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Tidings: Revolution in *The Prelude*

I

IF WE LOOK CAREFULLY FOR REVOLUTION IN Wordsworth's life-story, we are likely to find it everywhere and nowhere. This is equally true of his life-discourse. "I recoil from the bare idea of a *revolution*," he writes his friend William Matthews in 1794, in the first impulse of his recoil from the French Revolution he had so recently and ardently supported; "yet . . . how is that dreadful event to be *averted*?"¹ His language retraces some of the very turnings it rejects. So, and even similarly, do his life-poem and his life.

Superficially revolution is readily apparent and identifiable in *The Prelude*: it is named there on the very surface, in the title of Book x—"Residence in France and French Revolution."² Within the body of the poem, however, explicit revolution is not usually located where this label would seem to put it, in France. Save for a passing mention of the oddly unrevolutionary and powerless "revolutionary power" stirring in the Paris of early December 1791 ("Toss[ing] like a ship at anchor, rocked by storms" [ix.48–49], figuratively pitching and rolling in place under the pressure of a greater power it endures but does not utilize), *The Prelude* never mentions revolution until its closing, parenthetical glance at "all revolutions in the hopes / And fears of men" (xiii.449–50)—with one important exception. The real revolution of *The Prelude* occurs not in France but within Wordsworth, not in 1789 but in 1793, when "with open war / Britain opposed the liberties of France" (x.758–59):

No shock
Given to my moral nature had I known
Down to that very moment—neither lapse

1. Letter of 8 June 1794; *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, 2nd ed., Vol. 1: *The Early Years, 1787–1805*, rev. Chester L. Shaver (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967) 124; my emphasis. Hereafter LEY.

2. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979). All citations refer to the text of 1805.

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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.

(x.233–41)

Such transpositions from a public to a personal register are highly characteristic of *The Prelude*, of course; and Wordsworth similarly recasts another of his putative life-stages, “Summer Vacation” (the title of Book iv), by insinuating that not the summer respite from his Cambridge University studies but the period spent at Cambridge was the true time of “deep vacation” (iii. 542) in the course of his imaginative growth. The revolution that chiefly concerns Wordsworth now is not France’s—that, he had experienced from the first as unrevolutionary, “nothing out of nature’s certain course” (ix.253)—but his own. To turn a phrase from Poe, Revolution is not of France, but of the soul.³

Yet Wordsworth’s revolution remains highly problematic. At issue is not its alternatively historical or personal status so much as its very existence. Sometimes insistent upon it, at other times he just as insistently denies it.

Certainly Wordsworth’s just-quoted characterization of the revolution experienced “Not in my single self alone . . . / But in the minds of all ingenuous youth” (x.231–32) is explicit and insistent. And he reinforces this description on his later, more personal account of his reaction when Britain went to war against France. Before that moment, he says, he remained

a child of Nature, as at first,
 Diffusing only those affections wider
 That from the cradle had grown up with me,
 And losing, in no other way than light
 Is lost in light, the weak in the more strong.

(x.752–56)

Then Britain’s declaration of war “threw me first out of the pale of love”—

3. So Coleridge in 1809 refers to the unpublished *Prelude* as a “Poem on the growth and revolutions of an individual mind,” and says of his own life during the Revolutionary period, “My feelings . . . and imagination did not remain unkindled in this general conflagration. . . . I was a sharer in the general vortex, though my little World described the path of its Revolution in an orbit of its own.” Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969) 2: 258, 146.

was not, as hitherto,
 A swallowing up of lesser things in great,
 But change of them into their opposites,

 . . . What had been a pride
 Was now a shame, my likings and my loves
 Ran in new channels, leaving old ones dry. . . .
 (x.760–70)

The course of the French Revolution, moreover—a “transmigration,” a “fall of being” (x.599, 600), with things so changed into their opposites that “blasts / From hell came sanctified like airs from heaven” (x.313–14)—becomes the paradigm of Wordsworth’s psychological crisis, a time and state of “degradation” (xi.243; cf. x.928) when “greatest things give way to least” (xi.246).

But Wordsworth advances these forceful and often anguished analogies only to undercut and even deny them. The “eclipse” (xi.96) of his being, he says in retrospect, was no cataclysm or catastrophe but a mere temporary obscuration; self-appearance can be deceiving:

though impaired, and changed
 Much, as it seemed, I was no further changed
 Than as a clouded, not a waning moon. . . .
 (x.915–17)

After so dark and devastating a crisis, Wordsworth’s recuperation, unanticipated but inevitable, passively emerges with all the weak force of anticlimax, stunning only in its very lack of punch:

In truth, this degradation . . .

 . . . was transient. I had felt
 Too forcibly, too early in my life,
 Visitings of imaginative power
 For this to last: I shook the habit off
 Entirely and for ever, and again
 In Nature’s presence stood, as I stand now,
 A sensitive, and a *creative* soul.
 (xi.243–57)

With a figurative shrug of the shoulders, he lightly sheds the mantle of one “habit” to reassume or rediscover another:⁴

4. The pun on “habit” is Burkean, as James K. Chandler suggests (*Wordsworth’s Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics* [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984] 66–67, 75, 81–82, 127).

Behold me then
Once more in Nature's presence, thus restored
Or otherwise, and strengthened once again

. . . .

To habits of devoutest sympathy.

(XI. 393–97)

Is Wordsworth's revolution then after all but another stage of his "progress on the self-same path" rather than "a stride at once / Into another region"—in other words, no revolution at all?

II

The suppression or deemphasis of Wordsworth's revolutionary experience, we know, was a feature of *The Prelude* from the very first. The original (1798–99), two-part version of the poem discusses Wordsworth's growth only through his school days, until about 1787. And the expanded, five-part poem he has in view in early 1804, while it incorporates the 1791 ascent of Snowdon, still makes no mention of his 1790 or 1791–92 experiences in France. Whether Wordsworth's very sudden and very drastic decision in March 1804 to address revolution directly in *The Prelude* constitutes so great a reconception of the poem as to be itself revolutionary can remain, at least for the moment, an open question.

