

## Chapter 24

*The Prelude* as History

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The long blank verse poem that was published as *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet's Mind; An Autobiographical Poem* in 1850, just three months after Wordsworth's death, has its origin in a series of verse fragments composed in the early months of 1798. Comprising little more than 1,300 lines, the majority of these verses were conceived as additions to 'The Ruined Cottage', the tale of rural hardship that had begun life in the spring and summer of 1797. These poems are: 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', 'Old Man Travelling: Animal tranquillity and Decay, A Sketch', 'A Night Piece' and 'The Discharged Soldier'. Focused on instances of poverty, grief, and abandonment the thread that binds these works together (the exception is the loco-descriptive 'A Night Piece') is a concern with the victims of history. At least three of these poems centre on the sufferings brought about by Britain's engagement in overseas wars: Margaret, in 'The Ruined Cottage', has lost her husband in the American War of Independence; the ailing discharged soldier has returned from suppressing rebellion in the tropics; the old man of 'Animal Tranquillity and Decay' is visiting his son, a sailor, "'Who from a sea-fight has been brought to Falmouth, / And there is dying in an hospital'" (*LBOP* 110; ll. 19–20), and the aged beggar's vagrancy is almost certainly a consequence of the social deprivations resulting from hostilities with revolutionary France.

When addressing the treatment of history in *The Prelude*, therefore, it is worth bearing in mind the sense in which Wordsworth's stated ambition, to complete a work encompassing 'pictures of Nature, Man, and Society', was born out of observations of the effects of state violence on ordinary men and women. Conceived in the midst of Britain's lengthy and socially debilitating conflict with revolutionary and, later, Napoleonic France, *The Recluse*, as it was projected in the spring of 1798, might well have evolved into a mordant 'delineation of the *aggregate* calamity of war', to adopt the phrase that the radical poet and preacher Joseph Fawcett used to describe his own lengthy blank verse poem *The Art of War* (1795).<sup>1</sup> What singles out Wordsworth's verses from the vast majority of anti-

war poems published in the 1790s is a concern with the effects of war on personal identity: the deserted soldier is ‘forlorn and desolate, a man cut off / From all his kind, and more than half detached / From his own nature’ (*LBOP* 279; ll. 57–9); there is in all he says ‘a strange half-absence, and a tone / Of weakness and indifference, as of one / Remembering the importance of his theme / But feeling it no longer’ (*LBOP* 281–2; ll.140–44). Margaret, in ‘The Ruined Cottage’, is similarly ‘changed; / And to myself’ (*RCP* ll. 352-3), and in ‘Old Man Travelling’ the abrupt shift from the lyrical composure of lines 1-14 to the raw facticity of the poem’s closing statement (lines omitted after the fourth and final edition of *Lyrical Ballads* published in 1805) seems to enact the resistance of wartime experience to narrative inclusiveness. Although, as many critics have argued, the turbulent history of the French Revolution is undoubtedly a problem for Wordsworth, placing considerable pressure on his powers of lyric comprehension, it is war and, in particular, the eruption of war against France in February 1793 that initiates a ‘shock’ in his ‘moral nature’ (*Prel-13* 1, book ten, ll. 233-4). Like the traumatized subjects of the early *Recluse* fragments, Wordsworth goes on in book ten of *The Prelude* to present himself as a victim of war, compelled by internal ‘revolution’ to ‘stride at once / Into another region’ (*Prel-13* 1, ll. 240–1), but in the winter of 1798, as progress on *The Recluse* stalled, the poet had as yet to come to terms with the significance of this step. The great confessional outburst that initiates the poem that Wordsworth embarked on as a means of compensating for the failure to make progress with *The Recluse* – ‘Was it for this / That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved / To blend his murmurs with my Nurse’s song?’ (*Prel* 2 ll.1–3) – may therefore be read as an attempt to enfold the contingency of historical violence within a mythical narrative of personal development.

History in *The Prelude* begins, accordingly, with an image of pacific renewal. Readers of the 1799 version of *The Prelude* will know that Wordsworth is mainly concerned with charting the development of his relationship with nature, from early infancy to late adolescence. In this poem, the outcast figures of the earlier *Recluse* fragments are replaced by the redemptive presence of a ‘Bless’d [...] infant babe’ (*Prel* 2 l. 268):

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No outcast he, bewildered and depressed:

Along his infant veins are interfused

The gravitation and the filial bond

Of nature that connect him with the world. (*Prel 2 ll. 291–4*)

The verse's subsequent affirmation of 'bliss ineffable' (*Prel 2 l. 449*) and pantheistic 'joy' in the 'one life' (l. 460) addresses at least part of the desideratum to present a poem on 'Nature' and 'Man', but what seems to be missing here is any concerted attempt to engage with 'Society', still less on the vitiating effects of Britain's war on revolutionary terror. Yet, a few lines later, in a passage composed towards the end of 1799, Wordsworth writes of

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[...] these times of fear,  
 This melancholy waste of hopes o'erthrown,  
 [of] 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 [...] (*Prel 2 ll. 478–86*)

One of the 'good men' that Wordsworth may have had in mind is his former acquaintance, the Whig reformist turned apostate James Mackintosh, whose lectures on 'The Laws of Nature and Nations' had caused ripples among liberal intellectual circles for their criticisms of the French Revolution and for their refutation of the progressive principles advanced in Mackintosh's own 'visionary' pamphlet *Vindiciae Gallicae*, published just a few years earlier in 1791. Yet the charge also extends to the poet's more immediate circle: to the poet and radical agitator John Thelwall and to the liberal philosopher William Godwin, both of whom had 'shifted and trimmed their views' so as to avoid 'sliding into despair at the apparent failure of their best hopes for social and human reformation' (Johnston, *HW*, 682).

