weakest in the village', but also the 'poorest of the poor'; there is nothing for him to look forward to except death, which seems the only solution to his miserable life ('Few months of life has he in store,' l.65). Although the blurring of the old man's age ('he says he is three score and ten,/ But others say he's eighty,' ll.7-8) and his ultimate solitude even with a wife ('He is the sole survivor' l.24) help to make the old man a sublime symbol of human mortality<sup>40</sup> as in the previous 'old man' poems, in 'Simon Lee', readers are more emphatically advised to notice the old man's present plight:

His hunting feats have him bereft  
 Of his right eye, as you may see:  
 And then, what limbs those feats have left  
 To poor old Simon Lee!  
 ...  
 When he was young he little knew  
 Of husbandry or tillage;  
 And now he's forced to work, though weak,  
 --The weakest in the village.  
 ('Simon Lee', ll.25-28, 37-40)

This sympathy for the old man contrasts with the narrator's callous indifference toward the old Cumberland Beggar. It is exactly at this point that the poet directly addresses the reader abandoning the omniscient third-person point of view:

My gentle reader, I perceive  
 How patiently you've waited,  
 And I'm afraid that you expect  
 Some tale will be related.

---

<sup>40</sup>Simpson, *Historical Imagination*, p.155; Averill, p.166.

O reader! had you in your mind  
 Such stores as silent thought can bring,  
 O gentle reader! you would find  
 A tale in every thing.  
 What more I have to say is short,  
 I hope you'll kindly take it;  
 It is no tale; but should you think,  
 Perhaps a tale you'll make it.  
 ('Simon Lee', ll.69-80)

Wordsworth's 'experimental' intention is quite clear; he seems to present the description of the utterly hopeless life of an old man as a kind of test for readers who are passively expecting a poet's interpretation, that will relieve them of the obligation to find their own response to such suffering. In the 'Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*(1800)', Wordsworth refers to this poem as an exercise designed to place 'my reader in the way of receiving from ordinary moral sensations another and more salutary impression than we are accustomed to receive from them(*LB*, p.248)'. Wordsworth's concern with a miserable old man is now more obviously transferred from the social problem of poverty itself to its imaginative use in a poem; the concern is no longer with social ethics but with the education of the reader. By emphasizing the absoluteness of human suffering, and by giving up the authorial right of interpretation, the poet seems to seek to exempt himself from the psychological burden of offering an appropriate solution to the social problem. Also, he remains silent about what a 'more salutary impression' might be, or what practical effects such an impression might give rise to.

The 'story' of the poem consists of the poet's first-hand participation in an act of charity:

"You're overtaken, good Simon Lee,  
 Give me your tool" to him I said;  
 And at the word right gladly he  
 Received my proffer'd aid.  
 I struck, and with a single blow  
 The tangled root I sever'd,  
 At which the poor old man so long

And vainly had endeavour'd.  
 ('Simon Lee', ll.89-96)

Wordsworth's aid consists simply of chopping away the 'tangled root of an old tree' 'with a single blow', a task at which the old man 'might have worked for ever'. The contrast between the old man's utter impotence and the poet's strength is so sharp that we come to realize the distance between them. The poet's condescending act of charity is of course an expression of his benevolence. But it is evident that a mere humanitarian gesture cannot make any significant alteration in the pitiful reality of the old man's life. The triviality of the action leads to the embarrassing awareness that the poet is in fact powerless to give any substantial aid to the suffering individual. As soon as he completes the action, Wordsworth seems to recognize with regret that the covert motivation of his action had been self-satisfaction rather than real benevolence.

The connotations of chopping way the root of an old tree may have brought about a more complex reflection. If we remember, for example, Thomas Paine's assertion, 'lay then the axe to the root, and teach governments humanity',<sup>41</sup> the action of 'striking' may have summoned up for Wordsworth his own radical past in which he had wished to 'sever' the oppressing Old Order 'with a single blow', a blow of the kind delivered, perhaps, by the French guillotine which chopped off the head of Louis XVI. 'A stump of rotten wood' to be severed might well be understood as a symbol of the corrupt Old Order. But the old man obviously belongs to that older world, and it is precisely within that world that idealised social relationships are said to have existed, and Wordsworth does not yet seem able to endorse the value of that disappearing world with complacency. Here the poet himself presents himself as the charitable patron, but all that the exercise of charity gives him is the disheartening awareness that his charitable action contributes virtually nothing to the old man's welfare. If the old man and the old tree are linked by analogy, then Wordsworth's action might suggest a despairing awareness that the only effective assistance that he might offer the old man

---

<sup>41</sup>Thomas Paine, *Reader*, p.213; also quoted in Simpson, *Historical Imagination*, p.155.

would be a quick and easy death, euthanasia, and such a suggestion is strong enough in the poem to make it appropriate that the experience should leave Wordsworth in 'mourning':

The tears into his eyes were brought,  
 And thanks and praises seemed to run  
 So fast out of his heart, I thought  
 They never would have done.  
 - I've heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds  
 With coldness still returning.  
 Alas! the gratitude of men  
 Has oftener left me mourning.  
 ('Simon Lee', ll.97-104)

Literally, what Wordsworth is mourning is the lack of habitual kindness which made the old man shed grateful tears for such a trivial favour, or he is moved by the old man's goodness which has been preserved even in extreme hardship. But he seems also affected by an intuitive awareness of the impertinence of his own action. In the end, the poem arrives neither at a conventional sympathy for human suffering, nor at a demonstration of the moral value of charity; the poem ends rather with the expression of a curious compunction, as if the poem has succeeded in demonstrating only the insurmountable difference that separates him from the suffering people who appear in his poems. As long as the old man remains a human being of flesh and blood, who is suffering in the real world, he is a source of anxiety rather than of the kind of poetic inspiration likely to produce 'authors of delight'. Wordsworth was yet to find a way of reconciling his contradictory attitudes toward the suffering old man, which is perhaps why the topic continued to preoccupy him.

'A Narrow Girdle of Rough Stones and Craggs', composed between 23 July and 6 November 1800 follows the same pattern as the previous old man poems; the introductory description and the unexpected meeting with an old man. But there are some differences. The first part, which in the other poems was devoted to the

description of the old man, now describes the poet's own life in Grasmere. In September of 1800, Wordsworth was enjoying the retired life which he had desired for so long. After the hardship in Germany, this permanent home-coming must have been sweeter than ever. He had no pressing worries about money, and he had the company of Dorothy and Coleridge. It seemed to be a perfection of the half-retired life in Alfoxden. More significantly, Wordsworth knew, by then, the success of his first main publication, the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798, though it still remained anonymous. He had good reason to believe that he was by then a recognized poet, not a semi-unemployed intellectual. Preparing the second edition, he tried to make the whole project of *Lyrical Ballads* his own; apart from specifying his name on the front page, he rearranged all the poems in vol I to his own taste. Furthermore, he published the second volume of *Lyrical Ballads* comprising only his own poems, with the famous Preface. With a new sense of being settled, and with a strengthened confidence as a professional poet, Wordsworth was able to turn his eyes once again toward an impoverished old man.

The introductory description of 'A narrow girdle' shows many of these new circumstances. Wordsworth's intense awareness of the natural beauty of Grasmere results in an abundance of exuberant natural images. He wanders around in an idle mood, perceiving nature's 'internal feeling'. He and his companions are described as living in the world of 'old Romance', enjoying a happy communion with living nature. In this perfect affinity with Nature and his companions, even the noise of the working labourers, which might have invited, a few years ago, a self-conscious reflection on the lot of the labouring rural poor, seem to express simply their harmonious relationship with nature. In this picture of a regained paradise, however, there still lurks a self-conscious awareness of the retired, 'idle' life he was then leading. The place is described as being 'safe in its own privacy' (l.5) and 'retir'd' (l.9); the wanderers' idleness is emphasized by presenting them as people who 'Saunter'd' (l.9), 'Play'd with our(their) time' (l.11), 'trifling with a privilege/ Alike indulg'd to all' (ll.28-29). The trace of his underlying anxiety is clear in the phrase, 'unthinking fancies' (l.46). While



celebrating his blessed lot, Wordsworth is implicitly raising the issue of the poet's privilege of 'idleness'. In this context, he comes across 'The tall and upright figure of a Man/ Attir'd in peasant's garb, who stood alone/ Angling beside the margin of the lake' (ll.50-52). On seeing him, he does not hesitate to conclude that 'he must be indeed/ An idle man, who thus could lose a day/ Of the mid harvest, when the labourer's hire/ Is ample' (ll.56-59). The logic of this criticism is surprisingly materialistic and even utilitarian, which would have been unthinkable in 1798. At the very least, it seems impertinent as a comment from those who were leisurely wandering around doing nothing. Perhaps Wordsworth may have thought that their 'idleness' was somewhat different from that of a lazy old man, more productive, perhaps, and more creative. The burden of the twin poems 'Expostulation and Reply' and 'The Tables Turned', which were significantly re-located at the front of the 1800 edition, was a defence of his own idleness, 'a wise passiveness', as well as a criticism of a false strenuousness, 'meddling intellect'. In one of these poems, he deliberately insisted on being 'idle':

"-Then ask not wherefore, here, alone,  
 "Conversing as I may,  
 "I sit upon this old grey stone,  
 "And dream my time away."  
 ('Expostulation and Reply', ll.29-33)

Also in 'Lines: written at a small distance from my House, and sent by my little Boy to the Person to whom they are addressed', he determinedly declares that 'this one day/ We'll give to idleness' (ll.39-40). In the context of Volume I, Wordsworth's emphasis on a special kind of 'idleness' may well be understood as a defiant gesture against utilitarian 'industry'. But in 'A narrow girdle', Wordsworth's attitude is more complex and contradictory; the exaggerated harsh judgment becomes an easy target of self-criticism when he and his companions come closer to the old man:

He stood alone; whereat he turn'd his head  
 To greet us--and we saw a man worn down  
 By sickness, gaunt and lean, with sunken cheeks

And wasted limbs, his legs so long and lean  
 That for my single self I look'd at them,  
 Forgetful of the body they sustain'd.--  
 Too weak to labour in the harvest field,  
 The man was using his best skill to gain  
 A pittance from the dead unfeeling lake  
 That knew not of his wants. ...  
 ('A Narrow Girdle of Rough Stones and Craggs', ll. 63-71)

Here again, the old man's impotence is clearly revealed by the detailed description of his debilitated body. But his physical decay is not itself the point. What makes Wordsworth reconsider his hasty preconception about the old man is the fact that he was actually 'working' even with his disabled body (in 'Simon Lee', the fact that he had to work was seen only as a misery). Wordsworth's judgment was literally wrong. What might have been a leisure activity was for him the hardest labour of which he was capable. Who could blame him for idleness when he was 'using his best skill to gain/A pittance'? Wordsworth has an obvious reason for reproaching himself; everyone is engaged in honest labour to gain subsistence except him and his companions, who were playing with 'unthinking fancies'. But at the same time, in his exaggerated harshness and his easy repentance, there lies a covert wish to justify his own kind of labour. If the old man could be justified in fishing during the harvest season because he was 'using his best skill', could not Wordsworth also be justified in composing a poem, 'using his best skill'? As a poet living in an age when poetry was not an entertainment for a patron, but a means of subsistence, should he be criticised because he was composing a poem instead of working in the fields? With this underlying logic, Wordsworth might unconsciously have controverted his self-conscious awareness of the poet's privilege of being 'idle', which remains in the introductory description. Although in two years time, Wordsworth was to make a pompous claim, 'He(poet) is the rock of defence of human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying every where with him relationship and love' (*LB*, p. 259), and he would never have approved of the view of poetry as a commodity, it is well known

that he was extremely alert to the sales of his poems, making every effort to secure commercial success (Gill, p.191). If we remember that he was preparing the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* when he wrote this poem, he may well have wanted to justify his 'labour' even in a materialistic sense.

In 'A narrow girdle', Wordsworth, once again, refuses to reveal the possible good to be derived from the meeting with an old man('I will not say/ What thoughts immediately were ours', ll.72-73). Perhaps Wordsworth would not have been able to proceed further than the 'reading' of human suffering which had been accomplished four years earlier in 'The Baker's Cart' fragment: 'by strong access/ Of momentary pangs driven to that state/ In which all past experience melts away,/ And the rebellious heart to its own will/ Fashions the laws of nature' (Hayden I, p.243). At the same time, he reverts to the initial self-criticism of 'rash disdain' in the 'Lines left upon the seat in a Yew-Tree' with which he had begun *Lyrical Ballads*. We find here that the poet's claim of being a poet-teacher has clearly developed into a subjective experience of an old man overshadowed by his shamefaced defence of his own profession. The poet's possible contribution to social amelioration is no longer an immediate issue. Nevertheless, his preoccupation with a suffering old man continues in a couple of later poems such as 'Resolution and Independence' and 'The Discharged Soldier' of *The Prelude*. The old man of the later poems, however, is a more completely dehumanized, that is, 'naturalized' figure. In the dramatic confrontation with the old man, the poet comes to search for a personal epiphanic vision which would prompt his poetic imagination rather than for a public significance in the fact of human suffering which could be shared by his readers.

#### 4. The Old Man and the Growth of a Poetic Self: 'The Ruined Cottage'(1798) and 'The Pedlar'

Wordsworth's fascination with the old man figure, as was shown in the preceding sections, is extraordinarily persistent. His interest in an old man character is obviously much stronger than any surviving philanthropic impulse might have required, for his attitude towards the character was, to say the least, ambivalent. He was attracted towards an old man, but wished to remain detached from him at the same time. If 'Old Man Travelling' represents his attraction, 'Old Cumberland Beggar' displays the opposed concern to keep aloof from the old beggar. He not only described the impotent old man in distress as a social victim, but also offered him as the very source of his own poetic imagination. He used an old man as an object of his charitable benevolence as well as an instrument to vindicate his own way of life. Wordsworth's various characterizations of an old man figure are an expression of his desire to come to terms with contemporary social problems, without having to disavow his former allegiance to democratic values, and the tactic used is to present the old man in a manner designed to validate his developing sense of poetic calling. This led him to develop yet another type of old man, the pedlar who embodies the ideal poet, that is, a moral teacher with philosophical wisdom. The idea of such a character was conceived in the 'authors of delight' lines of 'Old Cumberland Beggar', but it was fully developed in the course of the structural revision of 'The Ruined Cottage' in early 1798.

In the long, complicated textual history of 'The Ruined Cottage', the most pressing problem for Wordsworth emerges as the problem of how he should accommodate the tragic story of Margaret. The repeated reshuffle of the narrative perspective which eventually leads to the growth of the pedlar's history in the poem shows Wordsworth's unsureness of his own position in relation to the reality of human suffering.

The earliest manuscript of 'The Ruined Cottage' MS A, written between March and 4-7 June 1797 (*RC*, p.x, pp.79-87), shows that Wordsworth, at first, intended a

straightforward narrative of Margaret's tragic fate, the pedlar being little more than a mouthpiece. But by the spring of 1798, Wordsworth was no longer satisfied with relating a pathetic story for its own sake. In the Alfoxden Notebook, written between 25 January and 10 March 1798, we find that the pedlar's first-person tale is framed within another first-person narrative by the more personal 'I'. The initial predicament of 'I' just before he comes across the pedlar reflects something of Wordsworth's own mind early in 1798:

Other lot was mine  
 Across a bare wide common I had toiled  
 With languid feet which by the slippery ground  
 Were baffled still; and when I sought repose  
 On the brown earth my limbs from very heat  
 Could find no rest nor my weak arm disperse  
 The insect host which gathered round my face  
 And joined their murmurs to the tedious noise  
 Of seeds of bursting gorse which crackled round.  
 (MS B ll.17-25)

The overall narrative scheme requires that the extreme discomfort of 'I' will be corrected through a kind of initiation achieved through hearing the tragic tale of Margaret. The introduction of 'I' as a listener reveals Wordsworth's anxiety to materialise his narrative aim by assuming at once the double role of an author and a reader. Wordsworth intended the tale of Margaret to be read in such a way that it would have a moral impact on the reader's mind so that human suffering need not be accepted as meaningless.

In this context, the two narrators might be said to embody Wordsworth's two selves; if the dejected 'I' represents the Wordsworth who stands in the present tense looking helplessly at the human misery around him, the pedlar is the portrayal of the future Wordsworth who recollects his past years of suffering through the medium of some imagined wisdom which cannot yet be explained in words. The objective of the

narration is then to present as persuasively as possible the procedure through which 'I' advances towards the pedlar's moral position.

The pedlar of 'The Ruined Cottage' is no longer the suffering object of the narrative, but the subject of narration. This sudden transformation is mediated by 'I' who is said to have enjoyed a similar upbringing in the same surroundings as the pedlar. It is also said that they had actually spent some time together as fellow wandering bards ('His eye/ Flashing poetic fire, he would repeat/ The songs of Burns, and as we trudged along/ Together did we make the hollow grove/Ring with our transports', MS B.11.70-74). Though not explicitly identified as such, the pedlar is a poet:

He was a chosen son:  
To him was given an ear which deeply felt  
The voice of Nature in the obscure wind,  
The sounding mountain and the running stream.  
To every natural form, rock, fruit, and flower,  
Even the loose stones that cover the highway,  
He gave a moral life: he saw them feel  
Or linked them to some feeling. In all shapes  
He found a secret and mysterious soul,  
A fragrance and a spirit of strange meaning.  
(MS B. 11. 76-85)

As a man who actively communes with Nature, the pedlar is described as an ideal poet. The pedlar is given a privileged place in this world so as to be free from all human worries in society. As 'a chosen son', he exists on the borderline between this world and somewhere beyond it. The old Cumberland beggar's simple imperturbability becomes 'sympathy' of a higher kind in which he can see 'deep into the shades of difference' 'hid in all exterior forms' (11.95-96)--a kind of poetic wisdom. 'I' has a similar cast of mind nurtured in similar surroundings, but still has far to go to reach that wisdom. So the pedlar begins his story, claiming, 'I can see around me/Things which you cannot see' (11.129-130). The pedlar is shown to be the preserver of something

precious that the speaker 'I' may have lost, but may possibly regain with the assistance of the pedlar, as he guides 'I' into the memory attached to the place before which they are now standing.

The first complete manuscript of 'The Ruined Cottage' available now is MS B which was written between 25 January and 10 March 1798. Wordsworth's main additions in this fair copy were a passage about the pedlar's reaction to Margaret's suffering, a history of the growth of the pedlar's mind, and a reconciling conclusion (*RC*, p. xi). In addition, Wordsworth inserted after the first part of Margaret's story a passage which directs us in the way we should respond to the story:

... 'Tis now the hour of deepest noon.  
 At this still season of repose and peace,  
 This hour when all things which are not at rest  
 Are chearful, while this multitude of flies  
 Fills all the air with happy melody,  
 Why should a tear be in an old Man's eye?  
 Why should we thus with an untoward mind  
 And in the weakness of humanity  
 From natural wisdom turn our hearts away,  
 To natural comfort shut our eyes and ears,  
 And feeding on disquiet thus disturb  
 ( ) of Nature with our restless thoughts?  
 (MS B ll. 245-256)

This makes evident Wordsworth's motivation behind the change of the narrative scheme. As we see in the change of the harassing 'insect host' joining 'their murmurs to the tedious noise' (MS B ll. 23-24) into 'this multitude of flies/ Fills all the air with happy melody', Wordsworth intended a kind of therapeutic effect from the tragic story. Wordsworth promoted the old man from a simple narrator who is also a helpless fellow victim of human suffering to a moral teacher whose 'natural wisdom' must be passed on to a naive listener with 'an untoward mind'. In the reconciling conclusion added to MS B, it is unmistakably shown that the old man's educational purpose has been achieved:

He ceased. By this the sun declining shot  
 A slant and mellow radiance which began  
 To fall upon us where beneath the trees  
 We sate on that low bench, and now we felt,  
 Admonished thus, the sweet hour coming on.  
 (MS D, ll.526-530)

Poetic wisdom, or a special faculty allowed only to poets, whatever it may be, teaches 'I to 'be wise chearful, and no longer read/ The forms of things with an unworthy eye' (MS D, ll.510-511). The 'I's successful initiation into maturity may also imply the possibility of the integration of the two different characters representing Wordsworth's own divided selves--figuring his own maturation into a prophetic sage equipped with natural wisdom. Wordsworth's strategy to achieve this aim is fairly simple: blaming the 'weakness of humanity' for rash disappointment or worthless sorrows, and asserting the need to believe in the providence of Nature. By participating in 'mournful thoughts' (MS B, l.287), we may hope to experience 'a power to virtue friendly' (MS B, l.288). Despite Wordsworth's painstaking control of the narration, 'I's initiation into maturity is not terribly convincing. In the concluding passage, the pedlar advises 'I to be 'wise and chearful', saying that he himself had managed to overcome sorrow and despair by receiving 'So still an image of tranquillity' (MS D, l.517) into his heart. In the same way, the pedlar and 'I, just after finishing the main story, are shown to be going through a similar experience once more, this time together. The 'slant and mellow radiance' (MS D, l.527) of the setting sun is 'falling upon' them. 'Admonished thus', they are said to feel that 'the sweet hour is coming' (MS D, l.530). The point is that the demonstrative adverb 'thus' does not have any definite referent other than the pedlar's rather dubious prior example. So it is not surprising that Wordsworth, shortly after completing the fair copy MS B, decided to expand the history of the pedlar to make him a more convincing example of a disciple of Nature.



On March 5 1798, Dorothy wrote to Mary Hutchinson, 'The pedlar's character now makes a very, certainly the most, considerable part of the poem' (*EY*, p.199). A day after Dorothy wrote this letter, Wordsworth revealed for the first time his ambitious plan to write his magnum opus, 'The Recluse':

I have written 1300 lines of a poem in which I contrive to convey most of the knowledge of which I am possessed. My object is to give pictures of Nature, Man, and Society. Indeed I know not anything which will not come within the scope of my plan (*EY*, p.212).