Wordsworth's own explanation of this deemphasis of revolution, as we have seen, is that he had mistaken as revolution what was, after all, only another stage of "the evolution of the poet's mind," a temporary mistake and impairment succeeded by "accommodation" and "reconciliation."⁵ His experience of revolution belonged to his mistaken conception of himself as a man of action; once he recognizes that his vocation is properly that of a poet, his taste of revolution seems less important to his teleology. But even those critics most disposed to take Wordsworth at his own estimation here acknowledge that the images and the experience of revolution continue to inform (and perhaps even form) Wordsworth's growth and work. And more recently critics particularly sensitive to the historical ground of Wordsworth's poetry have found in that poetry a determined "denial of history" that disguises but cannot

5. The first phrase is from M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971) 107; the latter are from Kenneth R. Johnston, *Wordsworth and THE RECLUSE* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1984) 116, 174, 119.

evade a deeper “realization of history.”⁶ Either implicitly or explicitly, unconsciously or consciously, all these critics reject Wordsworth’s denial of revolution.

What becomes of revolution in *The Prelude*? Does it somehow gather upon Wordsworth only to rush over and past, like the waters of the deep in pursuit of the fleeing Arab-Quixote, leaving Wordsworth himself mysteriously unaffected? Does it come in his young manhood only to retreat again, in tidal rhythm, to an only temporarily “safe distance, far retired” (x. 529)? Was it only a dream of drowning terror from which he wakes to find the sea after all still and always safely below him? Or does it so overwhelm him and absorb or steep him as to become his very element?

My images, or most of them, are taken from the opening of Book v, with its prophecy of “deluge now at hand” (v.99), which is also the opening of Wordsworth’s March 1804 work on the reconceived, explicitly revolutionary *Prelude*. “‘Deluge’ was, of course, one of the stereotyped images applied to the French Revolution,” as Ronald Paulson reminds us; and from the compositional history of *The Prelude* we can see that “book v of the full text must represent the beginning of Wordsworth’s attempt to fill in a middle which . . . bridges his school-days and the Mount Snowdon revelation with his experience of the French Revolution.”⁷ We might readily begin our consideration of Wordsworth’s revolution here where Wordsworth himself does, in Book v. But the Arab dream is still a revolutionary screen; and only “just below [its] surface,” as Paulson argues, do “all the subjects and themes surge forward that will surface in book ix” (Paulson 254). Not until in Books ix and especially x, where the tide of current history surges up into Wordsworth’s consciousness just when the river of imagination once past “the ways of Nature” sinks out of sight “bewildered and engulfed” (xiii.177–78), can we measure its threat directly.

III: History as Poetry

The voice of revolution in *The Prelude* is ultimately, for Wordsworth, the voice of poetry. Without the aid of poetry, revolution can speak but unpersuasively or unintelligibly.

It is not surprising that this fundamental characteristic of revolution should not be readily obvious. Certainly it was not immediately obvious

6. See especially Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1989) 4, 13, 32, 39, and *passim*.

7. Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution (1789–1820)* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983) 254, 253.

to Wordsworth, who thought he had discovered in his mentor Beauvuy revolution speaking with the voice of reason. But even in his days with Beauvuy, among all their “interchange of talk / On rational liberty, and hope in man, / Justice and peace” (IX.401–3), Wordsworth’s meditations on “the end / Of civil government, and its wisest forms” (IX.329–30) are repeatedly infused with fancies of Romance; similarly the relic from the Bastille that he pockets “in the guise / Of an enthusiast” does not, after all, move him so much as does an analogous work of fancy, “the Magdalene of le Brun, / A beauty exquisitely wrought—fair face / And rueful, with its ever-flowing tears” (IX.63–80);⁸ and eventually not Dion, the philosopher-warrior (IX.415–24), but Comates, whom the gift of poetry preserves through the bondage of tyranny (X.1021–27), becomes his sustaining paradigm.

Revolution in France has its own voice from the first, of course, and not merely the voice of Beauvuy. But at the beginning this voice is a babel of foreign speech:

I stared and listened with a stranger’s ears
To hawkers and haranguers, hubbub wild,
And hissing factionists with ardent eyes. . . .
(IX.55–57)⁹

And increasingly, even though Wordsworth gains proficiency in French, even though individual speeches begin to stand out for him from the background hum, still the Revolution’s voice—

voices of the hawkers in the crowd
Bawling, *Denunciation of the crimes*
Of Maximilian Robespierre,

the voice of Louvet in the National Convention making his charge, “I, Robespierre, accuse thee!” (X.86–88, 100)—cannot reach its proper audience; “The gift of tongues” (X.121) is still needed, and is lacking. Thus in October 1792 when Wordsworth returns to Paris from Blois and

8. For a somewhat different reading of Wordsworth’s reading of the ruined Bastille and le Brun’s *The Repentant Magdalene*, see Liu 366–73.

9. And here already Wordsworth intimates poetry’s voice, borrowing “hubbub wild” from Milton’s description of Satan’s first experience of Chaos:

At length a universal hubbub wild
Of stunning sounds and voices all confus’d
Borne through the hollow dark assaults his ear
With loudest vehemence. . . .
(*Paradise Lost* II.951–54)

Orleans he cannot read the new declaration of revolution that he finds there: touring the sites of the recent September Massacre, he looks on

as doth a man
 Upon a volume whose contents he knows
 Are memorable but from him locked up,
 Being written in a tongue he cannot read,
 So that he questions the mute leaves with pain,
 And half upbraids their silence.

(x.49–54)

But what he cannot read (or now is unwilling, rather, to believe that he has rightly read) he cannot but feel; and that night, as he broods anxiously on this new text, history in the making finally finds in Wordsworth an intelligible voice.

The text, inevitably, is revolution. The voice, however, is not yet properly Wordsworth's, though it seems to speak his thoughts:

“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 seemed to hear a voice that cried,
 To the whole City, “Sleep no more!”

(x.70–77)

While critics have noted that the framing lines here are Shakespeare's, the observation has not reduced their perplexity. “The sleepless city articulates its guilt through Macbeth”; “The city, guilty of murder and drifting to regicide, is likened to Macbeth after the killing of Duncan.”¹⁰ Is Wordsworth then but a spectator at a regicidal drama in which Paris performs Macbeth's part? The reading is hardly tenable (the City cries to itself?); Wordsworth's lines allusively identify him not with *Macbeth's* audience but with its protagonist. But neither is it reasonable to regard Wordsworth here as, “if not exactly an accessory after the crime, at least the victim of his own theatrical imaginings,” whose “transfer of power from what threatens him to elevated blank verse utterance installs him

10. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Sex and History in *The Prelude* (1805), Books Nine to Thirteen,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 23 (1981): 336; W. J. B. Owen, ed., *The Fourteen-Book PRELUDE*, by William Wordsworth (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985) 198n.

in an essentially rhetorical relationship to the Revolution."¹¹ "With fear sublimated and guilt repressed, the way lies open to assimilate revolution into the astronomical and natural cycles which make up the traditional connotations of the word," Jacobus elaborates (41). But surely this is to read backwards. It is instead Wordsworth's anxious effort now to justify the new course of revolution by thus assimilating, sublimating, and repressing it (an effort analogous to Macbeth's preceding dagger speech) that tortures his imagination into its Macbeth-like outburst. As Jacobus notes, "Late eighteenth-century interpretations of Macbeth as a man of feeling—for Hazlitt, a man of conscience, even—make him a man of his troubled times" (36). Wordsworth in October 1792 stands in Macbeth's place and plight—not yet in his guilt, but on the very verge of it. The suddenly articulate voice of history does not distance the threat of revolution, but proclaims and emphasizes it.

