'Some other Being': Wordsworth in *The Prelude*

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I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity; the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced and does itself actually exist in the mind.

Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*

A tranquillising spirit presses now
On my corporeal frame, so wide appears
The vacancy between me and those days
Which yet have such self-presence in my mind,
That, musing on them, often do I seem
Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself
And of some other Being.

(*The Prelude*, II. 27)[1]

There is — on the face of it — no doubt that the three revolutionary books of the 1850 text of *The Prelude* are intended to present a spectacle of woe, an illustration of human ignorance and guilt. They constitute a confession that Wordsworth (like Coleridge, the poem's addressee, who is now recuperating in the Mediterranean) has been capable of being parted from his better self. He too has experienced nightmares of incrimination, and periods 'Of sickliness, disjoining, joining things | Without the light of knowledge' (8: 436–37). He has been taught to 'tame the pride of intellect'. Wordsworth presents himself as 'lured' into France (IX. 34), over-confident in his capacity to understand the course of history, and 'enchanted' by revolutionary illusions.[2] Man, he comes to feel, is mocked by possession of the 'lordly attributes of will and choice', having in himself no guide to good and evil (XI. 306–20).

Yet no one who reads *The Prelude* attentively can fail to notice that Wordsworth's presentment of his earlier self has a candour which contrasts strikingly with Coleridge's lack of it in *Biographia Literaria*. Wordsworth is so bold to look on painful things that it becomes harder, the more familiar one becomes with the procedure of his account, to avoid the impression that

[1] All quotations from *The Prelude* are from the Penguin edition and from the *1850* text except where noted.

[2] The reference to enchantment is surely an allusion to Coleridge's reference to France in *France: an Ode* as 'disenchanted'.

while one of Wordsworth's consciousnesses is concerned to present himself as prey to delusions, another is anxious to present Coleridge with an image of one whose loyalty to the revolution — well after the Great Terror of 1794, and by implication right up to the Coronation of Napoleon in 1804 — is, as a form of natural piety, a matter of self-congratulation.

The manner of Wordsworth's self-presentation was well debated in *The Critical Quarterly* in 1976/77 by George Watson, John Beer and David Ellis.[3] Since then it has been more minutely examined by Michael Friedman and James Chandler.[4] The present essay agrees substantially with each of these contributions. I accept, with George Watson, that Wordsworth intends his account as a warning against allowing oneself to be seduced into political malignancy by the ardour of undisciplined benevolence. I accept with David Ellis that the rhetoric of *The Prelude* none the less sometimes works harder to enforce than to criticize the classical argument for political terror. I accept with Chandler that Wordsworth is quite clearly arguing in Burkean terms, even in the 1805 text, that 'upstart Theory' — whether French or Godwinian — is counter-humanist.

I am not here concerned with the arguments of Chandler and Friedman, that Wordsworth's politics is — even in *Lyrical Ballads* — that of a convert to Burke, or that he is by this date (ensconced in Grasmere) well on the way to becoming a 'tory humanist'.[5] My concern is rather with what is created in the rhetorical structure of Books IX, X, and XI: and initially, at least, with the way in which *The Prelude* embodies within its critique of the ardour of undisciplined benevolence, a more powerful argument against those who were not, at the time, capable of such 'indiscipline'.

As one reads *The Prelude* it becomes very hard to escape the impression that as Wordsworth recollects, in tranquillity, the year of the terror, 'an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced and does itself actually exist in the mind' so that the persona who addresses us from the midst of these events is a revolutionary persona, and if not a 'Terrorist', then certainly, in the phrase implausibly used of Coleridge by John Thelwall, a 'man of blood'.[6] In Book IV, Wordsworth's subject is the

[3] See George Watson, 'The revolutionary Youth of Wordsworth and Coleridge', *Critical Quarterly*, 18, no. 3, 49–66, John Beer, 'The "revolutionary youth" of Wordsworth and Coleridge: another view', *CQ*, 19 (1976), 79–86, and David Ellis, 'Wordsworth's revolutionary youth: how we read *The Prelude*', *CQ*, 19 (1976), 59–67.

[4] See Michael Friedman's illuminating account, in *The Making of a Tory Humanist* (New York, 1979), of Wordsworth's friendship with Beaupuy and the nature of Wordsworth's confusion in imagining that he shared Girondin's objectives, and James K. Chandler's often persuasive account of the Burkean basis of Wordsworth's political views, in *Wordsworth's Second Nature: a Study of the Poetry and the Politics* (Chicago and London, 1984).

[5] Both of these Burkean theses seem to me to rely on a very partial reading of the later Wordsworth — in the *The Convention of Cintra* and the *Postcript* for instance.