By this, we learn that Wordsworth's decision to expand the pedlar's life-history had something to do with another project Coleridge had urged Wordsworth to undertake ever since their intimate relationship began in the Quantock hills. What those 1300 lines consist of has been an important object of scholarly speculation. Whatever may have been the case, it is obvious that 'The Ruined Cottage' constituted the most substantial part. As is well known, such grandiose poetic projects were becoming fashionable.<sup>42</sup> Within this larger framework, the recasting of the pedlar is not designed simply to give more credibility to the reconciling conclusion of Margaret's story, but to create a new character who might incarnate the philosophical ideas which Wordsworth imagined to be 'of considerable utility' to mankind. Although the idea of a *magnum opus* turned out to be abortive, the constant pressure from Coleridge to accomplish that higher task was to be the driving force that led Wordsworth to produce the most substantial work in his whole career, though not the work that Coleridge expected. Wordsworth's idea about the shape and content of 'The Recluse' may not have been identical with Coleridge's, and may not even have been clear in itself. But the fact that Wordsworth did accept Coleridge's project suggests that they both felt the need for a work of that kind whoever the author should be. Wordsworth's feeling of debt to

---

<sup>42</sup>Kenneth Johnston observes, 'We must ask more generally who, among the bright young authors of the late 1790s, was not contemplating an epic poem with some combination of the same elements?' *Wordsworth and The Recluse*, p.11.

Coleridge which sometimes amounted to a sort of guilt is founded on their shared sense of this need. In 1799, Coleridge wrote to Wordsworth:

I wish you would write a poem, in blank verse, addressed to those, who, in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution, have thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind, and are sinking into an almost epicurian selfishness, disguising the same under the soft titles of domestic attachment and contempt for visionary *philosophes*. (Moorman, p.443)

Moorman suggests that Coleridge here refers to Southey. But considering the political situation at the time, Coleridge may not have had a particular individual in mind, but the whole group of frustrated intellectuals of a radical tinge, one of the most typical examples of whom was probably John Thelwall.<sup>43</sup> It seems likely that Coleridge would have recognized that he and Wordsworth were both themselves implicated in his charge. If so, there was a seed of contradiction from the very start of the project for an all-encompassing philosophical poem; the person who needed the admonition to escape from the political impasse is supposed himself to give the admonition. Even with this specific guideline from Coleridge, Wordsworth busied himself in something quite different, offering unconvincing excuses to Coleridge.

From the standpoint of January 1798 when Wordsworth is believed to have started working out his grand plan, there was nothing in the contemporary political situation to enable the frustrated radical intellectuals to preserve their hope for a reform of society that would rectify current injustice. Perhaps that is why Wordsworth was so hesitant in proceeding with the large project in spite of Coleridge's passionate appeals. Their first joint venture was not the philosophical poem. Apart from the abortive common composition('The Three Graves') (Reed, pp.189-90, n.21), they planned to stage their plays 'Osorio' and 'The Borderers' at Covent Garden. Wordsworth's visit to London in December 1797 to promote the staging of 'The

---

<sup>43</sup>For the disillusionment among the reformers in the latter half of 1797, see Goodwin, pp. 413-15.

Borderers' turned out to be a complete disappointment (Moorman, pp.350-51), which must have been a serious blow to their self-respect as professional writers. Wordsworth clearly felt the need to embark on some composition that would justify the high opinion of his own status that he and Coleridge shared. From the very start, it was fairly clear what kind of work he was required to write and for what purpose. What was unclear was how to draw 'hope' out of the apparently hopeless contemporary social situation. It was then that Wordsworth turned his eyes to the poems already in stock which might be used as raw materials for the grand masterpiece required. It is difficult to say with certainty exactly when the pedlar entered into 'The Recluse' in Wordsworth's mind, but it is obvious that the fundamental strategy in recasting the pedlar is already at work in the shorter history of the pedlar in MS B:

I knew him--he was born of lowly race  
 On Cumbrian hills, and I have seen the tear  
 Stand in his luminous eye when he described  
 The house in which his early days were passed  
 And found I was no stranger to the spot.  
 I loved to hear him talk of former days  
 And tell how when a child ere yet of age  
 To be a shepherd he had learned to read  
 His bible in a school that stood alone,  
 Sole building on a mountain's dreary edge,  
 Far from the sight of city spire, or sound  
 Of Minster clock.  
 (MS B ll. 47-58)

In the first five lines, a very delicate relationship between 'I' and the pedlar is carefully elaborated; 'I's personal knowledge of the pedlar is bluntly and rather dramatically asserted, unlike the equivalent passage in 'The Old Cumberland Beggar'. 'I's knowledge of the pedlar's humble origin and the specific place name of his home suggest that Wordsworth wanted to emphasize the intimacy or at least familiarity linking the two men. The reason why the recollection of the house where his 'early days were passed' brings tears to his eyes, is not explained. Instead, preshadowing the

main tale of Margaret, it insinuates that the pedlar himself had not been free from the human suffering inflicted on so many people particularly 'of lowly race'. And 'I' once again confirms that he was 'no stranger to the spot'. Obviously Wordsworth would not suggest that he himself came from 'lowly race', but he may have wanted to make clear that he understood well enough what it was like to be 'lowly' in these hard times. On the other hand, in the double negative 'no stranger', not just 'familiar', we perceive a tendency to distance himself from the pedlar as strong as his desire to express his sympathetic intimacy with him. 'I', at least for the moment, remains clearly *ab extra*. The pedlar, too, is detached from his native place by his occupation, and by his age. His tears are prompted by past memories rather than by present experience. Furthermore, his involvement with the rest of the world has been minimal from his early childhood. All the details of his upbringing cooperate to establish his distance from the social world, his ambition to be a shepherd, attendance at a school which 'stood alone,/Sole building' 'Far from the sight of city spire'. Kenneth Johnston notes:

Since the artistic motivation for making the Pedlar a philosophical character is to give plausibility to his interpretation of Margaret's suffering, it is remarkable that Wordsworth puts great stress on the fact that the Pedlar's special relationship to Nature began without the mediation of any human element and has no basis in any attribute of human consciousness or thought, such as prediction, conceptualization, or articulation. It is, very literally, "unutterable love," and the knowledge it gives him is potent precisely because it is untainted by the passions that distort human relations. This severe separation may seem paradoxical, but logically Wordsworth's strategy is correct, because it represents the Pedlar's interpretations of society as rising from a context outside of, and larger than, human relations. Like other redeemers of human alienation, he assumes a vantage point above human nature which enables him to interpret it in ways unavailable to those enmeshed in its physical sufferings and mental contradictions.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup>Johnston, *Recluse*, p.23.

Johnston's judgment that 'Wordsworth's strategy is correct' is justifiable only in relation to Wordsworth's original strategic intention; the contradiction remains, which is what impelled him to revise the pedlar's part so anxiously. Wordsworth could not afford to isolate the pedlar as absolutely as Johnston suggests. The pedlar had to be allowed to experience the outer world in such a way that his virtuous frame of mind should not be tainted by it:

He from his native hills  
 Had wandered far: much had he seen of men,  
 Their manners, their enjoyments, and pursuits,  
 Their passions and their feelings, chiefly those  
 Essential and eternal in the heart,  
 Which 'mid the simpler forms of rural life  
 Exist more simple in their elements  
 And speak a plainer language.  
 (MS B ll. 58-65)

The pedlar is said to go out of 'his native hills', but the description of his worldly experience is extremely vague and abstract: the simple enumeration is indicative of Wordsworth's anxiety to minimise this aspect. Wordsworth was not comfortable even with the generalization, but abruptly narrows down the area of the pedlar's wandering to the allegedly virtuous rural surroundings('chiefly'), which two years later he was to take as one of the chief theoretical subjects in his 'Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*'.

It was between the two passages above that the first substantial addendum was inserted. Wordsworth used the fair copy MS B as a working draft for the expansion of the pedlar's history.<sup>45</sup> The most remarkable change is of course the introduction of the 'one-life' philosophy in describing the pedlar's story. The greater part of 218 added lines are devoted to a description of the ecstatic communion which the pedlar enjoyed

---

<sup>45</sup>The expanded version of the Pedlar's history was made available in Jonathan Wordsworth's text, *The Pedlar, Tintern Abbey, The Two-Part Prelude* (Cambridge, 1985). The quotations of the 'addendum' to 'The Ruined Cottage' are from this text.

with Nature. Wordsworth seems wholly confident in a natural providence which would ensure the healthy growth of the pedlar's mind. He also seems sure of the kind of educational program that would produce the ideal person he imagined. He is educated first by Nature, and secondly by 'Second Nature'<sup>46</sup>--books of 'prenatural tales', poems(Milton and Burns), and Geometry, which he was later to enumerate as the main influences on the growth of his own mind in *The Prelude*. Nevertheless, in spite of his apparent confidence in his 'one-life' philosophy, Wordsworth does not seem to be comfortable within this system. The narrative is never easy going: the new belief in Nature is enacted too emphatically, and the argument becomes unnecessarily defensive of Nature's beneficial influence on the pedlar's mind. The account of the pedlar's ecstatic communion with Nature is impressively persuasive, but when he arrives at the point where he needs to explain or interpret these experiences, he tends to be nervous, blocking the natural flow of the narrative. For instance, after saying that the pedlar was yet to feel love, Wordsworth proceeds:

But he had felt the power  
Of nature, and already was prepared  
By his *intense* conceptions to *receive*  
Deeply the lesson deep of love, which he  
Whom Nature, by whatever means, has taught  
To feel *intensely*, cannot but *receive*  
(*The Pedlar*, ll. 86-91, my italics)

The italicized words embedded in extremely awkward syntax seem to reveal an anxiety to convince his readers 'by whatever means' of what he does not well know how to explain. As a matter of fact, Wordsworth's logic is not just unconvincing, but almost absurd. It is not made clear what 'love' means, nor whether the boy pedlar was just prepared to learn love or had already learned it. Nevertheless, Wordsworth seems to succeed in overwhelming the reader's analytical mind by the benumbing rhetorical power which his strong desire to persuade manages to produce. The restlessness

---

<sup>46</sup>Chandler, pp.62-92.

betrayed here is a symptom of his own sceptical mind which constantly threatens to undermine his seemingly confident belief in the providence of Nature. Wordsworth becomes desperate to leave no room for any possible skepticism about the validity of his explanation('cannot but receive'), which is why the completeness of Nature's influence is so persistently emphasized:

He felt the sentiment of being spread  
 O'er all that moves, all that seemth still,  
 O'er all which, lost beyond the reach of thought  
 And human knowledge, to the human eye  
 Invisible, yet liveth to the heart;  
 O'er all that leaps, and runs, and shouts, and sings,  
 Or beats the gladsome air: o'er all that glides  
 Beneath the wave, yea, in the wave itself,  
 And mighty depth of waters. Wonder not  
 If such his transports were;  
 (*The Pedlar*, ll.208-217)

Wordsworth's desire to cover 'everything' is conspicuous here, and produces a kind of hypnotic power designed to dragoon his readers into conformity with the belief Wordsworth is trying to instill. The solemn imperative, 'Wonder not', functions to distract the reader from noticing that no explanation is offered of what is actually meant by 'such'. Perhaps Wordsworth may argue that what the boy pedlar had received from Nature cannot be described or explained in words, since it is simply 'unutterable' love, not susceptible to logical explanation, possible only to be felt. So the limitation of human language is the excuse for verbosity. But given that Wordsworth was attempting even a semi-scientific explanation of the mechanism of the human mind in the above passage(*The Pedlar*, ll.26-43), the lack of any referent for 'such' is still problematic. In fact, the main function of this first addition is not to supply a philosophical background for the growth of a mind, but to prepare potentially suspicious readers to be readily convinced by the assertion that the pedlar is absolutely incorruptible. If it is necessary to send the pedlar out into the tainted world to endow

him with the authority to comment on the worldly business of society, the blessing of Nature, as an antidote, must be poured upon him liberally enough to immunise him against worldly evil. In the second main addition, this motivation is made clear:

He walked  
 Among the impure haunts of vulgar men  
 Unstained: the talisman of constant thought  
 And kind sensations in a gentle heart  
 Preserved him. Every shew of vice to him  
 Was a remembrancer of what he knew,  
 Or a fresh seed of wisdom, or produced  
 That tender interest which the virtuous feel  
 Among the wicked, which when truly felt  
 May bring the bad men nearer to the good,  
 But, innocent of evil, cannot sink  
 The good man to the bad  
 (*The Pedlar*, ll.249-259)

Wordsworth at last allows the pedlar to go about 'the impure haunts of vulgar men', but only in order to insist that his integrity is absolutely safe from any contamination. In order to understand this anxiety to prove the pedlar's integrity, we must attend to what Wordsworth denies rather than to what he affirms.<sup>47</sup> For example, Wordsworth claims,

...there he kept  
 In solitude and solitary thought,  
 So pleasant were those comprehensive views,  
 His mind in a just equipoise of love.  
 Serene it was, unclouded by the cares  
 Of ordinary life--unvexed, unwarped  
 By partial bondage. In his steady course  
 No piteous revolutions had he felt,  
 No wild varieties of joy or grief.  
 (*The Pedlar*, ll.265-273)

---

<sup>47</sup>Thompson, 'A Lay Sermon', p.151.



Having in mind what Wordsworth was really up to in March 1798, we can say with reasonable confidence that just the opposite of this would be applicable to himself: his mind was far from 'serene', it was clouded 'by the cares of ordinary life', vexed, warped 'by partial bondage'. More significantly, there is no doubt that in his unsteady course there *were* 'piteous revolutions' as well as 'wild varieties of joy or grief'. The word 'revolutions' refers to a radical change of mind, not the political revolution Wordsworth had gone through. But it is surely more than a coincidence that such a word should intrude into this peaceful picture. If the first substantial addition is an avalanche of blessings from Nature, the second is the story of the pedlar's confrontation with society. It is not an educative experience, for he is shown to be observing human suffering from the perspective of an already established wisdom. The boldest assertion made in this extended addition is introduced in the most casual way: 'He had no painful pressure from within/ Which made him turn aside from wretchedness/ With coward fears. He could afford to suffer/ With those whom he saw suffer.' (*The Pedlar*, ll.281-284) This is exactly the state of mind Wordsworth was aspiring to arrive at, and the very essence of the wisdom which he wanted to believe that Nature privileged the pedlar to achieve. The mass of 'evidence' that the pedlar has been favoured with Nature's blessing is required to make this point, and Wordsworth's strict control of the narrative, his over-emphatic assurance reveals his determination to defy the suggestion that remains in the text only as a metaphorical trace, that the sufferings of the poor can be a soothing spectacle in 1798 only to those who can 'afford' it.

Emboldened by this conclusive statement, Wordsworth becomes confident enough to show the pedlar going through experiences evidently rooted in contemporary political reality:

He had observed...

The history of many families,

And how they prospered, how they were o'erthrown

By passion or mischance, or such misrule

Among the unthinking masters of the earth  
 As makes the nations groan.  
 (*The Pedlar*, ll.288-294)

Wordsworth's indignation survives here, though only in extremely generalized terms. The referent of 'they' is vague, apart from its grammatical referent 'many families', which is as vague as 'they'. On a literal level, their 'o'erthrow' means their economic collapse. The connotations of the word 'o'erthrow' may even tempt us to imagine the fate of the French Royal Family in the revolution, but the failure to define the agent of the verb 'o'erthrow' suggests how a once determined radicalism has lapsed into political confusion. The last, but most significant possible subject of 'o'erthrow'--'such misrule/ Among the unthinking masters of the earth/ As makes the nations groan' still registers Wordsworth's resentment toward the rulers of the two nations-Britain and France--who are to blame for the present plight of the people of both nations. But in this context, we are less likely to think of the overthrow of the French monarchy than of the millenarian hopes that the French Revolution had once inspired. Such a disillusionment with revolutionary ideals was inevitable in the current political circumstances; the radicals were, on the one hand, harassed by Pitt's government with its repressive policies, on the other, they were themselves disgusted by Napoleon who, when he invaded Switzerland, the country that had become for Wordsworth a symbol of liberty and independence, seemed to show himself a worse despot than any he had overthrown. From this grim prospect our attention is diverted to the impressive features of the pedlar, who, we are assured, has 'wonderous skill, or such as lie beyond the grave' to draw 'meanings which it (his gaze) brought/ From years of youth' (*The Pedlar*, ll.309-311).

Considering that this addendum was originally intended as the pedlar's biography, it is quite extraordinary to find that the actual details are so scanty; almost all descriptive words are carefully chosen to dilute and generalise the unpleasant details of worldly experience. One of the reasons for this might have been that Wordsworth wanted to make the pedlar not an individual lucky enough to be favoured with a

special boon from Nature, but a universal type of a human mind whose dignity and integrity must be reaffirmed in this difficult period. The problem is that the narrative is unwittingly disturbed by the author's unsuppressible personal concern with the contemporary political reality which had originally motivated him to write such an account. As Wordsworth himself conceded 45 years later, his own past experience had already permeated the supposedly general account of the growth of a human mind.<sup>48</sup> The natural solution to the problem was the transformation of 'he' to 'I', which might eliminate the unnecessary tension between the ideal ego of a fictional character and the intervening self-consciousness of Wordsworth himself.

---

<sup>48</sup>Wordsworth's recollected in the IF note, '...Had I been born in a class which would have deprived me of what is called a liberal education, it is not unlikely that, being strong in body, I should have taken to a way of life such as that in which my pedlar passed the greater part of his days. At all events, I am here called upon freely to acknowledge that the character I have represented in his person is chiefly an idea of what I fancied my own character might have become in his circumstances', Grosart, p.196.

## Chapter VI: Emergence of a Poetic Self

### 1. Purgation of a Radical Self -- 'Lines left upon a Seat in a yew-tree'

'Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree' ('Yew-tree lines' hereafter) is a poem in the tradition of Inscription Poetry<sup>1</sup> where a narrator reflects upon the moral significance of a dead man's life; 'yew-tree lines' recounts the personal history of a man native to Hawkshead. He is described as having retired to his hometown after suffering a rebuff in the outer world. After some years of 'morbid pleasure', he dies in total isolation from society. We are invited by the narrator, who claims to be a local historian, to decipher the record of an unfortunate life which is inscribed in the piled stones under a lonely yew-tree, 'his only monument'. This man's life is recollected by a moralist:

...In youth, by genius nurs'd,  
 And big with lofty views, he to the world  
 Went forth, pure in his heart, against the taint  
 Of dissolute tongues, 'gainst jealousy, and hate,  
 And scorn, against all enemies prepared,  
 All but neglect: and so, his spirit damped  
 At once, with rash disdain he turned away,  
 And with the food of pride sustained his soul  
 In solitude....  
 ('Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree', ll.13-21)

What we are told about the dead man's past is tantalizingly brief and unspecific, especially considering the narrator's claim that he remembers him 'well'. But if the narrator knows what his 'lofty views' were, who his 'enemies' were, and why they decided to 'neglect' him, he does not pass on his information. The generalized description of his past activities hardly offers a single solid fact, and is concluded

---

<sup>1</sup>For an exhaustive discussion of 'Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree' as a poem of inscription, see Geoffrey Hartman, 'Inscriptions and Romantic Nature Poetry', in *The Unremarkable Wordsworth*, edited by Donald G. Marshall, pp.31-46.

hurriedly when the narrator locates the man's error in the 'rash disdain' which is caused by his tragic flaw, 'pride'. Without being told the actual content of his failure in the world, we are made to imagine a pathetic scene in which a young man of abortive genius is shedding tears of remorse, 'nourishing a morbid pleasure' (l.28), on the dreary shore of a lake which is to him only 'an emblem of his own unfruitful life' (l.29). As he was unsuccessful in gaining recognition in society, so he is unable to elicit a full response from nature, for 'his heart could not sustain/The beauty still more beautiful' (l.33). Despite this doubled isolation, however, his 'morbid pleasure' seems still directed toward the world which has deserted him:

...Nor, that time,  
Would he forget those beings, to whose minds,  
Warm from the labours of benevolence,  
The world, and man himself, appeared a scene  
Of kindred loveliness: then he would sigh  
With mournful joy, to think that others felt  
What he must never feel:  
(*'Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree'*, ll. 34-40)

But we are told neither who 'those beings' might be, nor what separates him from them. The young man's 'enemies' are characterized by such evasive terms as 'the taint/ of dissolute tongues', 'jealousy', 'hate', 'scorn' (ll.16-17), and the description of the virtuous remains just as abstract. The young man's experience is deprived of any social content, and this is the more remarkable if we recollect that the hero of the poem is not purely a fictional figure. In the Fenwick note dictated in 1843, Wordsworth identifies the model for the hero of 'yew-tree lines':

The individual whose habits and character are here given was a gentleman of the neighbourhood, a man of talent and learning, who had been educated at one of our universities, and returned to pass his time in seclusion on his own estate. He died a bachelor in middle age. Induced by the beauty of the prospect, he built a small summer-house on the rocks above the peninsula on which the ferry-house stands...(Grosart, pp.8-9)

This explanation does not add any substantial information to what we have already been told in the text except that the recluse of the poem was modelled on a real figure who used to live in Hawkshead. It is however solidly established that the man Wordsworth refers to is the Rev. William Braithwaite of Satterhow.<sup>2</sup> Thanks to T.W. Thompson's meticulous research, it is possible to supply the history that Wordsworth omits. According to Thompson, the Rev. Braithwaite was born in 1753, seventeen years before Wordsworth. Like Wordsworth he was educated at Hawkshead Grammar School, and in 1772 entered St. John's College, Cambridge, graduating, without an Honours degree, in 1776. Unlike Wordsworth, Braithwaite took orders, but then retired for some years to Hawkshead, until in 1787 he was appointed to a living.<sup>3</sup>

It seems probable that Wordsworth was interested in Braithwaite's story because he perceived parallels between Braithwaite's career and his own. But it is just as important to note that from the information Thompson has recovered, it seems that Braithwaite was not much like the recluse of Wordsworth's poem. Braithwaite's withdrawal from society was short-lived. From the 1790s he began to participate actively in the business of his native parish, holding in turn various offices including acting as one of the 'Twenty Four' whose business was to supervise the parish relief of the local poor.<sup>4</sup> In a sense, he might even be said to have actually engaged in 'the labours of benevolence' of which the disappointed young man of Wordsworth's poem finds himself incapable. If the facts of Braithwaite's life do not justify Wordsworth's characterization of him as an unfortunate misanthrope, and if Wordsworth was interested in Braithwaite because he recognized parallels between Braithwaite's experience and his own, then it seems appropriate to look for an explanation of the poem's gloominess not in Braithwaite's circumstances, but in Wordsworth's.