Wordsworth's initial, equivocating attempt to palliate revolution by evoking Shakespearean comedy rather than tragedy also strikes close to home. "The drift of this passage . . . appears to be that large natural forces repeat their effects," Owen notes; "but the reference to the horse does not seem to fit with the other images . . ." (Owen 198n). Yet the Shakespearean allusion—"a peculiarly inapt quotation," Gayatri Spivak (342) calls it—again seems strangely apt even while it jars. As Orlando, on the point of rebellion against his tyrannical oldest brother, reviews his lot at the beginning of *As You Like It*,

For my part, [my brother] keeps me rustically at home, or—to speak more properly—stays me here at home unkept, for call you that keeping for a gentleman of my birth that differs not from the stalling of an ox? His horses are bred better; for, besides that they are fair with their feeding, they are taught their manage, and to that end riders dearly hir'd. But I, his brother, gain nothing under him but growth, for the which his animals on his dunghills are as much bound to him as I. (1.1.)

Orlando's complaint pours forth a flow of images that Wordsworth has already adapted to the French Revolution, and more specifically to his sense of the French versus the English condition in 1791–92: the animal kept in confinement or left to scavenge for its own food versus the animal free to range but also cared for, the animal trained versus the animal not trained. Something of this has already surfaced in Book v,

11. Mary Jacobus, *Romanticism, Writing, and Sexual Difference* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) 40–41.

that foreshadowing of revolutionary themes, in Wordsworth's comparison of natural (and typically English) versus unnatural educations, of "things that teach as Nature teaches" (v.231) versus the confining, manipulative training of the "child, no child, / But a dwarf man" (v.294-95). For the dwarf manchild there is no taste of nature or of freedom;

Nay, if a thought of purer birth should rise
 To carry him towards a better clime,
 Some busy helper still is on the watch
 To drive him back, and pound him like a stray
 Within the pinfold of his own conceit. . . .

(v. 358-62)

"Oh where had been the man, the poet where," Wordsworth asks Coleridge,

If we, in lieu of wandering as we did
 Through heights and hollows and bye-spots of tales
 Rich with indigenous produce, open ground
 Of fancy, happy pastures ranged at will,
 Had been attended, followed, watched, and noosed,
 Each in his several melancholy walk,
 Stringed like a poor man's heifer at its feed,
 Led through the lanes in forlorn servitude;
 Or rather like the stallèd ox shut out
 From touch of growing grass, that may not taste
 A flower till it have yielded up its sweets
 A prelibation to the mower's scythe.

(v. 232-45)

The light hint ("lieu") that this is a French alternative takes literal shape in Book IX, when Wordsworth and Beaupuy happen to encounter near Blois

a hunger-bitten girl
 Who crept along fitting her languid self
 Unto a heifer's motion—by a cord
 Tied to her arm, and picking thus from the lane
 Its sustenance, while the girl with her two hands
 Was busy knitting in a heartless mood
 Of solitude. . . .

(IX. 512-18)¹²

12. Interestingly De Quincey, in his greatly elaborated account of this episode (based,

Wordsworth's natural education, in contrast, sets the pattern for his lifelong, characteristic "ranging," an essential element of his self-education (cf. III.362, X.39, XII.319). Thus in London at the beginning of Book IX, "Free as a colt at pasture on the hills / I ranged at large through the metropolis / Month after month" (IX.18–20), a pointed contrast to the poverty, the confinement, and the benightedness of the French girl.

But as Orlando demonstrates, in such mean physical and spiritual confinement is rebellion born. The French girl becomes for Beauvuy a paradigmatic provocation to revolution—"at the sight my friend / In agitation said, 'Tis against that / Which we are fighting'" (IX.518–20)—and her "heartless mood" ambivalently hints at future violence no less than present despondency. And the wildness of the suddenly loosed animal was even in early 1793 a type for Wordsworth of the Revolution's early violence: as he wrote in his vehemently radical "Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff,"

the coercive power is of necessity so strong in all the old governments that a people could not but at first make an abuse of that liberty which a legitimate republic supposes. The animal just released from its stall will exhaust the overflow of its spirits in a round of wanton vagaries, but it will soon return to itself and enjoy its freedom in moderate and regular delight.¹³

Perhaps a provocative historical circumstance lies behind this: when Wordsworth first visited Paris in early December 1791 he attended a meeting of the National Assembly, "introduced by a member"; and the "clamorous hall[]" (IX.46) in which the Assembly met was, as de Selincourt has noted, "the *salle de Manège* or Riding Hall" (LEY 71; Owen 180n). The Assembly was to teach the heretofore unschooled populace its manage; but the too long confined pupil was unruly, and the teacher proved to be no master.¹⁴

perhaps, on conversations with Wordsworth as well as on his decades-old recollection of *The Prelude*, which he elsewhere quotes with impressive accuracy), says that the girl was leading (not a heifer but) "the horse . . . that earned the miserable support of her family" *The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. David Masson, 14 vols. (Edinburgh: Black, 1889–90) 2: 277.

13. *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974) 1: 38. Hereafter *WPr*.

14. On the cacophonous and disorderly atmosphere of the *Manège*, see J. M. Thompson, *Robespierre* (1935; Oxford: Blackwell, 1988) 63.

Perhaps further behind this figure lies the ancient, classical one of another Paris going forth to battle:

In its purest, most abstract manifestation—"the very *ne plus ultra* of sublimity," De Quincy (2: 268) called it—the voice of revolution in *The Prelude* is purely the voice of poetry itself, sounding from the shell/book of the Arab dream. The shell, at once natural and artistic, comes from "the waters of the deep" and bespeaks their dangerous return. "[I]n an unknown tongue, / Which yet I understood" (v.94–95)—for to the dreaming man the gift of tongues denied in France (x.121) has now miraculously come—it articulates

A loud prophetic blast of harmony,
An ode in passion uttered, which foretold
Destruction to the children of the earth
By deluge now at hand.