Still further, Wordsworth may be reflecting on the motivations for his own pending retreat to ‘peace, and quiet, and domestic love’ with Dorothy in the Vale of Grasmere. Since leaving Cambridge in 1791 Wordsworth had led an unsettled, peripatetic life: first in Switzerland and France, then in London, Wales, Dorset and Germany. These wanderings mirrored, to some extent, the vicissitudes of his commitment to progressive politics which were first aroused then shaken and finally dashed by the turbulent course of the French Revolution. Finding home at Grasmere Wordsworth could begin to take stock of his life, to reflect not only on the influence of nature, books and formal education on his personal development but also on the psychological fallout of ‘hopes o’erthrown’.

The decisive event that confirmed Coleridge’s assessment of the Revolution as a ‘complete failure’, and that undoubtedly informs Wordsworth’s sense of the current ‘melancholy waste’, was Napoleon’s *coup d’état* of 9-10 November 1799. By the end of the year, having overturned the Directorate and Legislative Assemblies, Napoleon was presenting himself to the world as the omnipotent First Consul of France: the idea of the French Revolution as, in the opposition leader Charles Fox’s words, ‘the most stupendous and glorious edifice of liberty’ could no longer be sustained,<sup>2</sup> leading Robert Southey to proclaim, in a letter to Coleridge, that ‘[t]he cause of republicanism is over, and it is now only a struggle for domination’.<sup>3</sup> The pursuit of the war against France that, in February 1793, had sent Wordsworth spinning on a whirligig of conflicted emotions was now regarded as a grim necessity. Towards the close of the decade, an increasing sense of disgust with Napoleon’s territorial ambitions was compounded by alarm at the increasing likelihood of invasion. With the very notion of home under threat, these, indeed, were ‘times of fear’.

When Wordsworth came, therefore, to resume work on his long autobiographical poem in the late winter and spring of 1804 he must have looked back on his youthful enthusiasm for French republicanism with a mixture of pity and contempt or, if not contempt, at least with a sense of unease at the extent to which his identity had been shaped by the forces of politics and history: ‘Great God!’, to adapt book eight’s damning pronouncement on the alienating effects of urban life, ‘[t]hat aught external to the living

mind / Should have such mighty sway!’ (*Prel-13* 1, ll. 700–703). By the end of the year, as Wordsworth completed work on his narrative of the French Revolution, the news of the crowning of Napoleon as Emperor of the French by Pope Pius VII on 2 December, must have sounded as the final, resounding death knell for the progressive ideals that the poet had entertained for most of the previous decade.

That history could betray these ideals so starkly must surely have shaken his faith in his ability to discern meaning and purpose in the story of his own life. Yet, as Wordsworth began to tell the story of his first visit to France in the summer of 1790 there is no apparent indication of disillusionment, either with the Revolution or with his narrative capabilities. Here, as elsewhere in the poem, history is shaped by genre – in this case, by pastoral – and by a narrative process that Coleridge, commenting late in life on what Wordsworth might have achieved with *The Recluse*, describes as ‘redemptive’.<sup>4</sup> Looking back in book six of *The Prelude* to his first visit to the continent the student Wordsworth is thus shown rejoicing as France stands ‘on the top of golden hours’ with ‘human nature seeming born again’ (*Prel-13* 1, ll. 353–4). There is, however, as Richard Gravil has pointed out, a note of caution sounded in the use of ‘seeming’ as if the poem were looking forward to a subsequent period of post-revolutionary disenchantment.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, experiencing this peaceful and constitutional period of the Revolution at first hand (King Louis XVI would not be executed until January 1793) France appears to Wordsworth and his companion Robert Jones to be suffused with ‘benevolence and blessedness [...] like Spring / That leaves no corner of the Land untouched’ (*Prel-13* 1, ll. 367–9). In the lines that follow, echoes of ancient Greek pastoral – ‘we saw / Dances of Liberty [...] dances in the open air [...] Among the vine-clad Hills of Burgundy’ (ll. 380–3) – transform the nascent republic into a delirious festival of pagan renewal:

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We rose at signal given, and form’d a ring,  
 And, hand in hand, danced round and round the Board;  
 All hearts were open, every tongue was loud

With amity and glee [...] (ll. 407–8)

With Wordsworth and Jones welcomed as ‘forerunners in a glorious course’ (l. 412) the picture of the Revolution that emerges in this account is one of blithe, unthinking joy: the hope at this stage is that France will follow the example of the British ‘Glorious Revolution’ of 1688 by pursuing a benign course of constitutional reform. However, as caught up as Wordsworth appears in this ceaseless round of pacific delight, he is at pains to aver, towards the end of book six, that he looks upon the changes taking place across Europe as ‘from a distance [...] touch’d, but with no intimate concern; / I seem’d to move among them as a bird / Moves through the air’ (ll. 694–8). The poet wishes, in other words, to absolve himself of subsequent guilt over his support for the Revolution by presenting himself, by turns, as a naïvely sensuous participant in festive ‘glee’ and as an impartial onlooker swept up by the elemental currents of history. What connects both of these self-presentations is the desire to escape the historical conditioning of identity and to favour instead a kind of holiday self, observant of but not determined by the effects of time and change. If the older Wordsworth abjures critique of this earlier self it is so that he may retain a sense of history as the sully of innocence by violent experience. Still, no less than Blake, Wordsworth writes with the full awareness of innocence as the mythical, retroactive origin of experience: a state of being that never was.