---

<sup>2</sup>Moorman, p.312; T.W. Thompson, *Wordsworth's Hawkshead*, edited by Robert Woof (London, 1970), p.259.

<sup>3</sup>Thompson, p.260. Even in his recalling of the poem's background, Wordsworth does not disclose this same career just by calling his university as 'one of our universities'.

<sup>4</sup>Thompson, pp.256-309.

This poem is believed to have been composed in its final form between Feb 8 and July 1797.(Reed, p.192) Wordsworth had withdrawn to a retired life in Racedown, but not to a life without troubles. The most pressing problem, as is apparent from the letters, was money.<sup>5</sup> He was without any regular income, entirely depending on Raisley Calvert's inheritance which made possible the settled life in Racedown. As Stephen Gill suggests,<sup>6</sup> Robinson Wordsworth's request that Wordsworth's debt to him be repaid may have reminded him that he had no public profession to secure him a living, except the self-endowed title, a poet. Even as a poet, he had not managed to publish any substantial poem since 1793 while many of his acquaintances--Robert Lovell, Southey, Lamb, Wrangham, and especially Coleridge--were publishing widely and securing their reputations(Gill, p.118). Although he had a considerable number of unpublished poems by then--'The Female Vagrant', the draft of 'The Ruined Cottage', the recently finished 'The Borderers'--Wordsworth, for whatever reason, failed to make them public. As late as 1798, when Wordsworth and Coleridge were negotiating the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, even Coleridge, the most enthusiastic admirer of Wordsworth, said, 'Wordsworth's name is nothing' (Moorman, p.373).

But the more fundamental cause for Wordsworth's feeling of insecurity was still deeply political. After the Two 'Gagging Acts' were passed late in 1795,<sup>7</sup> most activities of the reform movements, as has already been observed in previous chapters, were severely repressed in the national paranoia aroused by the threat of French invasion. It was a hard time for the British intellectuals who had once been

---

<sup>5</sup>EY, pp.163-171. Apart from the letters concerning his cousin's request of money, in a letter to Matthew dated 21 March 1796, he asks him, 'How are you now employed? and what do you do for money?', which seems to reflect his self-consciousness of his own inability as a money-earner.

<sup>6</sup>Gill, *A Life*, p.117. Also Mary Moorman notes, '...we have to remember the disturbed and unhappy condition of his 'moral being' when they first arrive at Racedown: remorse for Annette still a torment; faith in human nature only precariously balanced on theories which were really alien to his nature; doubt about his own calling as a poet perhaps the most acute torture of all', Moorman, p.280.

<sup>7</sup>The Treasonable Practices Bill and the Seditious Meetings Bill were introduced in the Parliament on 6 Nov and 10 Nov 1795 respectively. Goodwin, p.387.

sympathetic to the revolutionary cause. Despite his political frustration, Wordsworth seems to have been leading a snug and comfortable everyday life.<sup>8</sup> He had finally realized his life-long dream of settling down with his sister which allowed him to enjoy domestic happiness for the first time in his life. He was mainly employed in his private business: lots of reading, revising the drafts of unpublished poems, composing new poems (especially, the first fragment of 'The Ruined Cottage' and 'The Borderers'), gardening and so on.

But he was still anxious to keep up with the contemporary political trends in London. From 1 June to 7 July, he was in London, developing his acquaintanceship with many liberal friends including Godwin, Stoddart, Coleridge, Tobin (Gill, p.104, 106). His life in the Racedown years, which produced 'yew-tree lines', is best illustrated by his letter to Matthew dated March 21, 1796:

Our present life is utterly barren of such events as merit even the short-lived chronicle of an accidental letter. We plant cabbages; and if retirement, in its full perfection, be as powerful in working transformations as one of Ovid's gods, you may perhaps suspect that into cabbages we shall be transformed. Indeed I learn that such has been the prophecy of one of our London friends. In spite of all this I was tolerably industrious in reading, if reading can ever deserve the name of industry, till our good friends the Pinneys came amongst us: and I have since returned to my books. As to writing, it is out of the question. Not however entirely to forget the world, I season my recollection of some of its objects with a little ill-nature, I attempt to write satires, whatever the authors may say, there will be found a spice of malignity (*EY*, p.155).

The letter exposes the anxieties that contaminate Wordsworth's apparently happy retirement. A reference to planting cabbages prompts a heavy-handed joke: a London friend has accused him of vegetating in his rural solitude. Is the friend's implication that, in retiring to Racedown, Wordsworth has retreated from the dangers

---

<sup>8</sup>March 19 1797, Dorothy wrote to Jane Marshall, 'Indeed William is as chearful as anybody can be; perhaps you may not think it but he is the life of the whole house,' *EY*, pp. 165-66.



of political involvement, has, like the hero of 'yew tree lines', proved himself incapable of 'labours of benevolence'? As if in response to such a criticism, Wordsworth insists that he has been about his proper work, that he has even been 'tolerably industrious', but immediately confesses that his work has been confined to reading. The references to 'industry' are manifestly embarrassed, betraying his anxiety over whether the man of letters can ever properly aspire to the dignity of labour. More painfully, he admits that he has written no poetry, except for some 'satires', presumably the fragmentary 'Imitations of Juvenal'. For these he claims only that they are flavoured with 'a spice of malignity'. It is an interesting choice of word. 'Malignity' had already gained a full literary expression in Rivers of 'The Borderers', who is the immediate forerunner of the recluse of 'yew-tree lines'. In a separate essay 'On the Character of Rivers', Wordsworth explains his mentality in the following terms: .

Let us suppose a young Man of great intellectual powers, yet without any solid principles of genuine benevolence. His master passions are pride and the love of distinction. He has deeply imbibed a spirit of enterprise in a tumultuous age. He goes into the World and is betrayed into a great crime. That influence on which all his happiness is built immediately deserts him. His talents are robbed of their weight; his exertions are unavailing, and he quits the world in disgust, with strong misanthropic feelings. In his retirement, he is impelled to examine the reasonableness of established opinions and the force of his mind exhausts itself in constant efforts to separate the elements of virtue and vice. It is his pleasure and his consolation to hunt out whatever is bad in actions usually esteemed virtuous and to detect the good in actions which the universal sense of mankind teaches us to reprobate (*Prose I*, p.76).

In his characterization of Rivers, Wordsworth claims, he is attempting a quasi-scientific investigation into the origin of evil. But the tribute to Rivers' 'intellectual powers' and to his infection by the spirit of a 'tumultuous age' suggests that the character of Rivers is also a jaundiced self-portrait, an embodiment of the 'malignity' that Wordsworth recognizes in himself. The characterization is intended as a 'purgation' of a negative

version of an aspect of himself. Looked at in this way, the character of Rivers and that of the recluse in 'yew tree lines' are strikingly similar. Both are pejorative representations of Wordsworth's revolutionary self, the one impersonated in the style of the *Anti-Jacobin*, the other similar in substance, but regarded with a more mournful disapproval. The recluse is accused of 'pride' and 'disdain':

If thou be one whose heart the holy forms  
Of young imagination have kept pure,  
Stranger! henceforth be warned; and know, that pride,  
Howe'er disguised in its own majesty,  
Is littleness; that he, who feels contempt  
For any living thing, hath faculties  
Which he has never used;...  
(*'Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree'*, ll.44-50)

Without specifying the details of the recluse's failure in society, Wordsworth simply condemns him for 'pride' as if it were the cause of his failure. In so doing, Wordsworth virtually presents the problem of misanthropy as a question of individual character rather than as a symptom of political circumstances. But Wordsworth is equally concerned to distance himself from the recluse's misanthropy. This is suggested in Wordsworth's opening description of the site of the yew tree:

--Nay, Traveller! rest. This lonely yew-tree stands  
Far from all human dwelling: what if here  
No sparkling rivulet spread the verdant herb;  
What if these barren boughs the bee not loves:  
Yet, if the wind breathe soft, the curling waves,  
That break against the shore, shall lull thy mind  
By one soft impulse saved from vacancy.  
(*'Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree'*, ll.1-7)

The natural setting in the opening scene is of course lonely and desolate, but not entirely unresponding; even the bleakness of the surrounding is depicted through the negation of refreshing and energetic images ('sparkling rivulet', 'verdant herb'). The soft breaths of wind and the 'impulse' from the waves seem to exercise their therapeutic

effects on the poet's mind, saving him 'from vacancy'. Contrastingly, the natural objects which surround the recluse are as alienating and disordered as his mind: while the poet is vaguely desiring the potentiality of a creative relationship with nature, the recluse is indulging in 'a morbid pleasure', 'tracing' in nature only 'An emblem of his own unfruitful life'. The recluse who projects his 'unfruitful life' onto nature is the mirror-image of Wordsworth who wishes to be released from the prison of his egotistic self, ready to receive something creative from 'The beauty (of nature) still more beautiful' which the recluse 'could not sustain'. The recluse's incapacity to respond to nature is the very reason why he fails to see 'The world, and man himself' as 'a scene/ Of kindred loveliness' though he cannot forget 'those beings' who can. The potentiality of nature as the source of restorative power is even more clearly suggested in the 1800 revision where Wordsworth added a line 'When Nature had subdued him to herself' just after 'that time'(l.34); it was Nature that made the recluse remember, though only in helpless repentance, 'those beings' in society who still hope.

But it should be noted that Wordsworth does not yet define 'what he must never feel'. In the Spring of 1797, Wordsworth was sure only of what he should be against. His positive ideal is rendered only in the Godwinian phrase 'the labours of benevolence', reverting to a vocabulary to which Wordsworth was no longer committed. I think Mary Jacobus goes too far when she argues that 'the yew-tree lines record Wordsworth's realization that withdrawal is no answer; 'like Godwin...he insists on the need for active participation in the social struggle'. Wordsworth had never actually participated in the social struggle, and even if he had wanted to, there were no actual correlatives of 'those beings' in British society in 1797 as Godwin himself testified (Gill, p.129). In fact, Wordsworth was still waiting for 'living help' from Coleridge who was to 'provide a vocabulary and philosophy that enabled Wordsworth to articulate his own "visionary views" as his misanthropic recluse could never do' (Roe, p.233). In this sense, the moral lesson of the poem, the admonition to 'suspect, and still revere himself,/ In lowliness of heart' (ll.59-60), is addressed to himself, giving his blessing to the healthier part of his own self, 'the holy forms/ Of young imagination'

(ll.44-45), that Wordsworth needed to preserve himself from the misanthropy to which he found himself dangerously vulnerable.

## 2. Creation of a Poetic Self: 'Tintern Abbey'

If 'yew-tree lines' is a poem of disavowal, 'Tintern Abbey' is a poem of affirmation. What he wanted to affirm as a poet and former radical at the conclusion of *Lyrical Ballads*, was already clear in the context of his recent poetic projects, clearest in 'The Ruined Cottage' and 'The Pedlar'. The kind of poetry to which Wordsworth aspired is apparent from the following passage:

So still an image of tranquillity,  
 So calm and still, and looked so beautiful  
 Amid the uneasy thoughts which filled my mind,  
 That what we feel of sorrow and despair  
 From ruin and from change, and all the grief  
 The passing shews of being leave behind,  
 Appeared an idle dream that could not live  
 Where meditation was. ...  
 (RC, MS D, ll.517-524)

The story of Margaret's tragic fate gives content to the 'uneasy thoughts' which lead us to 'feel of sorrow and despair', but the 'image of tranquillity' which somehow dissolves the painful story into 'an idle dream' remains mysterious. The growth of the pedlar's story was the result of Wordsworth's efforts to resolve such moral ambiguity by means of a Coleridgean One-Life philosophy that expressed itself in a transcendental vision of nature. The beauty of 'the high spear-grass on that wall,/ By mist and silent rain-drops silver'd o'er' (RC, MS D ll.514-15) of 'The Ruined Cottage' developed in 'The Pedlar' into more a dramatic experience of euphoria in which the individual self is dissolved into Nature:

He felt the sentiment of being spread  
 O'er all that moves, all that seemth still,  
 O'er all which, lost beyond the reach of thought  
 And human knowledge, to the human eye  
 Invisible, yet liveth to the heart:  
 O'er all that leaps, and runs, and shouts, and sings,

Or beats the gladsome air: o'er all that glides  
 Beneath the wave, yea, in the wave itself,  
 And mighty depth of waters. Wonder not  
 If such his transports were:  
 (*The Pedlar*, ll.208-217)

'Tintern Abbey', located at the very end of *Lyrical Ballads*, was implicitly required to conclude Wordsworth's poetic engagement with current social problems represented in the volume by a variety of poems of human suffering. Having incorporated both the aestheticism of 'The Ruined Cottage' and the transcendentalism of 'The Pedlar' in its first two verse-paragraphs, the speaker in 'Tintern Abbey' declares that such an euphoric experience in Nature has grown into a solid moral perspective on human life within his mind; Wordsworth's motivation behind 'Tintern Abbey', in other words, was to secure a philosophical perspective in which he might represent himself as the one who 'could afford to suffer/ with those whom he saw suffer' (*The Pedlar*, ll.328-29) without having to define his relationship with the sufferers or with their suffering:

...Not for this  
 Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur: other gifts  
 Have followed, for such loss, I would believe,  
 Abundant recompense. For I have learned  
 To look on nature, not as in the hour  
 Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes  
 The still, sad music of humanity...  
 ('Tintern Abbey', ll. 86-92)

Characteristic of 'Tintern Abbey' is that this confident declaration is accommodated in a tortuous rhetorical structure in which the speaker's apparently optimistic tone is repeatedly undermined by a dissenting voice of scepticism.<sup>9</sup> And that

---

<sup>9</sup>This point has already made it clear what kind of scholarship my reading of 'Tintern Abbey' is informed of: I tend to question, rather than endorse, as I have consistently done in this thesis, Wordsworth's affirmative poetic argument of natural providence at every stage of the poem. A series of New Historicist readings, particularly Johnston's pioneering article 'The Politics of "Tintern Abbey"', *TWC*, 14 (Winter 1983) pp.6-14, McGann's *The Romantic Ideology*, Simpson's *Wordsworth's*

has been the focus of the controversy over this poem among the critics: why was such a contradictory rhetoric needed to deliver the optimistic message? Which is Wordsworth's real voice at the time, the optimistic or the sceptical? Is such a contradiction resolved within the poem?<sup>10</sup>

Since the criticisms on 'Tintern Abbey' are a microcosm of Wordsworthian scholarship, and we have already surveyed some recent historical criticisms on 'Tintern Abbey' in Chapter I, we don't need to go through the whole spectrum of different answers to the questions raised above. But the following points seem to have become clear in the course of our discussion so far; the root of Wordsworth's anxiety implicit in the wavering rhetoric of his poetic argument is his sense of failure in his ideological

---

*Historical Imagination* (pp.109-113), have shaped my view on this poem. For a fine summary of scholarship on 'Tintern Abbey', see Patrick Campbell, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads: Critical Perspectives* (London, 1991), pp.76-83. Susan J. Wolfson's 'Questioning "The Romantic Ideology": Wordsworth', *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 174 (1990), pp.429-47, a constructive revision of McGann's New Historicist reading, also sensibly outlines the nature of New Historicist reading of 'Tintern Abbey'.

<sup>10</sup>John R. Nabholz, for example, argued that such a structure is a part of Wordsworth's intention, saying that 'The ambiguities and confusions have usually been pinpointed to an uncomfortable tension between the *persona's* repeated affirmations of faith in nature and his doubts about the validity of that faith. This view of the poem as the "sometimes bewildering but always impressive vacillation between conviction and doubt"(G.W. Meyer, *Wordsworth's Formative Years*[Ann Arbor, 1943] p.254) or the revelation of "perplexity on a background of absolute certainty"(Albert S.Gerard, *English Romantic Poetry*[Berkeley, 1968], p.113.) has to a large extent controlled consideration of the art of the poem. Jerome McGann, from a new historicist point of view, saw this rhetoric also as Wordsworth's consistent intention of evasion, more particularly, the representation of the very process in which the historical content is displaced from the text. Simpson, on the other hand, tends to regard the same characteristic as the symptom of Wordsworth's political unconscious represented by the 'intersubjective' poetical language which is out of Wordsworth's conscious control; '...the speaker's reluctance to specify what is invoked by the 'still, sad music of humanity'(l.116) can seem to stand as part of a desire to tame or deflect social and political realities. For it is the personal vision, forcefully set off against these realities by the poem's rhetoric, that seems to be given priority. But it is entirely Wordsworthian that what is 'excluded' or displaced is also covertly admitted and signified, both by the location and date specified in the title, and in the language of surmise('as might seem/ Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods') that enters into the description of the scene. Similarly, the language of affirmation and restitution that expounds Wordsworth's alternative response is also flawed and qualified from within, in a way that looks forward to the expanded debates of *The Prelude*', p.109. Susan Wolfson made a point similar to Simpson's, but with more emphasis on the narrative mode Wordsworth adopts more consciously; 'To the extent that Wordsworth stages but does not revise his struggles with historical self-awareness, he compels his poetry to retain and represent the fissures, gaps, and outright contradictions with which such struggle contends. These motions are not left behind in the illusion of achieved aesthetic complexity but, in a mode that is utterly Wordsworthian, they get written into the very texture of its poetry as a tenaciously interrogative rhetoric', pp.435-36.

commitment to the French Revolution as well as to the political and social reform of British society in the last 'five years'.<sup>11</sup>

Secondly, Wordsworth's poetic insistence on optimism is at odds with his apparent state of mind at the moment of the poem's composition; Wordsworth's circumstances when he wrote 'Tintern Abbey' were not likely to produce a mood of either political or personal optimism. The Spy Nozy episode prompted by Thelwell's presence at Alfoxden (Roe, pp.248-57)<sup>12</sup> whether Wordsworth actually knew about it or not, helps us to understand how serious was the pressure from the authorities. The seemingly imminent French invasion did not allow any room even for non-violent intellectual radicalism. (Goodwin, pp. 359-415) The plight of Thelwell, whose desire to settle in the Quantock Hills was rebuffed by Coleridge, who was with good reason worried about the hostility of the conservative local people, must have reminded Wordsworth that his own position was little different from Thelwell's, as was to be shown by his failure to renew the rental contract for Alfoxden. (Gill, pp.128-29) 'Tintern Abbey' was written just after he and Dorothy had been virtually driven out from Alfoxden, and yet before they embarked on their trip to Germany. Apparently, their intention was to qualify themselves as translators. One is reminded of the reason Wordsworth offered for his trip to France six years before, to learn the language so that he might become a private tutor of French (Moorman, p.412). But his mood in July 1798 must have been very different from his mood in 1792. If he was in 1792 like 'one/ Who sought the thing he loved' ('Tintern Abbey', ll.72-73), Wordsworth of July 1798 was more 'like a man/ Flying from something that he dreads' ('Tintern Abbey', l.72). In April 1798, the last major meeting of LCS held to discuss the society's

---

<sup>11</sup>Although this is something of a commonplace in any historicist reading of 'Tintern Abbey', to identify exactly the French Revolution as *the* reference of Wordsworth's anxiety undercurrent in 'Tintern Abbey' is neither easy in itself, nor readily accepted outside the academic camp of historicism. David Bromwich's article, 'The French Revolution and "Tintern Abbey"' (in *Raritan*, 10, no.3 (Winter, 1991), pp.1-23.) in which he explains how he had come to accept, after a sort of an epiphanic recognition, the French Revolution as the invisible but definite reference of 'Tintern Abbey', is an interesting and valuable support from the outside for historicist reading of the poem.

<sup>12</sup>See also, Nicholas Roe, 'Who Was Spy Nozy?', *TWC*, 15 (Spring 1984), pp.46-50.



response to the threat of French invasion, had resulted in the arrest of all Central Committee members. Furthermore, the government uncovered the plot for an Irish rebellion which implicated the English radicals who had survived the waves of suppression.(Goodwin, pp.416-50) All these circumstances must have driven Wordsworth to the view that in English soil the scope for radicals, even for their many silent sympathizers such as himself, was rapidly diminishing. Though not openly admitted by themselves, their trip to Germany was something of a voluntary political exile because Germany then was the only country that seemed to promise a congenial reception for defeated foreign radicals. Also, his expectations for *Lyrical Ballads* were not yet so high as to make him confident of financial or even psychological stability. So, his faith in the hopeful future was hardly supported by the current socio-political situation or his personal position which was as miserable as ever.

'Tintern Abbey' does not resolve Wordsworth's dilemmas, rather it changes the nature of the problem. In the series of autobiographical projects, of which 'Tintern Abbey' was the first, Wordsworth discovers a new subject matter, his own development towards poetic maturity.

