THREE

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

I) Criminals and Prophets

ON March 6, 1798, Wordsworth wrote his friend James Tobin to thank him for sending his copy of Henry Brooke's drama *Gustavus Vasa*. The correspondence does not indicate why he wanted to read the play just at that time. In the 1805 *Prelude*, Wordsworth mentioned the story of the heroic sixteenth-century Swedish general, who had freed his country from the tyranny of foreign rule, in a list of possible topics he says he considered for a great epic poem.[1] But in early 1798 Brooke's play might have been interesting to him for quite other reasons. *Gustavus Vasa* had been forbidden performance when it was written in 1739 and had not yet appeared on the London stage. One of its central characters was a malevolent royal minister who had helped seduce his king into tyranny by insisting on the necessity of basing governance on fear; the Lord Chamberlain, in charge of censorship, had taken the character as an attack on Walpole.[2] The scheming adviser of *Gustavus Vasa* had some striking resemblances to the character Rivers in Wordsworth's recently completed play, *The Borderers*, which had itself been rejected the previous December for production at Covent Garden. In any case, Wordsworth took the occasion of the letter of thanks to discuss his own recent theatrical disappointment. Although he made light of it, the rejection clearly rankled. He made some snidely dismissive remarks about the current London success of a melodramatic Gothic play by Matthew Gregory Lewis, but acknowledged that Lewis's triumph would have thrown him "into despair" if he had had no other method of employing himself. And he insisted that he didn't need to be urged not to publish his play, since he dreaded the prospect "as much as death itself"—an expression he immediately tried to take back as "hyperbolic."

It was only after venting his feelings about this obviously still-painful failure that Wordsworth made his well-known announcement of the large work in progress that was clearly intended to elevate him to the ranks of the great poets. "I have written 1300 lines of a poem in which I contrive to convey most of the knowledge of which I am possessed. My object is to give pictures of Nature, Man and Society. Indeed, I know not any thing which will not come within the scope of my plan." The next sentence confirms how much the announcement of the new poem was part of his reaction to the fate of *The Borderers*. "If ever I attempt another drama, it shall be written either purposely for the closet, or purposely for the stage.

There is no middle way." He went on to say, however, that he had no intention of going back to playwriting because he had his work "carved out" for him for a long time to come, and he intended to put all his eloquence into his poem.[3]

The context and the rhetoric of the announcement make the new project seem almost like compensation for the rejection of *The Borderers*, and the vast claims for its scope seem a measure of the ego whose pride had been wounded. But if vanity was involved, it was not purely personal. *The Borderers* was itself an ambitiously philosophical play that attacked what Wordsworth took to be the essential spirit of modernity. In its own way it made the same claim to totality as the projected new work, and the fact that Wordsworth had chosen the dramatic form and that he wanted the play produced despite its acknowledged static quality indicates that he wanted to convey his message as forcefully and directly as possible. That *The Recluse* could replace *The Borderers* as the object of Wordsworth's energy and ambition shows how closely linked they were for him in theme and purpose despite all differences of genre and subject. *The Recluse* was the positive to *The Borderers*' negative; the latter showed the bankruptcy of one ideology, the former offered a substitute.

But the personal aspect of the slight that Wordsworth felt cannot be ignored or dismissed as merely psychological; it has poetic significance. The authority of the poet's particular experience and voice was important to him because, as the fragments of *The Recluse* that had been written by then make plain, his individuality was the instrument of the grand synthesis that the new poem was to achieve and the warrant for its validity. Wordsworth's personal touchiness was an inextricable part of his concern for the validity of his poetry, because the poetry proposed the paradoxical idea that the unique particularity of the poet and the poet's experience was the principle of absolute universal authority and the agency by which the poetry attained the infinite totality it strove to evoke.

The implication of this view, however, is that there is an even closer connection between the play and the poem than already suggested, one perhaps less comfortable to Wordsworth's intention in linking them. They represent negative and positive not simply in the sense that one is destructive and the other constructive. The villain of *The Borderers*, Rivers, who incarnates the bankrupt ethic, is the negative of the exemplary figure of the Pedlar in *The Recluse*, who articulates the new ethic, as the photographic negative is to the positive: they are in crucial ways the same person, with the valence reversed.