Composed intermittently between April and December 1804, after completing work on the summary of the walking tour of 1790, the material that would eventually appear as books nine and ten of *The Prelude* appears, at first, to sustain book six’s mood of detachment. Announcing that he returned to France in order to ‘speak the language more familiarly’ (*Prel-13* 1, book nine, l. 37), Wordsworth represents his younger self as a tourist searching among the ruins of the Bastille for something he ‘could not find’ and ‘[a]ffecting more emotion’ than he ‘felt’ (l. 71). The poet goes on to state that he ‘scarcely felt’ the concussive ‘shock’ of the changes then taking place around him (ll. 86-7) and earlier, while regarding ‘the revolutionary Power / Toss like a Ship at anchor, rock’d by storms’ (ll. 48–9),

he claims to be ‘unconcern’d’, as if watching events unfold in a ‘theatre, of which the stage / Was busy with an action far advanced’ (ll. 88-95; *passim*). Like the model for the spectator, advanced by Joseph Addison at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the holiday self perceives the revolutionary sublime as a form of theatrical display. Shielded both from joy and pain the spectator is, as a consequence, unable to give ‘form and body’ to his experiences; from this detached perspective the French Revolution appears ‘[l]oose and disjointed’, and lacking in ‘vital interest’ (ll. 107–8). Only a few lines later, however, Wordsworth announces to the reader that, having wearied of attending tedious artistic ‘societies’, ‘I gradually withdrew / Into a noisier world; and thus did soon / Became a Patriot’ (ll. 122–4). The verb ‘withdrew’, with its connotations of retirement and retreat, rests uneasily with the busy, social implications of the ‘noisier world’ and seems to jar with the actively nominative ‘Became a Patriot’, but in many respects the word choice is on a par with the curiously Virgilian trajectory of the poem’s account of these early months in revolutionary France. The paradoxical nature of Wordsworth’s self-presentation may be paraphrased thus: although at this point I acceded to the name of patriot with the intention of taking an active role in the revolutionary cause I was, as yet, in a state of pastoral enchantment and cannot, therefore, be held accountable for my decisions.

Of critical importance to Wordsworth’s narrative is the description of Michel-Arnaud Bacharetie de Beaupuy (1755–1796), the noble officer hero whose friendship provides the poet with an education in revolutionary politics. Beaupuy, we are informed, has ‘wander’d’ through the Revolution ‘in perfect faith / As through a Book, an old Romance’, or fairy ‘Tale’ (ll. 305–7). Beaupuy’s fashioning as a Spenserian knight, a man acting on selfless principle rather than personal ambition, enables the poet to ameliorate a dominant sense of the Revolution as, from the outset, bathed in blood. A member of the moderate Girondist party, the high-born officer retains a sense of *noblesse oblige*; the ‘tie invisible’ that binds him in service ‘unto the poor / Among mankind’ is reminiscent of Edmund Burke’s conception of ‘the great primaevial contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and the invisible world, according to a fixed

compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place'.<sup>6</sup> Wordsworth presents his conversation with Beaupuy as philosophical discourses, such as 'Dion [held] with Plato' (l. 416). For reasons that will become clear, the reference to Plutarch's description of Dion's liberation of Sicily from the tyrannical rule of his nephew Dionysius the younger, following the failure of negotiations in which Plato had taken a leading part, provides the poem not only with an anchor in the Jacobin discourse of classical republicanism but also with a foundation for its redemptive teleology.

Book nine goes on to provide further justification for the pastoral or romantic conception of the early phases of the Revolution. Commenting, for instance, on the sight of Romarentin, the former seat of 'ancient kings', Wordsworth recounts a legend of noble 'passion' and 'deeds' sufficient to 'mitigate the force / Of civic prejudice, the bigotry, / So call it, of a youthful Patriot's mind' (ll. 499–501); on 'these spots with many gleams', the poet looks with 'chivalrous delight' (ll. 503–4). Alan Liu observes of this passage that 'surfacing in Wordsworth's younger mind' is 'recognition that the chivalric world is the very emblem of the *ancien régime* that necessitated revolution in the first place' (Liu, 375). Accordingly, as if in acknowledgement of this contradiction, the appearance of a 'hunger-bitten Girl / Who crept along, fitting her languid self / Unto a Heifer's motion [...] knitting, in a heartless mood / Of solitude' prompts Beaupuy to pronounce "'Tis against that / Which we are fighting'" inspiring Wordsworth, in turn, to pledge allegiance to the 'spirit' of social reform (ll. 512–34; *passim*). Although the sight of the starving cowherd is presented as a wake-up call, a bracing alternative to the mood of 'Fairy' romance that has dominated the poem thus far, the description of her predicament is not so far removed from the fanciful accounts of damsels in distress that had provided Wordsworth and Beaupuy with distraction during walks in the Loire forests. Earlier in the poem Wordsworth mentions Angelica and Ermine, the respective heroines of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1532) and Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1580–81), before going on to fantasize about jousting knights and

lusty satyrs '[r]ejoicing o'er a Female in the midst, / A mortal Beauty, their unhappy Thrall' (ll. 463–4). On both counts, the violence of revolutionary action is mitigated by romance.