In 'The Pedlar', Wordsworth's strategy was to attribute the pedlar's maturity to the beneficence of Nature. Doubts or hesitations were overwhelmed by the flood of the affirmative apostrophe celebrating Nature's providence, but the celebration is willed rather than inevitable, a rhetorical achievement rather than the conclusion of an argument. As we have seen in Chapter V-4, it may well have been the transparency of the tactic that persuaded Wordsworth to abandon the project at this point.<sup>13</sup> What

---

<sup>13</sup>Johnston explains the reason for the failure of 'The Pedlar' and the comparative success of *Lyrical Ballads* in the same terms; 'More important, however, is the fact that he had, by July, stopped working on *The Recluse*, and the most powerful reason for his stopping, on the basis of internal interpretation, is precisely his failure to integrate the sufferings of Margaret, the old Cumberland Beggar, and the Discharged Veteran with scenes of natural beauty like those described in 'A Night-Piece,' or to satisfactorily establish the connection between landscape viewing and social responsibility which is implicit in the frames around 'The Ruined Cottage' and the Discharged Veteran - i.e., the connection between their aesthetic, way-wandering young narrator and the bleak human figures or stories he unexpectedly meets on the road. Wordsworth's poems in *Lyrical Ballads* are successful, relative to his failure in *The Recluse*, because they separate, discrete, freestanding images of human suffering on the one hand, and meditations upon natural beauty on the other.' p.9.

differentiates 'Tintern Abbey' from 'The Pedlar' is the fact that dissenting voices -- those voices of doubt, hesitation, fear, etc.--are not simply avoided or excluded, but have become an integral part of the poem; his affirmative voice is obstructed and sometimes overwhelmed by an anxiety prompted by the years of political frustration--those 'five years', quite deliberately evoked at the very outset of the poem:

Five years have passed: five summers, with the length  
 Of five long winters! and again I hear  
 These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs  
 With a sweet inland murmur. - Once again  
 Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,  
 Which on a wild secluded scene impress  
 Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect  
 The landscape with the quiet of the sky.  
 ('Tintern Abbey', ll. 1-8)

Returning to the same landscape, Wordsworth is imaginatively going back to the past of five years before. But what this prompts is not a recollection of those years, but an intense observation of the natural scene in front of him now. Although the repetition of 'again' nominally connects the past memory and the present scene, it also tends to suppress the possibility of reminiscence by persuading us to concentrate on the corporeal act of perception taking place at the very moment of its narration. In the context of his poetic growth, however, the natural description is indeed going back to the moment five years before when he published *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches*. In Chapter III, we have observed that the descriptive principle of picturesque landscape, which had been under pressure to accommodate more realistic details, collided with the convention of humanitarian verse in *An Evening Walk* of 1793. In his 1794 revision of *An Evening Walk*, Wordsworth tried to maximize the humanitarian significance of the picturesque landscape by expanding some conventional episodes in a particular manner. Wordsworth's description of picturesque landscape in the opening of 'Tintern Abbey' seems to be motivated by an opposite intention; Wordsworth self-consciously adopts a more prescriptive principle of

description producing a less realistic, less humane landscape. The 'steep and lofty cliffs', for example, constitute a normal realistic description. But in the following 'which' clause, those 'cliffs' affect the surrounding landscape so that it becomes 'the scene', as if it were in a picture frame waiting to be observed and contemplated. Although 'secluded scene' is logically anterior to 'Thoughts of more deep seclusion' and the subject of 'Thoughts' is left undecided, it would be reasonable to assume 'I' as the subject of the 'Thoughts' which had made 'the scene' appear 'secluded' to the speaker in the first place. The immediate result of an adroit interchange of active and passive voices of the verb 'seclude' is that 'the landscape' is unwittingly 'connect'(ed) 'with the *quiet* of the sky'(my italics). Of course, the grammatical subject of 'impress' and 'connect' is the 'cliffs'. But the verb 'behold' reads much more actively than it normally should, extending its rhetorical power to the following action. It is clear that, at least in a literal sense, it is the speaker himself who imposes 'seclusion' and 'quiet' on the surrounding natural scene. Eventually, the image of wild nature, 'steep and lofty cliffs' is tamed to become a quiet and peaceful natural scene. The prescriptive nature of Wordsworth's description becomes even clearer in the way he constructs natural landscape in the following passage:

The day is come when I again repose  
 Here, under this dark sycamore, and view  
 These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,  
 Which, at this season, with their unripe fruits,  
 Among the woods and copses lose themselves,  
 Nor, with their green and simple hue, disturb  
 The wild green landscape.  
 ('Tintern Abbey', ll.9-15)

If the first manoeuvre was designed to create the undisturbed, quiet landscape desired by the viewer, the second is to re-naturalize the traces of human cultivation of nature.<sup>14</sup> 'I' looks at domestic objects such as 'plots of cottage-ground' and 'orchard-

---

<sup>14</sup>Johnston, 'The Politics of "Tintern Abbey"', pp.7-10.

tufts' in such a way that they 'lose themselves' among wild nature, 'the woods and copses'. It is not surprising that, after such self-negation, they do not 'disturb' 'the wild green landscape'. Since the wild natural landscape has been, through a picturesque viewing, humanized to offer itself as an objective correlative of the viewer's desire for 'seclusion', it should no longer be 'disturbed', or corrupted by human objects. Such a 'surrender to nature', in fact, is the single most important tenet in the aesthetic of Gilpin's picturesque.<sup>15</sup> Gilpin's aesthetic landscape, 'unadorned' nature, is extremely reluctant to admit any trace of human life unless it is properly 'adapted'. Such a mandate is more thoroughly followed in the last stage of this picturesque description:

Once again I see  
 These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines  
 Of sportive wood run wild; these pastoral farms  
 Green to the very door; and wreathes of smoke  
 Sent up, in silence, from among the trees,  
 With some uncertain notice, as might seem,  
 Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,  
 Or of some hermit's cave, where by his fire  
 The hermit sits alone.  
 (ll. 15-23)

'These hedge-rows' are immediately corrected into 'hardly hedge-rows', and eventually into 'little lines/ Of sportive wood' until naturalization has been successfully achieved. Only after that, farms, so far undisclosed, begin to be seen, but only as 'pastoral' farms aggressively invaded by Nature ('Green to the very door'). The possible presence of working people is even more strongly suggested by 'wreathes of smoke'. But people are allowed into the picture only in the speaker's surmise ('With some uncertain notice, as might seem') as 'vagrant dwellers' or as a 'hermit'.<sup>16</sup> The

---

<sup>15</sup>For aestheticism of Gilpin's theory of picturesque, see Chapter III-2, '*An Evening Walk* and the politics of Picturesque'.

<sup>16</sup>Along with a curiously long and specific title of the poem (For a political significance of the date of the composition specified in the title, Johnston, p.13; Marjorie Levinson, pp.14-18), the presence of 'vagrant dweller' and 'hermit' has been the focus of historicist reading. A standard historicist reading is that 'vagrant dweller' is the trace of Wordsworth's displacement of the actual beggars rampant in the

natural landscape Wordsworth returned to after five years must have been more noticeably marked by the traces of people's working lives, the social significance of which Wordsworth was now much better informed of. Wordsworth, however, employs the well-calculated narrative tactic drawn from the aesthetic of the picturesque to ensure that such objects be adapted so as not to 'corrupt' the beauty of 'secluded' natural landscape.

The beauty of a picturesque natural landscape, so intensely sought for in the opening description, is not celebrated in and for itself, but as an antidote to the mental disease that has infected the speaker 'in lonely rooms, and mid the din/ Of towns and cities' (ll.26-27): what he wants from such a pleasurable encounter with 'These forms of beauty' is the 'tranquil restoration' back to his 'purer mind'. This antithesis of natural virtue and social vice is conventional enough in the tradition of pastoral poetry,<sup>17</sup> but Wordsworth's sense of failure as a republican activist and a social reformer was still so strong that it infects the 'restoration' he seeks. His appreciation of nature's 'gift' is outspoken, but the tone is cautious or somewhat hesitant, sometimes outweighed by his own sceptical voice:

...I have owed to them,  
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,  
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart,  
And passing even into my purer mind  
With tranquil restoration: - feelings too  
Of unremembered pleasure; such, perhaps,

---

actual site of Tintern Abbey which is again transformed into 'hermit', a more acceptable figure in a picturesque landscape (Johnston, pp.8-9; McGann, pp.86-88.). Nicholas Roe and Robert A. Brinkley, on the other hand, saw 'hermit' as a Miltonic figure evoking his republican politics. Accordingly, the introduction of 'hermit' into the picturesque landscape does not have to mean the displacement of history, but should be understood as the creation of 'Miltonic picturesque' which is informed of political significance in itself, Nicholas Roe, 'The Politics of the Wye Valley: Re-placing "Tintern Abbey"', *The Politics of Nature: Wordsworth and Some Contemporaries* (London, 1992), pp.117-136; Robert A. Brinkley, 'Vagrant and Hermit: Milton and the Politics of "Tintern Abbey"', *TWC*, 16, no 3 (Summer 1985), pp.126-33.

<sup>17</sup>For the conventions of pastoral poetry, see J.E. Congleton, *Theories of Pastoral Poetry in England 1684-1798* (New York, 1952).

As may have had no trivial influence  
 On that best portion of a good man's life;  
 His little, nameless, unremembered acts  
 Of kindness and of love....  
 (ll.27-36)

Nature's first gift is the 'sensations sweet' which console his wearied mind by reminding him of a past healthier self, and bring about 'tranquil restoration'. Up to this point, the claim is persuasively modest. But when he explains how such 'restoration' was brought about--how an intimate contact with nature gives a man the strength to confront an intolerable social reality with an optimistic mind--Wordsworth's confidence rapidly decreases. The 'feelings of unremembered pleasure' must be of a quite different nature from merely sensational pleasure, for they are supposed to have moral effects on him; but the argument is extremely provisional, 'Such, perhaps,/ As may have had no trivial influence...'. On what? 'On that best portion of a good man's life;/ His little, nameless, unremembered acts/ Of kindness and of love.' The qualifier 'perhaps', 'may have had' and the understatement 'no trivial' would allow the immediate reversal of the argument without much embarrassment. In spite of the demonstrative pronoun 'that', neither the good man nor the nature of his actions need be specified, for his acts are 'little, nameless', and, 'unremembered.' Compare the following passage from 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' :

...While thus he creeps  
 From door to door, the Villagers in him  
 Behold a record which together binds  
 Past deeds and offices of charity  
 Else unremember'd, and so keeps alive  
 The kindly mood in hearts which lapse of years,  
 And that half-wisdom half-experience gives  
 Make slow to feel, and by sure steps resign  
 To selfishness and cold oblivious cares.  
 ...And thus the soul,  
 By that sweet taste of pleasure unpursu'd  
 Doth find itself insensibly dispos'd

To virtue and true goodness.  
 ('Old Cumberland Beggar', ll. 79-87, 94-97)

This was Wordsworth's explanation of how acts of charity towards the seemingly useless beggar prompt the human soul to 'virtue and true goodness'. The exercise of moral virtue is experienced as 'pleasure' which is preserved as 'memory'. The 'memory' of a particular kind of 'pleasure' in the past is to be reawakened in the future by the existence of a beggar. What is interesting in this account is that moral virtue is explained in terms of 'pleasure' and that 'pleasure' can be 'restored' to prompt the action of moral virtue. The 'tranquil restoration' of 'Tintern Abbey' seems to be an expression of the same principle; 'These forms of beauty' in the present scene, like the existence of the beggar, remind him of the 'pleasure' he has felt in the past, and 'restore' to him the state of mind he had then been in. Wordsworth's intense visual perception in the opening verse paragraph is a conscious effort to reawaken such 'pleasure' in himself. What is missing in 'Tintern Abbey', however, is any equivalent of the acts of charity towards the beggar. Also, it is left, perhaps on purpose, obscure what it was that has been restored to himself by this 'remembered' pleasure. Such pleasure, it is insisted, exerts a moral effect, but on somebody else rather than on himself. Such missing links are glossed over by ambiguous expressions, 'feelings too/ Of *unremembered* pleasure', or 'His little, nameless, *unremembered* acts/ Of kindness and of love'(my italics) as if he wants to *disremember* such pleasure and such acts.

In the very next passage, such a mechanism of restoration mediated by 'memory' is replaced by a new way of experiencing nature in which everything is forgotten rather than remembered:

Nor less, I trust,  
 To them I may have owed another gift,  
 Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,  
 In which the burthen of the mystery,  
 In which the heavy and the weary weight  
 Of all this unintelligible world  
 Is lightened: - that serene and blessed mood,

In which the affections gently lead us on,  
 Until, the breath of this corporeal frame,  
 And even the motion of our human blood  
 Almost suspended, we are laid asleep  
 In body, and become a living soul:  
 While with an eye made quiet by the power  
 Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
 We see into the life of things.  
 ('Tintern Abbey', ll. 36-49)

'That blessed mood' is a quintessentially Wordsworthian moment in which 'the burthen of the mystery' is somehow transformed into 'the life of things' while all the physical functions are suspended. The division of self and Nature, subject and object is completely dissolved with the result that any kind of engagement with the problems of human life becomes irrelevant. And this also marks the consummation of his long attempt to embrace the One-life philosophy which was already evident in 'The Pedlar'; 'He felt the sentiment of being spread/ O'er all that moves, all that seemth still,/ O'er all which, lost beyond the reach of thought/ And human knowledge, to the human eye/ Invisible, yet liveth to the heart:' ('The Pedlar', ll. 208-212). But the validity of such a solution is questioned by the speaker himself:

If this

Be but a vain belief, yet, oh! how oft,  
 In darkness, and amid the many shapes  
 Of joyless day-light; when the fretful stir  
 Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,  
 Have hung upon the beatings of my heart,  
 How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee  
 O sylvan Wye! Thou wanderer through the woods,  
 How often has my spirit turned to thee!  
 ('Tintern Abbey', ll. 50-58)

So far, Wordsworth has, consciously or unconsciously, reiterated his various poetic attempts to engage with the problem of natural providence only to demonstrate their inefficacy. Wordsworth's failure to stay with 'that serene and blessed mood' in



this first cycle of affirmation indicates his need to pursue a different tactic, and at once a new element is introduced into the poem, an autobiography.

In this short version of his first proper autobiography (ll. 59-112), Wordsworth employs a different narrative tactic; he begins with greater honesty, admitting that since he has failed to retain a fugitive feeling of a blissful vision, he has to recapitulate the whole process from the very beginning, 'With many recognitions dim and faint,/ And somewhat of a sad perplexity'. In 'The Pedlar', the motivation behind the making of the pedlar's history was to coordinate the postulated 'past' of the pedlar with the Coleridgean One Life philosophy. The pedlar, it is claimed, had 'yet retained an ear which deeply felt/ The voice of Nature in the obscure wind,/ The sounding mountain, and the running stream.' ('The Pedlar' ll. 326-329) The first three verse paragraphs of 'Tintern Abbey' are another attempt to declare and restore the missing link. In the second wave of affirmation, Wordsworth admits openly the inevitability of change in himself, making sense of it as a maturation bringing greater determination. Accepting, rather than suppressing, the change brought about by the intervening five years, Wordsworth makes much of his experience of those 'five years':

While here I stand, not only with the sense  
Of present pleasure, but with the pleasing thoughts  
That in this moment there is life and food  
For future years. And so I dare to hope  
Though changed, no doubt, from what I was, when first  
I came among these hills;...  
('Tintern Abbey', ll. 63-68)

Not a word is said about what it was that brought about the change, or on what ground he 'dare(s) to hope'. Instead, he begins to describe 'what I was', but this time not with the aim of connecting it with what he now is, but in order to differentiate the two stages of his life. Wordsworth does not attempt to endow his early contacts with nature with a moral meaning. On the contrary, he chooses to delineate his early life in nature without idealizing it. And then, he confidently sets forth what he has gained

from his experience during the intervening five years, still without referring to any specific events:

...Not for this  
 Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur: other gifts  
 Have followed, for such loss, I would believe,  
 Abundant recompence. For I have learned  
 To look on nature, not as in the hour  
 Of thoughtless youth, but hearing often times  
 The still, sad music of humanity,  
 Not harsh nor grating, though of ample power  
 To chasten and subdue.  
 ('Tintern Abbey', ll.86-94)

At first sight, it appears to be a simple recapitulation of the pedlar's position at the conclusion of 'The Ruined Cottage'. What is clear here is Wordsworth's determination to separate himself from the past when he had an instinctive, preconscious relationship with nature. Wordsworth, in other words, implicitly allows a vital significance to those unspoken 'five years' by discounting the value of 'the hour / Of thoughtless youth'. The present mature outlook on nature, it would seem, has been made possible by the painful, frustrating political experience, not by the privileged care he enjoyed in his youth from Nature. His indirect experience of human suffering-- 'Tintern Abbey' is the concluding poem of *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798 which is full of tales of human suffering-- has enabled him to feel 'A presence that disturbs me(him) with the joy / Of elevated thoughts' (ll.95-96). So in this case it may be said that 'love of man leads to love of nature', not vice versa. In 'The Pedlar', the expressions of One Life philosophy, which functioned as an essential foundation for the pedlar's present capacity to watch the scene of human suffering without condescending pity, marked the completion of his natural education (*The Pedlar*, ll.204-222). A similar set of ideas about the unity between self and nature is also set forth at the conclusion of the fourth verse paragraph of 'Tintern Abbey'(ll. 94-112), but its contextual status in the whole poem, especially its relation to 'The still, sad music of humanity', is entirely different;

the narrator's feeling of harmony with nature is now offered not as the origin of mental growth, but as the result of it. 'Tintern Abbey' might have concluded here if such a confident declaration of spiritual maturation were solidly founded. The existence of his long address to Dorothy (ll. 113-160) as the last part of the poem suggests obliquely that this was not the case.<sup>18</sup>

The desperate tone of the address to Dorothy ('thou, my dearest Friend,/ My dear, dear Friend, ...', 'My dear, dear sister', l.116, l.117, l.122), so many depressing 'Ifs' ('If I were not thus taught', 'If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,/ Should be thy portion', 'If I should be, where I no more can hear/ Thy voice', l.104, ll.114-15, ll.148-49) yet again work against the apparently consoling message, as well as subverting the complacent declaration of the completion of mental growth in the preceding passage. The more interesting point is that Wordsworth deliberately presents Dorothy as someone who is yet to go through a painful process of growth, the embodiment of the past self he has now irrevocably lost touch with. Dorothy, with her 'wild eyes', is clearly presented as an embodiment of innocence which is doomed to be tainted. But since Dorothy was only one year and seven months younger than Wordsworth himself, his presentation of his sister is significantly inappropriate. Furthermore, it is extremely unlikely that Wordsworth had actually shared the experience of early communion with nature reiterated in ll.67-84; Wordsworth was separated from Dorothy in June 1778 when he was eight, and he was not able to see her for nine years; and it was not until 1795 when he reached the age of 25 that he eventually set up home with Dorothy at Racedown Lodge. With the vivid memory of living together in the strongest mutual affection at Alfoxden, it would have been much more natural for him to recollect the

---

<sup>18</sup>A majority of the readers', Nabholz summarises, 'have seen this section (Wordsworth's address to Dorothy) as a disturbingly long postscript of "anti-climax" to the true climax of the poem, the famous affirmation of unity and love of nature in lines 93-111, and have argued that this section represents Wordsworth's attempt to convince himself (and his readers) of a faith in nature which in fact he knows to be not true.' p.228. My reading also follows this view of the 'majority' including Meyer (p.253), Gerard (p.113), Ferry (pp.110-11), and Hartman (p.156). For a feminist reading of this part, see John Barrel, 'The uses of Dorothy: "The Language of the Sense" in "Tintern Abbey" in *Poetry, language and politics* (Manchester, 1988), pp.137-67.

euphoria of their shared life in that period. And Dorothy's journal leaves no doubt that she was already mature enough to share Wordsworth's thoughts and feelings. As a matter of fact, Dorothy occupied the very centre of the happier part of those 'five years' evoked in the opening passage. If Wordsworth had anything to remember without a sinking heart in the past five years, it must have been the intimate tie between himself and Dorothy which had sustained him in his intellectual crisis. Dorothy was not only the symbol of domestic affection, but also the only tangible evidence of fidelity in those years of deception and betrayal. What Wordsworth is invoking is not Dorothy as his own past image, but what she has represented in the previous five years, the strong spirit of solidarity intensely felt and enjoyed by Coleridge, Dorothy, and himself. The problem was that that happy memory was inseparable from the painful memory of his own frustrated radicalism. It could only be recalled, therefore, in disguise. If he virtually admits that One Life in Nature cannot be a satisfactory answer to the problem of human suffering, why doesn't he openly offer his relationship with Dorothy as a possible substitute for those problematic ideological, philosophical solutions? Perhaps it was too early to abandon the possibility of a philosophical solution. In addition, it was obvious that the intimate emotional union within the family circle that the Wordsworths enjoyed could not be shared by most of the poor: in fact, the destruction of the family unit, and the disappearance of domestic affection was the single most important theme of *Lyrical Ballads* as Wordsworth himself was to indicate.<sup>19</sup> Wordsworth's fervent invocation of Dorothy as an alternative to the philosophical idea of One Life not only undercuts the validity of the affirmation

---

<sup>19</sup>On 14 January 1801, Wordsworth wrote to Charles James Fox, 'It appears to me that the most calamitous effect, which has followed the measures which have lately been pursued in this country, is a rapid decay of the domestic affections among the lower orders of society. ...But recently by the spreading of manufactures through every part of the country, by the heavy taxes upon postage, by workhouses, Houses of Industry, and the invention of Soup-shops &c. &c. superadded to the encreasing disproportion between the price of labour and that of the necessities of life, the bonds of domestic feeling among the poor, as far as the influence of these things has extended, have been weakened, and in innumerable instances entirely destroyed.' *EY*, pp.313-14.

just made, but also ironically reveals the apparently suppressed significance of the five years shared with her.

In the context of the autobiographical compositions which we have been tracing, from the 'authors of delight' lines of 'The Old Cumberland Beggar'(ll. 97-108) to 'Tintern Abbey', his presentation of Dorothy as his own past self can be seen as a modification of the relationship between the two narrators of 'The Ruined Cottage'. What Wordsworth was trying to do in 'The Ruined Cottage' was to show the procedure through which the young innocent narrator, by reading a tale of human suffering, is initiated into the maturity which the other narrator is assumed to have already reached. If the young narrator and the pedlar could be said to represent his innocent past self and his imagined ideal self respectively, the young narrator's successful maturation would prove two things; one is the educational value of human suffering or of a tale of human suffering in elevating the human mind; the other is, by analogy, the historical significance of the 'failed' French Revolution in the long journey of human progress. 'The Pedlar' is a rather crude attempt to establish a philosophical ground for the pedlar's mature viewpoint on human suffering so as to endow him with authority as an interpreter of human fate. As the project for a philosophical poem involves itself with an account of the growth of a poetic mind, his concern about actual human suffering, not just the representation of human suffering, begins to be diluted, shifting the focus to the question of how man and nature could interact with each other in a productive way so as to make a man morally good. Wordsworth's strong desire to validate his hope for man was constantly threatened by his awareness of a social reality which did not allow any visible sign of hope. In 'Tintern Abbey', Wordsworth's growing awareness of this contradiction makes him more hesitant and cautious in his argument; Wordsworth's various attempts to prove Nature's providence in 'Tintern Abbey' have ironically offered themselves as a dramatization of the inability of his own past poetical efforts to resolve the moral contradiction. Wordsworth's self-awareness, in the end, forces him to disavow Nature's special favour in his youth, virtually acknowledging the social experience during the 'five years' as the chief element in his

maturation. The contradiction between the scepticism of 'If this/ Be but a vain belief' (l.50), and the optimism of 'pleasing thought/ That in this moment there is life and food/ For future years' (ll.65-66) defines the form and content of 'Tintern Abbey'. As the contradiction deepens, Wordsworth's concern with actual suffering people and his anxious attempts to place himself among them as a poet, which had been the original impulse behind the autobiographic project, are entirely overshadowed by his persistent, but unfruitful efforts to stifle the ever reviving memory of the intervening 'five' years. The achievement of 'Tintern Abbey', therefore, is not to establish himself as an ideal poet by giving a convincing account of his past self, but the clear recognition of the need to explore his past selves in order convincingly to represent his life as that of a predestined poet.