(v.96–99)

Cataclysmic deluge, as *The Prelude* itself will later (in Book x) make more explicit, is a familiar figure for the French Revolution.¹⁵ If the shell's warning is timeless (evoking Noah's flood or Deucalion's, Plato's text or Ovid's or Milton's or Josephus's or Burnet's),¹⁶ it is also most timely.

As when some stalled horse who has been corn-fed at the manger
breaking free of his rope gallops over the plain in thunder

.....

So from uttermost Pergamos came Paris, the son of
Prima, shining in all his armour of war as the sun shines. . . .

(Homer, *Iliad*, tr. Richmond Lattimore [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1951]
vi.506–13; cf. xv.263–70)

15. George P. Landow, *Images of Crisis: Literary Iconology 1750 to the Present* (Boston: Routledge, 1982) 133–40; Paulson 254; Laurence Goldstein, *Ruins and Empire: The Evolution of a Theme in Augustan and Romantic Literature* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1977) 146–50, 159. Wordsworth himself had used deluge as a figure for the Revolution at the conclusion of "Descriptive Sketches":

Oh give, great God, to Freedom's waves to ride
Sublime o'er Conquest, Avarice, and Pride,

.....

And grant that every sceptred child of clay
Who cries, presumptuous, "here their tides shall stay,"
Swept in their anger from th' affrighted shore,
With all his creatures sink—to rise no more.

(792–809)

16. For consideration of various literary precedents of the prophesied deluge, see espe-

At this allegorical, asymptotic extreme, where the voice of revolution is the voice—one of the voices—of poetry itself, Wordsworth begins to insinuate (in counterpoint to his more explicit anxiety about the matter) that poetry is also that which can survive and preserve from revolution. On one level, as I have noted elsewhere, the “great overthrow” (v. 158) Wordsworth soberly but anxiously anticipates here is a personal one, his own death, and the Quixotic errand is that of saving and preserving from this flood his own poetry by writing and publishing it.¹⁷ And as he well remembers, what has heretofore threatened his life, and threatened to stifle his own poetic voice stillborn, is the Revolution:

Reluctantly to England I returned,
Compelled by nothing less than absolute want
Of funds for my support; else, well assured
That I both was and must be of small worth,

. . . .

I doubtless should have made a common cause
With some who perished, haply perished too—
A poor mistaken and bewildered offering,
Should to the breast of Nature have gone back,
With all my resolutions, all my hopes,
A poet only to myself, to men
Useless. . . .

(x. 189–200)

He left behind a lover (she addressed him as “husband” [*mon mari*] and longed for *le titre glorieux de son épouse* in her letters)¹⁸ and a soon-to-be-born daughter. The “want / Of funds” masks another motive for return—the literary publication that might bring him funds, as well as a poetic identity and endurance. “The field of Letters is very extensive, and it is astonishing if we cannot find some little corner, which with a little tillage will produce us enough for the necessities, nay even the

cially Michael Ragussis, *The Subterfuge of Art: Language and the Romantic Tradition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978), chapter 2; Teresa M. Kelley, “Spirit and Geometric Form: The Stone and the Shell in Wordsworth’s Arab Dream,” *Studies in English Literature* 22 (1982): 563–82; and Ernest Bernhardt-Kabisch, “The Stone and the Shell: Wordsworth, Cataclysm, and the Myth of Glaucus,” *Studies in Romanticism* 23 (1984): 455–90.

17. John A. Hodgson, *Wordsworth’s Philosophical Poetry, 1797–1814* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1980) 143–49. See also J. Hillis Miller, “The Stone and the Shell: The Problem of Poetic Form in Wordsworth’s Dream of the Arab,” *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (Boston: Routledge, 1981) 257–59.

18. Emile Legouis, *William Wordsworth and Annette Vallon* (London: Dent, 1922) 126, 132.

comforts, of life" (*LEY* 76), he writes from France to his friend Matthews in May 1792, at a time when he could still depend on his uncle Cookson's offer of a curacy to guarantee him a living. But soon the news about the expectant Annette Vallon could not be longer withheld; "Cookson found Wordsworth's behaviour in France unpardonable, withdrew the offer of assistance, and refused to welcome him at his house."¹⁹ Now Wordsworth had to think about writing for a living, as well as for an immortality, in earnest. As early as September 3, writing his brother Richard from Blois, he anticipates returning to England soon—in October, months before his child was due to be born (Annette gave birth on December 15)—to make arrangements for publishing his poetry: "I am very happy you have got into Chambers, as I shall perhaps be obliged to stay a few weeks in town about my publication you will I hope . . . find me a place for a bed" (*LEY* 81). And by the next month, now again in Paris for the first time since late 1791, he discovers in the aftermath of the September massacres that the city and the Revolution have indeed turned dangerous:

that night

When on my bed I lay, I was most moved
And felt most deeply in what world I was;

 . . . at the best it seemed a place of fear
Unfit for the repose of night,
Defenceless as a wood where tigers roam.

(x. 54–82)

While Wordsworth did not in the event return to London until late November or December, even so he did not see Annette (now in Orleans until she gave birth) after October; the birth he attended—in London, in January—was that of his literary, not his natural offspring. He published, apparently, in some haste, as both he and Dorothy soon acknowledged (*LEY* 89, 120). But he was anxious for recognition as well as funds: "as I had done nothing by which to distinguish myself at the university, I thought these little things might shew that I could do something" (120). And soon, in a letter to Matthews, he is referring to these poems as "my poetical bantlings" (136), a figure which, given the epithet's still-current connotation of "bastards" and the legal status of Wordsworth's own child, can hardly be casual. When Wordsworth confesses his sympathy for the Arab-Quixote's quest, then—

19. Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) 68.

Enow there are on earth to take in charge
 Their wives, their children, and their virgin loves,
 Or whatsoever else the heart holds dear—
 Enow to think of these—yea, will I say,
 In somber contemplation of the approach
 Of such great overthrow, made manifest
 By certain evidence, that I methinks
 Could share that maniac's anxiousness, could go
 Upon like errand

(v. 153-61)

—there is good reason to think that he is speaking from, and confessing to, personal experience.