[6] In the 1976 debate in the *Critical Quarterly* neither George Watson nor John Beer referred to the evidence of the Poole family regarding Coleridge's sentiments in 1794. Either Coldridge [sic] or Southey is alleged to have greeted the news of the death of Robespierre with the remark that 'Robespierre was a ministering angel of mercy, sent to slay thousands that he might save millions'. Mrs Sandford, *Thomas Poole and his Friends*, 2 vols (London, 1888), I, p. 105.

rediscovery of a true self beneath the Cambridge patina so recently interposed between the world and himself. In Book II, more famously, Wordsworth finds such 'self-presence' of the past that 'often do I seem | Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself and of some other Being'. What creates the difficulty for the reader of the revolutionary triad is the 'self-presence', alongside the autobiographer, of a Robespierrean *alter ego* who is capable of thrusting aside whatever attempts Wordsworth may make to sustain a tone of apologetics. This *alter ego* is related of course to those other manifestations of Wordsworth's revolutionary persona, the Solitary of *The Excursion* and Oswald in *The Borderers*, in whose mouths Wordsworth places many of his own best lines.

The recollected revolutionary self is younger, and more self-confident, than the writer. He may of course be more Satanic,[7] but he may also be, as Wordsworth twice recognizes, 'a child of nature' (XI. 168), for youth maintains 'Communion more direct and intimate | With Nature, — hence, ofttimes with reason too — | Than age or manhood even' (XI. 29). One of Wordsworth's major themes is that of loyalty to the self or recovery of a self which has becomed 'bedimmed and changed | Both as a clouded and a waning moon' (XI. 344). It would be perverse to argue that *The Prelude* consciously entertains any doubt as to which is the 'true self', for that self is explicitly associated with the feelings of my earlier [i.e. pre-revolutionary] life' (*1805*, X. 924 — not in *1850*), yet the possibility constantly presents itself that the self of 1792/93, the imaginative self, which usurps, by a species of reaction, upon the recollecting poet, may be in some sense 'truer' than the one it has left behind.

I '*Human Nature Seeming Born Again*'

The problems begin as early as Book VI. Wordsworth's excursion through France and the Alps with Robert Jones is 'chartered' (an interesting term, given its status in the revolution debate) by Nature. Nature being sovereign in his mind, her 'mighty forms . . . had given a charter to irregular hopes'. Logically one would suppose the forms alluded to to be the Alps, but tropically, and in context (VI. 333–41) they turn out to be a trinity of personifications — namely those of

> Europe . . . thrilled with joy,
> France standing on the top of golden hours,
> And human nature seeming born again.

There is little doubt that in *The Prelude* the devil has all the best images, even if these images must be read with the caution called for when reading Satan's rhetoric in *Paradise Lost*. Wordsworth presents himself as beset, and ensures that the reader is beset, with countless cases of seeming. Implicit in the

[7] In 'Tintern Abbey' Wordsworth's 'though changed no doubt from what I was' alludes, Tony Brinkley has suggested, to the fallen Satan while invoking the unchanged Milton. See 'Vagrant and Hermit: Milton and the Politics of *Tintern Abbey*', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 16 (1985), pp. 126–33.

fairground figure of France standing on the top of golden hours is a prefiguring of subsequent decline. The 'seeming' of 'seeming born again' is read to begin with as meaning merely 'as if': only later does one understand it to signify deception. The Wordsworth who tells us later that 'I had approached, like other youths, the shield | Of human nature from the golden side' expects us to recall the mediaeval fable of knights in combat over the true colour of a shield which was in reality silver on one side and gold on the other. But even if we do, chivalry is chivalry and silver is silver. We may think him mistaken, but we will hardly think him culpable. Each of these images is designed to tell the truth twice: the truth of enthusiasm and the truth of disenchantment.

The millennial 'born again' image is followed, in any case, by an extended picture of rejoiced humanity. This passage, with its wondering record of 'How bright a face is worn when joy of one | Is joy for tens of millions', its register of 'benevolence and blessedness | Spread like a fragrance everywhere', of 'amity and glee' and continuous dance, is vivid enough to remain as a reminder of a contrary state of the human soul depicted in London in Book VII. The long dance-like traverse of regenerated France (VI. 342–408) is Wordsworth's most Blakean vision of human possibility. It much surpasses the glimpse of 'Helvellyn fair' which, as the opening of Book VIII (ll. 1–69) is more often noted as the contrary to unregenerate St Bartholomew's (VII. 675–730).

Wordsworth's architectonics are much underrated, perhaps because they are so understated. In what might be called the second quatrain of the fourteen-book structure (the first quatrain having to do with the building of Wordsworth's own selfhood), Book V concerns itself with the culture man creates, and with the culture of man, including his ways of imagining other ways of being. Books VI, VII, and VIII appear to be designed to follow this theoretical introduction by counterpointing three successive visions of actual human life. 'Human nature seeming born again' (VI. 341) is contrasted in Book VII with Londoners 'melted and reduced | To one identity' (VII. 726). In Book VIII the central figure is a Cumbrian shepherd 'wedded to his life | Of hope and hazard', whose feet 'Crush out a livelier fragrance from the flowers | Of lowly thyme'. This third vision of human possibility refers back, not surprisingly, to the patriarchal Swiss ('to hardship born and compassed round with | Danger' (VI. 509–10). More surprisingly perhaps it also refers forward, though only in the more carefully articulated *1850* text, to Book IX's introduction of Michel Beaupuy as a man whose nature 'Did breathe its sweetness out most sensibly, | As aromatic flowers on Alpine turf, | When foot hath crushed them'.