### 3. History of a Poetic Self: 'Two-Part Prelude' of 1798-99

If the composition of 'Tintern Abbey' was occasioned by a fleeting experience of euphoria in Nature, the more properly autobiographical project that was to be known as 'The Prelude' was propelled by the very contrary situation. Wordsworth's life in Germany between 18 September 1798 and 20 April 1799 was a succession of disappointments; there was no decent library near William and Dorothy at Goslar, no interesting people to mix with except a French emigre priest and a deaf neighbour with bad teeth.<sup>20</sup> The usual poverty made it impossible for them to participate in an active social life. The unusually cold winter kept Wordsworth indoors. There was no real progress in his learning German so that he lost even the motivation to learn. Wordsworth's state of mind in these early Goslar days during which he launched the autobiographical project is best revealed in his letter to Coleridge written on 14 or 21 Dec. 1798

As I have no books I have been obliged to write in self-defence. I should have written five times as much as I have done but that I am prevented by an uneasiness at my stomach and side, with a dull pain about my heart. I have used the word pain, but uneasiness and heat are words which more accurately express my feeling. At all events it renders writing unpleasant. Reading is now become a kind of luxury to me. (EY, p.235)

There is no doubt that Wordsworth was living an extremely uncomfortable life both mentally and physically. But it is interesting that some of his best poems in this period-- two Lucy poems, the skating scene, the boat-stealing episode, and 'Nutting'-- which Wordsworth modestly described as 'a few descriptions', were produced during this unfortunate period of his life, and they were copied on the other side of the letter containing this self-reproachful passage. What then was the precise reason for his

---

<sup>20</sup>Moorman, p.414, for Wordsworth's impression about Goslar and its people, see his letter to Josiah Wedgwood dated February 5th 1799, EY, pp. 248-250.

depression? How might we explain the discrepancy between Wordsworth's complaints about the unfruitfulness of his life and his creative achievement in the same period?

Wordsworth's apologetic tone in the above passage is probably a response to Coleridge's expectation of 'The Recluse'<sup>21</sup>: Wordsworth is implicitly offering an excuse for the delay of 'The Recluse'. So Wordsworth reproaches himself for his failure to produce what had been expected, and attributes the failure to his bad health. But he concedes immediately that his bad health may not have been the real reason for the delay; his illness, he suggests might itself be a physical expression of his anxiety to compose the promised poem: 'pain' is revised into 'uneasiness and heat'.<sup>22</sup> In this context, his statement that he has been 'obliged to write in self-defence' is more illuminating in explaining the significance of what he was doing in the past two months than Wordsworth had intended; in a literal sense, it means simply that writing poems was the only thing that he could do to maintain his mental agility in the absence of any intellectual stimulation. When it is placed, however, in the context of 'The Pedlar' and 'Tintern Abbey', 'The Two-Part Prelude', the poem on which he was working, could indeed be seen as a 'self-defence', a project undertaken to defend himself against the charge that he had failed to proceed with 'The Recluse'. The new poem could be thought of, on the one hand, as the resumption of the unfinished work he left off with 'The Pedlar'--giving a convincing historical account of a poetic mind--on the other, as a poem designed to consolidate Wordsworth's sense that his whole life, from his earliest childhood, had prepared him to become the author of a great philosophical poem.

The prime objective of 'The Recluse' was to secure an optimistic vision of the future of mankind, but could this remain a possibility during a period of political disillusionment? Wordsworth's 'failure' to produce 'The Recluse' is not a simple failure

---

<sup>21</sup>For example, on 12 October 1799, Coleridge was writing to Wordsworth, 'I long to see what you have been doing. O let it be the tail-piece of 'The Recluse' for of nothing but 'The Recluse' can I hear patiently'. *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1785-1806*, edited by Earl L. Griggs, 2 vols (London, 1956), vol I, p. 538. Although it was written a year later than the period in question, there is no doubt that Wordsworth had been getting the same sort of pressure from Coleridge since early 1798.

<sup>22</sup>Moorman also pointed out that 'the pain in the side and stomach was connected with the effort of composition', p.416.



of poetic talent or creative inspiration, but a failure that had its origin in Wordsworth's recognition that he could no longer sustain the radical idealism that had animated him throughout his early manhood.

### MS JJ - the earliest manuscript of 'The Prelude'

MS JJ<sup>23</sup>, the first manuscript of 'The Two-Part Prelude', reflects in its structure Wordsworth's need for self-assurance as the would-be author of 'The Recluse'. The most noticeable characteristic of MS JJ's structure is its pattern of question and answer, anxious questions and the fervidly affirmative answers. What is peculiar is that neither the questions nor the answers, in spite of the impassioned rhetoric employed throughout the poem, seem to have any specific content. Just as the feeling of 'uneasiness and heat' in the letter to Coleridge is left unexplained, so there is no explication of what the fervent internal dialogue is really about, nor of what impels the anxiety to offer affirmative answers to those self-addressed questions. The opening fragment of MS JJ is significantly ambiguous:

a mild creative breeze  
a vital breeze that passes gently on  
Oer things which it has made and soon becomes  
A tempest a redundant energy  
Creating not but as it may  
disturbing things created.--  
(MS JJ. ll. 1-6)

On the one hand, it seems to register a hopeful prospect of his future commitment to poetry('mild and creative'), on the other, it allows expression to a voice that seems to undermine this optimistic prospect('disturbing things created'). Although it was omitted from 'Two-Part Prelude' after MS JJ until it was re-placed in the positive context of the 'glad preamble' of *The Prelude* of 1805, the fragment at this stage of MS JJ remains ambiguous, not exactly hopeful, nor entirely free from fear and anxiety. In the same way, the following question 'was it for this?' sounds significantly

---

<sup>23</sup>For a full description of this manuscript, see Stephen Parrish's 'Introduction' in *TP-Prelude*, pp. 3-9. Hereafter, all quotations are from this text unless specified otherwise.

ambivalent.<sup>24</sup> The repeated questions do not seem rhetorical, but to prompt a search for an affirmative answer. Stephen Gill, ignoring the anterior fragment, argues that 'the antecedent of 'this' is implied in the very act of writing the poem and the answer is a jubilant yes.'<sup>25</sup> But the answer Wordsworth explicitly offers in the two apostrophes (ll. 68-96) is, in fact, not only irrelevant to the rest of the poem, but also strikingly lacking in confidence:

*Ah not in vain ye spirits of the springs  
And ye that have your voices in the clouds  
And ye that are familiars of the Lakes  
And standing pools, ah not for trivial ends*

...

*Did ye with such assiduous love pursue  
Your favorite and your joy  
I may not think  
A vulgar hope was your's when ye employd  
Such ministry ...*

(MS JJ. ll. 80-89, my italics)

What we see here is that Wordsworth's answer 'yes' is based more on wish than on conviction. Wordsworth's painful awareness of his incapacity to support convincingly his ready-made affirmative answer is only too apparent.

---

<sup>24</sup>Stephen Parrish does not see the question as regretful or depressing, though he identifies the referent of 'this' as 'the powerful disturbance of mind' because he thinks that it was occasioned by 'a superabundant flow of inspiration--not incapacity, or guilt, or self-reproach'. He suggests that it could be even 'exultant', 'Introduction', in *TP-Prelude*, p.6. But I think that until the opening fragmentary passages are placed in the context of the 'glad preamble' of 1805, there is no textual evidence which makes the questions so positive. Compared with the bold declaration of his own maturity in 'Tintern Abbey', what is being argued in MS JJ is so modest that we cannot but think that 'incapacity, or guilt, or self-reproach' is still preponderant over his self-cheering voice. On the other hand, Jonathan Wordsworth understands 'Was it for this?...' as a regretful rhetorical question which is based on his sense of failure to go ahead with 'The Recluse', noting that 'the fact that this sequence, together with the Birdsnesting, Woodcock-snaring, and Boat-stealing episodes, appeared in MS JJ of October/November 1798 suggests that the new autobiographical direction taken by his poetry at Goslar may from the first have been associated by Wordsworth with guilt at the failure to justify his private sense of being "a chosen son"'. Jonathan Wordsworth and Stephen Gill, 'The Two-Part Prelude of 1798-99', *JEGP* 72(1973), pp.503-25 (p.510). For the most part I agree with this, but there also exists a feeling of genuine optimism, particularly in the last five lines of the opening paragraph (ll. 17-21), and in the concluding passage (ll. 152-170).

<sup>25</sup>Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life*, Oxford, 1989, p. 162.

MS JJ, however, marks a decisive breakthrough, for it marks Wordsworth's recognition that he must search for the answer to his question in a history of the development of his own mind:

Was it for this & now I speak of things  
That have been & that are no gentle dreams  
Complacent fashioned fondly to adorn  
The time of unrememberable being  
(MS JJ. ll. 37-40)

This is a new definition of the work he is engaged in: it will refer to the things of the past, as 'The Pedlar' and 'Tintern Abbey' had done, but, this time, it will neither be 'gentle' to hear, nor a consoling fiction. Since it was clearly a self-conscious decision to write about himself in his own person rather than yield to the pressure to go ahead with 'The Recluse' which was intended to be informed with some general, objective and public knowledge, it is natural for Wordsworth to insist that his poem is not fiction. Apparently, it is Wordsworth's wish that his poem be faithfully founded on his own real experience. This may be seen as an implicit self-criticism of both the idealizing tendency in 'The Pedlar' and the mood of reminiscence in 'Tintern Abbey'. Accordingly, this new proposal would oblige him to encounter directly the unpleasant or disturbing aspects of his experience that he had preferred to be reticent about in earlier poems. In other words, Wordsworth shows himself determined to accommodate within the framework of Nature's providence what had seemed meaningless, confusing, or painful in his past experience. That is why Wordsworth, in the first apostrophe (ll. 68-79), mentions 'discipline' which is 'sanctifying', 'Both *pain & fear*', and in the second (ll. 80-96) asserts that 'the character/ Of danger & desire' is inscribed on natural objects which are filled 'With meanings of delight of *hope & fear*'. The expansion of the poetic subject is obviously a positive move; it offers evidence that he has recognised the limitation of his past approaches to the problem.

The new approach informs the episodes from which most of the poetic merit of the 'Two-Part Prelude' derives. In these unconnected passages, the presence of Nature

is vividly felt and recognized through the physical perception of its corporeal elements. The success of these passages resides in the impressiveness of the visionary experience itself which seems not to be distorted by Wordsworth's authorial interpretation, nor accommodated within a premeditated framework of Nature's providence.

In MS JJ, there are three main episodes, distinguished by their vivid detailing of the physical sense of Nature revealed through trivial actions of no apparent significance. Wordsworth concentrates on a detailed description of 'I's physical contacts with Nature without trying to endow them with a clearly intelligible meaning. Although these impressive experiences are interpreted in the apostrophes, as in 'The Pedlar', each episode is represented as significant in its own right, so that Wordsworth's after-thought becomes increasingly irrelevant.

The recollection of Wordsworth's early days begins with his memory of bathing from the shore of Derwent when he was just four-years old:

Was it for this that I a four years child  
 Beneath thy scars & in thy silent pools  
 Made one long bathing of a summers day  
 Basked in the sun or plungd into thy stream  
 Alternate all a summers day, or cours'd  
 Over thy sandy plains & dashed the flowers  
 Of Yellow grundsel or when the hill tops  
 The woods & all the distant mountains  
 Were bronzed with a deep radiance stood alone  
 A naked savage in the thunder shower  
 (MS.JJ ll. 41-50)

Wordsworth's language in this passage is quite different from that in equivalent passages in 'The Pedlar' (for example, ll.26-57) where he explains how the pedlar's mind had been constructed in his childhood. There are no abstract terms to suggest a pseudo-scientific explanation of the mechanism of mind, nor any religious vocabulary. Instead, the passage begins with a strictly naturalistic description of the boy's actual movements on the shore of Derwent. 'Basked' and 'plungd' are vital words in

establishing the interaction between the boy and Nature; the boy exposes himself to Nature passively, and also actively throws himself into Nature. There is no premeditated condition for their interaction nor any intermediary between them, but an immediate, instinctive communication. In the same way, the boy continues to act upon Nature by 'coursing' and 'dashing', and Nature responds to him with 'a deep radiance' that 'bronzes' everything, including the boy himself. At this moment, the distinction between the boy and Nature evaporates and the boy himself has become an element in Nature. At the same time, on being 'bronzed', the four year old boy, steps beyond the limits of realism, becoming a symbol of primitive man who keeps his original innocence untainted, like Adam and Eve before the fall. Again, the 'deep radiance' is the decisive factor in the transformation of a normal boy into a mythic type of innocent mankind just as 'A slant and mellow radiance' at the end of 'The Ruined Cottage' transfigures the naive listener into a man of wisdom like the pedlar. But here, 'the radiance' does not prompt an epiphanic recognition. It simply makes possible the impressive metaphor of the 'naked savage' which is solidly supported by the preceding realistic details. The metaphor endows a naturalistic description of a boy's river-bath with a mythical aura so that a simple childhood episode opens a window onto aboriginal human life. So from the very beginning, 'The Prelude' was more than a record of particular, personal experiences. Wordsworth's impulse is to represent himself not as a particular individual, but as an archetypal example of human creativity so that the story of his mental growth functions also as a the microcosm of the whole history of human development.

In 'The Pedlar', there was an attempt to explain how his 'frame of mind' had been formed, but it was a theory of the human mind rather than a full scale historical account of a human life. In 'Tintern Abbey', there was a similar attempt to organize and represent his past life within a single, coherent framework (ll.67-84), but the main concern was to accommodate his own scepticism so that the momentary pleasure of the present moment could be preserved and extended to the future. Wordsworth was more anxious to convince his readers and himself of the happiness to which his life was

tending rather than to offer an account of his past life as such. In the 'Two-Part Prelude', Wordsworth presupposes an ideal state of human existence which in infancy is perfectly in tune with Nature. It was this paradigm under which his life, now an epitome of human history, is organised. Wordsworth chooses to see his own life as a cycle beginning from a state of absolute perfection and ending with the restoration of happiness after long, painful suffering. Obviously, this is the Christian paradigm of human life, except that God is replaced by Nature.<sup>26</sup> It is not surprising that Wordsworth adopted a version of the Christian paradigm of human history. In any case, the argument for the ultimate redemption of mankind from present evil and corruption would demand the presupposition of a period of innocence as the reference for the future recovery, whether Christian or not. More important is the fact that the paradigm focused Wordsworth's attention on the degeneration and deterioration which inevitably accompanied his growth as a human being. If 'The Pedlar' was intended as a history of virtue and moral goodness, most of *The Prelude* was going to be a story of sin and guilt, though arriving eventually at a restoration of innocence. In this sense, it was a radical change of strategy from that of 'The Pedlar' or 'Tintern Abbey' implying that Wordsworth was now prepared to talk much more specifically about 'the impure haunts of vulgar men' ('The Pedlar', l.250) and 'the heavy and weary weight/ Of all this unintelligible world' ('Tintern Abbey', ll. 40-41).

---

<sup>26</sup>M.H. Abrams indicates that what we call 'Romantic philosophy' retained the Christian concepts and Christian idea of the plot of history although God was replaced by nature or the non-self. He regards Wordsworth's *The Prelude* as the typical example of this Romantic philosophy:

Wordsworth's assumption, like that of all writers of theodicies, whether of universal scope or of the private life, is that if life is to be worth living there cannot be a blank unreason or mere contingency at the heart of things; there must be meaning (in the sense of a good and intelligible purpose) in the occurrence of both physical and moral evils. The Christian theodicy of the private life, in the long lineage of Augustine's *Confessions*, transfers the locus of the primary concern with evil from the providential history of mankind to the providential history of the individual self, and justifies the experience of wrongdoing, suffering, and loss as a necessary means toward the greater good of personal redemption', *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, (New York and London, 1971), pp.88-96.

In MS JJ, this idea is still at the stage of conception. From the very start, however, Wordsworth presented the perfect state of human existence embodied in the bathing-episode as something that is not compatible with his own growth. That is why the nest-robbing episode comes next:

... Oh when *I have hung*  
 Above the raven's nest, *have hung alone*  
 By half inch fissures in the slippery rock  
 But ill sustained and almost as it seemed  
 Suspended by the wind which blew amain  
 Against the naked cragg ah then  
 While on the perilous edge *I hung alone*  
 With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind  
 Blow through my ears the sky seemd not a sky  
 Of earth, and with what motion moved the clouds  
 (my italics, MS JJ. ll. 58-67)

The savage's 'standing alone' becomes the boy's 'hanging alone'. If the former is the expression of a stable relationship with Nature, the latter is the indication of its disruption. The description of nature in the first four lines of this episode is as congenial as ever. But immediately after it is revealed that the boy's intention is 'mean' and 'inglorious', Nature's treatment of him gets suddenly tougher. The boy experiences a sudden estrangement from Nature, and finds himself 'on the *perilous* edge'. In spite of Wordsworth's trite interpretation of the episode's significance ('the end/ Was not ignoble', ll.57-58), the nightmarish experience of fear and anxiety is preserved with extraordinary vividness in the form of a concrete sense of physical danger. 'The loud dry wind' is half personified so that it is heard as a 'strange utterance', but Wordsworth does not go as far as to give it an intelligible meaning, remaining faithful to the boy's real experience. The scary aspect of Nature is expressed vividly enough to evoke a supernatural atmosphere('the sky seemd not a sky/ Of earth', ll.66-67), but not so as to breach the principle of realism, 'seemd' rather than 'was'. There is a strong suggestion that the feeling of danger and fear is Nature's punishment for the plundering and that



the 'strange utterance' is her warning, but these suggestions remain implicit. It is this subtle way of presenting Nature's presence, along with the remarkably concrete naturalistic details, that differentiates 'The Two-Part Prelude' from 'The Pedlar'.

If in the raven-nest episode his sense of fear is materialised, the next episode of trap-robbing deepens his sense of dread into a more concrete feeling of guilt. Wordsworth here defines himself rather exaggeratedly as 'a fell destroyer'. If the plunder of the raven's nest was a sin against the order of Nature, the trap-robbing is a crime against human law, for it is a theft of 'another's toil' (Oddly, there is no feeling of guilt about the trapping itself).

...I heard

Low breathings coming after me and sounds  
Of undistinguishable motion steps  
Almost as silent as the turf they trod  
(MS JJ. ll. 114-117)

Literally, the boy's sense of guilt is not directed at Nature but at the people whose spoils he is robbing. So the signs of human presences, the 'breathings' and 'sound of steps' which must in fact be his own, are prompted by his sense of guilt. In this episode, the status of 'Gentle power(s)' (l.104) is rather dubious. By portraying himself as 'a fell destroyer', Wordsworth seems to intend to present himself as an ungrateful traitor to the 'Gentle power(s)'. But line 105('Who give us happiness & call it peace') is disconnected from the rest of the episode.

After giving the three impressive episodes from his childhood with a vague intention to use them as the proofs of natural providence, Wordsworth seems to have been unsure of quite what it was that he had done. He seems to have felt it necessary to redefine the significance of these unusual attempts to recapture and revivify the strong feelings buried in the memories of juvenile years.

...Oh bounteous power

In childhood, in rememberable days  
How often did thy love renew for me

Those naked feelings which when thou wouldst form  
 A living thing thou sendst like a breeze  
 Into its infant being. Soul of things  
 How often did thy love renew for me  
 Those hallowed & pure motions of the sense  
 Which seem in their simplicity to own  
 An intellectual charm: that calm delight  
 Which if I err not surely must belong  
 To those first born affinities which fit  
 Our new existence to existing things  
 And in our dawn of being constitute  
 The bond of union betwixt life & joy.  
 (MS JJ. ll. 129-143)

The insistence now is on the significance of these childhood incidents in his subsequent life. They are preserved in the memory where they prompt feelings which are first of all 'naked', feelings, that is, through which the adult may recover the Eden of childhood. Wordsworth goes on to locate in such episodes 'hallowed & pure motions of the sense'. In the following clause, the trace of fear and guilt is not only suppressed, but also transformed into an apparently contradictory emotion: 'Those hallowed & pure *motions of the sense*/ Which seem in their simplicity to own/ An intellectual charm.' The 'naked' in the first definition becomes 'hallowed & pure', which is in turn described as 'simplicity'. While we follow this series, the 'motions of the sense' become 'An intellectual charm'. And then, 'An intellectual charm' is immediately identified with 'that *calm* delight', which seems the very opposite of fear.

The agent that effects the transformation of fear into calm delight seems to be time, the years that separate the adult man from the frightened boy. But the fragment concludes by offering a rather different explanation:

Nor unsubsevient even to noblest ends  
 Are these primordial feeling(s) how serene  
 How calm those seem amid the swell  
 Of human passion even yet I feel

their tranquillizing power  
(MS JJ. ll. 166-170)

Memory in this passage is still a 'tranquillising power', but it operates to calm 'the swell Of human passion' with which the adult Wordsworth is contending. The boy's fear is transformed into the adult's calm delight, and simultaneously the adult's stormy 'human passion' is calmed by dwelling on memories of childhood. The adult's passions remain unspecified, except through the childhood episodes that the adult chooses to dwell on, and those episodes are dominated by the boy's experience of guilty fear.