While this departure into the realms of antique and early modern eroticism seems to be a distraction from the sober business of recounting the progress of the Revolution, and of Wordsworth's changing responses to the Revolution, one must bear in mind the biographical context that informs these lines. Sometime in the winter of 1791–1792 Wordsworth had fallen in love. With Annette Vallon, the lively, articulate and intelligent daughter of a lawyer's clerk, Wordsworth embarked on a passionate affair that was to change the course of his life. Unsurprisingly, the relationship between William and Annette, and the illegitimate daughter, Caroline, born as a consequence of this relationship, goes unmentioned in *The Prelude*. A woman of royalist sympathies who would later receive a pension for her work in the counter-revolutionary underground, Annette seems, at first sight, to be an unlikely lover for a republican sympathizer. Yet, as Kenneth Johnston has pointed out, in the early months of his stay in France Wordsworth's political opinions were by no means settled; *The Prelude* records how, at first, the 'chief / Of my associates [...] were men well born [...] the Chivalry of France' (ll. 129–33) – in other words, military officers loyal to the crown (Johnston, *HW*, 295–300).

That Wordsworth, as yet uncommitted to the cause of the people, should have associated with counter-revolutionaries is perhaps unsurprising; what is striking about this admission is how the emphasis on Royalist 'chivalry' carries over into those passages addressing the poet's friendship with Beaupuy. Like the younger Wordsworth Beaupuy may be guilty of over-indulgence in 'that first poetic faculty / Of plain Imagination and severe' and consequently, as Grivil conjectures, of 'wilfulness of fancy and conceit' from touch of which '[n]othing' is 'safe' (*Prel-13* 1, book eight, ll. 521–6; *passim*), yet the poem goes to some lengths to establish the military hero as a figure mediating between the realms of 'old Romance' and revolutionary actuality.<sup>7</sup> At once a knight of the mythical chivalric past *and* a 'Patriot' hero Beaupuy's 'ideality' consists, in Johnston's words, 'of his ability to establish *correspondence*, or continuity, between the old and the new' (Johnston, *Recluse*, 177).

Earlier in the poem Beaupuy is described as dying, like the ‘worthiest of Antiquity’ (l. 427), in the service of ‘Liberty’ (l. 433) during the civil war in the Vendée in the spring of 1793. But this act of consecration of the pure or noble phase of the Revolution is founded on the elision of historical actuality; for Beaupuy was in fact killed in October 1796 during the wars of expansion that transformed the Republic into an imperialist power. Were the poem not so eager to impose consistency on revolutionary identity Beaupuy ought rightly to be considered one of those who ‘become oppressors in their turn’, change a ‘war of self-defence / For one of conquest, losing sight of all / Which they had struggled for’ (*Prel-13* 1, book ten, ll.791–3). Here, Liu’s assessment is apposite: ‘a revolution in which protagonists in one phase of action turn antagonists in the next necessarily perpetuates the state of war as the very condition of its being’ (Liu, 376). It is the knowledge of this condition, manifested in the poem’s bewildering account of conflicted allegiances and covert sympathies that romance seeks to repress.

Chief among those subterranean sympathies, of course, is the hidden narrative of a young man’s sexual history. As critics have long acknowledged, the story that Wordsworth cannot tell is granted sublimated expression in the ‘tragic Tale’ (l. 551) of Vaudracour and Julia. The tale, which follows on from a passage outlining a daringly Jacobin program of constitutional reforms culminating with a call for ‘the People’ to have ‘a strong hand / In making their own Laws’ (ll. 532–3), focuses on the conflict between respect for paternal authority and the necessity of reform. Vaudracour, a member of the privileged Second Estate, fathers a child with his lower-born lover Julia. Falsely arrested, denied a fair trial and prevented from communicating with his beloved, Vaudracour is, nevertheless, an unsympathetic hero; like Hamlet he ‘does not act consistently, flares up heroically only to recoil submissively, and fritters away his many opportunities in an aimless series of comings and goings, hidings and findings, arrests and releases, all caused by the “will of the One” (his father) whom he dreams of reforming by sympathy but fears to rebel against by force’ (Johnston, *Recluse*, 180). Wordsworth’s stillborn tale abounds with silences and elisions, with hints of psychological motivations that are never satisfactorily developed or explained.

At once a veiled account of his illicit relationship with Annette and a commentary on that part of himself that would remain in thrall to paternal power, unable to commit to service in the cause of freedom, the story was omitted from the published version of *The Prelude*.