The introduction of Beaupuy is, however, contextualized by two strains echoed from Book VIII, and this conjunction creates a remarkable ambivalence. Shepherdlike he may be, in ll. 294–98, but in 298–302 he appears as a character wandering in perfect faith through a realm of Romance. Might

Beaupuy, like Wordsworth in Book VIII, be guilty of excessive exercise of 'that first poetic faculty | Of plain Imagination and severe' and consequently of 'wilfulness of fancy and conceit'? 'From touch of this new power', Wordsworth had said of his own imagination, 'Nothing was safe' (VIII. 365–77). The phraseology is ominous, and weighty enough to be applied to that later and greater 'work | Of false imagination' (*1805*, X. 848) his Godwinian new man. Beaupuy, however, is not presented, as Coleridge is in Book VIII, as one 'in endless dreams | Of sickliness, disjoining, joining, things | Without the light of knowledge' (l. 435). Wordsworth and Beaupuy *beheld* a 'living confirmation' of their theories and their aspirations, and

> saw in rudest men,
> Self-sacrifice the firmest; generous love,
> And continence of mind, and sense of right,
> Uppermost in the midst of fiercest strife.
>
> (IX. 386)

They were steadied in their speculations by having real and solid forms about them.

The most striking 'form' of this book, the hunger-bitten girl of Blois, licenses Wordsworth's most positive enunciation of a political manifesto. The girl is employed, as every reader of *The Prelude* knows, as a mobile object to which a heifer can be conveniently tethered, an emblem of the utmost human degradation. What Wordsworth tethers to her, within the same long sentence, is first the unsurprising hope that 'poverty | Abject as this would in a little time | Be found no more' and then a striking series of constitutional demands. The 'heartless' girl releases in him a hope to see

> 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 framing their own laws; . . .

What we have here is, in effect, a recollected Rousseauistic preview of the politics of the *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*.[8]

Wordsworth's tale up to this point in Book IX projects a young man only slowly deciding upon his stance and sympathies. Lured (IX. 34) into a 'theatre, whose stage was filled | And busy with an action far advanced' (IX. 94) he was 'unprepared with needful knowledge'. The National Synod, and the Bastille, are tourist attractions, like but less powerful than 'the painted Magdalen of le Brun' (IX. 42–80). Only by a species of reaction to Royalist

[8] It is hard to know whether 'edict of the few' could in this instance include the idea of representative government (to which Rousseau was opposed, but which his reading of Paine persuaded Wordsworth to accept as sensible), or whether 'the people' meant some of the people (as it did to the Girondins) or all of the people (as it did to Robespierre and to Wordsworth in *A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*). But the 'studied vagueness' here is not merely poetic: it is appropriate after all to Wordsworth in 1793, a Wordsworth taking his first steps in political science, and 'untaught' in 'nice distinctions'.

feeling and opinion does he discover that 'The soil of common life, was, at that time, | Too hot to tread on'. His political science, before Beaupuy, amounts to a feeling that 'the best ruled not, and feeling that they ought to rule', a position rooted in his schooltime experience of 'ancient homeliness' in Lakeland's admittedly untypical 'nook'. The events of France seem to have happened 'rather late than soon'. Identifying with the French in their desire to share in such ancient homeliness as Cumbrians enjoy, and with the 'bravest youth of France' enlisting in defence of their revolution, he thunderously concludes that no one could resist their cause

> Who was not lost, abandoned, selfish, proud,
> Mean, miserable, wilfully depraved,
> Hater perverse of equity and truth.

There is, then, little in Book IX except its frame, to suggest that this is a cautionary tale. The framing should be noted, however. Book IX began with an ominous image: that of the poet fearing to press on for fear of the 'ravenous', or in *1805* 'devouring', sea that lies in wait (IX. 4). It ends, in *1805*, with the narrative of Vaudracour and Julia as an oblique instance of impatience, illegitimacy and untethered mind.

II *'Domestic Carnage'*

In October 1792 the fierce metropolis finds Wordsworth — now bound for England — by no means as indifferent to late events as he had been the previous year. The account given in the first paragraph of Book X, of the historical state of play, leaves one in no doubt which side Wordsworth is on. The revolutionary state has a high and fearless soul, and is a republic in body as well as in name. The late and lamentable crimes are past, and 'the plains of liberty' seems a suitable periphrasis for French soil. In daylight, however, the Carousel is no more affecting than was the Bastille a year before: he seems still unable to unlock the meaning of Parisian stones. Only at night, in his lonely garret room, does the carnage of the previous month, in the September Massacres, seem close enough to touch. Or rather, for this is Wordsworth's most manufactured 'spot', the events can be made to yield a 'substantial dread' by one willing to work and to be wrought upon by apocalyptic incantations and tragic fictions and appropriate echoes of Shakespeare. The brilliant, if over-literary, vision ends by grafting Burke's 'swinish multitude' onto Blake's revolutionary tigers to produce a sense of Paris as a place 'Defenceless as a wood where tigers roam' (IX. 93).