## MS. 15

The second stage of the 'Two-Part Prelude' of 1798-99 is found in MS.15 known as the 'Christabel Notebook'. The main changes from MS.JJ are the relocation of the trap-robbing episode ahead of the raven-nest episode and the expansion of the conclusion. One of the results of this reorganization is that the destruction of the initial harmonious relationship between the boy and Nature is more dramatically disclosed by the more obvious act of defiance against the natural order. This implies that Wordsworth came to realize that the guilty feeling displayed in the trap-robbing episode was more relevant to the purpose of the whole poem than he had originally thought: for example, his declaration in the Trap-Robbing episode, 'I was a fell destroyer', is a challenging and bold self-definition compared with those of the previous poems. The terrifying experience of guilt, Wordsworth may have recognized, should be recognized as more important in the shaping of his poetic mind, and deserved a place of more importance. This intention is spelt out in the newly composed lines of the conclusion. He argues that the purpose of recollection was to 'fetch/ Reproaches from my former years, whose power/ May spur me on, in manhood now mature,/ To honourable toil' (*TP-Prelude*, ll.451-53).<sup>27</sup> His search for Nature's rectifying discipline seems to be his dominant preoccupation, and it will go on to serve as an organizing principle in *The Prelude* of 1805. So, for the moment, what was necessary was to substantiate and amplify the central part of the poem which could serve as the palpable evidence of Nature's disciplinary effects upon the boy Wordsworth.

---

<sup>27</sup>All quotations of 'The Two-Part Prelude' are from the Reading Text of *TP-Prelude* based on MSS. U & V (pp.43-67) except the MS JJ reading text of which is separately provided in *TP-Prelude*.

### MS 16 --The Boat-Stealing Episode

The third stage of *The Prelude*, which we find in MS 16, shows that Wordsworth's further revision was made to correspond to this need. What happened in MS 16 was to fit the boat-stealing episode into the main body of the poem that begins with the 'soul of man' phrases (ll.67-80). This stage marks the completion of putting various materials drafted in MS JJ into a coherent structure. The 'soul of man' passage is used as another provisional re-definition of what the poem is about: it offers an explanation of how 'the mind of man is fashioned and built up' (l.67), particularly in the demonstration of 'Severer interventions, ministry/ More palpable' (ll.79-80) of Nature.

The boat-stealing episode is the most substantial embodiment of the darker side of Nature, as well as the most intense dramatization of his feeling of guilt, marking the climax of this series of episodes. What is extraordinary in this episode is the fact that nothing actually happens; there is no obvious guilty purpose like trap-robbing or plundering raven's eggs. The boy's intention is to borrow, not to steal the boat. Nevertheless, he describes his action as 'an act of stealth/ And troubled pleasure' ll.90-91). And the natural objects around the boy are felt as more threatening and more awesome than ever. This effect of terror is created by an extended simile through which the natural objects are represented as human presences. The interactions between the boy and the natural objects are dramatically presented in terms of physical perception. The story begins with a peaceful natural landscape, so peaceful that it acts as an invitation to the boy to violate it. The boy responds to the invitation by 'pushing' and 'striking' the oar while his little boat becomes a living thing: the capitalised 'Boat' is immediately compared with 'a man'. At first, the response from nature seems to be subtle and slight ('the voice / Of mountain-echoes', 'Small circles glittering idly in the moon', ll.91-92, l.94). Quite suddenly, however, 'A rocky steep uprose' and a nightmare begins:

...A rocky steep *uprose*  
Above the cavern of the willow tree,

And now, as suited one who proudly rowed  
 with his best skill, I fixed a steady view  
 Upon the top of that same craggy ridge,  
 The bound of horizon, for behind  
 Was nothing-- but the stars and the grey sky  
 She was an elfin pinnace; twenty times  
 I *dipped* my oars into the silent lake,  
 And, as I *rose* upon the stroke, my Boat  
 Went *heaving* through that rocky steep, till then  
 The bound of the horizon, a huge Cliff,  
 As if with voluntary power instinct,  
*Upreared its head*: I *struck*, and *struck* again,  
 And, *growing* still in stature, the huge cliff  
*Rose up* between me and the stars, and still  
 With measured motion, like a living thing,  
*Strode* after me. With trembling hands I turned,  
 And through the silent water *stole my way*  
 Back to the cavern of the willow-tree.  
 (my italics, ll. 96-116)

All things -- boat, rocky steep, lake...-- seem to gain 'the breath of life' and begin to threaten and terrify the boy. The boy's 'steady view' manages to regain control over the surrounding objects which are temporarily made inactive again. But as the boat becomes 'an elfin pinnace', the boy's imagination is released from the restriction of realism. When he 'dipped' his oars and 'rose', in response, the Boat 'went heaving', and 'a huge Cliff' is said to have 'upreared its head'. While, frightened and scared, the boy 'struck and struck again', it, 'growing still in stature', 'Rose up' and 'strode after' him. The natural objects, 'rocky steep' or 'huge cliff', are represented as the living embodiment of some terrifying principle of Nature, which is described as 'unknown modes of being'. Whatever these 'modes' may be, they seem antithetical to the 'Gentle Powers/ Who give us happiness and call it peace' (ll.35-36). He describes his experience as a 'blank desertion': it is a shocking experience of estrangement from Nature and from his familiar surroundings, and at the same time it is a crucial step towards gaining his adult sense of identity.

### The Drowned Man Episode

When he wrote the 'Two-Part Prelude' as a 'self-defence', thinking that it was no more than a preparation for the philosophical poem, Wordsworth seems not to have had a clear idea of what he was about, which is why he tries to redefine and justify his project at every phase of its growth. After completing the organization of the materials drafted in MS JJ, Wordsworth must have realised that something quite unexpected had emerged as the substance of his poem. What had been launched as an effort to prove that he had been specially cared for by Nature from the very start of his life, thus qualifying him to be the author of his philosophical poem, had turned into a collection of a few vivid descriptions of his early memories, all of which are strongly associated with sin and guilt. The poem could have been completed here: a curious opening which posits the problem to be discussed, the initial stage of perfect harmony, and the three consecutive episodes of terrifying, disturbing, but strangely pleasurable experiences of early days, followed by the author's strong vindication of Nature's providence and the concluding epilogue. But Wordsworth, after recognising the poetic potentiality of terrifying experience as a mind-shaping power, decided to add more memories of the same kind; he added the drowned man episode and the famous sequence of the 'spots of time' between the two apostrophes and the conclusion. As Wordsworth himself obliquely admits in his self-conscious remark that he had to release himself 'from delicate fears/ Of breaking in upon the unity/ Of this my argument' (ll.252-54) because 'we should/ Ill attain our object' (ll.251-52) otherwise, the decision to append another series of recollection to the celebration of Nature's benediction threatened the structural unity of the poem. But the apostrophes could no longer accommodate the powerful emotions released in the preceding episodes. So in the fourth stage of the revision, Wordsworth makes an attempt, first, to introduce more episodes of a similar kind, but of a greater complexity, secondly to re-define and theorise the significance of the seemingly unconnected episodes in terms of the growth of his mind.

In the addition made here, Wordsworth goes back to a precise moment of his past (he even specifies the week) when he was eight years old. Wordsworth then describes his first experience of seeing a dead body.

The landscape suggests a return to the bathing-scene that Wordsworth had described at the outset of the poem. But what is shown here is not the life-giving interaction of nature and man, but the frightening scene of death.

At length the dead man 'mid that beautiful scene  
Of trees, and hills, and water, *bolt upright*  
*Rose* with his ghastly face.  
(my italics, ll. 277-279)

The humanized natural images in the boat-stealing episode are repeated: 'A rocky steep *uprose*/ Above the cavern of the willow tree' (ll.96-97), 'A huge Cliff...Upreared its head' (ll.108-110). By replacing the natural objects by the 'ghastly face' of a drowned man, Wordsworth intensifies a feeling of anxiety into an awareness of terror. The focus of the narrative is on how the image produced by the incident functions in his mind rather than on the incident itself, for no information is given about the dead man, who he was, why he died, and how he came to death. What is underlined instead is the procedure by which the boy comes to confront the dead man's face. The extremely minute details about the geography of the site, the natural scenery of twilight, its stillness disrupted only by a leaping fish, the meticulous description of searching-- all these details are employed not to give us a full report of a man's death, but to increase the dramatic effect of the boy's perception of a death. Unlike in the preceding episodes Wordsworth's role is as an audience rather than the chief participant. Wordsworth is no longer satisfied with a simple reproduction of powerful feelings evoked by an infantile guilt, but is now preoccupied with the problem of how to make use of such strong emotion in a poetically fruitful way. This is no longer a poetry that seeks to record experience, but rather a poetry that looks through experience in quest of the origin of its own power.



## Spots of Time

Wordsworth theorises what he now aims at in the poetic reconstruction of remembered images:

There are in our existence spots of time  
Which with distinct pre-eminence retain  
A fructifying virtue, whence, depressed  
By trivial occupations and the round  
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds  
(Especially the imaginative power)  
Are nourished, and invisibly repaired.  
Such moments chiefly seem to have their date  
In our first childhood....  
(ll. 288-296)

We remember that the narrator of 'The Ruined Cottage' attributed to 'mournful thoughts' 'A power to virtue friendly'. 'A power' refers to some creative energy which can be named 'imagination' if it is employed by a poet like himself, and 'virtue' is not an item of metaphysical value, but rather a quality that reveals itself in benevolent actions within the social world. So in 'The Ruined Cottage', the literary imagination and the social life of real people are represented as inseparable. Although he didn't (couldn't) specify the actual content of the 'mournful thoughts', it was at least certain that these thoughts were generated by human suffering such as that exemplified in Margaret's tale. Whether or not the 'mournful thoughts' are practically effective in curing the suffering, they are solidly based on a real social phenomenon. Accordingly, 'A power to virtue friendly' was located in 'mournful thoughts', in other words, such thoughts prompted some form of constructive response to human suffering. Here we have 'spots of time' and 'A fructifying virtue'. 'A fructifying virtue' is described as deriving from the 'spots of time'. But what really matters are 'the images' created at those moments. And 'the images' are not a direct reflection of reality, but the results of a long process performed in the memory of 'purification' or 'abstraction' in which the material

contents of social, political life originally attached to images are safely removed. Nevertheless, 'the spots of time', the moments as the sources of 'images', somehow, are said to be the origin of 'A fructifying virtue'. 'A fructifying virtue' is a virtue because it 'nourishes' and 'repairs' our minds. It has more to do with poetic creativity than with the morality of everyday-life. Also, the virtue mentioned here must be of very particular kind because it is concerned with healing the impaired faculty of our minds rather than with, say, rectifying the kind of problem that might induce a man to drown himself in a lake. It seems possible that it was the practical difficulty of substantiating 'mournful thoughts', in other words, of establishing a morally sound attitude towards human suffering that prompted Wordsworth to give an account of the narrator's life-history, which again grew into 'The Pedlar'. In 'The Pedlar', the source of the virtue embodied by the pedlar was always a benignant nature. Also, in 'Tintern Abbey', the only antidote to the human corruption of the outer world was the blessed feeling of ecstasy in Nature. But here, what stands against 'trivial occupations and the round/ Of ordinary intercourse' is not to be found in Nature, but in 'spots of time' where some impressive 'images' have their origin not in a blessed feeling of communion with Nature, but in a frightening encounter with a dead man under circumstances in which both the narrator and the human object being described are estranged from Nature. Although the encounter itself is described later on as having in fact been arranged by the invisible providence of Nature, this seems to mark an important development from the strategy of 'The Pedlar' and 'Tintern Abbey'; instead of attributing everything to Nature's providence (although some gesture towards this remains in the apostrophes and the conclusion) Wordsworth pays more attention to the memory of terror and anxiety associated with death. His interest is not so much in the experience itself as in the reflection of the experience in his mind. The later developments of 'The Prelude' show that the spots of time are playing a more and more important role in the progress of the narrative while his praise of the providence of Nature becomes more and more nominal. The non-chronological sequence of those experiences of terror repeatedly

disrupts the chronological narrative of the actual history of Wordsworth's life, providing a breakthrough at every moment of *cul-de-sac*.

So, Wordsworth does not bother with explaining why, despite breaking 'the unity of argument', he had to introduce the drowned man episode, nor what meaning could be drawn from his encounter with the dead man, except by indicating that a certain powerful image was produced. The next 'spots of time' are more detailed illustrations of the dissociation of the experience and the image. By allowing a kind of autonomous life to the linguistic signs now set free from their references, he also manages to release himself, the narrating subject, from the psychological burden of the past experiences, not only those recounted here as image-producing ones, but those unspoken experiences which are, in fact, the original references of all those linguistic signs which deny and displace their attachment to reality. In the drowned-man episode, the boy's response to the dead man's face, though not spoken, is certainly a feeling of terror, which is the natural explanation for why the image of terror has exerted such a strong power in the boy's memory. But in the next episodes, which are offered as the examples of 'the spots of time' by the author himself, the boy's responses to the frightening subjects are more problematically represented. And a reasonable interpretation of the incidents introduced is not even attempted. Instead, what emerges at the end of the episode is just a series of logically unconnected images:

...I remember well  
 ('Tis of an early season that I speak,  
 The twilight of rememberable life)  
 While I was yet an urchin, one who scarce  
 Could hold a bridle, with ambitious hopes  
 I mounted, and we rode towards the hills;  
 We were a pair of horseman: 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 man, the murderer of his wife, was hung  
 In irons: mouldered was the gibbet mast,  
 The bones were gone, the iron and the wood,  
 Only a long green ridge of turf remained  
 Whose shape was like a grave. I left the spot,  
 And, reascending the bare slope, I 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.  
 (ll.296-327)

At first sight, this seems to be an episode which was randomly selected from the stock of Wordsworth's memories of childhood; it may be trivial in content from the viewpoint of an adult, but enormously impressive in a child's eyes. So, it gives the impression that it would be pointless to draw a coherent plot from the series of incidents narrated; all that happens in the narration seems contingent, with no necessary causes, no logical connections between events, and no significant consequences. Especially at line 313, between 'a grave' and 'I left the spot', there is a jump; no connection between the two scenes is stated. After this point, all that matters are those mysterious images left on his mind. Wordsworth himself describes these images as 'An ordinary sight' as if he warns the reader against trying to work out an intelligible meaning for them, and insists that one's attention be fixed on the images

themselves, and on 'the visionary dreariness' investing them which is in any case incommunicable.

Wordsworth's memory of the guide is particularly intimate and warm-hearted; he calls him by his first name 'James' and describes him as 'my encourager and guide'. If we remember that Wordsworth had just decided that his poem should be addressed to Coleridge (at the previous revision), and that he was at the moment of writing this passage separated from Coleridge, badly missing him, sending his poems to Coleridge for his comment, imploring him for a workable idea for 'The Recluse', we might suspect that it was Coleridge who motivated Wordsworth to recollect 'James' in these terms. Coleridge had indeed been Wordsworth's 'encourager and guide' in every sense for the past five years: Wordsworth's sense of crisis which forced him to write this poem as 'self-defence' had its origin in his separation from his literary mentor. So, it was literally applicable to the earlier Goslar days that 'We had not travelled long ere some mischance/ Disjoined me from my *comrade*'. If this recollection could be said to reflect in a figurative way Wordsworth's state of mind in his Goslar days, it is interesting that the first thing he confronts is the gibbet-mast: the symbol of human guilt which had presided over the conclusion of 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain'. The reference to 'the murderer of his wife' suggests that Wordsworth's memory is of a more recent date than he pretends. In a letter dated 27 February 1799, Wordsworth wrote to Coleridge, 'I also took courage to devote two days (O Wonder) to the Salisbury Plain. I am resolved to discard Robert Walford and invent a new story for the woman' (*EY*, p.256). The result of this revision, 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain', is to be found in a German notebook DC MS.16(18 A) where the third stage of the 'Two-Part Prelude' of 1798-99 stands.<sup>28</sup> As Moorman indicates (pp.432-33), the name 'Robert Walford' does not appear in any version of the 'Salisbury Plain poems'.<sup>29</sup> Instead, the name 'Robert' found its way into a poem in the Spenserian stanza called 'Somersetshire

---

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Parrish, 'Introduction', p.17. Reed I. pp. 321-328.

<sup>29</sup> The editor of *EY* identifies as 'Robert Walford' an old soldier who turns out to be the male traveller's father-in-law. But still he remained unnamed.

Tragedy' which exists only as a fragment in the same notebook. The other name 'Walford' suggests the probable source of the gibbet-mast story; in Alfoxden days, Thomas Poole told Wordsworth and Coleridge about 'the tragic fate of a wretched charcoal burner, a man well known to Poole in his boyish days, who, having met with disappointment in love, drifted into evil courses, and was forced into a disastrous marriage with a poor degraded creature whom he almost loathed, and whom in the end he murdered'.<sup>30</sup> His name was John Walford, and he was executed at the place where the crime had been committed, 'amid the beautiful scenery of the Quantock Hills'.<sup>31</sup> The mood and the quality of the incident above are very akin to those of 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain'. It is striking to find in a German Notebook evidence which shows that while he was composing 'The Prelude' Wordsworth was still tinkering with the poem of social protest that apparently belonged to the past. The story of John Walford reached Wordsworth when he was strolling around Alfoxden with Thomas Poole and Coleridge. Wordsworth relocates it in his own early childhood, offering the first strong evidence that Wordsworth's childhood memories are contaminated by the intrusion of much more recent events. The echo of the 'Salisbury Plain poems' makes it evident that Wordsworth's point in introducing this tragic story is no longer to confront social injustice, but to dwell upon the subsequent effect of a single image on his mind. With the phrase 'I left the spot', he diverts our attention abruptly from the incident itself to the images it impressed on his memory. On leaving the spot, Wordsworth next encounters 'A naked pool' that might carry a faint memory of the deserted well beside Margaret's ruined cottage from which the Pedlar started his tale. In 'The Ruined Cottage', readers were requested to notice the trace of human suffering inseparably associated with the well, though invisible. It was the symbol of the destruction the war has inflicted on people's life. Here, the pool is less related to human life than a well, but the modifier 'naked', as was the case with 'naked Savage'(l.26), 'naked crag'(l.62))

---

<sup>30</sup>Henry Sandford, *Thomas Poole and His Friends*, vol II, London, 1888, p. 235.

<sup>31</sup>Sandford, p.235.

by emphasising natural primitiveness, seems to imply Wordsworth's desire to strip the pool of any social associations. 'The beacon on the summit' could perhaps be connected to the chastising image of Nature which appeared in the boat-stealing episode, 'A rocky steep' or 'the huge cliff'. Lastly, 'A girl who bore a pitcher on her head' might be seen as a displaced image of Margaret who used to offer water to travellers, 'the cool refreshment drawn/ From that forsaken well' (MS B, ll. 154-55). Wordsworth, we may suspect, has taken these images from earlier poems, but has removed them from their narrative context, abstracted and refined them so completely that no definite textual evidence remains to link them with their origin.

The other episode Wordsworth identifies as one of the 'spots of time' is a memory associated with his father's death. Again the point is not the consequences of his father's death in his own life, serious though they were, nor the sorrow occasioned by the sudden bereavement. Again the focus is on Wordsworth's strange sense of guilt and a grateful acknowledgement of the invisible agency of Nature. What stands out in this episode, however, are a couple of impressive images which are themselves irrelevant to his father's death. The argument is quite simple: at Christmas time, Wordsworth was waiting for the horses which were due to carry himself and his brothers home. He was so homesick that he was anxiously looking forward to the appearance of the horses. But before he had been home ten days, his father died. The child Wordsworth blames himself for the father's death, thinking it a divine punishment for his having wanted to go home too passionately.

But this synopsis is no more than one of many possible guesses based on expressions like 'A chastisement', 'corrected my desire'. In spite of a very detailed description of his act of waiting, there is no clear explanation of the connection of the two incidents, his waiting and his father's death. There is only a strong suggestion that there must be some unspoken cause for his guilt, because it is hard to accept that even a child might think 'anxiety' to go home a sin. The process of association that comes in time to link his father's death with the dreary scene in which he was waiting for the

horses is easily understandable. But nothing seems to happen to justify the boy's intense feeling of guilt and of proper chastisement:

...'twas a day  
 Stormy, and rough, and wild, and on the grass  
 I sate, half-sheltered by a naked wall;  
 Upon my right hand was a single sheep,  
 A whistling hawthorn on my left, and there,  
 Those two companions are at my side, I watched  
 With eyes intensely straining as the mist  
 Gave intermitting prospects of the wood  
 And plain beneath.  
 (ll.341-349)

Although there is very little action in this first incident apart from 'watching', although there is nothing supernatural in the picture, the whole scene is presented in a strongly evocative way as if his 'intense watching' had become a strangely active condition. The boy watching, and the objects around him, the wall, the hawthorn, the sheep, are all charged with the tension of the event that they portend, the death of the father. As he gazes into the mist, it is as if the boy is already, and in anticipation, probing the dark mystery of death and of mortality. At the very climax of the emotional tension, the mood suddenly changes, and the father's death, and its effect on the lives of the children is reported quite matter-of-factly. The death is made to seem insignificant in comparison with the scene on the hillside, and yet the emotional impact of that landscape is explicable only in terms of the death that it heralds.

Three features have emerged in this study of 'The Two-Part Prelude' that warrant consideration as new in Wordsworth's poetry. First, there is a concentration on incidents in which Wordsworth describes himself as experiencing a sudden sense of estrangement from Nature, an experience which is almost always associated with feelings of fear and of guilt. The series of incidents of this kind culminates in the description of the death of his own father. Secondly, there is a strong tendency for the image to achieve independence of its narrative frame, so that it is presented to the



reader 'naked'. It is a process made explicit in the comment on the episode of the drowning man:

...I might advert  
 To . . . tragic facts  
 Of rural history that impressed my mind  
 With images, to which in following years  
 Far other feelings were attached, with forms  
 That yet exist with independent life  
 And, like their archetypes, know no decay.  
 (ll. 279-287)

The 'tragic facts Of rural history', facts such as those that had prompted the 'Salisbury Plain poems' or the tale of Margaret, are dissolved into images, and the feelings that they once aroused are replaced by 'Far other feelings', until in the end they win free of all social circumstances and achieve an 'independent life'. Thirdly, as is apparent in Wordsworth's use of the story of Robert Walford, Wordsworth feels free to displace into his boyhood memories of much more recent origin, memories that derive, in fact, from the previous five years.

