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The Politics of the Epic: Wordsworth, Byron, and the Romantic Redefinition of Heroism

Paul A. Cantor

Abstract: Traditionally, the epic focused on the heroic deeds of great public figures, but the Romantics remade the genre into something more personal, making the poet himself the hero of their epics. The Romantic disillusionment with politics, flowing from the failure of the French Revolution, lies behind their revaluation of heroism. The turn to nature, which the Romantics present as immediate, turns out to be mediated by their political experience. Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* are good examples of the Romantic transformation of the epic and provide a case study in the relation of politics and literature, specifically the politics of literary form.

I want a hero: an uncommon want,
When every year and month sends forth a new one,
Till, after cloying the gazettes with cant,
The age discovers he is not the true one.

—Lord Byron, *Don Juan*

All my tale is of myself.

—Wordsworth, *The Prelude*

I

“Arms and the man I sing” is the way John Dryden famously translates the opening words of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, thereby summing up the traditional subject matter of epic poetry. The classic epics—*The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*—chronicle the heroic deeds of great warriors like Achilles, Odysseus, and Aeneas and celebrate the life of warfare. Although Homer and Virgil do not present the hero’s intense devotion to war as unproblematic, they do single out the warrior’s life as the central theme of epic poetry. Even Shakespeare, with his wider range as a poet, focuses his serious plays, his histories and tragedies, on public figures and the central political issue of war and peace. Shakespeare’s tragic heroes—King Lear, Othello, Macbeth, Julius Caesar, Brutus, Mark Antony, Coriolanus—are noble warriors and even generals in the field, and the one great exception to the rule, Hamlet, fervently wishes that he were a heroic man of action. Up through the Renaissance and beyond, the poet was generally subordinate to the man of action; the poet’s highest subject was not himself but heroic deeds in the public sphere. The traditional concept of epic and tragedy as the supreme genres and the pinnacle of literary achievement effectively placed political life at the center of poetic concern.

Clearly this attitude does not prevail today. Few if any contemporary poets would choose to write an epic at all, let alone one celebrating the life of war. Rather, poets today feel quite comfortable writing about themselves as their principal subject and regard their personal struggles to become poets as a new form of heroism, fully worthy of the most serious treatment in literature. At some point between the eighteenth century and the present—roughly at the beginning of the nineteenth century with the Romantic revolution in poetry—the poet became his own hero. We are so much the heirs of this revolution that we think it quite natural that a poet should write, not about the heroic world of war and politics, but about his own feelings as a private individual. It was William Wordsworth who defined poetry (somewhat contradictorily) as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” and “emotion recollected in tranquility.”¹ Following Romantic models, we tend to think that the poet’s true subject is his own emotional responses to the world around him, particularly to the beauty of nature. Our archetype of a poem is still something like Percy Shelley’s “To a Skylark” or John Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale.” Why should a poet write about a battlefield when he can write about a field of daffodils?

Students of politics should be interested in how this Romantic transformation of the nature of poetry came about, because it involved an enormous devaluation of political life as a literary subject and also because it can be connected to the specific political circumstances in which the Romantics wrote. I will argue that the spontaneity of the Romantic response to nature is a consciously created poetic myth. The seemingly immediate Romantic relation to the natural world is mediated by their relation to the political world. In short, the Romantic turn to nature is a turning away from politics; their enchantment with nature follows from disenchantment with politics (especially their disappointment with the French Revolution and the Napoleonic despotism that resulted from it). This turn from the political to the natural world is clearest in Romantic attempts at epic, where the two worlds confront each other directly. Today we may remember the Romantics chiefly for their achievements in lyric poetry, but in their own day they were not satisfied with working in small forms. Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats—each in his own way had ambitions to join the pantheon of great poets by producing a long narrative poem that would be epic in scope. But working in a genre traditionally

¹These definitions appear in the famous Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800). See Jack Stillinger, ed., *Selected Poems and Prefaces by William Wordsworth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 448, 460. Wordsworth was aware that he was trying to chart a new poetic course: “Another circumstance must be mentioned which distinguishes these Poems from the popular Poetry of the day: it is this, that the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling” (448). One could not have a clearer statement of the new primacy of emotion over action in Romantic poetry.

focused on the heroism of public life was difficult for the Romantics, partly because the example set by predecessors like Homer and Virgil could be daunting to any poet, partly because the nature of public life had changed in their day in ways that made it less attractive as a poetic subject. Finding themselves unable to write traditional epics, the Romantics labored to transform the genre into something more personal, and in the process they discovered that they could be their own best heroes. Confronted with the traditional epic and its premium on war and politics, the Romantics challenged its claim for the superiority of the heroic life of action and came up with arguments for their new form of heroism as poets. If we want to understand how the poet became his own hero, we must examine the Romantic epic.

II

A good place to begin is Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. As its title indicates, this poem was intended to be merely the prelude to the great epic Wordsworth hoped to write, a project he called *The Recluse*, on which he worked intermittently for years but produced nothing more than fragments. Thus *The Prelude* is generally regarded as the closest Wordsworth ever came to writing an epic poem and stands as one of the most significant Romantic achievements in the genre. It is divided into fourteen books (in its finished, published version of 1850),² it is written in an elevated blank verse that often has a Miltonic ring, it contains epic diction and epic similes, and it shows many other signs of Wordsworth's attempt to work within the established epic tradition. But if one looks at the beginning of the poem, where the epic poet traditionally invokes his Muse, one can see how radically Wordsworth differs from his predecessors.³ The Invocation to the Muse in the classic epic is brief and to the point. The classic poet knows what his subject will be—Homer's "wrath of Achilles" or Virgil's "arms and the man"—and he plunges without hesitation into narrating the story he has to tell. But Wordsworth

²The history of the composition and publication of *The Prelude* is incredibly complicated and can be found in any modern edition of the poem, such as the one edited by J. C. Maxwell, *William Wordsworth: The Prelude: A Parallel Text* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1971), 17–29. The long version of *The Prelude* basically exists in two forms, an original version from 1805 and a final version Wordsworth prepared in 1839 for posthumous publication, which occurred in 1850. I have used the Maxwell edition for all quotations, with book and line citations incorporated into the body of the essay. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from the 1805 version, which comes closer to recording Wordsworth's "spontaneous" reactions to the events of his life.

³See Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787–1814* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971), 208.

is massively unsure of himself as *The Prelude* opens and it takes him some 270 lines to get to the narrative of his childhood that turns out to be the beginning of the story his poem is to recount. In the opening lines, Wordsworth is searching for an epic theme suitable to his ambitions as a poet. He is in the mood to write something epic, he believes he has the freedom and the energy to devote himself to the task, and he certainly aspires to take his place among the great practitioners of the genre, with an “assurance of some work / Of glory there forthwith to be begun” (I.85–86). But what in the world is Wordsworth going to write about in his epic?

Unlike Homer and Virgil, Wordsworth weighs his epic options carefully before beginning the poem proper. He considers at first the kind of everyday theme he typically explores in his lyric poetry—“the life / In common things” (I.117–18)—but he quickly admits: “I had hopes / Still higher” (I.127–28), and he goes on to say that his “determined aim” (I.124) is to “grapple with some nobler theme” (I.139). As he seeks a way to elevate his poetry to the epic plane, he pauses to take inventory of his resources as a poet to write “a glorious work” (I.158) and somewhat immodestly concludes that he has what it takes, “the vital soul” (I.161), as well as the ideas and images “needful to build up a Poet’s praise” (I.168). But with all the skills of a poet at this command, Wordsworth is still lacking the appropriate epic theme:

Time, place, and manners, these I seek, and these
I find in plenteous store, but nowhere such
As may be singled out with steady choice;
No little band of yet remembered names
Whom I, in perfect confidence, might hope
To summon back from lonesome banishment,
And make the inmates in the hearts of men
Now living, or to live in times to come. (I.169–76)

This passage crystallizes the difference between Wordsworth and his great epic predecessors. Unlike Homer and Virgil, he cannot begin his epic with “perfect confidence.” When he searches the annals of history, he cannot hit upon a heroic subject that stands out as obviously worthy of poetic immortality. Wordsworth worries that he may be “mistaking vainly” “Proud spring-time swellings for a regular sea” (I.177–78)—that is, he might be overestimating a contemporary event as having epic importance, when it really is of merely passing significance.