Rivers creates a new ethic by refusing to feel remorse at his unwitting crime of abandoning an innocent man to his death and then making a virtue of his refusal. Remorse, he reasons, would be an even greater crime than his original error because it would destructively turn the awesome power of the human mind against itself. That power has been built

up, as he has learned in his solitary wanderings, from "mighty objects" that "impress their forms" upon it.[4] To recognize this immense power within the mind is to become a special being who can transcend all the traditional constraints on human action, the "tyranny of moralists and saints and lawgivers" (*Borderers*, 3.5.24–35), and create his own world:

> When with these forms I turned to contemplate
> The opinions and the uses of the world,
> I seemed a being who had passed alone
> Beyond the visible barriers of the world
> And travelled into things to come.
>
> (4.2.141–45)

The Pedlar's development has not been initiated by trauma, as Rivers's has been, but his self-fashioning is described in almost the exact same language Rivers uses to describe the origins of the mind's powers:

> He had perceived the presence and the power
> Of greatness, and deep feelings had impressed
> Great objects on his mind.
>
> ("Pedlar" 29–31)[5]

These objects and feelings made his being "sublime and comprehensive" (129); he became, though untaught and undisciplined in the "dead lore of schools," "a chosen son" (326) who could pass beyond the barriers of the merely visible to give "To every natural form, rock, fruit, and flower, / . . . / . . . a moral life" (332–34). As with Rivers, this ability made him a creator whose originary power transcended the understanding of ordinary men:

> He had a world about him—'twas his own,
> He made it—for it only lived to him,
> And to the God who looked into his mind.
> Such sympathies would often bear him far
> In outward gesture, and in visible look,
> Beyond the common seeming of mankind.
> Some called it madness; such it might have been,
> But that he had an eye . . .
> . . . .
> Which from a stone, a tree, a withered leaf,
> Could find no surface where its power might sleep.
>
> (339–53)

The fundamental difference between Rivers and the Pedlar is neither in the nature of their power nor even in its source, because both attribute it initially to the effect of "great objects" on the mind. The difference is that while for Rivers the effect of external objects is apparently to stimu-

late or waken the mind to its own powers, so that once awakened it is no longer beholden to the outside, the Pedlar retains, or tries to retain, his links with his source. In the Pedlar's case that source is seen not as merely initiatory but as foundational, hence indispensable, so that, having "felt the power / Of Nature" ("Pedlar," 86–87) and having "received so much" from her "and her overflowing soul" (203–4), his heart, despite its sublimity, remains "Lowly, for he was meek in gratitude / Oft as he called to mind those exstasies / And whence they flowed" (132–34). Dependent on the bounty of his source, "he perceived, / Though yet he knew not how, a wasting power / In all things which from her sweet influence / Might tend to wean him" (159–61). It is this maternally-figured relationship, counterbalanced with the radical absolutism of the Pedlar's autonomous creation of world, that produces the enormous tension between the active creation and passive reception that modern criticism has established as the essence of Wordsworth's idea of the imagination and what Thomas Weiskel called, with regard to the Snowdon vision, Wordsworth's "astonishing . . . indifference to priority" about what the mind confers and what it perceives.[6] The juxtaposition of *The Borderers* and "The Pedlar" shows that the tension is present from the very beginning of his "great" period, at the heart of the poem that was to be his contribution to social poetry. If Wordsworth was continually blocked in his efforts to complete that poem, it was in important part because *The Recluse* was itself anchored in a consuming dialectic of absolute autonomy and absolute dependence, neither pole of which was compatible with a reconciled vision of social man, a dialectic that could not, however, be dissolved because of the dangers represented by its repressed origins in the frightening character of the revolutionary Rivers.[7]

In recent decades, two lines of Wordsworth interpretation have emerged (in one case, perhaps, reemerged), both equally subtle and methodologically sophisticated in their address to texts and contexts, but to their proponents—despite occasional disclaimers—mutually incompatible. The first, reversing the terms of nineteenth-century criticism, sees Wordsworth not as nature poet but as the poet of visionary imagination or modern self-consciousness.[8] A more recent trend describes a much more concrete and historical Wordsworth, whose poetry not only reflected the political and social issues of the day but was a partisan contribution to them, even when—in some views, especially when—it was least overtly or self-awaredly political.[9] The one major effort to connect Wordsworth's poetics of the imagination with his politics has met with serious objections from both camps. In his *Natural Supernaturalism*, M. H. Abrams links the visionary with the political Wordsworth by suggesting that the poet's vision of the regeneration of humanity through the union of auton-