All three characteristics, taken together, suggest that 'The Prelude' has its origin, as Wordsworth confesses in his letter to Coleridge, in a complex need to present a self-defence. It is a complex need because it requires Wordsworth at once to evade and to confront the facts of his own recent history. He evades his own history by seeking the origin of his own imaginative power not in narrative but in images, images which have freed themselves from time and history and have achieved an 'independent life', and he evades history, too, by looking back through his own immediate past to his boyhood, to a time when his experience could be remembered as safely apolitical. But he confronts his own history by allowing his memories of boyhood experience to be permeated by emotions that, we may suspect, were attached to his memory of the much more recent past, in particular, emotions of guilt and fear. It was, perhaps, too complex a guilt to be directly analysed, a guilt that was equally the product of the radical principles that he had espoused and of his timidity in allowing

those principles public expression. It was a fear that he had left himself vulnerable to political persecution, and a fear that he had done too little in comparison with other of his radical associates. The treatment of guilt climaxes oddly in his account of his father's death, oddly because nothing in that account seems to justify the gravity with which Wordsworth insists on his guiltiness, his chastisement, and his repentance. It seems strikingly inappropriate that eagerness to return home for the Christmas holidays should be represented as an emotion that implicates the young boy in the sin of parricide. It makes more sense, perhaps, if we associate the guilt not only with the young boy, but with the young man, who had in church secretly prayed for the defeat of his own country's armies, and had inwardly assented to the killing of a French King, the father of his nation. Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff, had prayed:

Merciful God! strike speedily, we beseech Thee, with deep contrition and sincere remorse, the obdurate hearts of the relentless perpetrators and projectors of these horrid deeds, lest they should suddenly sink into eternal and extreme perdition, loaded with an unutterable weight of unrepented and, except through the blood of Him whose religion they reject, inexpressible sin (Grosart I, p.25)

Wordsworth had calmly replied, 'I am sorry that you attach so much importance to the sufferings of the late royal martyr' (*Prose* I, p.32), and had taken his own stand on what must now have seemed to him a chilling principle: 'Political virtues are developed at the expence of moral ones' (*Prose* I, p.34). But in his account of his father's death, Wordsworth substitutes the word 'God' for the word 'Nature', the only occasion on which he does so in the whole poem, and, as the Bishop had prayed, God strikes him 'with deep contrition and sincere remorse'. In later life, Wordsworth tells us, he often 'repairs' to the images associated with his father's death, but it may well be that those images are associated not simply with a sad episode in his boyhood but the complex sadness of much of his experience in the previous five years.

### The final stage of Part I, MS U & V

Part one reaches its climax with the 'spots of time' episodes. Up to this point, in spite of its lack of overall plan, the theme of Part I has been fairly coherent; how the initial state of perfect harmony between himself and Nature, illustrated by the river-bathing episode, was eroded, and how those experiences of estrangement from Nature could also be understood as the expression of Nature's impenetrable providence, for they assist the growth of his mind. At the final stage of the revision, the result of which is MS U & V, Wordsworth decided to introduce a quite different sort of experience to 'The Prelude'. The newly introduced episodes - the skating scene and the card playing scene - are remarkable for their normality: pleasure and delight replace guilt and fear as the dominant emotions, and Wordsworth describes himself enjoying the company of other children. These episodes are distinguished, too, from the ecstatic spiritual joy which had been so impressively grasped in 'The Pedlar' and 'Tintern Abbey'; they are like common experiences of everyday life, unmarked by any particularly dramatic or exciting moments. In comparison with the earlier memories, his mood seems light and the memory of childhood becomes more openly and more comfortably the figurative representation of something in Wordsworth's mind.

Prominent in the skating scene are various kinds of noises. Following 'the resounding horn' and 'The pack loud bellowing':

not a *voice* was idle: with the *din*,  
 Meanwhile, the precipices *rang aloud*,  
 The leafless trees and every icy *crag*  
*Tinkled* like iron, while the distant hills  
 Into the *tumult* sent an *alien sound*  
 Of melancholy not unnoticed while the stars,  
 Eastward, were sparkling clear, and in the west  
 The orange sky of evening died away.  
 (ll.162-169, my italics)

The discordant sounds originate with the group of boys. Playing with the other boys represents an involvement with the social community. The noises that the boys make mingle to produce a 'tumult', but if the word suggests an angry mob rather than sportive boys the text does nothing to fill out the suggestion. Just as the troubled mind was pacified by 'A slant and mellow radiance' at the end of 'The Ruined Cottage', so 'an alien sound/ Of melancholy' is sent 'Into the tumult' subduing the disturbance and recovering the harmony. Hence the beautiful images of the sparkling stars and the orange sky of a dying evening. And not surprisingly, Wordsworth separates himself from the other boys:

Not seldom from the *uproar* I retired  
 Into a silent bay, or sportively  
 Glanced sideways leaving the *tumultuous* throng  
 To cut across the shadow of a star  
 That gleamed upon the ice:....  
 (ll. 170-174, my italics)

The figure of sounds continues. Wordsworth is shown to be escaping from the world of disturbing noises into that of peaceful silence; this symbolic move from human discordance('the uproar') to the silent harmony of nature('a silent bay') is implicitly justified by the continuing figure of noise, 'the uproar' and 'the tumultuous throng'. Here, the self-created myth of 'a chosen son' revives, and the rest of the story shows us two things; one is Wordsworth's separation from the other boys (the passage begins with 'we', but after three lines the focus is decisively shifted from 'we' to 'I', making the subsequent experience exclusively Wordsworth's own), and the other is that Wordsworth, unlike the other boys, was in perfect tune with Nature. While the other boys are rushing around, making an 'uproar', Wordsworth stops short and feels as if the surrounding landscape continues to move at its own will. This simple hallucination is deliberately strengthened and the feeling of dizziness is generalised into a perception of the earth's movement. The recovery from the dizziness is cleverly identified with the restablilzing of the relationship between Nature and Wordsworth

himself. The story ends with a moment of absolute silence to which Wordsworth tunes himself, witnessing how the disturbed nature gradually subsides and finally becomes as 'tranquil as a summer sea' (l.185). So in a seemingly simple recollection of skating, the conventional roles of three main agents (Society, narrating subject I, and Nature) work together to act out a little allegory: Society described as a chaos which disrupts and provokes Nature (the boys and the noises they make), Nature which responds angrily to human provocation, but eventually subdues it, and the narrating subject who shifts his position from society to nature, being a witness to Nature's generous power to forgive and accommodate human evil.

In this episode, the face of Nature regains its usual beneficial aspect which we recognize from 'The Pedlar' and 'Tintern Abbey'. But here, the procedure in which the human conflicts are alleviated and eventually resolved by Nature is presented in a kind of extended metaphor of noise. Although Wordsworth here is describing what had really happened, the narrated story itself serves more as a metaphorical vehicle to embody Wordsworth's sense of himself as a chosen son of Nature.

Wordsworth's figurative intention becomes even clearer in the card-playing episode. The scene of a card game is described in a mock-heroic tone employing war terminology, the effect is heavily humorous, until the military metaphors generate a simile that escapes from the mock-heroic tone; 'not as in the world / Discarded and ungratefully thrown by / Even for the very service they had wrought' (ll.216-18). The card-playing episode, on the whole, is characterised by homely comfort and domestic pleasure as in the phrase 'Our home amusements by the warm peat fire' (l.207). And the mock heroic tone is possible only when the narrating subject is appropriately detached from the narrated situation. But the reference to discharged soldiers seems too indignant ('Discarded', 'ungratefully thrown by', l.216) to fit with a warm and comfortable mood of home amusement and to be an adequate figure in a mock-heroic narration, which suggests that Wordsworth's seemingly carefree recollection of childhood fun is also tinged by his knowledge of later and more public experiences.

The other element which deviates from Wordsworth's apparent intention in this episode--the memory of fun and pleasure-- is its conclusion:

...Meanwhile abroad  
 The heavy rain was falling, or the frost  
 Raged bitterly with keen and silent tooth,  
 And interrupting the impassioned game  
 Oft from the neighbouring lake the splitting ice  
 While it sank down towards the water sent  
 Among the meadows and the hills its long  
 And frequent yellings, imitative some  
 Of wolves that howling along the Bothnic main.  
 (ll. 225-233)

Wordsworth's childhood world of fun and pleasure in which even the bloodiest battle is harmless is deliberately differentiated from a world where soldiers are used and then thrown aside. But it seems to be differentiated, too, from the surrounding natural world; not only from the sound of the frost which is described in a frightful image of violence('Raged bitterly with keen and silent tooth'), but also from the sound of 'the splitting ice', the 'yelling' of which is associated with the howling of wolves, and seems to threaten the world of fun and play.

A more obvious exposure of Wordsworth's unspoken political concern occurs in the passage lying between the card playing episode and the spots of time. He first represents himself as an angler, his 'rod and line' the 'True symbol of the foolishness of hope/ Which with its strong enchantment led me on' ll.237-38), Wordsworth then describes the movement of a kite:

The kite, in sultry calms from some high hill  
 Sent up, ascending thence till it was lost  
 Among the fleecy clouds, in gusty days  
 Launched from the lower grounds, and suddenly  
 Dash'd headlong-- and rejected by the storm.  
 (ll.242-246)

It is hard not to understand the boy carrying symbols of 'the foolishness of hope', and the kite flying high among the clouds until the storm strikes and it is dashed to earth as an allegory of Wordsworth's whole political career. But if so, it is a comfortable, even a playful allegory, quite free of the intense and mysterious guilt that marked the earlier episodes.

Wordsworth wanted to show that his mind was nurtured both 'by the impressive agency of fear' and 'by pleasure and repeated happiness' (l.433, l.434). The incorporation of these episodes seems to reflect his desire to counterbalance the episodes of fear and anxiety by presenting the memory of delight and joy in an equally impressive way. Although his desire is far from realised, it seems to have reminded him of what he had originally had in mind when he had started the autobiographical writing; to give an account of how he came to be qualified as the legitimate author of a philosophical poem. So the episodes of childhood fun, unsuccessful in themselves, serve as the occasion in which the nearly forgotten materials, hardly used in 'The Pedlar' and 'Tintern Abbey' are reintroduced into the main stream of the autobiographical project which is now 'The Prelude'. So, Part II of 'Two-Part Prelude' is the result of his efforts to reorientate the whole poem in line with the original intention by the elaboration of these last episodes and the reintegration of the materials in which his euphoric interactions with Nature were said to shape his mind.

## Part II

Part II of 'Two-Part Prelude' is characterised by its uneven, patchiness; the beginning seems to be a simple continuation of reminiscences of pleasurable experiences like the card-playing and skating episodes of part I. We have boat racing, a visit to Furness Abbey, a visit to an old hall near Coniston Water, a description of an Inn on the shore of Windermere. They are quite flat descriptions of things past marked by nostalgia. Lines 161-74, and 215-36, seem to recapture the experiences of 'Tintern Abbey'. But a more decisive change comes in line 237, where Wordsworth declares his new subject, 'How nature, intervenient till this time/ And secondary, now at length was sought/ For her own sake.' From this point, the narrative tone suddenly becomes contemplative and philosophical. A fresh attempt is made to explore the origin of creative sensibility in the infantile interaction with its mother. Along with self-conscious remarks on the difficulty of the task which he is now carrying out, he gives an account of how he was privileged by Nature to preserve his first creative sensibility, making use of passages from 'The Pedlar' in a new context.

At the end of Part I, Wordsworth redefined his poetic intention; to 'fetch/ Reproaches from my former years, whose power/ May spur me on, in manhood now mature,/ To honourable toil' (ll.451-53). The 'Reproaches' are made not in the form of a logical exposition, but through a series of impressive moments when a kind of epiphanic recognition is achieved, which is exactly what differentiates 'Two-Part Prelude' from 'The Pedlar'. Also, Nature which 'reproaches' Wordsworth is disciplinary rather than simply caring, which makes 'Two-Part Prelude' different, too, from 'Tintern Abbey'. These unique aspects of 'The Prelude' Part I produce impressive poetry, but do not lead to a clearer answer as to how such poetry contributes to the making of a great philosophical poem. This summary seems to remind Wordsworth why the autobiography was called for in the first place. So, Part II seems to be the result of Wordsworth's fresh determination to make the autobiography a part of 'The Recluse'.



As a result, the two unique aspects of Part I--the epiphanic moments, and the representation of nature as disciplinary-- disappear from Part II.

Part II consists of three parts; one which continues the description of boyhood experiences in much the same manner as the card-playing and the skating episodes, a second which records the blessed moments when Wordsworth experiences a kind of holy communion with Nature as in 'Tintern Abbey', and finally a section in which Wordsworth tries to explain how Nature's beneficial influence has qualified him to be the author of 'The Recluse'.

The nostalgic recollections of boyhood amusements however are not identical with those of part I. For example, the boat-racing episode:

...In such a race,  
 So ended, disappointment could be none,  
 Uneasiness, or pain, or jealousy;  
 We rested in the shade all pleased alike,  
 Conquered and conqueror. Thus our selfishness  
 Was mellowed down, and thus the pride of strength  
 And the vain-glory of superior skill  
 Were interfused with objects which subdued  
 And tempered them, and gradually produced  
 A quiet independence of the heart.  
 And to my Friend who knows me I may add,  
 Unapprehensive of reproof, that hence  
 Ensued a diffidence and modesty,  
 And I was taught to feel, perhaps too much,  
 The self-sufficing power of solitude.  
 (ll. 63-77)

The distinction between the present adult world and the past world of childhood becomes more obvious. It is also clear that the point of the recollection is to illustrate the moral value of the children's play, as a way of learning natural virtue. In previous poems, the moral or educational value of certain memorable experiences was also underlined. The education was usually carried out through the particular

experience itself which brought about an epiphanic recognition of something that was indescribable at the moment, but would emerge as somehow invaluable in the future development of his mind. Here, the virtue to be learned is clearly defined and logically explained; the competition in his boyhood brought about neither 'disappointment' nor 'pride of strength', and eventually produced 'A quiet independence of the heart'. What matters here is not the narrated experience itself, but what it brought about in his mind, which is, as Wordsworth reminds us, the theme of his poem. In fact, the moral import of the episode is less coherent than Wordsworth suggests. He claims that such sports instilled in the boys a kind of public or political virtue allowing all members of the community to coexist democratically without harming each other. The personal virtue of 'independence of the heart' is not celebrated for its own sake, but as a social virtue represented in each member of society. But what Wordsworth personally learned from this is not an item of communal wisdom, but 'The self-sufficing power of solitude', which seems a quality irrelevant to the exercise of social virtue. If he lives in solitude, there would no competition, no disappointment, and no need for virtues such as 'diffidence, modesty' in the first place. Wordsworth still finds it difficult to establish a persuasive connection between his natural education and even the most anodyne of political principles.

A couple of rather relaxed recollections of his boyhood activities lead to a celebration of Nature of the same kind as that offered in 'Tintern Abbey':

...already I began  
 To love the sun, a Boy I loved the sun  
*Not, as I since have loved him, as a pledge*  
*And surety of my earthy life, a light*  
 Which while I view I feel I am alive,  
 But for this cause, that I had seen him lay  
 His beauty on the morning hills, had seen  
 The western mountain touch his setting orb  
*In many a thoughtless hour, when from excess*  
*Of happiness my blood appeared to flow*  
*With its own pleasure and I breathed with joy.*

And from like feelings, humble though intense,  
 To patriotic and domestic love  
 Analogous, the moon to me was dear,  
 For *I would dream away my purposes*  
 Standing to look upon her while she hung  
 Midway between the hills as if she knew  
 No other region but belonged to thee,  
 Yea, appertained by a peculiar right  
 To thee and thy grey huts, my native vale.  
 (ll. 217-236)(my italics)

But, whereas in 'Tintern Abbey', Nature is presented as a refuge and a consolation for sufferings in human society, in this passage Wordsworth makes the relation between his feelings for Nature and his responses to the social world so opaque as to be incomprehensible. We are told only that his feelings for the moon were 'Analogous' 'To patriotic and domestic love', but the basis of the analogy seems to rest on nothing more than the claim that both kinds of love are disinterested.

The reminiscence ends at line 236, and Wordsworth dismisses the earlier part as an account of the 'incidental charms' of 'rural objects' in which nature was only 'intervenient' and 'secondary'. From now on, the topic of the narration, Wordsworth declares, will be 'How nature...now at length was sought/ For her own sake' (ll.240-42) What follows, however, is not another record of his seeking Nature as he claims; the narration becomes more abstract and philosophical. Wordsworth seems more concerned with the meaning of his whole autobiographical project rather than with his natural experiences. Behind this sudden change is the presence of Coleridge who had been continuously urging Wordsworth to proceed with the project for a philosophical poem. According to the 'Prospectus to "The Recluse"', 'the main region' of 'The Recluse' will be 'the Mind of Man', and its argument would be 'How exquisitely the individual Mind/ ...to the external World/ Is fitted--and how exquisitely, too--...The external World is fitted to the Mind.' This, however, is not exactly identical with the objective pursued in 'The Pedlar', the only material he had by then managed to produce as a part of 'The Recluse'. Its original aim was to show that the pedlar was specially

favoured and educated by Nature to be equipped with a natural wisdom which would enable him to narrate the tragic story of Margaret without losing his optimism. But 'The Pedlar' pursues in addition another theme, to present the pedlar's life story as an illustration of the growth of a poetic mind. The two themes continue to co-exist uneasily in the 'Two-Part Prelude'.

This confusion is precisely reflected in the later part of Part II; on the one hand, Wordsworth is self-consciously complaining about the difficulty of his task (ll. 242-249, 262-267, 317-320, 395-396), on the other, he tries again to explain through the infant Babe episode 'how exquisitely the individual mind is fitted to the external world' and vice versa. Furthermore, he wanted to make his poem a study of the origin of the poetic mind whose creativity is continuously maintained through all the vicissitudes of adult life ('Such verily is the first/ Poetic spirit of our human life,/ By uniform control of after years/ In most abated and suppressed, in some/ Through every change of growth or of decay/ Preeminent till death.' ll.305-309). But this optimistic development of the poetic argument turns out to be fragile because his confidence is disrupted by a sudden skepticism ('How shall I trace the history, where seek/ the origin of what I then have felt?' ll.395-96). After admitting that his efforts to present himself in the way that would suit the purpose of 'The Recluse' were by and large fruitless, Wordsworth becomes more desperate and makes his case more directly; 'But let this at least/ Be not forgotten, that I still retained/ My first creative sensibility,/ That by the regular action of the world/ My soul was unsubdued' (ll.407-411). Furthermore, he incorporates a vital passage from 'The Pedlar' by the simple expedient of replacing 'he' with 'I'; 'I saw one life and felt that it was joy'(l.460). But again he comes close to admitting that his claim is a wish rather than a reality by making another revision of his argument into an even more modest claim:

If this be error, and another faith  
Find easier access to the pious mind,  
Yet were I grossly destitute of all  
Those human sentiments which make this earth

So dear...

If, in my youth, I have been pure in heart,  
 If, mingling with the world, I am content  
 With my own modest pleasures, and have lived  
 With God and Nature communing, removed  
 From little enmities and low desires,  
 The gift is yours:  
 (ll. 465-478)

All assertions which have been made or taken for granted so far become somewhat provisional by being placed in 'If' clauses. Neither 'this' nor 'another faith' achieve any clear content. Insofar as the project for 'The Recluse' demanded a coherent, philosophical elucidation of this faith, the lines amount to a confession that thus far the real task has not yet been begun. The poem ends not with the statement of a faith but with an impassioned statement that such a faith is necessary, and it ends with the poem's first and only explicit confrontation with those facts that at once make such a faith necessary and impossible:

...If in these times of fear  
 This melancholy waste of hopes o'erthrown,  
 If, 'mid indifference and apathy  
 And wicked exultation, when good men  
 On every side fall off we know not how  
 To selfishness disguised in gentle names  
 Of peace, and quiet, and domestic love,  
 Yet mingled, not unwillingly, with sneers  
 On visionary minds, if in this time  
 Of dereliction and dismay I yet  
 Despair not of our nature, but retain  
 A more than Roman confidence, a faith  
 That fails not, in all sorrow my support,  
 The blessing of my life, the gift is yours,  
 Ye Mountains! thine, O Nature! thou hast fed  
 My lofty speculations, and in thee  
 For this uneasy heart of ours I find  
 A never-failing principle of joy

And purest passion.  
(ll.478-496)

Here at last Wordsworth addresses himself to the reality of his life in England over the past five years, during 'times of fear', times of 'wicked exultation', times of 'dereliction' and 'dismay', times that have witnessed the 'melancholy waste of hopes o'erthrown'. Wordsworth claims to have preserved throughout these years a 'more than Roman confidence', but it is apparent from the passage that he has lost all ideological certainty. He has seen how 'good men / On every side fall off', and the phrase reveals that he no longer knows what side he is on. He knows only the truth of his own 'uneasy heart' and his faith is that in the mountains, in Nature, there is a principle that can cure his uneasiness. It is a precarious faith, and it demanded to be consolidated through another major extension of his autobiographical project.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

## 1. Wordsworth's Texts

*The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, edited by Ernest De Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1940-49).

The Cornell Wordsworth Series: General Editor Stephen Parrish

*The Salisbury Plain Poems*, edited by Stephen Gill (Ithaca, 1975).

*The Prelude, 1798-99*, edited by Stephen Parrish (Ithaca, 1977).

*The Fourteen-Book Prelude*, edited by W.J.B. Owen (Ithaca, 1985).

*The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, 2 vols, edited by Mark L. Reed (Ithaca, 1991).

*The Ruined Cottage and The Pedlar*, edited by James Butler (Ithaca, 1979).

*An Evening Walk*, edited by James Averill (Ithaca, 1984).