But the Arab dream carries a universal as well as a personal significance; and here, too, poetry offers itself as that which can survive and preserve from revolution. That revolution of some kind, historical rather than natural cataclysm, is deeply at issue here appears again in Wordsworth's choice of a dream-protagonist: as Ernest Bernhardt-Kabisch aptly notes, "As an Arab, he is one of a nation of preservers and transmitters who rescued Greek science and metaphysics from oblivion . . . and who thereby laid the groundwork for the Renaissance in Europe" (472). Moreover, the dream-insistence, not merely on deluge, not merely on two archetypal books of science and of poetry,²⁰ not merely on the destruction of learning by cataclysm, not merely on a stone and a shell, but specifically on the preserving of a book, of literature and learning, from revolutionary deluge, points to a heretofore unrecognized source which further reinforces Wordsworth's poetic hopes. This undervoice is itself a poem, and one Wordsworth surely knew: it is John Donne's "A Valediction: of the book." In it, much as in Shakespeare's Sonnets 55 and 65 (which respond to the anxiety of Sonnet 64, quoted by Wordsworth in his preface to the dream [v. 251]), a lover speaks to his beloved of how they and their love can endure to future ages. Make a book from our love-letters (implicitly including this very poem), he advises, which will be the annals and records of our love, and of love itself.

This book, as long-liv'd as the elements,
 Or as the world's form, this all-gravèd tome
 In cypher write, or new-made idiom;

20. Jane Worthington Smyser traced back this aspect of the dream to Descartes' third dream of 10 November 1619, in which he "beheld two books, one of which contained all scientific knowledge, while the other, which he valued more highly, contained all the inspired wisdom of poetry" ("Wordsworth's Dream of Poetry and Science, *The Prelude*, v" *PMLA* 71 [1956]: 271-72).

We for Love's clergy only are instruments.
 When this book is made thus,
 Should again the ravenous
 Vandals and Goths inundate us,
 Learning were safe; in this our Universe
 Schools might learn sciences, spheres music, angels verse.
 (19–27)²¹

Through revolutionary inundation as through individual death, poetry can preserve itself and us, “enshrin[ing] the spirit of the past / For future restoration” (xi.342–43).

IV: Poetry as History

Thus in *The Prelude* the voice of revolution first emerges intelligibly to Wordsworth from its origins in the white noise of foreign and chaotic speech, and first breaks forth from Wordsworth himself, as the voice of poetry—other poets' poetry; and in its essence the voice of revolution, as the Arab dream tells us, is the voice of poetry itself. Between these initial and apocalyptic extremes come the discovery and development of Wordsworth's own, distinctive voice.

We can trace the origins of Wordsworth's poetic self-definition more precisely still, to the time immediately after the revolutionary shock he experiences with England's declaration of war against France. Here he essays for the first time the fierce tone of vindictive prophecy:

I rejoiced,
 Yes, afterwards, truth painful to record,
 Exulted in the triumph of my soul
 When Englishmen by thousands were o'erthrown,
 Left without glory on the field, or driven,
 Brave hearts, to shameful flight.

Alienated from his countrymen, he nurses among them his own domestically revolutionary hopes; but, voiceless yet, he does so only silently, secretly:

It was a grief—
 Grief call it not, 'twas any thing but that—
 A conflict of sensations without name,
 Of which he only who may love the sight
 Of a village steeple as I do can judge,

21. *The Songs and Sonnets of John Donne*, ed. Theodore Redpath, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin's, 1983) 247–48.

When in the congregation, bending all
 To their great Father, prayers were offered up
 Or praises for our country's victories,
 And, 'mid the simple worshippers perchance
 I only, like an uninvited guest
 Whom no one owned, sate silent—shall I add,
 Fed on the day of vengeance yet to come!

(x.258–74)²²

This might well be the rehearsal of some “prophetic blast,” some “ode in passion uttered, which foretold / Destruction to the children of the earth / By deluge now at hand”—save that it is still a theme without a song, the broodings of a poet still without a voice. This struggle toward utterance continues through the “unintelligible chastisement” (x.415) to which “rage and dog-day heat” (x.411) provoke him during the Terror. But not until the news comes “That, *Robespierre was dead*” (x.535) does Wordsworth find his voice.

Kenneth Johnston has argued of Wordsworth that “self-quotation is the strongest form of authority this poet knows” (317; see also 215, 186); and nowhere else in *The Prelude* is self-quotation so emphatic and

22. While Wordsworth in 1793 may have sat silently at odds with the congregation of some village church in such a scene (probably in Wales; see Mark L. Reed, *Wordsworth: The Chronology of the Early Years 1770–1799* [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1967] 148n), the secretly revolutionary thoughts he nursed echo sentiments which were in fact then sometimes resounding from the pulpit itself. In a contemporary sermon entitled “Christianity vindicated in not particularly inculcating Friendship and Patriotism,” the famous Dissenter Joseph Fawcett preached at the Old Jewry in London that “The patriot of the Christian school is one, who loves his country as a community of MEN”:

[I]f his fellow-countrymen oppose the right, set their face against the welfare, of his fellow-men; if they engage in unrighteous war; . . . his heart protests against their proceeding; his prayers oppose the cry of their temples; his sighs accompany the shout of their success; and his song of thanksgiving ascends for their defeats. (Joseph Fawcett, *Sermons Delivered at the Sunday-evening Lecture, for the Winter Season, at the Old Jewry*, 2 vols. [1795; 2nd ed. London, 1801] 2: 127, 142, 143)

Wordsworth later told Isabella Fenwick that “It happened to me several times to be one of [Fawcett’s] congregation” when he was in London “at the beginning of the French Revolution” (*The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon, 1940–49] 5: 374–75). Gill states that “The *Sermons*, which are uncontroversial, had little impact on W[ordsworth],” and argues that Wordsworth’s locating this recollection “at the time, when I had not many acquaintances in London” indicates 1791 rather than 1793 (Gill 434nn. 87, 88). But this one controversial sermon so closely anticipates *The Prelude* here as to make a direct connection, and the later date, seem likely.

prominent as it is here, when Wordsworth first unmistakably proclaims, in his own voice, his own voice. Now at last the vindictive, exultant revolutionary voice that he has nursed and rehearsed so long in silence erupts:

Great was my glee of spirit, great my joy
 In vengeance, and eternal justice, thus
 Made manifest. 'Come now, ye golden times',
 Said I, forth-breaking on those open sands
 A hymn of triumph, 'as the morning comes
 Out of the bosom of the night, come ye.'

(x. 539–44)

But gradually the tone and the theme shift; and by the end of the passage, as Wordsworth travels along the Furness shore of the Leven estuary and recalls his childhood outings along this same shore, he first paraphrases and finally—for the only time in the poem—quotes exactly his own earlier lines from *The Prelude*.