omous mind with nature was a displacement of, and a compensation for, the failed hopes of the French Revolution.[10] Against this interpretation, critics who have made the transcendence of imagination central to Wordsworth's enterprise make essentially two arguments. First, it is claimed, Wordsworth's poetics of consciousness deals with ontological —and therefore ultimate—structures of man's relationship to self and world that transcend, or subtend, historical events; the historical is at best mere occasion for their emergence. "What Wordsworth suffered so acutely," Geoffrey Hartman writes in an especially clear expression of this view, "may lie in the destiny of all men: a betrayal into autonomy, into self-dependence. This is the story wherever the tragic sense of life is strong: in *Oedipus Rex*, in *King Lear*, in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, and in Wordsworth's own drama, *The Borderers*, (1796–1797). The wound inflicted is self-consciousness: 'And they knew that they were naked'."[11] It also follows from this view that Wordsworth's poetry did not in any case achieve—could not have achieved—the reconciliation between mind and nature that Abrams claims for it, for consciousness is forever separated from the world.[12] On the other hand, the historicist camp has argued that Abrams concerns himself only with large generalities about the Revolution and that in any case he either oversimplifies the politics or gets them wrong by missing the hidden ideological agenda and the decisively antirevolutionary, Burkean cast in the poetry of Wordsworth's "great decade."[13]

The atmosphere of the "visionary" criticism may indeed seem at times too rarified, too abstract to capture Wordsworth's often all-too-concrete concerns—and evasions. Yet despite the often fine textual and historical detective work of the historicists, it would be a serious mistake to surrender the visionary Wordsworth. To do so is to flatten his work to one-dimensionality as much as visionary criticism does and to deny Wordsworth concerns that were not only passionately his but which made him part of a pivotal moment both in English poetry and in the history of Western mind. In order to appreciate the historicity of Wordsworth's poetry, it is not necessary either to ignore the visionary mode or to reduce it to ideology in the sense of a "resumption" of detailed sociopolitical themes "at the level of image and of metaphysics" and to concrete social and political issues disguised as abstract philosophy "because they were deadlocked at the practical level."[14] The problem with the line of visionary criticism is not its focus on the emerging "apocalyptic" consciousness of self in Wordsworth's poetry but its refusal or inability to see both the timing and the very form of that consciousness as historically specific. Wordsworth's principle of autonomy, if also shared with other Romantics of his own generation, is radically different from anything that had come before.

Those critics who redefine Wordsworth as the poet of imagination or self-consciousness have also pointed out the profound incoherence of his consciously professed central doctrine on the subject. Geoffrey Hartman characterizes the Mount Snowdon episode, Wordsworth's most detailed proclamation of mind and nature as parallel creative forces, as "a transference," "one of the most complexly deceptive episodes in literature."[15] On the summit of Snowdon, Wordsworth's perception unites the moon looking down from above him, the active mist-sea of clouds reaching outwards at his feet, and the voice of waters mounting up from below into an Agency whose creation of forms ("headlands, tongues and promontory shapes") usurps the dominion of empirical nature. Here, says Hartman, "Wordsworth sees Imagination by its own light and calls that light Nature's."[16] Tracing a similar poetic move in "Tintern Abbey," Harold Bloom speaks of Wordsworth's "repression" of the imagination. In describing the "mighty world of eye and ear" as a blending of what they "half create / And what perceive," Wordsworth denies the full creative power of his own imagination, for the qualification "*half* create" weights the balance in favor of passive perception. This, Bloom argues, is a rather more modest claim than Wordsworth had made a few months before in the early draft of the "Prospectus" to *The Excursion*, where he had praised the mind as a creative force more exalted than heaven and more terrifying than hell.[17]

Hartman and Bloom have forever alerted readers to the conflict in Wordsworth's conception of the nature and functioning of mind. Their own explanations of that conflict, however—Wordsworth's fear of an "apocalypse of the imagination" that would blot out the natural world in the assertion of its own supremacy or his anxiety over Milton's priority in poetic divination, which required a suppression both of Milton's power and his own—are, by themselves, either too broad or too narrow. They omit the historical and the personal contexts in which and out of which the contradictions in Wordsworth's ontology of consciousness developed, contexts that conditioned the very idea of autonomous imagination in Wordsworth, the forms of its contradictions, and his attempts to resolve them. As a result of these omissions, despite the critics' generally superbly sensitive readings, their explanations ignore important details of the poetic context itself.