One's suspicion that this dread is somewhat factitious, a product of Burke's intoxicating bowl, is reinforced by its slight effect on Wordsworth's daytime consciousness. True, he attributes to himself foresight of widening terror, but the immediate consequence is that he toys with the idea of summoning an international brigade to descend on France 'from the four quarters of the winds' to compel her to be free. In such a cause he would

have been prepared to offer 'Service however dangerous'. When he reflects that

> A spirit thoroughly faithful to itself,
> Is for Society's unreasoning herd
> A domineering instinct
>
> (x. 167)

it is not entirely clear whether he sees himself as the needful bellwether, or is merely expressing willingness, as an insignificant stranger, to serve some other 'paramount mind'.

At home in England, Wordsworth presents himself as no woolly-minded liberal but a strident revolutionary — more Stalinist than Hegelian — indifferent to the outcome of Clarkson's campaign against the slave-trade not because slavery isn't a rotten business, but because it is fatuous to concern oneself with pruning a tree which is on the point of being felled.

> for I brought with me the faith
> That if France prospered, good men would not long
> Pay fruitless worship to humanity,
> And this most rotten branch of human shame.
> Object, so seemed it, of superfluous pains,
> Would fall together with its parent tree.
>
> (x. 257)

This systemic metaphor should caution one against any reading of Wordsworth's convictions at this date based upon a compendium of good causes: the 1805 text expresses derision for disappointed campaigners awaiting the next fashionable 'caravan', just as the 1850 introduces a barbed reference to English liberals experiencing 'a novel heat of virtuous feeling'. Unless the metaphor is loosely chosen, slavery is here envisioned as part of a shameful system of exploitation, based upon division, ownership, and the failure to recognize the good of humanity as an end in itself. Wordsworth's relative indifference to it as a single issue indicates a confidence in the imminent fall of all social organizations based upon any but '*equity* and justice'.[9] 'Such was my then belief', (*1805* continues), 'that there was one, | And only one, solicitude for all'.

There follows 'the conflict of sensations without name' brought about by the declaration of war between Britain and France. Britain's rulers could not see that to test old-fashioned 'patriotic love' at the very moment when the volcano of revolution was bringing to birth a new and higher loyalty, to human freedom itself, was akin to deifying John the Baptist and spurning the Christ. The implication of this outrageous analogy is that responsibility for the crucifixion of humanity that follows must be laid at the door of English idolaters. Should we miss that implication it does not matter, because

[9] *1805* says the issue never 'fastened on' his affections; *1850* is surely more credible when it says the issue did not 'rivet itself' upon those affections.

Wordsworth's account of the Great Terror begins, at line 331, by arraigning Pitt for provoking it.

Nothing in *The Prelude*, in either text, exculpates Pitt. There were of course men in France who 'for their desperate ends had plucked up mercy by the roots', but only Pitt's goad could have created the coalition of temperaments necessary to the instigation and the continuance of revolutionary terror. In describing the terror, which began in June 1794, Wordsworth uses the oddest of his exculpatory tropes: the guillotine whirls like a windmill, with a kind of macabre innocence. The infant revolution, we are invited to conclude, exemplifies like any other infant the recurring Wordsworthian theme of 'the might of souls . . . while yet the yoke of earth is new to them' (III. 180), and the desirable 'eagerness of infantine desire'. One of Wordsworth's selves parenthetically questions the image, but does not censor it:

> Domestic carnage now filled the whole year
> With feast-days; old men from the chimney nook,
> The maiden from the bosom of her love,
> The mother from the cradle of her babe,
> The warrior from the field — all perished, all —
> Friends, enemies, of all parties, ages, ranks,
> Head after head, and never heads enough
> For those that bade them fall. They found their joy,
> They made it proudly, eager as a child,
> (If light desires of innocent little ones
> May with such heinous appetites be compared),
> Pleased in some open field to exercise
> A toy that mimics with revolving wings
> The motion of a windmill; though the air
> Do of itself blow fresh, and make the vanes
> Spin in his eyesight, *that* contents him not,
> But, with the plaything at arm's length, he sets
> His front against the blast, and runs amain,
> That it may whirl the faster.
>
> (X. 356)

The edict which released the worst phase of the Terror was passed on 10 June 1794. Two days before that, on 8 June 1794, Wordsworth told Mathews (with whom he was planning a somewhat Fabian organ of reform to be called *The Philanthropist*) that he 'recoiled from the bare idea of a revolution'. He described himself as 'a determined enemy to every species of violence'.[10] Ten years later *The Prelude* certainly expresses in these lines a horror of violence, but Wordsworth seems equally capable of finding images expressive of something which is not merely horror, but a kind of dreadful fascination. Either Wordsworth the philanthropist was not, in fact, as 'determined' an enemy to 'every species of violence' as he pretended, or Wordsworth the poet

[10] *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth. The Early Years 1787–1805*, edited by E. de Selincourt. Second edition revised by Chester L. Shaver (Oxford, 1967), p. 124.

has become aware, whether in writing *The Prelude* or at some point in between, that the rage for destruction is something he had shared.