Book ten, which continues the narrative of the poet's residence in France, opens with an account of the events of August and September 1792. Ranging through Paris, the poet surveys the 'prison where the unhappy monarch lay' and the Palace of the Tuileries, 'lately stormed / With roar of cannon and a numerous host'; he crosses the square in front of the palace, just a 'few weeks back / Heap'd up' with the 'dead and dying' (*Prel-13* 1, ll. 47–8) bodies of the Swiss guard, and in his narrative recalls a by now familiar sense of numbness and detachment:

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[...] upon these

And other sights looking as doth a man  
 Upon a volume whose content he knows  
 Are memorable, but from him lock'd up,  
 Being written in a tongue he cannot read;  
 So that he questions the leaves with pain,  
 And half upbraids their silence. (ll. 48–54)

A few lines earlier the poem adopts the tone of a political instrumentalist, excusing the perpetration of '[l]amentable crimes' – Wordsworth has in mind the September massacres – as '[e]phemeral monsters, to be seen but once' so that '[e]arth' may be 'free from them forever' (ll. 31–7; *passim*). '[E]nflam'd with hope' the poet believes himself to be immune to the shock of the violent origins of the new republic. But a change has taken place in the way the Revolution is perceived. No longer amenable to the shaping spirit of old romance the descent of the Revolution into violence and factionalism weighs on the poet's mind, manifesting its traumatic illegibility through a series of biblical and Shakespearean allusions:

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'The horse is taught his manage and the wind  
 Of heaven wheels round and treads in his own steps,  
 Year follows year, the tide returns again,  
 Day follows day, all things have second birth;  
 The earthquake is not satisfied at once.'  
 And in such way I wrought upon myself,  
 Until I seem'd to hear a voice that cried  
 To the whole City, 'Sleep no more.' (ll. 70–7)

The architect of this change and the personage with whom Wordsworth struggles throughout book ten is Maximilian Robespierre. If Robespierre is the man held responsible for plunging the Revolution into chaos and despair, then it is Wordsworth who will come forward as the Revolution's redeemer. By way of a continuation of the emphasis placed in book nine on the decisive influence of individuals on world events – a forerunner of Carlyle's 'great men' thesis – book ten lays stress on the role of 'single persons [...] / Transcendent to all local patrimony', bound 'in self-restraint, / In circumspection and simplicity', acting in defence of just causes (ll. 138–54; *passim*). The ensuing lines, with their reference to Athenian liberators such as Harmodius and Aristogon, recall the poet's conversations with Beauclerk concerning the moral superiority of ancient Greek philosophers in the struggle against tyranny. Although Wordsworth acknowledges that such thoughts are 'common-places', a 'theme for Boys, too trite even to be felt', yet these thoughts inspire him, with 'a revelation's liveliness', to pronounce a hope 'that the virtue of one paramount mind' will clear 'a passage for just government' (ll. 158–85; *passim*). In addition to classical heroes the poem makes allusions to the redemptive endings of Shakespeare's tragedies, in particular to *Hamlet* (ll. 313–4), *Julius Caesar* (l. 167), *King Lear* (l. 462) and *Macbeth* (l. 177). That a Fortinbras or Macduff fails to appear to redeem the time marks the limits of the poem's investment in catharsis as a solution to historical contradictions. Drama is thus no more able than romance to inform the shapeless energies of revolution (Liu, 378).

Among the many events that Wordsworth elides in this narrative of his final months in Paris is the birth of his daughter Caroline. The poet's biographers record that the father was not present for the birth of his child, and one wonders to what extent the poem's allusions to 'solid birth-right [...] Redeem'd according to example given / By ancient Lawgivers' (ll. 186–8) is informed by feelings of guilt and concern for ensuring the legitimacy of his progeny. From its inception the French Revolution has been portrayed as a second birth for humanity, but at this stage in the poem, as the political shades over into the personal, Wordsworth's fantasy of an early death in the service of the people seems, no less than the elicited fruit of his procreation, to be a 'mistaken and bewilder'd offering' (l. 196). When Wordsworth returns to England ostensibly for want of funds to support himself but in truth to seek the means to support both himself and a wife and child, he experiences a further, decisive change in his attitude towards the Revolution:

<retain format below>

And now the strength of Britain was put forth  
 In league with the [confederated] Host;  
 Not in my single self alone I found,  
 But in the minds of all ingenuous Youth,  
 Change and subversion from this hour. No shock  
 Given to my moral nature had I known  
 Down to that very moment; neither lapse  
 Nor turn of sentiment that might be named  
 A revolution, save at this one time,  
 All else was progress on the self-same path  
 On which with a diversity of pace  
 I had been travelling; this a stride at once  
 Into another region. (ll. 229–41)

The declaration of war against France in February 1793 places the revolutionary ‘patriot’ at a distance from the ‘patriotic love’ (l. 280) of his country. Exiled in this other region – a condition of mind akin to the dissociative states explored in ‘The Discharged Soldier’ and ‘The Ruined Cottage’ – the ensuing ‘unnatural strife’ is felt as a ‘weight’ within the ‘heart’, a depressive condition contrasting with the state of enjoyment in which, as a youth, the poet had sported with the ‘breeze’, a ‘green leaf on the blessed tree / Of my beloved Country’ (ll. 250–55; *passim*). Now, cut off from the Burkean image of organic community and ‘toss’d about in whirlwinds’ the poet undergoes a ‘conflict of sensations without name’ as, meditating on the prospect of the deaths of English soldiers, he ‘exult[s] in the triumph of [his] soul’ (ll. 257–9).