It is not necessary to look to the "Prospectus," whose dating is in any case so highly problematic, to detect the repression of power in "Tintern Abbey" that Bloom notes; the process goes on in full view within "Tintern Abbey" itself. The opening section of twenty-two lines is a tour de force of imaginative construction in which both the materials and the labor of the "poetry work" (by analogy with Freud's "dream work," which pro-

duces the manifest from the latent dream) are visible in figure and diction. The poet's visual choices and metaphors transform a landscape of difference, of human habitation and untouched nature, into one of natural unity and totality. The "steep and lofty cliffs" of the "wild secluded scene" are seen to "connect / The landscape with the quiet of the sky" to produce the frame, the harmonious blending of motion and stasis.[18] Within it, the (humanly cultivated) orchards with their unripe fruits are as green as untamed nature and so "lose themselves / 'Mid groves and copses" (13–14); the (artificial) hedgerows—"hardly hedgerows," Wordsworth asserts, stripping them of their human shaping with an adjective—are but "little lines / Of sportive wood run wild" (15–16); and the pastoral farms, "Green to the very door," blend indistinguishably in with the woods. Against the refractory particulars of reality, separated into the natural and the worked, the poem has created its own world by main force, a homogeneous universe whose "power / Of harmony" can, when recalled, lighten the burden "Of all this unintelligible world" (47–48, 40).

But each step after this first section is a retreat from what has happened within it. The retreat takes place in two ways: Wordsworth attributes the harmony that the imagination has just visibly produced to the unitary life inhering in things themselves (49) and then casts doubt on the objective reality of the harmonious "life of things" as soon as he has proclaimed it ("If this / Be but a vain belief" [49–50]). The two moves are repeated sequentially in spiraling cycles of rising and falling action; each expression of doubt is followed by a poetically heightened reaffirmation of real presence. In the major climax at lines 106–11 Wordsworth finally acknowledges that the eye and ear half create the mighty world they perceive but then backtracks even further to language in which nature becomes sole anchor, "the nurse / The guide, the guardian of my heart." The repression that Bloom notes in "Tintern Abbey" is actually a regression; the relationship between mind and nature at this point is one of almost explicitly maternal tutelage, protection, and nurturance. Nurse and guardian, nature "feeds" the mind "with lofty thoughts" (127–28) in order to protect its "cheerful faith." Nor does the regression reach its end point with a metaphorical and abstract evocation of the feminine. The apparently climactic affirmation of nature's tutelary power—or of Wordsworth's ability to learn nature's lesson—is called into question in one final turn of the spiral of doubt. And within the very sentence that gives it voice, consolation appears again, this time in the person of Dorothy, whose presence is suddenly announced as the addressee of the poem all along.

Nor perchance
If I were not thus taught, should I the more

> Suffer my genial spirits to decay:
> For thou art with me here upon the banks
> Of this fair river; thou my dearest Friend,
> My dear dear Friend; and in thy voice I catch
> The language of my former heart, and read
> My former pleasures in the shooting lights
> Of thy wild eyes.
>
> (112–19)

Dorothy seems to be the ultimate repository and guardian of Wordsworth's vision of harmony, the guarantor of its permanence, hence of its very possibility. In the hope that he may behold in Dorothy "what I was once" (120) and that Dorothy's memory will be the "dwelling-place / For all sweet sounds and harmonies," the original act of creation is completely abjured and handed over to her.

It is the consensus of modern criticism that Wordsworth's indirect admission that the "one life" is a vain belief results from his half-acknowledged, half-suppressed awareness that he himself has projected it on to nature. What Wordsworth has denied by this projection, however, is not the abstract constitutive power of the imagination; it is the specific poetic act that has constructed the unified world of the opening lines of the poem through a process of blending and exclusion. And it is not only human artifacts that poetic vision has eliminated; it has also removed the human inhabitants of the space it has reconstructed. The evidence of wreaths of smoke rising from the trees shifts its testimony from the existence of settled farms to an "uncertain notice" of vagrants in the woods, to, finally, the lonely hermit in his cave. Just as all objects have been blended into nonhuman nature, all humans have been blended into the hermit, who is at home alone with nature; the poet has obliterated other individualities in the interests of his own harmony. This is not only the benign creativity of the Pedlar—"He had a world about him —'twas his own, / He made it"—but the malign creativity of Rivers, who has built the sense of his own autonomous world-making upon the (originally unintended) sacrifice of others.