A second 'childhood' image is introduced at line 391, dignified by its association with both Classical and English myth: 'The Herculean Commonwealth had put forth her arms and throttled with an infant godhead's might | The snakes about her cradle'. Part of its function is to prepare for the curious usage of the terms 'treachery' and 'desertion' in the nightmare passage which follows: Wordsworth presents himself as tortured 'through months, through years, long after the last beat | Of those atrocities' (well into the Racedown period, that is) by nightmares of imprisonment, nightmares in which he appears to plead before unjust tribunals 'with a voice | Labouring, a brain confounded, and a sense, | Death-like, of treacherous desertion, felt | In the last place of refuge — my own soul'. The ambiguity is of the sharpest order: would it be more treacherous to plead against the victims of the terror, or on their behalf? The function of the 'Herculean Commonwealth' image, and the repeated child motif, is to give weight to the less expected sense, that the treachery is to the infant commonwealth, the rough beast that born-again human nature turns out to be.

Can human nature in its 'dog-day' aspect be worshipped as physical nature had been worshipped in its tumultuous states? The answer to that strange question (if that is what the paragraph x. 416–36 means) appears to be yes. Wordsworth identifies with those (briefly alluded to at x. 340) who see the terror as part of the wrath of providence, a sublime retribution: he experiences 'daring sympathies with power', sympathies whose 'dread vibration is to this hour prolonged' (x. 457–60 — the final phrase in *1850* only). The devouring sea, threatened at the beginning of Book IX, is now (x. 470–80) understood as a 'deluge' of ancient guilt, spreading its loathsome charge, to fertilize (if one may extrapolate the image as Wordsworth does elsewhere) the plains of liberty.

That being so, it is hard to see why Robespierre, prime strangler of the snakes about the cradle of the commonwealth, and lancer of the boils of ancient guilt, should come in for such rhetorical vengeance as he receives at Wordsworth's hands in x. 481–603. If those of the Poole circle in 1794 could view Robespierre as 'a ministering angel of mercy, sent to slay thousands that he might save millions'[11] why should Wordsworth react so differently? That he did rejoice so immoderately one may doubt. But even as an instance of editorial self-exculpation, a distancing, it is quite out of character with the rest of the account. The extent of Wordsworth's alleged glee is puzzling. The reference to Robespierre as 'chief regent' of 'this foul Tribe of Moloch' might be understood as an ironic adoption of fiercely anti-Jacobin sentiments except that no irony seems to be present. Or we might see Robespierre as having given too many hostages to Tory propagandists and having fuelled

[11] See note 6 above.

counter-revolutionary zeal. But there is a further consideration. Robespierre appears as having incarnated Wordsworth's own revolutionary self, a self which was far closer to the reality of the 'angel of death' so lightly spoken of in Nether Stowey, and which the poet of 1805 is relieved to lay to rest.

The letter to Mathews already quoted contains — presumably by coincidence — the very image Coleridge would use in 1795 to describe Robespierre. Wordsworth in June 1794 can see himself as one who 'in [his] ardour to attain the goal, [does] not forget the nature of the ground where the race is to be run': Coleridge sees Robespierre as one whose eagerness to reach the 'grand and beautiful' prospect ahead of him, caused him to 'neglect the foulness of the road'.[12] Whether or not Wordsworth has Robespierre in mind, in choosing his image, it is clear that he does not choose to present himself to Mathews as one who has already been seduced into excessive hatred, or undisciplined benevolence, or discovered to what extreme consequences his conversion, by the innocent Godwin, to schemes of social engineering, could lead him.

III *'Come now, ye Golden Times'*

The death of Robespierre is prepared for and concluded by the most complex assortment of motifs. It begins with a paragraph of recollection of the joys of Arras (Robespierre's birthplace) in 1790, and ends with a reprise of the Furness 'spot' from Wordsworth's own boyhood. It tells of a visit to the burial-place of William Taylor the wise instructor (Taylor stands in perhaps for that later tutor Michel Beaupuy, but also contrasting with him, as the one who set Wordsworth on the safer path of poetry). It includes a description of ethereal mountains observed from the Leven sands, mountains reminiscent of the 'dawn dedication' passage, and pauses to make ironic reference to the 'great sea . . . at a safe distance far retired', having momentarily suspended its ravages.

The announcement, by a passing traveller, of Robespierre's death occasions from Wordsworth a 'hymn of triumph', and (in *1805*) 'glee of spirit' and 'joy in vengeance'. It is presented as reawakening and reactivating Wordsworth's sense of himself as a power: his boyhood mastery of the horses of Furness usurps upon the fading echoes of the horsemen of apocalypse. The Wordsworth who with his boyhood associates 'beat with thundering hoofs the level sand' now sees himself, with his political associates, cleansing the Augean stables by more patient means than those of Hercules, tranquillizing the 'madding factions', and furthering 'the glorious renovation'. The shadow has passed, and its passing is recorded in a dawn image, which Wordsworth orchestrates as deliberately for humanity as Coleridge once orchestrated a sublime sunset for Lamb in 'This Lime-Tree Bower': 'Come

[12] S. T. Coleridge, *Lectures 1795 on Politics and Religion*, edited by L. Patton and P. Mann (1971), p. 35.

now, ye golden times . . . as the morning comes | From out the bosom of the night come ye'.