Somewhat dismayed, Wordsworth begins to consider the concrete possibilities he might choose for an epic theme:

I settle on some British theme, some old
Romantic tale by Milton left unsung;
More often resting at some gentle place
Within the groves of Chivalry, I pipe

Among the shepherds, with reposing knights
 Sit by a fountain side, and hear their tales. (l.179–84)

This seems at first promising. The epic poet typically celebrates his own nation by telling the story of a national hero who embodies its distinctive virtues and has a place in the hearts of his countrymen. So Wordsworth will turn to “some British theme.” The mention of a “tale by Milton left unsung” is a reference to the fact that, before settling on “Man’s first Disobedience” as the subject of his epic, *Paradise Lost*, Milton seriously considered writing about King Arthur and his knights. But by speaking of what “Milton left unsung,” Wordsworth hints at his problem as a poet in the nineteenth century. He feels condemned to follow in Milton’s footsteps—not an enviable position for a poet hoping to make a name for himself. When Wordsworth tries to change the subject and turn to chivalric and pastoral romances, he finds himself stumbling into Edmund Spenser territory and entering into competition with the second most famous epic in English, *The Faerie Queene*. Wordsworth’s unhappiness with the traditional subject matter of English epic is an example of the phenomenon Harold Bloom calls the anxiety of influence.⁴ Wordsworth is not sure he wants to invite direct comparisons with the towering poetic achievements of Spenser and Milton.

Thus Wordsworth moves farther afield in search of original subject matter for his epic and considers possibilities from Roman and Norse history and mythology and other figures from the ancient world. The principle of his selection is not clear, but his interest does seem to have a political focus. He speaks of “the soul / Of Liberty” in the ancient world (l.195–96), which he fears has been lost in the modern, and finally he hits upon a well-formulated theme that has a noble sound to it:

I would record
 How, in tyrannic times, some unknown man,
 Unheard of in the chronicles of kings,
 Suffered in silence for the love of Truth. (l.201–204)

Wordsworth, at last, appears to be on the right track. For a Romantic poet to write an epic praising freedom and celebrating the struggle of the courageous rebel against tyranny seems appropriate. Wordsworth mentions a number of heroic figures from history whose adventures would allow him to tell an epic tale of human liberty. The series culminates in a very un-British gesture, as Wordsworth brings up William Wallace, the great rebel against English rule in Scotland. We think of the Romantic poets as rebels themselves, and it would have been a very rebellious move for Wordsworth to have written

⁴See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), and *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

an epic celebrating a Scotsman as embodying the "soul / Of independence and stern liberty" (I.218–19). Has Wordsworth finally found the subject for his epic poem?

But Wordsworth suddenly backpedals, and returns to the possibilities he explored in his lyric poetry: "Sometimes it suits me better to shape out / Some tale from my own heart" (I.220–21), only to worry that such a subject is "unsubstantial" (I.228), perhaps unworthy of epic treatment. He momentarily considers the subject for an epic his friend Coleridge kept urging upon him, "some philosophic song" (230), but concludes that he should wait until he is mature enough to deal adequately with such a lofty intellectual theme.⁵ Having run through all these possibilities for the subject matter of his epic, Wordsworth finds himself stymied. He wonders whether he is raising legitimate doubts about possible themes for his epic, or merely making excuses to avoid having to face up to actually undertaking the difficult task (I.238–47). Wordsworth bitterly admits that he has reached a dead end in his search for an epic subject and wishes that he had never aspired to rival the great poets of the past (I.257–60). In the end, he is uncertain whether the problem lies with the epic themes he has considered or with his own abilities as a poet:

This is my lot; for either still I find
Some imperfection in the chosen theme,
Or see of absolute accomplishment
Much wanting, so much wanting, in myself. (I.263–66)

The opening of *The Prelude* is a fascinating case study of the frustration a poet at the beginning of the nineteenth century experienced when confronted with the task of writing an epic. Part of the problem was what Walter Jackson Bate has called "the burden of the past," the sheer weight of the epic tradition that had accumulated by the time Wordsworth sat down to write.⁶ Part of the problem was what struck the Romantic poets as the lack of suitable subject matter in their unheroic, ignoble, and unpoetic age. But just as Wordsworth appears to be abandoning his epic quest, he plunges right into his story:

Was it for this
That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved
To blend his murmurs with my nurse's song? (I.271–73)

⁵In a letter to Wordsworth dated May 30, 1815, Coleridge outlined in elaborate detail the philosophic subjects he had hoped his fellow poet would cover in *The Recluse*, including a critique of Locke. As it became painfully clear to Coleridge that he himself would never write an epic poem, he transferred his literary ambitions to Wordsworth.

⁶Walter Jackson Bate, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

Suddenly Wordsworth is on solid ground, as he begins to narrate the events from his childhood that started him on his long journey to become a poet. On the brink of artistic despair, he has found his epic theme after all—it will be the development of his own mind, his growth as a poet. Epic becomes autobiography. Wordsworth will tell the story of his life up to the point where *The Prelude* begins, that is, the point when he is ready to write a great epic. *The Prelude* is a kind of proto-postmodernist enterprise, a poem that circles back to its own beginning and tells the story of its own creation. In a move that became paradigmatic for Romantic, Victorian, modern, and even postmodern authors, Wordsworth turns his poetic weakness into poetic strength.⁷ His difficulty in finding an epic subject becomes his epic subject; his struggle to write an epic becomes his epic struggle. In this way, Wordsworth snatches poetic victory from the jaws of poetic defeat—and all by making himself the hero of his own epic.

III

Despite Wordsworth's success in finding his epic theme, we are left wondering why he did not pursue the more traditional and seemingly more promising course of writing about a political subject, perhaps a heroic champion of freedom who acted on an epic scale. A clue to his decision may be provided by the most obscure of the heroic figures he lists in the prelude to *The Prelude*:

How that one Frenchman, through continued force
Of meditation on the inhuman deeds
Of the first conquerors of the Indian Isles,
Went single in his ministry across
The Ocean; not to comfort the oppressed,
But, like a thirsty wind, to roam about
Withering the Oppressor. (l.205–11)

Wordsworth himself felt compelled to supply the explanation of this obscure reference in a note in the 1850 edition: "Dominique de Gourges, a French gentleman who went in 1568 to Florida to avenge the massacre of the French by the Spaniards there."⁸ Modern readers may be pardoned for asking, if Wordsworth was looking for a famous Frenchman to write an epic about, could he not have come up with someone a little better known than Dominique de Gourges? This question may sound facetious at first,

⁷An excellent example of this poetic strategy is William Butler Yeats's "The Circus Animals' Desertion," which begins: "I sought a theme and sought for it in vain" (*The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* [New York: Macmillan, 1956], 335).

⁸Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill, eds., *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850* (New York: Norton, 1979), 40 n. 4.

but it actually takes us to the heart of the problematic of *The Prelude* and Wordsworth's quest for an epic theme.