A further detail repressed in this account is Wordsworth’s authoring of his ‘Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff’ (1793). Written by a self-proclaimed ‘Republican’, the letter mounts a vitriolic attack on the British monarchy and aristocracy and mocks the ‘idle cry of modish lamentation’ for the recent French regicide.<sup>8</sup> The endorsement of revolutionary violence proved too extreme for the radical publisher Joseph Johnson and the letter remained unpublished until well after the poet’s death. Had the letter been published it would, as Johnston notes, ‘have been one of the most radical of all responses to Burke, Watson, or any other conservative writer on events in France’ and the author, if identified, would undoubtedly have been subject to severe punishment (Johnston, *HW*, 339). As it stands, in the account given in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth’s repressed identity as an advocate of political violence is detectable in the portrait he gives of himself as a young man skulking like an ‘uninvited Guest’ in the midst of a church congregation. As his countrymen offer ‘praises for our [...] Victories’ the anonymous author of the ‘Letter to Llandaff’ sits ‘silent’, speculating on the ‘day of vengeance yet to come’ (ll. 271–3). Looking back with some degree of shame on this period of youthful enthusiasm for the violent promulgation of revolutionary ideals Wordsworth’s perspective is nevertheless informed by an abiding fascination with the spectacle of war. One thinks, for example, of his declaration in the sonnet ‘Anticipation: October 1803’ that ‘even the prospect of our Brethren slain, / Hath

something in it which the heart enjoys' (*CWRT* 1, ll. 12–13), or of his notorious affirmation of 'carnage' as 'God's daughter' (*SP*, l. 282) in the 'Thanksgiving Ode' of 1816 written to commemorate the Allied victory over Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo. Writing of the three revolutionary books of *The Prelude* Richard Gravil has conjectured that the struggle to reconcile between the poet's early Jacobin and later loyalist selves is complicated by the persistence of a certain apocalyptic tendency in the Wordsworthian Imagination, a tendency manifested initially in the rapt invocation of druidic sacrifice in the 'Salisbury Plain' poem of 1793–4 and later reworked in book twelve of *The Prelude*:

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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-ax, stride across the Wold;  
 The voice of spears was heard, the rattling spear  
 Shaken by arms of mighty bone, in strength  
 Long moulder'd, of barbaric majesty.  
 I call'd upon the darkness; and it took,  
 A midnight darkness seem'd to come and take  
 All objects from my sight; and lo! again  
 The desert visible by dismal flames! (ll. 320–30)

Wordsworth's insight into the destructive origins of human society is linked here with the Satanic paradox of 'darkness visible'; momentarily, the poet seems on the verge of a self-cancelling identification with the powers of negation reminiscent, as Geoffrey Hartman, Kenneth Johnston and many other critics have noted, of the apocalyptic eruption of Imagination during the crossing of the Alps episode in book six. Although at first glance the apostrophe to Imagination seems far removed from the 'midnight darkness' of the Salisbury

Plain passage, there is a strong family resemblance between the two accounts: in both instances an event occurs that places the poet outside the normative scheme of human development, an event that threatens to jeopardise the idea of history as a progressive march towards enlightenment. As with the Imagination passage, in book twelve the urge to extinction is counterbalanced by ‘sight / Of a new world’ (ll. 370–1), a vision of peaceful renewal not a million miles away from the second birth of the French Revolution as it appeared to Wordsworth in 1790. Yet this second birth is itself informed by memories of the fatalistic prophesying of book ten, lines 70–7: ‘the tide returns again, / Day follows day, all things have second birth; / The earthquake is not satisfied at once’. Wordsworth, it seems, is unable to do away with that part of his mind that would identify with the forces of destruction.

But where does this identification begin? In book six, lines 290–305, Wordsworth recalls the sight of the British fleet, preparing for war off the coast of Portsmouth in the summer of 1793. As the manuscript shows, the image of the light of the setting sun as it struck the warships made a powerful impression on the poet:

<retain format below>

While anchored Vessels scattered fa[r] [     ]  
 Darken with shadowy hulks [             ]  
 O’er earth o’er air and oce[an] [             ]  
 Tranquillity extends her [             ]  
 But hark from yon proud fleet in peal profound  
 Thunders the sunset cannon; at the sound  
 The star of life appears set in blood  
 Old ocean shudders in offended mood  
 Deepening with moral gloom his angry flood. (*EPF* 738)