The reprise of 'We beat with thundering hoofs the level sand' makes so resonant a conclusion to Book x in the 1850 text that it can obscure the fact that the 'dawn' image is not yet finished with. The death of Robespierre marks in fact a rite of passage for Wordsworth's revolutionary self — all things have second birth — and he looks now (August 1794) for the republic to enjoy triumphs which will be 'Great, universal, irresistible'. Lines 19–27 of Book xi recognize that he was mistaken, but the revolutionary self is permitted an uncensored claim that what is at work, once again, is Nature's self. Wordsworth seems confident that the acquittal of Thelwall, Hardy and Tooke in the treason trials of December 1794 is a victory for Nature, Justice and Liberty over those who, in England, appeared intent on importing terror in the cause of repression.

Less clear is what happens when Wordsworth returns 'from those bitter truths' about Pitt's persecutions to continue his own history. On the face of it, Book xi lines 75–104, which review his development as a political thinker, could be dealing solely with the summer of 1792, when under Beaupuy's tutelage he was led to take 'an eager part | In arguments of civil polity'. Arguably, however, the same passage could be surveying his political development through to the end of 1794 when, with Mathews, he is striving to learn to what extent the happiness of nations depends 'Upon their laws, and fashion of the state'.

Most readers have, quite reasonably, taken the passage beginning

> Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
> But to be young was very Heaven!

to refer unambiguously to France's 'standing on the top of golden hours' in the period between 1790 (the walk to Como) and 1792 (the friendship with Beaupuy). The fact that the lines were separately published under the title 'Feelings of an Enthusiast upon the Commencement of the French Revolution' appears to confirm that view, as indeed does the reflection that Wordsworth in 1794 is not thought to have known much 'bliss'.

In context however, in *The Prelude*, the antecedent dawn is that which breaks in August 1794 upon the sands of Leven. One of the most impressive features of *The Prelude*, especially in *1850*, is Wordsworth's articulation of image to image: Snowdon and Simplon are linked by usurpation of vapours, the Shepherd and Beaupuy by herbal fragrances, and so on. Could a poet who links widely separated episodes by such means *miss* the fact that the logical antecedent of 'that dawn' is the dawn of hope in 1794, a mere 134 lines before? Simply *by placing the passage where he places it*, Wordsworth invites the question whether he found in the early period of maximum political involvement following the terror, the climax of his bliss.

Moreover, the reference in this famous passage to 'Reason' seeming to assert her rights 'When most intent on making of herself a prime enchantress', seems to fit the Godwinian period of 1794 rather better than any moment before that, as indeed does the imagery of plasticity (XI. 138) and of moulding and remoulding (XI. 150) the world one inherits. If this 'dawn' is that of 1789 or 1790 Wordsworth's description of himself as politically committed in *that* dawn is thoroughly misleading. If it is the summer of 1792, it is hard to see what the 'licence' of 11: 163 refers to, or why he refers to himself as

> Not caring if the wind did now and then
> Blow keen upon an eminence that gave
> Prospect so large into futurity.

As an image for one who has come to terms with the need for political violence this has the merit of somewhat chilling understatement: as an image for one who knows of nothing worse than the fall of the Bastille, or the need to repel invaders massing upon the borders, it simply misses the mark.

What prevents one from concluding that the 'blissful dawn' is biographically as well as textually subsequent to rather than prior to the death of Robespierre is, of course, the resumption of relative chronological clarity at XI. 173. 'In the main outline, such it might be said | Was my condition, till with open war | Britain opposed the liberties of France'. This statement would certainly appear to restrict the 'blissful dawn' to a period before February 1793. Even this, however, is five months after the September Massacres. In any case the event which is blamed for clouding the blissful dawn, and bringing to an end this 'condition' of rapture is not, in the first place, Robespierre's terror but Pitt's military action against France.

No doubt Coleridge, as auditor-elect, was better equipped than we to know precisely what the landmarks were in Wordsworth's political development. For whatever reason, the frequency of Wordsworth's references to time in Book XI does nothing to make them more distinct. 'But now', Wordsworth continues, in XI. 206, 'become oppressors in their turn, | Frenchmen had changed a war of self-defence | For one of conquest'. It is not possible to date this 'now' any earlier than May 1794, when the French began a summer of offensive military campaigns, or to know what it signifies. Dire though the news is, it makes France no worse than the autocratic powers opposing her. Wordsworth is unlikely to have sided with those fighting against France any earlier than Tom Poole (who was welcoming Napoleon's victories in May 1797),[13] and he seems to have taken most of France's martial adventures prior to the second invasion of Switzerland in his stride. War merely prompts him to adhere 'more firmly to old tenets'.

And 'this was the time' (XI. 223) when Godwin's philosophy arrived to complete the work Pitt had begun: the stopping of the passages through

[13] Sandford, p. 219.

which the ear converses with the heart. The poet's goaded mind takes on the mantle of Robespierre, dragging 'all precepts, judgements, maxims, creeds, | Like culprits to the bar' (XI. 295) and probing (in *1805*) 'the living body of society | Even to the heart' (*1805*, X. 875).