The oblique allusion to an obscure Frenchman at the beginning of *The Prelude* virtually forces us to think of other Frenchmen Wordsworth might have chosen as the subject for an epic celebrating the struggle for liberty. The greatest—the most epic—event of Wordsworth's lifetime was the French Revolution. In a letter to Lord Byron dated September 8, 1816, Percy Shelley speaks of "the master theme of the epoch in which we live—the French Revolution."⁹ If Wordsworth was looking for an epic hero, why not write about one of the great revolutionaries: Danton, Marat, or even Robespierre?¹⁰ Why not write about the man who turned out to be the most epic figure of the nineteenth century, perhaps of the modern world in general—Napoleon Bonaparte? In terms of military achievements alone, Napoleon cries out for treatment by a modern Homer or Virgil, and one can only dream of what Shakespeare might have done with a tragedy based on the life of the astounding Frenchman, who combined virtues and vices in precisely the way Shakespeare's tragic heroes usually do. It is just possible that Wordsworth could have written about a Frenchman in the opening lines of *The Prelude* without thinking of all the heroic figures in France who were shaking up the world in his day. But it is unlikely. The allusion to Dominique de Gournes has the feel of a poetic evasion, an act of literary disinformation. Its presence points to the great absence in Wordsworth's roll call of epic subjects. He claims to be searching for the one world-historical event the chronicling of which will place him among the great epic poets. One feels like saying, "Wordsworth, it's staring you right in the face; it's the French Revolution. What better subject if you want to celebrate liberty and portray the struggle against tyranny?" In their quests to rival Homer and Virgil, the Romantics were always complaining about the lack of epic subject matter in their day, and yet they were living in the midst of one of the most epic upheavals in world history, one that spotlighted one heroic figure after another, culminating in Napoleon, a man who combined elements of Achilles, Odysseus, and Aeneas in his complex character.¹¹

⁹Frederick Jones, ed., *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964), I, 504.

¹⁰In 1794 Coleridge wrote a play called *The Fall of Robespierre* with Robert Southey. Blake began an epic poem called *The French Revolution*, of which he published only the first book, in which he deals with such historical figures as Lafayette and Mirabeau.

¹¹My Byron epigraph comes from the opening of Canto I of *Don Juan*, where he goes on to consider a whole series of heroes from the Napoleonic wars as the subject of his epic, and dismisses all of them as false. The series includes Napoleon himself, and Condorcet, Mirabeau, Danton, Marat, and Lafayette. To show that he is above national prejudice, Byron includes Admiral Nelson and the Duke of Wellington among the false heroes of his day. See Canto I, stanzas 2–4.

One cannot help concluding that Wordsworth was deliberately avoiding the French Revolution as the subject of his epic and, therefore, wondering why he did so when it seems to have been such a promising poetic theme. But it turns out that the French Revolution is not absent from *The Prelude*, after all, and the way in which it appears in the narrative explains Wordsworth's evasive action.¹² In a remarkable case of inverting the traditional hierarchy of the political and the personal, the French Revolution functions in *The Prelude* as an episode in Wordsworth's spiritual autobiography. Wordsworth does not play a role in the French Revolution; the French Revolution plays a role in the life of the poet. Wordsworth downplays and even occludes the world-historical importance of the event and dwells on its personal significance for him. For example, Wordsworth does refer to Robespierre at several points in *The Prelude*, but never gives a sustained portrait of his political career. Wordsworth's remarks on Robespierre are scattered and he dwells only on his fall—the accusations made against him and his death (X.83–120, 456–66, 530–39).¹³ Wordsworth is more interested in how he himself reacted to events in Robespierre's life than he is in the events themselves, as he makes clear:

¹²The idea that Wordsworth systematically evades politics in his poetry was developed by Marjorie Levinson in a well-known analysis of his lyric "Tintern Abbey." She called attention to the full title of the poem: "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798." Levinson noticed the temporal displacement in this curiously elaborate title; Wordsworth's careful dating places the poem on the eve of the day most closely associated with the French Revolution, July 14, or Bastille Day. As with his allusion to Dominique de Gournay, Wordsworth seems to approach the subject of the French Revolution and then avoid it. Levinson goes on to show in detail how Wordsworth uses the lyrical meditation to evade discussing the political issues raised by the setting he has chosen: "The success or failure of the visionary poem turns on its ability to hide its omission of the historical" (Marjorie Levinson, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems* [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986], 390). For further discussion of Wordsworth's evasion of the political in his poetry, see Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 81–92. For an excellent discussion of the importance of the French Revolution in *The Prelude*, and in the Romantic epic in general, see Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution (1789–1820)* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 248–85. Paulson concludes that the French Revolution both is and is not the subject of *The Prelude*: "[T]he Revolution is in one sense the great subject matter that may explain to him his spots of time, and in another the great public subject matter he is turning *away* from as less suitable than the development of his own mind (or of his imagination)" (262).

¹³For an excellent discussion of the place of Robespierre in *The Prelude*, see Brooke Hopkins, "Representing Robespierre," in *History & Myth: Essays on English Romantic Literature*, ed. Stephen C. Behrendt (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 116–29.

but these are things
Of which I speak, only as they were storm
Or sunshine to my individual mind,
No further. (X.103–6)

Wordsworth presents the French Revolution as a stage in his personal development, his growth as a poet. It is almost as if France and all of Europe have to go through a titanic convulsion so that Wordsworth can overcome a way of thinking that is standing in the way of his poetic progress. No wonder Keats accused Wordsworth of indulging in the “egotistical sublime.”¹⁴

Wordsworth first visited France in 1790 (in his twentieth year), and he was there again from November 1791 to December 1792—during the crucial early stages of the Revolution. He devotes three full books of *The Prelude* in the 1850 version (IX–XI) to his experience in France. He is not completely candid about what happened to him; for example, he omits the story of the love affair and the illegitimate child he fathered in France. But what he says about the French Revolution is sufficient to reconstruct his reasons for rejecting it as the central theme of his epic. Wordsworth offers a forthright critique of the French Revolution, which helps us to understand why he turned from the political to the personal in his quest to write an epic. Wordsworth presents the failure of his political hopes for the French Revolution as a crucial stage in his recognition of his calling as a poet. Events in France force Wordsworth to turn from politics as a vocation to poetry, and, hence, to himself as the hero of his poem.

Wordsworth’s description of what it was like to be present at the early stages of the French Revolution is famous:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very Heaven! . . .
Not favoured spots alone, but the whole Earth,
The beauty wore of promise—that which sets
(To take an image which was felt, no doubt,
Among the bowers of Paradise itself)
The budding rose above the rose full blown.¹⁵ (X, 693–94, 702–706)

¹⁴Letter to Richard Woodhouse, Oct. 27, 1818, in Robert Pack, ed., *Selected Letters of John Keats* (New York: Signet, 1974), 113.

¹⁵I quote these lines the way most commentators do—as referring in general to Wordsworth’s initial reaction to the French Revolution. It should be noted, however, that these lines come relatively late in Wordsworth’s discussion of the French Revolution, and, in strict narrative terms, would seem to refer to events in 1793. On this issue, see Carl Woodring, *Politics in English Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 110. Like most commentators, I view these lines as part of a broad retrospective on the French Revolution as Wordsworth comes to the end of his treatment of the topic.