While in one sense, as Johnston has claimed, the breach in the centre of the passage is a demonstration of the violation of the ‘[t]ranquillity’ of Nature by the forces of ‘history,

politics, and war', it is important to bear in mind that the lines derive their imaginative force from the disjunctive image of the 'sunset cannon' (Johnston, *HW*, 344). The violent yoking of nature and culture and life and death encoded in this image is perhaps synecdochal of a deeper, psychological enthrallment with self-cancelling extremes. While from a conventional point of view war might ruin a beautiful sunset, in this passage war has become a principle of poetic profundity: a harbinger of 'pain' imbued with 'deep / Imagination' (*Prel-13* 1, book ten, ll. 303–5). Wordsworth claims later on in book ten that the war with France 'threw' him 'out of the pale of love' (l. 760), opening the way to a brief period of allegiance to the rationalist utopianism of William Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1794), described in lines 847–8 as 'a work / Of false imagination'. Yet, as jarring as the entry into war undoubtedly was, it also brought the poet into closer proximity with the demonic undercurrents of his creative abilities. As the poem enters into its description of the excesses of Robespierre's Reign of Terror, the Revolution is presented as a dizzying, unsustainable perversion of childhood pleasures; the delight that Wordsworth took in the festival atmosphere of 1790 is turned in these lines into a fiendish celebration of infantile glee as the revolutionary child sets his windmill 'against the blast, and runs amain / To make it whirl the faster' (ll. 343–4). As if in acknowledgement of the dangerous appeal of the id-enjoyment of destruction Wordsworth moves to distinguish the '[e]nnobling' (l. 399), 'holy passion' (l. 383) of his own youthful impulses from the savage 'rage' (l. 411) of the 'foul Tribe of Moloch' (ll. 468–9), declaring 'sympathy' with divine 'power' (l. 415) to rise above the tumult.

As the revisions to this passage indicate, however, Wordsworth appears to have been troubled by the implications of his identification with the 'enflamed' visions of 'the ancient Prophets' (l. 401). In the 1850 text the prophets are 'borne aloft' yet 'constrained by natural laws' (*Prel-14*, ll. 437–8); while glimpsing 'retribution' they want not 'humility [...] pity and sorrow', and as they claim 'daring sympathies with power' their motions are 'not treacherous or profane' (ll. 447–58). It is possible that the older Wordsworth perceived in the first drafting of this passage visionary promptings that placed his youthful self in

uncomfortable proximity to his blood-letting ‘Robespierrean *alter ego*’. While, Gravid cautions, it would be ‘perverse to argue that *The Prelude* consciously entertains any doubt’ as to which of these identities is the poet’s ‘true self’ the suggestion constantly presents itself that the revolutionary self, ‘which usurps, by a species of reaction upon the recollecting poet, may in some sense be “truer” than the one it has left behind’.<sup>9</sup> In respect of this, the description of Robespierre as the Moloch of the Terror is worth considering further. In Milton’s *Paradise Lost* Moloch is identified as the ‘horrid king, besmeared with blood / Of human sacrifice’ and the younger Wordsworth may have transferred the grotesque allure of this image to his vision of sacrifice on Salisbury Plain.<sup>10</sup> The description of the poet’s discovery of the death of Robespierre that forms the centrepiece of book ten (*Prel-13*, ll. 515–66) has justly been celebrated as a triumphant affirmation of the restorative powers of the Wordsworthian Imagination, but residues of the seductive charm of unbridled potency nevertheless play a part in shaping this vision. ‘Great was my glee of spirit, great my joy / In vengeance’ (ll. 539–40) announces the poet in the first flush of victory before announcing the return of the “‘golden times”” (l. 541) of the opening phase of the Revolution. Although ‘vengeance’ is moderated by calmer schemes of ‘renovation’ (l. 556) the first, instinctive response is a reminder of the fatalistic view of history outlined in book ten, lines 70–7; even as Wordsworth declares his faith in the ‘[m]arch [...] towards righteousness and peace’ (l. 553) his vision is tainted by recollections of the ineluctable return of hate and war. Stephen Gill has suggested that the self-quotation of line 566, ‘We beat with thundering hoofs the level sand’ – a repetition of the Furness Abbey episode of book two, lines 99–144 – is a means of asserting the triumph of the pacific, pre-revolutionary self,<sup>11</sup> but the poet who, on 8 June 1794, at the height of the worst excesses of the Terror, declared himself ‘a determined enemy to every species of violence’ knows in his heart that the ‘rage for destruction’ is something he shares.<sup>12</sup> The poem’s subsequent denunciation of the Pitt government’s ‘child-like’ (l. 650) mimicry of French belligerence may be read, in light of this, as a criticism not so much of the government’s perfidious undermining of the cause of ‘liberty’ as of its failure to exhibit an equivalent martial zeal.

What, then, are the ‘bitter truths’ that Wordsworth leaves suspended so that he may ‘return / To my own History’ (ll. 657–8)? Given the poem’s notorious vagueness over the placing of dates and events I would suggest that what is passed over, at this point, is the extent to which ‘my own History’ is not, wholly ‘my own’ but is, rather, shaped and informed by forces beyond the poet’s conscious control. While the death of Robespierre is presented in *The Prelude* as a staging ground for the reassertion of the right to tell one’s own story, untainted by the accretions of ‘aught external to the living mind’ (book eight, ll. 701) or, indeed, by ‘unnatural strife’ (book ten, l. 250) rising from within, the poet’s retelling of the paradisaic ‘dawn’ of his revolutionary hopes (book ten, ll. 689–756), and the resumption of his attempt to protect these hopes from the shock of ‘open war’ (l. 758), lead only to the same conclusion: that the drive to narrative consistency is baffled by the return of historical ‘contrarities’ (l. 899). Yet still the poet maintains that ‘saving intercourse’ with his ‘true self’ (ll. 914–15), associated with the ‘feelings of my earlier life’, has sustained him in ‘that strength and knowledge full of peace’:

<retain format below>

Which through the steps of our degeneracy,  
All degradation of this age, hath still  
Upheld me, and upholds me at this day  
In the catastrophe [...] (ll. 924–30)

Writing in the aftermath of Napoleon’s coronation, Wordsworth contrasts his affirmation of personal consistency with a denunciation of the fatal reversal of the French Revolution ‘into a gewgaw, a machine’ (l. 939), a tawdry piece of theatrical chicanery.