I pursued my way
 Along that very shore which I had skimmed
 In former times, when, spurring from the Vale
 Of Nightshade, and St. Mary's mouldering fane,
 And the stone abbot, after circuit made
 In wantonness of heart, a joyous crew
 Of schoolboys, hastening to their distant home,
 Along the margin of the moonlight sea,
 We beat with thundering hoofs the level sand.

(x. 558–66; compare II. 110–12, 125, 136–38, 143–44)

This modulation of Wordsworth's song from political to personal history is paradigmatic of what Liu sees as Wordsworth's persistent lyric "denial of history": it "lays history to rest through precise strategies designed to transform the scene of collective authority into that of the poet's original self. Its basic strategy is a strangely selfish manner of allusion" (Liu 383; and see 380–83 *passim*). The Leven scene is all the more finely paradigmatic because it is not merely Wordsworth's first properly poetic utterance in his self-history, but a type of his poetic beginning itself. Here indeed, in his "immediate response to the news of Robespierre's death," as Douglas Kneale notes, is Wordsworth "making a present joy the matter of his song" (see 1. 55–56).²³ Kneale's allusion

23. J. Douglas Kneale, *Monumental Writing: Aspects of Rhetoric in Wordsworth's Poetry*

to the “glad preamble” of Book I is suggestive; for now as then Wordsworth, with a sense of release from spiritual confinement, is prompted by a “welcome messenger” to an outburst of “dithyrambic fervour” (vii.5) and anticipates a renovative time of peace.

But such transformations of the scene hardly lay history to rest; revolution disappears into the private scene only to live and resonate there, ever ready to return and reassert itself. The “small / And rocky island” prominent in the Leven sands scene on which “a fragment stood— / Itself like a sea rock—of what had been / A Romish chapel” (x.517–20) perfectly exemplifies Liu’s claim that “Nature obscure[s] history within landscape once more, return[s] the facts of historical violence to the status of ghostly, unnatural fictions” (166). But in counterturn that ruined Romish chapel, a place where once “monks prayed continually for the welfare of voyagers,”²⁴ evokes the similar but more recent depredations in France (like that “convent . . . a roofless pile, / And not by reverential touch of time / Dismantled, but by violence abrupt” [ix.469–72]) and more specifically their instigator Robespierre, who “Wielded the sceptre of the atheist crew” (x.457). It also anticipates Wordsworth’s presentation of himself, in his temporary “habit” of sterile rationalism, as a misguided “noviciate” and then “monk,” “A bigot to a new idolatry” (x.682, xi.254, 75–76). Given Wordsworth’s sustained figuring of the Revolution as a profane and false worship, perhaps even “St. Mary’s” and “the stone abbot” here in this Vale of Nightshade may be felt as antithetically evoking their Revolutionary counterparts—say, “Jacobin” and “Robespierre” (“stone robes”), respectively. In this context it is interesting to note that the Robespierre-like Oswald of *The Borderers* pointedly identifies himself with the nightshade—“That which, while it is / Strong to destroy, is also strong to heal” (i.i.18–19)—upon his first entrance.²⁵ The Leven scene absorbs the French Revolution into

(Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1988) 124–25. More generally, Chandler argues that “the crisis we see enacted in book I with respect to the psychology of poetic composition is congruent or homologous with the crisis we see narrated in book II with respect to the psychology of political morality” (194), though he does not apply this particularly to the Leven sands episode.

24. Jeffery Baker, *Time and Mind in Wordsworth’s Poetry* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1980) 162. Baker’s entire description of the Leven setting is informative (161–63).

25. On the identification of Oswald (“Rivers” in the early version of the play) with Robespierre, see especially David V. Erdman, “Wordsworth as Heartsworth; or, Was Regicide the Prophetic Ground of Those ‘Moral Questions’?” in *The Evidence of the Imagination: Studies of the Interactions between Life and Art in English Romantic Literature*, ed. Donald H. Reiman, Michael C. Jaye, and Betty T. Bennett (New York: New York UP, 1978) 20–32. See also Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford:

the poetry of Wordsworth's private history only to represent that revolution everywhere.

This transformation of the Leven scene involves poetical no less than political history. For Wordsworth's supposedly "selfish manner of allusion" here is also a pointedly unselfish allusiveness to an epic precursor. The one line of *The Prelude* that he repeats—"We beat with thundering hoofs the level sand"—is, as Bruce Graver points out, a direct borrowing from *The Aeneid's* *quadrupedante putrem sonitu quatit ungula campum*, "the hoof shakes with four-footed thunder the soft plain" (VIII.596; see also XI.875).²⁶ And this line, the famous "galloping verse," is in fact one of the few that Virgil himself repeats in his own epic; Wordsworth's very self-repetition is itself allusive. Wordsworth's initial outburst, moreover—"Come now, ye golden times"—clearly evokes the hailing of a new Golden Age, another Age of Saturn, in Virgil's Fourth Eclogue: "*talia saecla . . . currite*", "Hasten, ye such [golden] times" (*Ecl.* 4.46). Wordsworth's lines, like the Leven scene he describes, absorb but also preserve their history.

So even while Wordsworth's poetic outburst at Leven shows him at last finding his own revolutionary voice, *The Prelude* at just this point demonstrates that the history and the poetry thus imported will be domesticated but not denied. And more than this, the development of Wordsworth's voice, when it finally breaks forth, proves to be significantly like the development of revolution itself—an initial "overflow of its spirits in a round of wanton vagaries," from which "it will soon return to itself and enjoy its freedom in moderate and regular delight"

Clarendon, 1988) 223: "In the character of Rivers Wordsworth had, in fact, realized Coleridge's perception of the similarities between Godwin's arrogant abstraction and Robespierre's visionary politics." On the emblematic association of Oswald with the nightshade, see Hodgson 10. The association itself would seem to owe a particular debt to Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794): at the conclusion Williams says of Falkland,

Thy intellectual powers were truly sublime, and thy bosom burned with a godlike ambition. But of what use are talents and sentiments in the corrupt wilderness of human society? It is a rank and rotten soil, from which every finer shrub draws poison as it grows. All that in a happier field and a purer air, would expand into virtue and germinate into usefulness is thus converted into henbane and deadly nightshade. (William Godwin, *Caleb Williams*, ed. George Sherburn [New York: Holt, 1963] 377)

Robert Osborn regards *Caleb Williams* as an important but "oddly neglected" influence on *The Borderers*; see William Wordsworth, *The Borderers*, ed. Robert Osborn (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982) 31–32.

26. Personal communication; see Graver's forthcoming edition of Wordsworth's *Aeneid* translation in the Cornell Wordsworth series.