Most of what we think of as Romantic poetry was written after 1798, the publication date of the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge. Thus most of Romantic poetry, including *The Prelude*, was written after the high hopes initially raised by the French Revolution had been dashed. With the Reign of Terror and the rise of Napoleon, people in England who originally supported the Revolution began to turn against it. This passage where Wordsworth recalls and recreates his original feelings about the French Revolution is, thus, extremely important. It reveals how much Wordsworth's generation, the youth of England, expected from the French Revolution at first. As Wordsworth's imagery indicates, events in France seemed to herald the dawning of a new era in history, a fundamental transformation of the human condition into something better, perhaps even a recapturing of paradise on earth. Elsewhere Wordsworth writes:

'twas a time when Europe was rejoiced,
 France standing on the top of golden hours,
 And human nature seeming born again. (VI.352–54)

Wordsworth began as an "active partisan" (X.737) of the French Revolution, believing that it would realize the age-old dreams of humanity:

Not in Utopia, —subterranean fields, —
 Or some secreted island, Heaven knows where!
 But in the very world which is the world
 Of all of us, —the place in which, in the end,
 We find our happiness, or not at all! (X.724–28)

Although Wordsworth denies that he is speaking of utopia, his hopes are profoundly utopian. He is claiming that in his day utopia can finally be made reality, not just in France but in the whole world. Like many of his contemporaries, he originally hoped that the French Revolution would quickly spread to England and on to the rest of Europe, bringing down the Old Regime everywhere and liberating humanity once and for all. He initially hoped that he might play the part of a hero in this liberation:

Mean as I was, and little graced with power
 Of eloquence even in my native speech,
 And all unfit for tumult and intrigue,
 Yet would I willingly have taken up
 A service at this time for cause so great,
 However dangerous. Inly I revolved
 How much the destiny of Man had still
 Hung upon single persons. (X.132–39)

Speaking of his "desires heroic" (X.147), Wordsworth begins to cast himself in a traditional epic role, the single individual who by his courageous efforts can make history. There is obviously an element of fantasy in this passage, but on the face of it, Wordsworth is saying that he was contemplating a political career in the French Revolution.

One must take into account the height of Wordsworth's idealistic hopes for the French Revolution in order to comprehend the depth of the despair into which he plunged when he realized that events in France were not going to fulfill his—or humanity's—dreams. If it was at first "heaven" for Wordsworth to witness the French Revolution, it soon turned into hell to watch it fail. Wordsworth's turn from political life as an epic subject was rooted in his original utopian expectations for politics. Homer, Virgil, and Shakespeare were political realists. They represented the world largely as they found it, picturing war, for example, as an inescapable part of the human condition. That is why a strain of tragedy runs throughout their works, even though one can find optimistic moments in them and the hope that peace might alternate with war. The tragic sense of Homer, Virgil, and Shakespeare means that they do not reject political life when they find that it cannot bring perfect happiness to all humanity. Wordsworth is more romantic than his poetic predecessors and turns against political life because he initially made such utopian demands upon it.

IV

Wordsworth's disillusionment with the French Revolution began in earnest when he realized that it was not going to spread peacefully to England. Far from embracing the liberating example set by the French, the British government became increasingly reactionary in the 1790s, did everything it could to prevent revolution at home, and allied itself with the enemies of revolution in France:

Our shepherds, this say merely, at that time
Thirsted to make the guardian crook of law
A tool of murder. . . .
But, in their weapons and their warfare base
As vermin working out of reach, they leagued
Their strength perfidiously, to undermine
Justice, and make an end of Liberty. (X.646–48, 654–57)

The British government's reaction to the French Revolution put Wordsworth in an awkward position. It meant that if he were to appear as a partisan of events in France, he would seem to be a traitor to his own country; he laments that he was in fact forced to root against his fellow Englishmen:

I rejoiced,
Yea, afterwards—truth most painful to record!—
Exulted in the triumph of my soul
When Englishmen by thousands were o'erthrown. (X.259–62)

This fact alone helps explain Wordsworth's uncertainty about choosing the subject for his epic and his shying away from political themes. His dislike of the antiliberal policies of the British authorities made him reluctant to celebrate a British theme, but celebrating a French theme at this moment would

have been a bold move and likely to be viewed as politically subversive.¹⁶ This was not a merely abstract issue for Wordsworth. Especially in the middle of the 1790s, during the period of the Reign of Terror, but also throughout the Napoleonic wars, supporters of the French cause in England were actively persecuted, their publications suppressed, and they themselves thrown into jail and sometimes charged with the capital crime of treason.¹⁷ Wordsworth had more than theoretical reasons for avoiding politics in his epic.

Even more disillusioning than his countrymen turning against the French Revolution was his sense that it veered off course and became the negation of everything for which it originally stood. Wordsworth came to object to many of the policies of the young French Republic, including its attacks on venerable Catholic institutions (see the 1850 *Prelude*, VI.418–78). He was particularly dismayed by the foreign policy of the revolutionary regime. Having been attacked by their neighbors, the French soon went on the offensive against them, embracing the life of war Wordsworth had hoped they had put behind them forever:

And now, become oppressors in their turn,
Frenchmen had changed a war of self-defence

¹⁶Wordsworth seemed concerned about how his remarks might be interpreted in England even decades after the controversy over the French Revolution had passed into history. In the text he prepared for the posthumous publication of *The Prelude*, he considerably toned down the passage on British perfidy. Whereas in the original text he wrote “Our Shepherds . . . / Thirsted to make the guardian crook of law / A tool of murder,” in the 1850 version, he backs off the claim: “Our Shepherds . . . / Acted, or seemed at least to act, like men / Thirsting to make the guardian crook of law / A tool of murder” (XI.62–65). He rewrites Book X, lines 654–57 in the 1805 version this way in the 1850 version: “Or left (by mere timidity betrayed) / The plain straight road, for one no better chosen / Than if their wish had been to undermine / Justice, and make an end of Liberty” (XI.70–73). Whereas originally Wordsworth had compared the British authorities to “vermin,” accused them of perfidy, and stated unequivocally that they fought against justice and liberty, in the 1850 passage he omits the mention of “vermin” entirely, accuses the British of timidity rather than perfidy, and speaks of them acting only *as if* they wished to undermine justice and liberty.

¹⁷Blake was put on trial for high treason on January 11, 1804, at the Chicester Quarter Sessions. At issue in the complaint filed by a soldier named John Schofield was a number of pro-French and anti-British remarks he alleged Blake to have made: “that the French Knew our Strength very well, and if Bonaparte should come he would be Master of Europe in an Hour’s Time, . . . that when he set his Foot on English Ground that every Englishman would have his choice whether to have his Throat cut, or to join the French.” For an account of the incident, see Mona Wilson, *The Life of William Blake* (1927; rpt. New York: Cooper Square, 1969), 142–49; for the Schofield quotation, see 147. Blake was acquitted, but for months prior to the trial he feared for his life.

For one of conquest, losing sight of all
Which they had struggled for. (X.792–95)

For Wordsworth, as for the other Romantics, war lost its poetic glamour when it ceased to be a matter of the mano-a-mano contests of individual heroes celebrated in Homer, and became an occasion for mass slaughter. Thousands died when modern armies, with their artillery and other new weapons, clashed in the name of ideologies rather than a code of honor. Wordsworth could not bring himself to glorify this kind of warfare in his poetry, and he was bitterly disappointed when his beloved French turned to conquering their neighbors.

Witnessing the oppressed become oppressors in their turn was at the heart of the Romantic disillusionment with the French Revolution. The process culminated in the moment when the revolutionary government, which had claimed to liberate the French from tyranny, turned into a military dictatorship under Napoleon. For Wordsworth as for all the Romantics the wheel truly came full circle when in 1804 Napoleon crowned himself Emperor in the presence of the Pope:

finally, to close
And rivet up the gains of France, a Pope
Is summoned in, to crown an Emperor—
This last opprobrium, when we see the dog
Returning to his vomit. (X.932–36)

Wordsworth can barely contain his disgust with Napoleon, much like Beethoven, who famously tore up the dedication of his Third Symphony to Napoleon when he heard of his becoming emperor. For Beethoven it seemed to be the death of all that Napoleon had originally stood for as the enlightened liberator of Europe. Consequently, he renamed the work “Heroic Symphony to Celebrate the Memory of a Great Man.”¹⁸ For Wordsworth, too, the coronation of Napoleon sounded the death knell of the French Revolution and its ideals of liberty, equality, fraternity.