The book concludes with an apostrophe to Coleridge, the absent ‘friend’ who first inspired the poet’s exploration of Man, Nature and Society. Returning from Malta, the island that Britain refused to cede to the French under the terms of the 1802 Treaty of Amiens, thereby provoking the resumption of hostilities between the two nations, Coleridge had made a stop in Sicily. Wordsworth imagines his friend at large among the ‘lowest fallen / Of all the

race of men', a land strewn 'with the wreck of loftiest years [...] Of simple virtue once [...] Now without one memorial hope' (ll. 947–63; *passim*). Adopting the *longue durée* the poet regards the fate of Sicily, once a seat of peace and democracy, now mired in ignorance, superstition and poverty, as 'a far more sober cause [...] of sorrow' (ll. 958–8) than the present state of France. The passage casts a sceptical pall on the glories of 'philosophic war' that Wordsworth had celebrated with Beaupuy during the romance phase of the Revolution. Returning to a theme originating in the 1799 version of the poem, Wordsworth expresses a wish that Coleridge's presence on the island will purge the 'Sirocco air of its degeneracy' and that a reciprocal 'breeze' (ll. 974–5) will, in turn, restore his friend, then suffering from the pains of opium addiction and rejection in love, to physical and moral health. The source of Sicily's 'restorative delight' (l. 1005) is the fountain of Arethusa, the mythical source of pastoral poetry. Thus the poem descends from epic heights, through glades of enchanting romance to 'fancied images' (l. 1029) of pastoral rebirth. But the poem is not yet at peace, and just as the story of the fount of Arethusa betrays its origins in struggle (in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* the nymph Arethusa is changed into a subterranean river to protect her from violation by the river-god Alpheus), so the fountain's location on the island of Ortygia, just across from the city of Syracuse, recalls a history of incessant violence. Invoked by Pindar as the temple or precinct of Mars, Syracuse was under constant threat of invasion, whether from Carthage, Athens or Rome. Although originally a Greek myth, the story of Arethusa, as popularised by Virgil and Ovid, served as an allegory of the benefits of Roman imperialism, with the vulnerable nymph, an emblem of Greek inferiority, saved from rape by the intervention of 'higher' powers. In Pindar's second Pythian ode Syracuse is described as 'βαθυπολέμο' or 'plunged deep in war'.<sup>13</sup> The ancient Greek, transliterated in Latin as '*bathupolemou*', is a reminder that literary representations of war as *peri hypsous*, that is as heightened or 'sublime', are mired from the outset by unnerving recollections of human suffering. When, in 1798, Admiral Nelson visited the island to water his fleet for the Battle of the Nile he may have reflected on the fountain's links with this history of violence and,

like Wordsworth, he may have realised, with part of his being, that there is no way out of this history, that the ‘airy and fantastical’ path of peace leads ‘but from war to war’.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Fawcett, *War Elegies* (London: J. Johnson, 1801), iii. For further discussion of Fawcett and anti-war poetry of this period see Simon Bainbridge, *British Poetry and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 28–9.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Gill, *Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 53.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Curry (ed.), *New Letters of Robert Southey*, 2 vols (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1965), 1, p.211.

<sup>4</sup> See Henry Nelson Coleridge (ed.), *Specimens of the Table Talk of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1835), 2, p.72. For discussion of the relations between history and genre in books six, nine and ten of the 1805 *Prelude* see Liu, 1989: 362–87; 365. See also Johnston, *Recluse*, 113–18.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Gravil, “‘Some Other Being’: Wordsworth in *The Prelude*”, in Stephen Gill (ed.), *William Wordsworth’s The Prelude: A Casebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 321–40; 324.

<sup>6</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France: A Critical Edition*, ed., J. C. D. Clarke (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), 261.

<sup>7</sup> Gravil, “‘Some Other Being’: Wordsworth in *The Prelude*”, 325.

<sup>8</sup> W. J. B. Owen and J. W. Smyser (eds), *Wordsworth’s Political Writings* (Penrith: Humanities-Ebooks, LLP, 2009), 25.

<sup>9</sup> Gravil, “‘Some Other Being’: Wordsworth in *The Prelude*”, 323.

<sup>10</sup> *Paradise Lost*, book one, ll. 392–3. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed., Alistair Fowler (London and New York: Longman, 1971), 67.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth’s Revisitings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3–7.

<sup>12</sup> Gravil, “‘Some Other Being’: Wordsworth in *The Prelude*”, 329.

<sup>13</sup> Pindar, ‘Pythian II: For Hieron of Syracuse’, ll. 1–2. *The Odes of Pindar*, trans., Sir John Sandys (London and Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1946), 170–1. Translation modified.

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<sup>14</sup> László Krasznahorkai, *War and War*, trans., George Szirtes (New York: New Directions Books, 2006), 203.

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