'Studied vagueness' understates what Wordsworth is doing with chronology throughout the first 305 lines of Book XI. They lead up to an undateable moral and intellectual crisis, some time between the joint depredations of France and Godwin in 1794, and the beginnings of recovery in late 1795 under Dorothy's influence at Racedown: a crisis most probably associated with political activity during the period of residence in the great city in 1795. In any case, if one examines the images employed, even as hastily as here, one cannot but notice that something more than a haziness about dates is involved. The poetry seems designed to induce a real confusion about the sequence of events and responses, rather than merely about their intervals. Confusion has its attraction, of course, for if 'Bliss' cannot be dated, neither culpability nor apostasy can be established. But the confusion in this case seems to stem from something else: a recognition that the famous cantata to revolutionary enthusiasm seems to Wordsworth to apply with equal force to two quite separate phases in his political development, and to express two quite different states of being.

One of those states is the one which generates in the course of the narrative that striking sequence of tropes designed to rob terror of its sting: the child with his windmill, Hercules in his cradle, and the wind upon an eminence. Each figure exhibits, arguably, that use of language Wordsworth deplored in the Essays upon Epitaphs, as 'a counter-spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work to derange, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve' (*Prose Works*, II, 85). More pertinently, perhaps, Wordsworth's prefatory essay to *The Borderers* directly addresses the tendency of revolutionaries to employ style to diminish atrocities. He remarks of the revolutionary mind that it will tend to 'chequer & degrade enterprises great in their atrocity by grotesque littleness of manner and fantastic obliquities' (*Prose Works*, I, 78). This is not through lack of imagination. Minds such as Oswald's possess powerful imagination, as the preface observes. The presence of powerful imagination is perhaps appropriately signified in the 'windmill' simile and the mountain-top metaphor by their common element, the correspondent breeze.

IV *'A Veil had been Uplifted'*

In Book XI. lines 224–320 Wordsworth develops his account of the intellectual crisis which ends his revolutionary career. Godwinian philosophy, the philosophy 'That promised to abstract the hopes of man | Out of his feelings', but which in fact allowed the passions to work disguised as pure reason seduces Wordsworth into the experience he dramatizes in his 'Oswald'. (Wordsworth's distrust of the reason may be Burkean, as Chandler argues,

but it can also be heard as strikingly Nietzschean). What both experience is masterful personal liberty,

> Which, to the blind restraints of general laws
> Superior, magisterially adopts
> One guide, the light of circumstances, flashed
> Upon an independent intellect.

The career of 'Oswald' shows this guide to be a will o'the wisp — an abstraction operating upon a delusion — and line 248 speaks of Wordsworth's understanding as 'inflamed'. None the less, the desire that man should 'start out of his earthy, worm-like state' still appears to Wordsworth 'A noble aspiration!' To the 1805 declaration that 'yet I feel the aspiration', the 1850 text adds 'nor shall ever cease | To feel it'. What he criticizes himself for is the desire to accomplish that transformation 'by such means as did not lie in nature'.

If the enlightenment dream of the man to come, parted as by a gulph from him who has been (XII: 59–60) is a work of 'false imagination' it is none the less justified by the upholders of 'ancient Institutions'.

> Enough, no doubt, the advocates themselves
> Of ancient Institutions had performed
> To bring disgrace upon their very names;
> Disgrace, of which, custom and written law,
> And sundry moral sentiments as props
> And emanations of those institutes,
> Too justly bore a part. *A veil had been*
> *Uplifted; why deceive ourselves? 'twas so,*
> *'Twas even so; and sorrow for the man*
> *Who either had not eyes wherewith to see,*
> *Or, seeing, hath forgotten!*
>
> (*1805*, X. 849 my italics)

Moreover it is at this point that Wordsworth describes himself as having been mentally let loose, 'let loose and goaded', a trope which combines an image earlier used of the French leaders in 1794 (goaded into Terror by Pitt's ministrations, X. 336), with one used in the *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff* of the French people themselves: 'The animal just released from its stall will exhaust the overflow of its spirits in a round of wanton vagaries'.[14] He thereby gratuitously associates himself with the Mountain and the People, and absolves all three.

Wordsworth's hymn of triumph at the passing of the shadow, Robespierre, one may conclude, is only partly occasioned by what he felt about the death of Robespierre himself. A major element is relief, felt at the time of writing, at the dethroning of his Godwinian self whose depredations upon the living body of society and nature's holiest places are quite clearly presented as an internalization of Robespierre's practices. Yet that self, even

[14] *Prose Works*, I, p. 38.

amid these confusing obsequies (confused by images of dawn and consecration and mingled origins at Arras and Hawkshead) asserts itself sufficiently to see the 'dawn' of Robespierre's death as the blissful dawn of its own experience.

Its continued co-presence as co-author in 1804 is responsible, one has to feel, for the fact that Wordsworth, although largely restored to his milder self, by nature and 'all varieties of human love', twice employs language of the utmost vituperation in Books X and XI. First in the reference to Pitt's verminous Tory cabinet, and its imitative bloodlust, and second in his account of the coronation of Napoleon in 1804.

> This last opprobrium *when we see the dog*
> *Returning to his vomit*; when the sun
> That rose in splendour, was alive, and moved
> In exultation among living clouds
> Hath put his function and his glory off,
> And turned into a gewgaw, a machine,
> Sets like an Opera phantom.