Wordsworth generalized his experience with Napoleon to include other leaders of the French Revolution and a contempt for politics as such. He became:

¹⁸This account goes back to the biographical notes about Beethoven compiled by Ferdinand Ries, published in 1838. Ries writes of Beethoven: “I was the first to tell him the news that Buonaparte had declared himself Emperor, whereupon he flew into a rage and exclaimed: ‘So he is no more than a common mortal! Now, too, he will tread under foot all the rights of man, indulge only his own ambition; now he will think himself superior to all men, become a tyrant!’ Beethoven went to the table, seized the top of the title-page, tore it in half and threw it on the floor.” See Michael Hamburger, ed. and trans., *Beethoven: Letters, Journals and Conversations* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 47.

prepared to find
 Ambition, folly, madness, in the men
 Who thrust themselves upon this passive world
 As Rulers of the world; to see in these,
 Even when the public welfare is their aim,
 Plans without thought, or bottomed on false thoughts
 And false philosophy. (XII.70–76)

The Prelude thus contains an explanation of why Wordsworth did not choose a political theme for his epic. The French Revolution had taught him the emptiness of public life and the vanity of all political ambition. But it did not direct him away from the active life to the contemplative, at least as traditionally understood. As Wordsworth perceived, the French Revolution was rooted in developments in eighteenth-century philosophy in France, and it actively sought to put the ideas of thinkers like Voltaire and Rousseau into practice. Thus, as this passage indicates, Wordsworth became suspicious of philosophy. In an almost Burkean fashion, he came to view the French Revolution as a lesson in the dangers of applying abstract reason to practical matters.¹⁹ As a poet, he particularly objected to the way the French revolutionaries erected Reason into their new god and tried to elevate the rational over the emotional. He rejected:

the philosophy
 That promised to abstract the hopes of man
 Out of his feelings, to be fixed thenceforth
 For ever in a purer element. (X.807–10)

Here we begin to see the lesson that Wordsworth *as a poet* learned from the French Revolution. It taught him the importance of the emotions in any comprehensive understanding of human life, which led him to focus on the emotions in his definition of poetry (“emotion recollected in tranquility”). Wordsworth felt justified in elevating the poet over the man of action or the philosopher because he believed that only the poet gives full credit to the emotions in his understanding of humanity. If the heroes of traditional epics turn out to have feet of clay, the poet can point us toward higher ideals:

Sage, patriot, lover, hero; for it seemed
 That their best virtues were not free from taint
 Of something false and weak, which could not stand
 The open eye of Reason. Then I said,
 ‘Go to the Poets; they will speak to thee
 More perfectly of purer creatures.’ (XI.64–69)

¹⁹Wordsworth added a tribute to Burke in the 1850 version of *The Prelude*, which focuses on his eloquence in arguing “Against all systems built on abstract rights” (VII.524).

In this way, Wordsworth emerges as his own hero in *The Prelude*. And in this manner, his epic subject can legitimately become a chronicle of how his own emotional sensibility develops in contact with the natural world as an alternative to the political. As Wordsworth sums it up:

Above all
 Did nature bring again that wiser mood
 More deeply re-established in my soul,
 Which, seeing little worthy or sublime
 In what we blazon with pompous names
 Of power and action, early tutored me
 To look with feelings of fraternal love
 Upon those unassuming things that hold
 A silent station in this beauteous world. (XII.44–52)

Wordsworth's new form of epic in *The Prelude* rests on this conscious revaluation of the traditional understanding of political life as the locus of nobility. Whereas poets like Homer and Virgil regarded heroic action in the public sphere as glorious, Wordsworth views it as merely "pompous," and he turns with confidence to his private life as a poet as a higher mode of existence. He presents his contact with and appreciation of the simple things of everyday life as paradoxically nobler than the warrior's pursuit of glory.²⁰

If there seems to be something Christian about this attitude, it is no accident. Wordsworth's revaluation of politics bears a remarkable resemblance to what Nietzsche called the Christian revaluation of classical values.²¹ In Nietzsche's analysis, Christians took what was regarded as good in classical antiquity and reinterpreted it as evil. The assertiveness and aggressiveness of a classical hero like Achilles is regarded as sinful in Christianity. At the same time, Christians took what was regarded as bad in classical antiquity and turned it into their new form of good. Suffering pain and defeat, which was viewed in classical terms as a sign of weakness and, hence, as contemptible, is reinterpreted in Christian terms as martyrdom, a courageous willingness to endure suffering and, therefore, a virtue. This Christian revaluation can be observed within the epic tradition in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Milton tried to follow in the epic footsteps of Homer and Virgil, and even includes conventionally heroic battle scenes in Books V and VI of his poem. But by choosing Adam as his subject, Milton moves away from the classical focus

²⁰In an 1801 sonnet, "I Grieved for Buonaparté," Wordsworth asserts the superiority of the domestic over the political. He claims: "'Tis not in battles that from youth we train / The Governor who must be wise and good"; rather, "Wisdom doth live with children round her knees: / Books, leisure, perfect freedom, and the talk / Man holds with week-day man" (Stillinger, *Selected Poems*, 165).

²¹See the first essay in Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* and section 260 of *Beyond Good and Evil*.

on the noble public figure in the epic and dwells instead on an Everyman figure, together with the Everywoman, Eve—human beings in all their common humanity. For Milton, retelling the biblical story of the Fall is a:

Sad task, yet argument
Not less but more Heroic than the wrath
Of stern *Achilles* on his Foe pursu'd
Thrice Fugitive about *Troy Wall*; or rage
Of *Turnus* for *Lavinia* disespous'd.²² (IX.13–17)

So much for Homer and Virgil and their celebration of the pagan virtues of war. In his Christian epic, Milton gives those virtues to Satan; the classical hero becomes a demonic figure in this new context.²³ As a Christian poet, Milton is

Not sedulous by Nature to indite
Wars, hitherto the only Argument
Heroic deem'd, chief maistry to dissect
With long and tedious havoc fable'd Knights
In Battles feign'd; the better fortitude
Of Patience and Heroic Martyrdom
Unsung. (IX.27–33)

For Milton true heroism is to be found not in traditional epic warfare but in the Christian's humble submission to God's will. We see here one of the reasons he abandoned his original plan to write an epic about King Arthur. Milton pointed the Romantics beyond the classical epic tradition by offering a critique of its ethical foundations and redefining heroism in more spiritual terms.²⁴

The Romantics may not have followed Milton in his orthodox Christianity—Blake and Shelley, in fact, questioned whether Milton himself was truly orthodox²⁵—but they shared his critique of classical values, especially of the premium on warfare as a noble way of life. Blake was the most anticlassical of the Romantics and repeatedly railed against “the silly

²²Quoted from Merritt Hughes, ed., *Paradise Lost* (New York: Odyssey, 1935). I give book and line numbers in the body of the essay.

²³For more on this subject, see Paul A. Cantor, *Shakespeare: Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 8–10.

²⁴Wordsworth echoes the opening of *Paradise Lost*, Book IX when he writes in *The Prelude*: “This is, in truth, heroic argument, / And genuine prowess” (III.182–83). For a reevaluation of traditional epic values in *The Prelude*, see Book VI, where in the space of only eight lines, “cowardice” (43) becomes “original strength” (51).

²⁵For Blake, see the section “The Voice of the Devil” in his *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 34–35; and for Shelley, see the preface to his *Prometheus Unbound* and his *A Defence of Poetry* in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), 133, 498.