(*WPr* 1: 38). So Wordsworth now characterizes the Revolution itself: “They who with clumsy desperation brought / Rivers of blood . . . / . . . by the might / Of their own helper have been swept away,” and “Elsewhere will safety now be sought, and earth / March firmly towards righteousness and peace” (x.546–52). But so also has he already characterized the “dithyrambic fervour” of *The Prelude’s* beginning, a “deep / But short-lived uproar, like a torrent sent / Out of the bowels of a bursting cloud / Down Scawfell, or Blencathara’s rugged sides, / A water-spout from heaven” (vii.5–9). And now, like revolution, his poetry begins to “return to itself” (“Then schemes I framed more calmly, when and how / The madding factions might be tranquillized” [x.553–541])—though for a while it is still, like the Revolution, “interrupted by uneasy bursts / Of exultation,” still “spurring . . . In wantonness of heart” (x.557–63). For while Wordsworth’s poetry is revolutionary, he has not yet, in 1794, found his revolutionary style. Now appreciating that poetry, like revolution, “is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (*WPr* 1: 126, 148), he has not yet also learned its need for a certain “recollect[ion]”—a “return to itself”—“in tranquillity” (*WPr* 1: 148). Only after 1794 will Wordsworth begin to English his poetic revolution.

V: The Political Theory of Poetry

The ultimate recompense of Wordsworth’s turn from politics to poetry is that it proves to be not a departure but a reorientation, not a denial but an incorporation of the lessons of history. Wordsworth’s final choice of the poet’s rather than the statesman’s habit of devotion is so anticlimactic because the real choice—“imaginative power” (xi.253)—has already been made. All else, all since, has indeed been “progress on the self-same path”; what had stunned and momentarily subverted him was not revolution, but tyranny.

I have “given twelve hours thought to the conditions and prospects of society, for one to poetry,” Wordsworth announced later in life.²⁷ The ratio is in fact roughly that planned by Wordsworth and his friend Matthews for the monthly miscellany they contemplated undertaking in the summer of 1794 (*LEY* 125–29). Yet in a deeper sense the distinction here is deceptive: the former pursuit is futile and even harmful without the latter. As Wordsworth argues in his fragmentary “Essay on Morals” (1798),

27. Quoted in F. M. Todd, *Politics and the Poet: A Study of Wordsworth* (London: Methuen, 1957) 11.

I consider such books as Mr. Godwyn's [*Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*], Mr. Paley's [presumably *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*], & those of the whole tribe of authors of that class as impotent [? in or ? to] all their intended good purposes; to which I wish I could add that they were equally impotent to all bad one[s]. . . . I know no book or system of moral philosophy written with sufficient power to melt into our affection[?s], to incorporate itself with the blood & vital juices of our minds, & thence to have any influence worth our notice in forming [our] habits. . . . Can it be imagined by any man who has deeply examined his own heart that an old habit will be foregone, or a new one formed, by a series of propositions, which, presenting no image to the [?mind] can convey no feeling which has any connection with the supposed archetype or fountain of the proposition existing in human life? These moralists attempt to strip the mind of all its old clothing when their object ought to be to furnish it with new. . . . The whole secret of this juggler's trick[?] lies (not in fitting words to things (which would be a noble employment) but) in fitting things to words. . . . (WPr 1: 103)

This is but the negative of the positive that Wordsworth would soon argue—with political imagery he would in *The Prelude* recall antithetically in the “unjust tribunals” (x.377) of his Revolutionary nightmares—in his “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads*:

Poetry is the most philosophic of all writing: . . . its object is truth, not individual and local, but general and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion; truth which is its own testimony, which gives strength and divinity to the tribunal to which it appeals, and receives them from the same tribunal. (WPr 1: 139)

Yet the deeper lesson of Wordsworth's political self-education is not simply that poetry is a necessary vehicle for political and moral philosophy but, much more than this, that poetry also incarnates such philosophy. Not only is poetry the intelligible voice of revolution; the political lessons of revolution are the very principles of poetry.

The most fundamental of these principles is sympathy. The great flaw of a monarchical system of government, Wordsworth writes in his “Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff,” is that it “precludes [the monarch] from attaining even a moderate knowledge of common life and from feeling a particular share in the interests of mankind” (WPr 1: 33). The corresponding virtue of a representative system is just this “grand prin-

principle of identification": "to be qualified for the office of legislation you should have felt like the bulk of mankind; their sorrows should be familiar to you, of which if you are ignorant how can you redress them?" (*WPr* 1: 37, 47). But just such identification, Wordsworth will later argue, constitutes the particular power of the poet, whose "passions and thoughts and feelings are the general passions and thoughts and feelings of men" and who will seek "to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes, nay, for short spaces of time, perhaps, to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs" (*WPr* 1: 142, 138).

Early in 1793 Wordsworth responded angrily to Richard Watson's attempt to "calm[] a perturbation which you say has been *excited* in the minds of the lower orders of the community" with a radically French retort:

What! have you so little knowledge of the nature of man as to be ignorant, that a time of revolution is not the season of true Liberty. Alas! the obstinacy & perversion of men is such that she is too often obliged to borrow the very arms of despotism to overthrow him, and in order to reign in peace must establish herself by violence. She deplores such stern necessity, but the safety of the people, her supreme law, is her consolation. . . . Political virtues are developed at the expense of moral ones. . . . (*WPr* 1: 31, 33-34)

Just so in France "Tyrants, strong before / In devilish pleas, were ten times stronger now" (x.309-10), he would later write, thus displacingly confessing the viciousness of his own earlier words.²⁸ In poetry, too, "excitement may be carried beyond its proper bounds" in the absence of some means of "tempering and restraining the passion by an intertexture of ordinary feeling" (*WPr* 1: 146). Wordsworth is here speaking of poetic execution, specifically of the tempering as well as pleasing influence of meter and rhyme. And this easy passage between political and poetical conditions comes increasingly to characterize his work by the time of *The Prelude*.

In the final stage of his imaginative impairment Wordsworth presents himself as something like the agent of a spiritual despotism—living

28. "So spake the Fiend, and with necessity, / The Tyrant's plea, excus'd his devilish deeds" (*Paradise Lost* iv. 393-94). In his speech of 25 December 1793 Robespierre formalized the plea as the position of the Committee of Public Safety: revolutionary government, he declared, "rests on the most sacred of all laws, the safety of the people; and on the most irrefutable of all arguments: that of necessity" (quoted in D. G. Wright, *Revolution and Terror in France 1789-1795* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1974) 129).