The sun is dead and France has killed it.

Wordsworth had been of the devil's party. In so far as to be a man of blood is to be of the devil's party, he remains one in Book XII and XIII. It has been part of my intention to suggest that Wordsworth in *The Prelude* justifies the little terror, and partially excuses the great terror, just as he presents the character of Oswald, in *The Borderers*, as a blend of himself and Robespierre. Imagination resuscitates past selves and their loyalties.

But this explanation is too simple. It is not necessary, after all, that it should be a strictly revolutionary self that in the *1805* and *1850* texts continues to legitimate a certain connoisseurship of blood. It might also be an apocalyptic one. We see that self emerging, in fact, in the curious rhetoric of Book X where Wordsworth notes among the observers of the terror those who 'doubted not that providence had times of vengeful retribution' (X. 340), and suggests that some spirit fell on him that linked him with the ancient prophets who

> Wanted not consolations . . .
> when they denounced
> On towns and cities, wallowing in the abyss
> Of their offences, punishment to come
> (X. 440)

Wordsworth's youthful and revolutionary selves were certainly more imaginative than his editorial self. The youthful imagination is unafraid of contemplating 'a world how different from this', or 'something evermore about to be'. It is pleased that a midnight storm can grow darker 'in the presence of my eye', and delights in witnessing — in the Snowdon vision — how the real sea gives up its majesty in the face of an imaginative usurpation, the sea of mist on whose shore Wordsworth finds himself. Similarly the

revolutionary self is able to share the excitement of a Robespierre, or a Godwin, as they contemplate 'the man to come, parted as by a gulph from him who had been', or try to bring to birth 'a world how different from this', or drive man more rapidly along what Coleridge called the imaginative 'ascent of being'.

Most accounts of Wordsworth's imagination, however, leave out the quality of dread, which while present elsewhere emerges most clearly in the negative sublime of the Salisbury Plain spot, whose topography is associated with another of Wordsworth's literary self-projections in the 1790s, the benevolently murderous sailor of *Guilt and Sorrow*. In Book XIII lines 279–349, in a major argument too little attended to in this context, Wordsworth presents himself as wandering across Salisbury Plain in a state of confidence that he has the power to perceive things unseen before, and to create works which because they arise 'from a source of untaught things' might 'become a power like one of Nature's'. There, like his sailor in *Guilt and Sorrow*, he 'paced the bare white roads | Lengthening in solitude their dreary line'. For him, however, time fled backwards until he saw 'multitudes of men, and here and there, | A single Briton clothed in wolfskin vest' and heard 'The voice of spears':

> I called on darkness — but before the word
> Was uttered, midnight darkness seemed to take
> All objects from my sight; and lo! again
> The desert visible by dismal flames;
> It is the sacrificial altar, fed
> With living men — how deep the groans! The voice
> Of those that crowd the giant wicker thrills
> The monumental hillocks, and the pomp
> Is for both worlds, the living and the dead.

Suck wickers, according to Frazer, formed part of traditional mid-summer processions in some regions of Europe, and particularly France and Belgium, until well into the early years of the nineteenth century. In Brie a wicker giant was burnt annually on Midsummer's Eve. In Paris and elsewhere the preferred date was the nearest Sunday to 7 July. In many areas animals — usually cats — were substituted for the human sacrifices which according to Caesar and Strabo were offered by the ancient Gauls. For contemporary cartoonists the wicker was negatively associated with the iconography of terror: Wordsworth, however, seems able to sympathize with the sublimity of sacrifice.

While Chandler boldly deals with the early spots of time as Burkean, in that they have to do with the discipline of place, he has less to say about this spot, except to call it — none too helpfully, it seems to me — 'a sublime dream of Burke's immemorial British past'.[15] The meaning of this reverie concerning benign druidic sacrifice may not be welcome, but it is clear: the

[15] Chandler, p. 139.

imaginative mind 'stands by Nature's side among the men of old' and may indeed 'boldly take his way among mankind | Wherever nature leads' (XIII. 296), whether it leads to contemplation of the stars or to 'the sacrificial altar, fed | With living men' (ll. 331–32).

Imagination is geared to the sublime in so extraordinary a degree that in 1816 Wordsworth will celebrate the bloodshed of Waterloo as both a votive offering and a martial feat on a scale sufficient to satiate Imagination. The 'Ode: 1815' made many tremble, not least for the lines on the deity which Wordsworth advisedly cut:

> But Thy most dreaded instrument,
> In working out a pure intent,
> Is man arrayed for mutual slaughter,
> Yea, Carnage is thy daughter

But these lines of 1816 are not, it seems to me, an aberration. They continue in a direct line from the Salisbury Plain spot, in which Wordsworth offered his definitive statement of what it means to be a child of nature and to stand by Nature's side. A veil had indeed been uplifted in the 1790s, but there was more behind it than revolutionary sympathy. There was also the curious perception, attributed to Ovid in Geoffrey Hill's poem ('Ovid in the Third Reich', *King Log*, 1968), that those who stand near 'the ancient troughs of blood', though they may be damned, 'harmonise strangely with the divine love'.