Greek & Latin slaves of the Sword."²⁶ In a brief discussion "On Homers Poetry," Blake blamed Greek and Latin literature for encouraging belligerence: "[I]t is the Classics! & not Goths nor Monks, that Devastate Europe with War." He makes the same point in "On Virgil," insisting that the Bible is "the only light of antiquity that remains unperverted by War." He goes on to condemn the militarism of the great Latin epic: "Virgil in the Eneid Book VI. line 848 says Let others study Art: Rome has somewhat better to do, namely War & Dominion."²⁷ "Make Art, not War" could have been Blake's lifelong slogan, and he saw a profound tension between the life of artistic achievement and the life of imperial conquest. The Romantics' quarrel with the classical epic was thus not simply an aesthetic dispute. They rejected the classical epic because of the martial ethic it embodied, and if they turned to themselves as their own heroes, it was with a firm conviction of the superiority of the artist to the warrior.

Keats was the most gifted of the Romantics poetically, and the one most capable of writing in a Miltonic mode. Thus he ought to have had the best chance to write a great epic, and his *Hyperion* was a promising start.²⁸ But he broke off the poem at the beginning of Book III, just when he faced the task of narrating the war in heaven between the Olympians and the rebellious Titans:

Oh, leave them, Muse! Oh, leave them to their woes;
For thou art weak to sing such tumults dire:
A solitary sorrow best befits
Thy lips, and antheing a lonely grief.²⁹

Keats assesses his poetic gifts correctly. He was not suited to celebrating epic warfare; his talent lay in another direction—in giving unmatched expression to his feelings lyrically. Keats comes closest to formulating the challenge the Romantics faced in writing epics. The Romantics' conception of poetry as self-expression placed them fundamentally at odds with the traditional epic emphasis on the poet stepping out of himself and recounting the noble deeds of men of action. Their only hope was to reshape the epic into a form of self-expression and spiritual autobiography. And they were able to link that redirection of the epic to a critique of the martial values on which the genre traditionally rested. Wordsworth looked at the most momentous political event of his day, the French Revolution, and saw its leading figures

²⁶Preface to *Milton*, in Erdman, *William Blake*, 95. In all quotations from Blake, I preserve his idiosyncratic spelling and punctuation.

²⁷The three preceding Blake quotations are taken from Erdman, *William Blake*, 270.

²⁸For an account of how Keats attempted to rival Milton in his *Hyperion* poems, see Paul A. Cantor, *Creature and Creator: Myth-making and English Romanticism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 156–80.

²⁹*Hyperion*, Book III, ll.3–6, in *John Keats: Complete Poems*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 265–66.

outdoing each other in bloodshed and mayhem. It was, thus, with a sense of both aesthetic and ethical relief that he turned to himself as the hero of his poem.

V

A similar process can be observed in the most romantic of the Romantics, Lord Byron. The long narrative poem that made Byron famous, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, surveys Europe in the era of the Napoleonic wars and their aftermath, and it also surveys contemporary forms of heroism.³⁰ Byron portrays a Europe in ruins, wrecked by the violence unleashed by the French Revolution. He structures Canto III of the poem around his search for a form of greatness in the modern world that will not be so destructive. He begins by examining Napoleon and moves on to a portrait of Rousseau. In between he turns to the world of nature, which provides the basis for his vision of the imaginative artist as the genuine peak of humanity. But the context of this exaltation of the artist is the denigration of what had often been considered the twin peaks of humanity: the political hero, here personified in Napoleon, and the philosopher, here personified in Rousseau.

Contemplating Napoleon after his fall at Waterloo, Byron sees a heroic figure, but a deeply ambiguous one:

There sank the greatest, nor the worst of men,
Whose spirit antithetically mixt
One moment of the mightiest, and again
On little objects with like firmness fixt,
Extreme in all things! hadst thou been betwixt,
Thy throne had still been thine, or never been.³¹ (III.36)

Byron finds a heroic power in Napoleon, which made him rise above the ordinary ranks of human beings, but he questions the goals the Emperor pursued. For all his greatness, Napoleon could be vain and petty, often questing after the same vulgar honors ordinary men covet. Thus Byron condemns Napoleon for the nature of his ambition. In seeking to lord it over others, he became a slave to his own passion for glory: "An empire thou couldst crush,

³⁰It might be argued that *Childe Harold* is a romance, not an epic; after all, Byron subtitled it "A Romaunt." But there are many signs in the poem that Byron had the epic tradition in mind. Canto I begins with a classical invocation to the muse, and Byron invokes the worlds of ancient Greece and Rome at many points in the poem. Moreover, it is written in Spenserian stanzas, calling to mind *The Faerie Queene*, which is a good reminder that it is often difficult to draw a sharp line between epic and romance.

³¹I quote *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* from Jerome McGann, ed., *The Oxford Authors: Byron* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). I cite the poem by canto and stanza number in the body of the essay.

command, rebuild, / But govern not thy pettiest passion" (III.38). Precisely because Napoleon is in Byron's view the greatest of all political leaders, his fall lays bare the ultimate emptiness of political life as a heroic endeavor.³²

When ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle questioned the supremacy of great political figures, they did so in the name of philosophy itself as the highest way of life, esteeming a life of contemplation over a life of action. But when Byron looks at philosophy in his day, he does not see a contemplative ideal, but rather a philosophy that orients itself toward action, specifically political action. When he turns later in Canto III to Rousseau, rather than viewing him as an alternative to Napoleon, Byron portrays a Napoleonic Rousseau. Byron understands that Rousseau represented a turn in the history of philosophy—a philosopher who tried to legitimate and liberate the passions rather than to subdue them. Byron writes that Rousseau "threw / Enchantment over passion" (III.77) and that "his love was passion's essence" (III.78). Thus in *Childe Harold*, Rousseau does not appear as a peaceful hero. On the contrary, Byron sees passion driving the philosopher to unending strife: "His life was one long war with self-sought foes" (III.80).

Above all, Byron sees Rousseau's philosophy as having *political* consequences, since he views him as inspiring the French Revolution:

For then he was inspired, and from him came,
As from the Pythian's mystic cave of yore,
Those oracles which set the world in flame,
Nor ceased to burn till kingdoms were no more:
Did he not this for France? which lay before
Bowed to the inborn tyranny of years?
Broken and trembling, to the yoke she bore,
Till by the voice of him and his compeers,
Roused up to too much wrath which follows o'ergrown fears? (III.81)

Much as Blake did, Byron yokes Rousseau with the *philosophes*.³³ Ignoring Rousseau's critique of the Enlightenment, Byron views him as essentially an Enlightenment figure himself, looking to translate philosophy into political action. Thus Byron sees Rousseau and his Enlightenment partners as having a great deal on their conscience:

They made themselves a fearful monument!
The wreck of old opinions—things which grew
Breathed from the birth of time: the veil they rent,
And what behind it lay, all earth shall view.
But good with ill they also overthrew,

³²For a general discussion of Byron's view of Napoleon, see Christina M. Root, "History as Character: Byron and the Myth of Napoleon," in Behrendt, *History & Myth*, 149–65.

³³See Blake's poem "Mock on Mock on Voltaire Rousseau" (Erdman, *William Blake*, 477) and line 282 of his *The French Revolution*.

Leaving but ruins, wherewith to rebuild
 Upon the same foundation, and renew
 Dungeons and thrones, which the same hour re-fill'd,
 As heretofore, because ambition was self-will'd. (III.82)

According to Byron, the Enlightenment philosophers became ambitious themselves, coveting direct political influence and therefore ceasing to offer a legitimate alternative to ambitious rulers like Napoleon. In the Romantic view, the will to power behind the French Revolution led to its tragedy. As we have seen in Wordsworth's *Prelude*, in France revolution quickly turned into tyranny. The power vacuum left by the overthrow of the Old Regime was quickly filled by the leaders who had promised liberation but instead delivered their followers into new forms of despotism.