“Beneath the domination of a taste / Less elevated” than the world deserves, held in “thralldom” in the eye’s tyrannic “empire,” himself “sitting . . . in judgment” only to parrot “rules of mimic art,” “critic rules” he has no part in forming (XI.117–18, 197, 192, 164, 154, 202). His analysis of this degraded condition presents it in political terms:

The state to which I now allude was one
 In which the eye was master of the heart,
 When that which is in every stage of life
 The most despotic of our senses gained
 Such strength in me as often held my mind
 In absolute dominion.

And just so does he allude to its correction:

Gladly here,
 Entering upon abstruser argument,
 Would I endeavour to unfold the means
 Which Nature studiously employs to thwart
 This tyranny, summons all the senses each
 To counteract the other and themselves,
 And makes them all, and the objects with which all
 Are conversant, subservient in their turn
 To the great ends of liberty and power.
 But this is matter for another song. . . .

(XI.170–84)

No politically literate European of the time could have failed to recognize Wordsworth’s analogy here. For Wordsworth is pointedly evoking Montesquieu’s celebrated theory in *The Spirit of the Laws* of a governmental “separation of powers” as a guarantee of civil liberty by virtue of these powers’ checks and balances upon each other. Montesquieu’s ideas—all the more attractive to an Englishman in that Montesquieu regarded the English constitutional system as the best instance of political liberty—were current and influential in France during the early years of the Revolution, and were especially popular among the more moderate parties. Wordsworth would almost certainly have discussed them with Beaupuy during their “discourse[s] about the end / Of civil government, and its wisest forms” (IX.329–30). He could equally well have encountered them back in England through the filter of Sir William Blackstone, who borrowed heavily from Montesquieu in his famous *Commentaries*: Wordsworth’s brother Richard, with whom he stayed in London upon his return from France in late 1792, was a lawyer, and William borrowed

(and did not return for years, if ever) two volumes of Richard's four-volume set of the *Commentaries* in 1794.²⁹

An analysis of Nature's checkings and balancings of the senses' powers may be "matter for another song";³⁰ but a record of the process is matter for this one, Wordsworth's autobiography. The present book concludes with a succinct example. Countering the threat that "the most despotic of our senses" might "h[o]ld my mind / In absolute dominion," Wordsworth soon thankfully recalls the restorative influence of

those passages of life in which
We have had deepest feeling that the mind
Is lord and master, and that outward sense
Is but the obedient servant of her will.

(XI.269–72)

In the latter of the two incidents—the "spots of time"—which he then illustratively recounts, that of his anxious lookout for the horses that would take him and his brothers home from school for the Christmas holidays, the young Wordsworth stations himself atop a crag whence he can observe both the possible approaches.

'Twas a day
Stormy, and rough, and wild, and on the grass
I sate half sheltered by a naked wall.
Upon my right hand was a single sheep,
A whistling hawthorn on my left, and there,
With those companions at my side, I watched,
Straining my eyes intensely as the mist
Gave intermitting prospect of the wood
And plain beneath.

(XI.355–63)

Within ten days his father dies, and the boy feels mysteriously chastised for his earlier anxiousness to be home. Henceforth the scene of his impatient waiting becomes significantly memorable:

29. LEY 674; Reed 149n. This or another complete four-volume set of Blackstone's *Commentaries* eventually made part of Wordsworth's personal library at Rydal Mount; see Chester L. Shaver and Alice C. Shaver, *Wordsworth's Library: A Catalogue* (New York: Garland, 1979) 28.

30. Geoffrey H. Hartman has several times meditated on "the dialectic of the senses" in Wordsworth, most recently in his essay "A Touching Compulsion": "How do ears counteract eyes?" See his *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987) 23–30 (the quotation is from 25).

the wind and sleety rain,
 And all the business of the elements,
 The single sheep, and the one blasted tree,
 And the bleak music of that old stone wall,
 The noise of wood and water, and the mist
 Which on the line of each of those two roads
 Advanced in such indisputable shapes—
 All these were spectacles and sounds to which
 I often would repair, and thence would drink
 As at a fountain.

(XI.375–84)

It is the same scene, and yet not the same; the sensing of it has strangely shifted. What were first recorded as “a naked wall” (a visual image) and “a whistling hawthorn” (aural) are later recalled as “the bleak music of that old stone wall” (aural) and “the one blasted tree” (visual). Yet “blasted” also suggests additional, aural connotations, recalling the “Wild blasts of music” figuring Wordsworth’s prophetic rage during the Terror (x.419), “The stationary blasts of waterfalls” in the Gondo Gorge (vi.558), the “loud prophetic blast of harmony” sounding from the Arab’s shell (v.96), and suggests also the tactile pressure of the wind, like “the blast which blew amain” during the bird’s-nest episode (i.345), the blasts of the Terror which spin the child’s pinwheel (x.344) and “From hell came sanctified like airs from heaven” (x.313–14); and “bleak” similarly brings visual and tactile associations. The wood which was sensed once in “prospect” is sensed now in “noise”; the mist which once irregularly shifted now firmly advances. And from all these “spectacles and sounds”—and which are which?—Wordsworth “would drink, / As at a fountain.”

These alternations of sense, another manifestation of the tidal “fluxes and refluxes of the mind” (*WPr* I: 126) so characteristic of Wordsworth’s best poetry, here animate what he presents as an exclusively personal, private experience, one of “the hiding-places of my power” (xi.335); and yet they illustrate a fundamental theory of political philosophy, which is also an Englishing and domesticating of dangerous revolution. Revolution is not only the voice of poetry and the message; it is also the medium.

Wordsworth twice receives “tidings” in *The Prelude*. The first come at a high tide of accomplishment, an “overflowing” of imagination, to be followed by a “slackening”: climbing without a guide, Wordsworth has peaked without knowing it. The “tidings by the peasant given,” even

when, “Hard of belief, we questioned him again,” amount to this: “that we had crossed the Alps” (vi. 548–50, 520, 524). The second come at a low tide of despair, on a “pathless track” of sea-sand where an unguided poet’s voice is waiting to break forth and be born.³¹ The traveller’s “tidings,” confirmed “On further question”—“Nor was a doubt . . . left within my mind”—amount to this: “That, *Robespierre was dead*” (x. 535–37).³²

The Prelude brings us questionable but indisputable tidings. They are revolutionary.

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31. The phrase is from De Quincey’s own description of the Leven setting and its dangers, offered as a context for Wordsworth’s lines (2: 281n).

32. Kneale 124 notes the “close rhetorical similarity” of the two messages.