*Descriptive Sketches*, edited by Eric Birdsall (Ithaca, 1984).

*William Wordsworth: The Poems*, edited by John O. Hayden, 2 vols. (Harmondsworth, 1977).

*Lyrical Ballads: The Text of the 1798 Edition with the Additional 1800 Poems and the Prefaces*, edited by R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (London, 1963).

*William Wordsworth: The Prelude, a Parallel Text*, edited by J.C. Maxwell (Harmondsworth, 1971).

*William Wordsworth: The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850, Authoritative Texts, Context and Reception, Recent Critical Essays*, A Norton Critical Edition, edited by Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York and London, 1979).

*William Wordsworth: The Pedlar, Tintern Abbey, The Two-Part Prelude*, edited by Jonathan Wordsworth (Cambridge, 1985)

*The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, edited by Alexander B. Grosart, 3 vols. (London, 1876).

*The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, edited by W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols (Oxford, 1974).

*Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Early Years, 1787-1805*, edited by E. de Selincourt, revised by Chester L. Shaver (Oxford, 1967); *The Middle Years, 1806-11*, revised by Mary Moorman (Oxford, 1969); *The Middle Years, 1812-1820*, revised by Mary Moorman and Alan G. Hill (Oxford, 1970); *The Later Years, 1821-53*, revised by Alan G. Hill, 4 vols (Oxford, 1978-88).

*The Love Letters of William and Mary Wordsworth*, edited by Beth Darlington (Ithaca, 1981).

## 2. Other Materials

Abrams, M.H., 'On Political Readings of "Lyrical Ballads"', in *Romantic Revolutions: Criticism and Theory*, edited by K. Johnston and others (Bloomington, 1990).

----- *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York and London, 1971).

----- 'Introduction: Two Roads to Wordsworth', in *Wordsworth: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by M.H. Abrams (London, 1972), pp.381-412.

Adams, M. Ray, *Studies in the Literary Backgrounds of English Radicalism with special Reference to the French Revolution* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1947).

Aers, David, 'Wordsworth's Model in *The Prelude*', in *Romanticism and Ideology: Studies in English Writing 1765-1830*, edited by David Aers, Jonathan Cook, David Punter (London, 1981), pp.64-81.

Andrews, Malcolm, *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain 1760-1800* (Aldershot, 1989).

Aspinall, A., and Smith, E. Anthony, ed., *English Historical Documents: 1783-1832* (London, 1959).

Aubin, Robert Arnold, *Topographical Poetry in XVIII-century England* (New York, 1936).

Averill, James H., *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Human Suffering* (Ithaca and London, 1980).

Bamfield, Veronica, *On the Strength: The story of the British Army Wife* (London, 1974).

Barbauld, Anna Laetitia, 'Sins of Government, Sins of the Nation; or A Discourse for the Fast, appointed on April 19, 1793', in *The Works of Anna Laetitia Barbauld with a Memoir*, edited by Lucy Aikin, 2 vols (London, 1825), vol II, pp. 381-412.



- Barbier, Carl Paul, *William Gilpin: His Drawings, Teaching, and Theory of the Picturesque* (Oxford, 1963).
- Barrell, John, *Poetry, Language and Politics* (Manchester, 1988).
- *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge, 1972).
- , *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The rural poor in English painting 1730-1840* (Cambridge, 1980).
- Bateson, F.W., *Wordsworth: A Re-interpretation* (London, 1954).
- Beatty, Arthur, *William Wordsworth; His Doctrine and Art in Their Historical Relations* (Madison, 1922).
- 'Joseph Fawcett: The Art of War: Its Relation to the earlier Development of William Wordsworth,' *University of Wisconsin Studies in Language and Literature*, no.2 (September 1918), pp.224-69.
- Beer, John, *Wordsworth and the human heart* (London, 1978).
- 'The "revolutionary youth" of Wordsworth and Coleridge: another view,' *Critical Quarterly*, 19, no.2 (1977), pp.79-87.
- Beik, Paul H., ed., *The French Revolution* (New York, 1970).
- Bennett, Betty T., *British War Poetry in the Age of Romanticism: 1793-1815* (New York, 1976).
- Bermingham, Ann, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860* (London, 1987).
- Birdsall, Eric, 'Nature and Society in *Descriptive Sketches*,' *Modern Philology* 84(August 1986), pp.39-52.
- Black, E.C., *The Association: British Extraparliamentary Political Organization, 1769-1793* (Cambridge, MA, 1963).
- Bloom, Harold, *The Visionary Company* (Ithaca, 1971).
- Booth, Alan, 'Food Riots in the North-West of England 1790-1801', *Past and Present* 77 (November, 1977), pp.84-107.
- Boulton, James T., *The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke* (London, 1963).
- Bourtrais, C.M., *The History of the Great Chartreuse*, translated by E. Hassid (London, 1934).
- Brinkley, Robert A., 'Vagrant and Hermit: Milton and the Politics of "Tintern Abbey"', *TWC*, 16, no 3 (Summer 1985), pp.126-33.

- Brinton, Crane, *The Political Ideas of the English Romanticists* (Oxford, 1926).
- Bromwich, David, 'The French Revolution and "Tintern Abbey"', *Raritan*, 10, no.3 (Winter, 1991), pp.1-23.
- Brooks, Cleanth, 'Wordsworth and Human Suffering: Notes on Two Early Poems', in *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle*, edited by Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (1965), pp.373-387.
- Brown, P.A, *The French Revolution in English History* (London, 1918).
- Burke, Edmund, 'Thoughts and Details on Scarcity', in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, edited by R.B. McDowell, 9 vols. (Oxford, 1991), vol 9, pp.119-45.
- Bussi re, M.M., and Legouis, E., *Le G n ral Michel Beaupuy* (Paris and Perigueux, 1891).
- Butler, Marilyn, *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy* (Cambridge, 1984).
- *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760-1830* (Oxford, 1981).
- Cambell, Patrick, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads: Critical Perspectives* (London, 1991).
- Catholic University of America, The, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 17 vols. (Washington, 1967).
- Caudwell, Christopher, *Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry* (London, 1937, 1977).
- Chandler, James, *Wordsworth's Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics* (Chicago and London, 1984).
- Chard, Leslie, *Dissenting Republican; Wordsworth's Early Life and Thought in their Political Context* (The Hague, 1972).
- Claeys, Gregory, *Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought* (Boston, 1989).
- Cobban, Alfred, ed., *The Debate on the French Revolution: 1789-1800*, second edition (London, 1960).
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, 'On the Present War', in *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, edited by Lewis Patton and Peter Mann, 14 vols, (London, 1971), vol 1, pp.51-74.
- Cone, Carl B., *The English Jacobins: reformers in the late 18th century England* (New York, 1968).

- Congleton, J.E., *Theories of Pastoral Poetry in England 1684-1798* (New York, 1952).
- Cookson, J.E., *The Friends of Peace: Anti-war Liberalism in England, 1793-1815* (Cambridge, 1982).
- Crabbe, George, *George Crabbe: The Complete Poetical Works*, edited by Norman Dalrymple-Champneys and Arthur Pollard, 3 vols (Oxford, 1988).
- De Quincey, Thomas, 'On Wordsworth's Poetry', in *The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, edited by David Masson, 14 vols. (Edinburgh, 1890), vol.11, pp. 294-325.
- Dacey, A.V., *The Statesmanship of Wordsworth* (Oxford, 1917).
- Dickinson, H.T., *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth Century Britain* (New York, 1977).
- Dow, F.D., *Radicalism in the English Revolution 1640-1660* (Oxford, 1985).
- Eastwood, David, 'Patriotism and the English state in the 1790s', in *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics*, edited by Mark Philp (Cambridge, 1991).
- Eden, Frederick Morton, *The State of the Poor*, abridged edition, edited by A.G.L. Rogers (London, 1928).
- Ehrenpreis, Irvin, 'Poverty and Poetry: Representations of the Poor in Augustan Literature' in *The Modernity of the Eighteenth Century* (Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture), edited by Louis T. Milic (Cleveland and London, 1971), pp.3-35.
- Ellis, David, 'Wordsworth's revolutionary youth: how we read *The Prelude*', *Critical Quarterly*, 19, no.4 (1977), pp.59-67.
- Emsley, Clive, *British Society and the French Wars 1793-1815* (London, 1979).
- Erdman, David, 'The Man who was not Napoleon', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 12 (Winter 1981), pp.92-96.
- Everest, Kelvin, ed., *Revolution in Writing: British literary responses to the French Revolution* (Milton Keynes, 1991).
- Fink, Z.S., 'Wordsworth and the English Republican Tradition', *JEGP*, 47 (1948).
- Forrest, Alan, *The French Revolution and the Poor* (Oxford, 1981).
- Foster, John Wilson, 'A Redefinition of Topographical Poetry', *JEGP*, 69 (1970), pp. 394-406.

- Fox, Charles James, 'Resolutions against the war with France'(18 Feb.1793), in *English Historical Documents, 1783-1832*, edited by A. Aspinall and E.A. Smith (London, 1959), pp.885-86.
- Frend, William, *Peace and Union 1793* (Revolution and Romanticism, 1789-1834: A series of facsimile reprints chosen and introduced by Jonathan Wordsworth), (Oxford and New York, 1991).
- Friedman, Michael H., *William Wordsworth and the Idea of Community* (New York, 1979).
- Gerard, Albert S., *English Romantic Poetry* (Berkeley, 1968).
- Gill, Stephen, *William Wordsworth; A Life* (Oxford, 1989).
- 'Wordsworth's Breeches Pocket: Attitudes to the Didactic Poet', *Essays in Criticism*, 19 (1969), pp.385-401.
- 'The Original Salisbury Plain: Introduction and Text' in *Bicentenary Wordsworth Studies in Memory of John Alban Finch*, edited by Jonathan Wordsworth (Ithaca and London, 1969), pp.142-79.
- '"Adventures on Salisbury Plain" and Wordsworth's Poetry of Protest', *SIR*, 11 (1972), pp.48-65.
- Gilpin, William, *Three Essays: on Picturesque Beauty; on Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape; with a Poem, on Landscape Painting. To these are added Two Essays, giving an account of the principles and mode in which the author executed his own drawings. ...Third Edition* (London, 1808).
- Goldsmith, Oliver, *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, edited by Arthur Friedman, 5 vols (Oxford, 1966).
- Gorton, John, *A General Biographical Dictionary*, 2 vols. (London, 1828).
- Grob, Alan, 'Wordsworth and Godwin: A Reassessment', *Studies in Romanticism* (1967), pp. 98-119.
- Harper, G.M., *William Wordsworth; His Life, Works, and Influence* (London, 1916).
- Harrison, Gary Lee, *Wordsworth and the Itinerant Poor: The Discourse On Poverty*, unpublished Ph D thesis (Stanford University, 1987).
- 'Wordsworth's "The Old Cumberland Beggar": The Economy of Charity in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain', *Criticism*, 30, no.1. (Winter 1988), pp.23-42.
- Hartman, Geoffrey, 'Inscriptions and Romantic Nature Poetry', in *The Unremarkable Wordsworth*, edited by Donald G. Marshall (London, 1987), pp.31-46.
- *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814* (New Haven, 1964, rpt 1971).

- Hasbach, W., *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer*, translated by Ruth Kenyon (London, 1908).
- Hay, Douglas, 'Property, Authority and the Criminal Law', in *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England*, edited by Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh, John G. Rule, E.P. Thompson, Cal Winslow (London, 1975).
- Hibbert, Christopher, *The Days of The French Revolution* (London, 1982).
- Hill, Bridget, *Eighteenth-Century Women: An Anthology* (London, 1984).
- Himmelfarb, Gertrude, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age* (London and Boston, 1984).
- Hipple, Jr., Walter John, *The Beautiful, The Sublime, & The Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetic Theory* (Carbondale, 1957).
- Hooker, E.N., 'Wordsworth's *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*', *Studies in Philology*, 28 (1931), pp.522-31.
- Horn, Pamela, *The Rural World, 1780-1850: Social Change in the English Countryside* (London, 1980).
- Hoskins, W.G., *The Making of the English Landscape*, a Pelican Book (Harmondsworth, 1955, reprinted 1979).
- Hussey, Christopher, *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View* (London, 1927).
- Jacobus, Mary, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's "Lyrical Ballads", 1798* (Oxford, 1976).
- Janowitz, Anne, *English Ruins: Poetic Purpose and the National Landscape* (Oxford, 1990).
- Jarvis, Robin, 'Wordsworth and the Use of Charity' in *Beyond Romanticism: New Approaches to Texts and Contexts 1780-1832*, edited by Stephen Copley and John Whale (London and New York, 1992), pp.200-217.
- John Hardman, ed., *The French Revolution: The Fall of the Ancien Regime to the Thermidorian Reaction, 1785-1795* (London, 1981).
- Johnston, Kenneth R., 'Philanthropy or Treason? Wordsworth as "Active Partizan"', *Studies in Romanticism*, no.25 (Fall 1986), pp.371-409.
- 'The Politics of "Tintern Abbey"', *TWC*, 14 (Winter 1983), pp.6-14.
- Jones, Colin, *The Longman Companion to the French Revolution* (London and New York, 1988).

- Kelley, Paul, 'Rousseau's "Discourse on the Origins of Inequality" and Wordsworth's "Salisbury Plain"', *Notes and Queries* 24 (July-August 1977), p.323.
- Klancher, Jon P., *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832* (Wisconsin, 1987).
- Klingender, Francis D., *Art and the Industrial Revolution*, edited and revised by Arthur Elton (Chatham, 1947, revised and extended 1968).
- Koch, Mark, 'Utilitarian and Reactionary Arguments for Almsgiving in Wordsworth's "Old Cumberland Beggar"', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 13 (November 1989), pp.18-33.
- Kopperman, Paul E., 'The British High Command and Soldiers' Wives in America, 1755-1783', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, 60 (1982), pp.14-34.
- Kwiatkowski, Hieronim, *Wordsworth and Godwin: A Study of Influence*, unpublished Ph D thesis, University of Glasgow, (1989).
- Landon, Carol, 'Some Sidelights on *The Prelude*', in *Bicentenary Wordsworth Studies in Memory of John Alban Finch* (Ithaca, 1970), pp.359-76.
- Leavis, F.R., *Revaluation: Tradition and Revaluation in English Poetry* (London, 1936).
- Lefebvre, Georges, *The French Revolution From Its Origin To 1793*, translated by Elizabeth Moss Evanson (London, 1962).
- Legouis, Émile, *The Early Life of William Wordsworth 1770-1798: A Study of "The Prelude"* (London and Toronto, 1921).
- *William Wordsworth and Annette Vallon*(1922).
- Levinson, Marjorie, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems: Four Essays* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986).
- 'The New Historicism: Back To the Future', in *Rethinking Historicism: Critical Readings in Romantic History*, edited by Marjorie Levinson, Marilyn Butler, Jerome McGann, and Paul Hamilton (Oxford, 1989), pp.18-63.
- Liu, Alan, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford, 1989).
- 'The Power of Formalism: The New Historicism', *ELH*, 56, no.4 (1989), pp.721-71.
- Lough, John, *France on the Eve of Revolution* (London, 1987).
- Maccoby, S., *English Radicalism 1786-1832: from Paine to Cobbett* (London, 1955).

- Maitland, D.D., 'The Care of the Soldier's Family', *Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps*, 94, no.3. (March 1950), pp.107-25.
- Marshall, Dorothy, *The English Poor in The Eighteenth Century: A Study in Social and Administrative History* (London, 1926).
- Marshall, J.D., *The Old Poor Law, 1795-1834* (London, 1968).
- Maxwell, J.C., 'Wordsworth and the subjugation of Switzerland', *Modern Language Review* 65 (1970), pp.16-18.
- Mayo, Robert, 'The Contemporaneity of the *Lyrical Ballads*', *PMLA* 69 (1954), pp.494-506.
- McFarland, Thomas, *William Wordsworth: Intensity and Achievement* (Oxford, 1992).
- McGann, Jerome, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago, 1983).
- Meyer, G.W., *Wordsworth's Formative Years* (Ann Arbor, 1943).
- Moor, C.A., *Backgrounds of English Literature* (Minneapolis, 1953).
- Moorman, Mary, *William Wordsworth, A Biography; The Early Years: 1770-1803* (Oxford, 1957); *The Later Years: 1803-1850* (Oxford, 1965).
- Philp, Mark, *Godwin's Political Justice* (London, 1986).
- Poynter, J.R., *Society and Pauperism: English Ideas on Poor Law, 1795-1834* (London, 1969).
- Price, Uvedale, *Essays on the Picturesque*, (London, 1810).
- Richet, Denis, 'Revolutionary Journee', in *A Critical Dictionary of The French Revolution*, edited by Francois Furet and Mona Ozouf, (Cambridge, MA, 1989).
- Rieder, John, 'Civic Virtue and Social Class at the Scene of Execution: Wordsworth's Salisbury Plain Poems', *Studies in Romanticism*, 30 (Fall, 1991), pp.325-43.
- Roberts, C.W., 'Influence of Godwin on Wordsworth's *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*', *Studies in Philology*, 29 (1932), pp.588-606.
- Rodger, N.A.M., *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (London, 1986).
- Roe, Nicholas, *Wordsworth and Coleridge; The Radical Years* (Oxford, 1988).
- 'Who Was Spy Nozy?', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 15 (Spring 1984).
- *The Politics of Nature: Wordsworth and Some Contemporaries* (London, 1992), pp.117-136.

- Royle, Edward, and Walvin, James, *English Radicals and Reformers 1760-1848* (Brighton, 1982).
- Sales, Roger, *English Literature in History, 1780-1830: Pastoral and Politics* (London, 1983).
- Sandford, Henry, *Thomas Poole and His Friends*, 2 vols. (London, 1888).
- Schulman, Samuel E., 'Wordsworth's "Salisbury Plain Poems" and Their Spenserian Motives', *JEGP*, 84 (1985), pp.221-42.
- Sharrock, Roger, 'Wordsworth and John Langhorne's "The Country Justice,"' *Notes & Queries*, New Series. 1 (1954), pp.302-4.
- Simpson, David, *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination* (New York and London, 1987).
- Siskin, Clifford, *The Historicity of Romantic Discourse* (Oxford, 1988).
- Six, George, *Dictionnaire Biographique des Généraux & Amiraux Français de la Révolution et de l'Empire (1792-1814)*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1934).
- Smith, Olivia, *The Politics of Language 1791-1819* (Oxford, 1984).
- Southey, Robert, *Poems of Robert Southey*, edited by Maurice H. Fitzgerald (London, 1909).
- Stephenson, J., 'Food Riots in England, 1792-1818', in *Popular Protest and Public Order*, edited by J.Stevenson and R.Quinault (London, 1974), pp.36-45.
- *Popular Disturbances in England 1700-1870* (New York, 1979).
- Stern, Walter M., 'The Bread Crisis in Britain, 1795-96', *Economica*, New Series 31 (May 1964), pp.168-87.
- Stewart, John Hall (ed), *A Documentary Survey of the French Revolution* (New York, 1951).
- Stone, Lawrence, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (London, 1977).
- Swann, Karen, 'Public Transport: Adventuring on Wordsworth's Salisbury Plain', *ELH*, 55(1988), pp.811-34.
- Sydenham, M.J., *The Girondins* (London, 1961).
- Thale, Mary, ed., *Selections from the Papers of the London Corresponding Society 1792-1799* (Cambridge, 1983).
- Thompson, J.M., ed., *English Witnesses of the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1938).
- Thompson, E.P., *The Making of The English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1968).



----- 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present*, 50 (February, 1971), pp. 76-136.

----- 'Disenchantment or Default? A Lay Sermon' in *Power and Consciousness* edited by C.C.O'Brien and W.D. Vanech (London and New York, 1969), pp. 149-81.

Thompson, T.W., *Wordsworth's Hawkshead*, edited by Robert Woof (London, 1970).

Todd, F.M., *Politics and The Poet; A Study of Wordsworth* (London, 1957).

Trevelyan, G.O., *Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay* (London, 1876).

Turner, John, *Play and Politics; A Study of Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1800* (London, 1986).

Turner, F., "'Various Journey, Sad and Slow': Wordsworth's *Descriptive Sketches* (1791-2) and the Lure of Pastoral", *Durham University Journal*, 69 (New Series 38), pp. 38-51.

Watson, George, 'The revolutionary youth of Wordsworth and Coleridge', *Critical Quarterly*, 18, no.3 (1976), pp. 49-66.

Watson, J.R., *Picturesque Landscape and English Romantic Poetry* (London, 1970).

Webb, Sidney, and Webb, Beatrice, *English Local Government: English Poor Law History: Part I. The Old Poor Law* (London, 1927).

Webster, Nesta H., *The French Revolution: A Study in Democracy* (London, 1919).

Welsford, Enid, *Salisbury Plain: A Study in the Development of Wordsworth's Mind and Art* (Oxford, 1966).

Wiley, Basil, *The Eighteenth-Century Background: Studies on the Idea of Nature in the Thought of the Period* (London, 1940).

Williams, John, *Wordsworth: romantic poetry and revolution politics* (Manchester, 1989).

Winn, Norman Field, *The Treatment of Humble life in the Poetry of George Crabbe and William Wordsworth*, Unpublished Ph D dissertation (University of Washington, 1955).

Wolfson, Susan J., 'Questioning "The Romantic Ideology": Wordsworth', *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 174 (1990), pp. 429-47.

Woodring, Carl, *Politics in English Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970).

Wordsworth, Christopher, *Memoirs of William Wordsworth*, 2 vols (London, 1851).

Wordsworth, Jonathan, *The Music of Humanity* (London, 1969).

----- *The Pedlar, Tintern Abbey, The Two-Part Prelude* (Cambridge, 1985).

Wordsworth, Jonathan, and Gill, Stephen, 'The Two-Part Prelude of 1798-99', *JEGP* 72(1973), pp.503-525.

Wuscher, H.J., *Liberty, Equality and Fraternity in Wordsworth, 1791-1800* (Uppsala, 1980).

Young, Arthur, *Travels in France: during the years 1787, 1788 and 1789*, edited by Jeffry Kaplow (Gloucester, Mass, 1976).