In the context of this disillusionment with political action, Byron turns to nature in *Childe Harold*. In between the musings on Napoleon and Rousseau, Byron has Harold visit the Alps, which become the site of his vision of true greatness:

Above me are the Alps,
 The palaces of Nature, whose vast walls
 Have pinnacled in clouds their snowy scalps,
 And throned Eternity in icy halls
 Of cold sublimity, where forms and falls
 The avalanche—the thunderbolt of snow!
 All which expands the spirit, yet appals,
 Gather around these summits, as to show
 How Earth may pierce to Heaven, yet leave vain man below. (III.62)

Byron may be disappointed and disenchanted with both Napoleon and Rousseau, but in the Alps he finds something he can truly look up to. The mountains tower above ordinary human beings in a way that Napoleon and Rousseau could not. In the Alps Byron finally locates a form of greatness free of the taint of human ambition. The mountains are “[i]mperishably pure beyond all things below” (III.67). The Alps do not seek to lord it over anyone; hence, they cannot be corrupted by vanity. In fact, they provide a measure of the pettiness of conventional forms of glory. By contemplating the mountains, Byron hopes to elevate his imagination above the limits of ordinary humanity: “[T]he mind shall be all free / From what it hates in this degraded form” (III.74).

Canto III of *Childe Harold* allows us to see with unusual clarity how nature functioned in Romantic poetry. Byron's placement of the Alps episode between his portraits of Napoleon and Rousseau shows that the Romantics' turn to nature was mediated by their disillusionment with revolutionary politics and the theories that inspired it. Having lost faith in conventional forms of greatness, Byron turned to the natural world for images of a benign greatness, or at least a greatness uncorrupted by baser human passions. It may seem odd to claim that the Romantic attraction to mountain scenery was a political

gesture, but it fits with everything we know about aesthetic developments in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, above all the new premium critics and artists began to place upon the sublime.³⁴ Many have wondered why the idea of sublimity increasingly became the focus of aesthetic discourse in the course of the eighteenth century. My answer is that the idea of the sublime filled a new need in aesthetics—to find a form of greatness detached from conventional social hierarchies. As we have seen, the highest forms of literature, epic and tragedy, had traditionally focused on the deeds of the great men (and sometimes women) of history. For authors from Homer to Shakespeare, greatness is fundamentally aristocratic greatness, measured by the ability to act heroically in the public sphere, and, hence, dependent on an elevated social position. Shakespeare, for example, often shows sympathy for ordinary human beings, but he still treats them comically. All the heroes and heroines of his tragedies are of noble birth.³⁵ Romeo and Juliet come closest to our notions of ordinary humanity, but even they are from two of the noblest families in Verona.

As democratic ideas began to flourish in the eighteenth century—culminating in the American and French Revolutions—authors became increasingly uncomfortable with taking examples of greatness from the ranks of the aristocracy.³⁶ Consequently, the impulse to seek images of greatness became displaced into the world of nature. The sublime is a more democratic concept than traditional ideas of the epic or the tragic, especially once sublimity came to be associated with mountain scenery rather than with the higher ranks of society. As we have seen in both Wordsworth and Byron, the Romantics became skeptical of the claim that political rulers embody the true form of greatness. Anxious to topple the giants of the political world, they found that the best way to do so was to measure traditional political greatness against the grandeur of the natural world. Sublime mountain scenery works to dwarf would-be political titans like Napoleon. Measured on the scale of the Alps, the heights to which political leaders claim to climb pale into insignificance. In the triumph of the sublime, the literal trumps the figurative; the real height of the mountain overwhelms the metaphorical height of the merely human hero.

³⁴See Samuel Holt Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1960). The classic study of the new premium on mountain scenery in eighteenth-century aesthetics is Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (1959; rpt. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997).

³⁵See Erich Auerbach's famous chapter on Shakespeare, "The Weary Prince," in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (1953; rpt. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 312–33, especially 315: "His conception of the sublime and tragic is altogether aristocratic."

³⁶One reflection of this trend was the development of bourgeois tragedy, especially in Germany in the plays of Lessing, Goethe, and Schiller.

It is not surprising that the democratic subtext of the turn to mountain scenery comes to the surface in an American author. In a gesture that seems to be his way of thumbing his nose at aristocratic Europe, Herman Melville dedicates his novel *Pierre* to a mountain in western Massachusetts: "To Greylock's Most Excellent Majesty":

In old times authors were proud of the privilege of dedicating their works to Majesty. A right noble custom, which we of Berkshire must revive. For whether we will or no, Majesty is all around us here in Berkshire, sitting as in a grand Congress of Vienna of majestic hill-tops, and eternally challenging our homage.³⁷

Melville's sarcasm is palpable—whereas obsequious European authors slavishly dedicated their works to aristocratic patrons, an independent American author turns freely to the natural world for inspiration and a measure of true greatness. Melville has fun showing in the extended dedication that American mountains can perform fully the function that European aristocrats served, giving him something to look up to and even displaying the imperial purple. The difference, however, is that Melville does not have to submit to the will of Mt. Greylock because it has none: "[I]t is but meet, that I here devoutly kneel, and render up my gratitude, whether, thereto, The Most Excellent Purple Majesty of Greylock benignantly incline his hoary crown or no." Melville focuses on the same point that struck Byron—the mountain's sublime indifference to human concerns. In Melville's proud American gesture, he can bow down to a mountain because, unlike an aristocrat, Greylock does not demand his homage and asks nothing from him. By placing a mountain where a European author would traditionally have placed an aristocratic patron, Melville makes a statement about American literature. In a democratic nation, authors will no longer have to cater to the whims of an aristocracy. Americans will find greatness in the magnificent natural scenery all around them, not in a class of hereditary rulers. The dedication to *Pierre* is the best gloss I know on the significance of mountain scenery in Romantic poetry; it helps explain why the Romantics turned from great warriors as their inspiration to great mountains.

In using nature as a standard to criticize conventional forms of human greatness, the Romantics may at first sound like classical philosophers. But we must remember that *nature* means something very different to Byron from what it does to Aristotle. In classical philosophy, nature sets limits to human aspiration; as we will see, for the Romantics, nature—by a strange sleight of hand—becomes the means of the infinite expansion of human

³⁷Herman Melville, *Pierre or The Ambiguities* (1852; rpt. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1971), vii. The mention of the Congress of Vienna is a political reference to the conference that tried to put Europe back together after the Napoleonic wars.

power. Having attributed greatness to nature, Byron almost immediately proceeds to take it back. He begins, in typical Romantic fashion, by appearing to lose himself in nature:

I live not in myself, but I become
 Portion of that around me; and to me,
 High mountains are a feeling, but the hum
 Of human cities torture. (III.72)

This passage seems congruent with the Romantic elevation of nature. Byron is uplifted by participating in what appears to be the larger natural order. But notice what has subtly happened here: “High mountains are a *feeling*.”³⁸ What had been huge, objective slabs of earth and rock have suddenly become attenuated into subjectivity. Byron transforms the Alps into an emotion, and that means an emotion within him as poet. Now he is ready to reverse the hierarchy of the natural and the human worlds and place himself in command:

Are not the mountains, waves, and skies, a part
 Of me and of my soul, as I of them?
 Is not the love of these deep in my heart
 With a pure passion? should I not condemn
 All objects, if compared with these? (III.75)

Within the space of four stanzas, Byron has performed the great magic trick of Romanticism. He begins as part of nature, but now nature becomes a part of him; nature is assimilated into human consciousness. Byron appears at first to subordinate himself to a larger natural order, but then subordinates that order to his own mind. He, at first, projects greatness out of the human world and into the world of nature, but then he reabsorbs that world back into his imagination as a poet. He uses the natural world to dwarf conventional forms of human greatness, but then lays claim to the superiority of the human imagination, which can contain the entire natural world in the act of representing it. This is the ultimate way in which the poet becomes his own hero in Romanticism—taking a detour through nature, he can establish his creative imagination as the center of the universe.

Anyone familiar with the *Critique of Judgment* will recognize here the strategy of Immanuel Kant’s reconception of the sublime. To attribute sublimity to nature, to view the sublime as a natural quality inhering in objects, Kant regards as a vulgar error. For Kant the sublime is always a quality of our

³⁸In “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth anticipates Byron’s poetic move: “The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood, / Their colours, and their forms, were then to me / An appetite; a feeling and a love” (78–80) in Stillinger, *Selected Poems*, 109. Byron undoubtedly knew “Tintern Abbey,” but he may not have been familiar with Wordsworth’s treatment of mountains in *The Prelude*, which was not published until 1850.

representation of objects.³⁹ The sublime is not in the objects themselves but in our consciousness, which encompasses and transcends objects. This point was not lost on the Romantic poets, who, in effect, used the Kantian idea of the sublime to establish themselves as their own heroes, as the locus of true greatness in the world.⁴⁰ If Byron had directly measured himself against Napoleon, we might question his claim to superiority. But Byron begins by setting Napoleon next to Mt. Blanc, and in this comparison the already diminutive emperor inevitably comes up a little short. But Byron turns around and compares himself as poet to the mountain, and in this comparison, the mountain now comes up short because it is lacking in poetic feeling. The sublime feelings are really all in Byron; without his imagination, the mountain remains merely a large lump of rocks, and besides, as Kant would point out, no matter how big a mountain is, the poet can always imagine a bigger one.⁴¹

The subordination of the sublime mountain to the more profound sublimity of the poet's imagination became a central trope in Romantic literature. It appears, for example, in Percy Shelley's lyric poem, "Mont Blanc," written at almost the same time (1816) as Canto III of *Childe Harold*. Shelley concludes his poem by telling the mountain, as well as the rest of the natural world, that they are nothing without the poet's imagination:

And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
If to the human mind's imaginings
Silence and solitude were vacancy?⁴²

Here the poet takes command over the natural phenomenon that at first seemed to dwarf conventional forms of human greatness. Shelley's answer to the old question, "If a tree falls in a forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?" is simply: "No." Wordsworth portrays the encounter of his imagination with mountain scenery at several points in *The Prelude*, culminating in his triumphal vision from the top of Mt. Snowdon in the last book. Wordsworth is conventionally regarded as a nature poet, and yet *The Prelude* builds up to his insistence that the human mind is far more powerful

³⁹See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1952), 97: "Hence it comes that the sublime is not to be looked for in the things of nature, but only in our own ideas." See also 111–12, 127.

⁴⁰I am not claiming that all the Romantics read Kant, but Coleridge certainly did, and he was probably the chief conduit for Kant's great influence on English Romantic poetry. See René Wellek, *Immanuel Kant in England, 1793–1838* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1931); and G. N. G. Orsini, *Coleridge and German Idealism* (Carbondale, IL: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1969).

⁴¹See Kant, *Critique*, 97: "Here we readily see that nothing can be given in nature, no matter how great we may judge it to be, which, regarded in some other relation, may not be degraded to the level of the infinitely little." See also 105.

⁴²Lines 142–44 in Reiman and Powers, *Shelley's Poetry*, 93.

than nature and can exercise dominion over it: "[T]he mind / Is lord and master, and . . . outward sense / Is but the obedient servant of her will" (XI.271–73). His final vision is of

how the mind of man becomes
 A thousand times more beautiful than the earth
 On which he dwells, above this frame of things
 (Which, 'mid all revolutions in the hopes
 And fears of men, doth still remain unchanged)
 In beauty exalted, as it is itself
 Of substance and of fabric more divine. (XIII.446–52)

Why should Wordsworth worship nature when he can worship the transcendental power of his own imagination instead? And no traditional epic hero—not Achilles, Odysseus, or Aeneas—could hope to equal this kind of greatness. The Romantic poet becomes godlike because he creates the world through the power of his own imagination.

VI

The Romantic attempt to reconceive the epic makes for a fascinating episode in literary history and an equally fascinating case study in the interrelation of politics and literature. We normally think of genres in formal terms, as if they could embody any content. But for much of the history of the epic, it was tied to specific thematic material. Growing out of the ancient world of military aristocracies, the epic was linked for centuries to the task of celebrating the brave deeds of heroic warriors. Thus, when poets from the modern world turned to the epic, they were confronted not just by the intimidating formal achievements of Homer and Virgil. Milton tried to assume his place in the epic tradition as he inherited it, but his *Paradise Lost* quarrels with the traditional Homeric exultation of war and offers the man of peace as a higher heroic ideal. The Romantics had an even greater quarrel with the epic tradition. As partisans of democracy, they rejected the aristocratic bias of the traditional epic (even Lord Byron had contempt for his fellow aristocrats). Once the Romantics became disillusioned with the French Revolution, they lost all hope in political action and began to think of their own poetry as the best means of liberating humanity. Like the other Romantics, Wordsworth came to conclude that "genuine liberty" (XIII.122) is something internal, something that happens in the soul, not in society. The Romantics sought to make the epic into a vehicle of their own self-expression, and they became the heroes of their own poems. The result was a literary hybrid, poems that copied many of the external characteristics of the traditional epic (invocation to the muse, division into books, epic diction), but that were essentially lyric at their core.

This generic ambivalence meant that the Romantics had limited success with their epics, which often turned out to be half-epic and half-lyric in

spirit.⁴³ Many of the great Romantic epic projects remained unfinished, including Blake's *The Four Zoas*, Keats's *Hyperion*, and Byron's *Don Juan* (which might even be described as an anti-epic). The epic Wordsworth truly pinned his hopes on, *The Recluse*, was never even written. As a poetic possibility, the epic limped on in the nineteenth century, as several of the most prominent poets kept trying their hand at the genre. Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote *Aurora Leigh*, and her husband Robert wrote *The Ring and the Book*—both long narrative poems that, in effect, try to novelize the epic. Working more traditionally, Alfred Tennyson took up one of the subjects Wordsworth had considered for his epic. *Idylls of the King* uses the British theme of King Arthur and his knights to express the anxiety and melancholy of Victorian England. The way the poem dwells obsessively on the death of Arthur suggests the passing of the epic world itself. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the epic seemed to be played out as a genre.⁴⁴

But cultural history is full of surprises, and just when the epic appeared to be dead, it experienced a remarkable rebirth in a new medium. As often happens, the coming of a new medium can revitalize old artistic possibilities. No longer viable in poetry, the epic found new life in motion pictures. Almost immediately, filmmakers set out to work on an epic scale, as the movies of D. W. Griffith testify (*Birth of a Nation*, *Intolerance*, *Orphans of the Storm*). Some of the greatest cinematic classics celebrate heroic action in war, from Sergei Eisenstein's epic *Alexander Nevsky* to John Ford's equally epic *The Searchers*.⁴⁵ And who would have thought that an Australian movie star named Mel Gibson would accomplish what the great English poet William Wordsworth failed to do? And yet Gibson's film *Braveheart* succeeds in giving an epic treatment of just that Scottish hero, William Wallace, Wordsworth briefly considered as the subject of his epic. Furthermore, it does so in a way that celebrates liberty and teaches a powerful anticolonial message. It took cinema to suggest that the modern world may not be as barren of epic subject matter as the Romantics feared.

⁴³For a discussion of this process in Keats, see Cantor, *Creature and Creator*, 168–69.

⁴⁴For the classic discussion of the problem of writing an epic in the nineteenth century, see A. C. Bradley, "The Long Poem in the Age of Wordsworth," *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: MacMillan, 1909), 177–205.

⁴⁵For a discussion of *Alexander Nevsky* in relation to the epic literary tradition, see David Quint, *Epic and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 361–68.