Marjorie Levinson has also argued that the first part of the poem represents an ideological act of denial because it omits all of the contextual associations to the problems of poverty and vagrancy that a contemporary would have made to Tintern Abbey and its locale. But leaving aside the theoretical question of whether and how what is not present in the poem can legitimately be said to be suppressed, Levinson has matters almost exactly the wrong way around when she claims that in constructing the "idyllic landscape, lines 1–22, Wordsworth establishes a literary immortality for the endangered farms and woods" only by denying all the com-

mercial forces that were threatening them at the time.[19] The opening lines do not celebrate those farms at all but function in fact to obliterate them completely—along with their owners and inhabitants. Nothing is to be allowed to undermine the eternity of objective nature, not the power of human cultivation, which testifies to the human capacity to transform nature and hence to nature's malleability and temporality,[20] but not the power of the poetic imagination either. In "Tintern Abbey" the power of the poet only referred to in "The Pedlar" is actually exercised, and its exercise shows more ominously its substantive links with the ideas of Rivers. Those links certainly suggest the political context of Wordsworth's venture into the poetics of nature and imagination in 1798 that Abrams and Levinson also argue for. But that venture was neither the linear sublimation of collective politics into imagination that Abrams sees, nor the escapist displacement of collective politics into transcendence that the historicists claim. The exercise of individual power in the poem is real, and in some ways goes far beyond the claims for individual authority envisaged in any revolutionary ideology of the period. At the same time, the submission to nature that the act of autonomy produces poetically is more profound than any curbing of individual freedom demanded by the ideals of political equality or social solidarity. And finally, the investment of the vision of the one life in Dorothy sustains the contradiction by enabling Wordsworth to affirm both sides. Only if she is the repository of his (created) vision can he be secure in the belief that its power is benign. In her the "wild ecstasies" of that vision will mature "Into a sober pleasure." Yet in the end, the power remains his, for should she ever suffer solitude or fear, pain or grief, she will be healed by remembering his vision and his exhortations. In the fusion between them, she is the precondition of his power. If he forgets his vision, the shooting lights of her wild eyes will remind him of it, but as in Lucinde's relation to Julius in Schlegel's novel, what Dorothy's eyes will reflect back to Wordsworth is himself. To understand this contradiction, we must trace the rise and the crisis of Wordsworth's idea of freedom.

II) The Road to Revolution

Wordsworth's conversion to the cause of revolution has always been something of a puzzle. He was sufficiently troubled by it himself to devote a whole book of *The Prelude* to an attempt at explaining it. The effort is clearly vexed; he offers a number of explanations, and, like the excuses in the archetypal story of the man who borrowed a pot and returned it broken, they are mutually inconsistent. Inevitably they also contain serious, but revealing, factual errors and misleading statements.

The difficulty is, on the surface, straightforward enough. Wordsworth made two trips to France in the early years of the Revolution, the first in July 1790, when he was twenty years old, the second a year later in November 1791. Despite the portentous words with which he later described the plausible attractions of a visit to the Continent in 1790—" 'twas a time when Europe was rejoiced, / France standing on the top of golden hours, / And human nature seeming born again" (*Prelude* VI.352–54)—he showed little initial interest in the epochal prospect of human regeneration. He observed, he even joined on occasion with the celebrating French, but only as a pleasant episode in what was intended as a walking tour of the French and Swiss Alps. The fact is that he was fundamentally indifferent to revolutionary politics in 1790. He recalled, on seeing the revolutionary army marching off to battle, that he "look'd upon these things / As from a distance . . . / Was touched but with no intimate concern" (VI.694–96). A year and a half later, after a stay of barely two months in the French provinces, away from the main scene of revolutionary politics, he became a passionately committed "Patriot," fully involved both in the cause at large and in the minutiae of politics: "my heart was all / Given to the people, and my love was theirs" (IX.125–26). What had caused him to change between the two visits?

At the end of Book VI, Wordsworth attributes his early political indifference to his being "A Stripling, scarcely of the household then / Of social life" (VI.683–84). The words suggest a retrospective judgment of youthful immaturity leavened, however, by retrospective approval of the intimacy with nature that made him as yet socially unaware. "I needed not that joy, I did not need / Such help: the ever-living universe / And independent spirit of pure youth / Were with me at that season" (VI.700–703). This is close enough to the truth to count as a distortion rather than a falsehood. If his few letters to Dorothy from France did in fact contain animated social observation in familiar eighteenth-century terms—he particularly appreciated the French for their politeness, sociability, and benevolence—his deepest emotions were undoubtedly reserved for the natural sublime. "Among the more awful scenes of the Alps," he wrote her, "I had not a thought of men, of a single being; my whole soul was turned to him who produced the terrible majesty before me" (*Letters*, 105). Yet contrary to what he implied here, nature did not exclude man for Wordsworth even at that time. Describing in Book VIII the early "Love of Nature" that supposedly only later led him to "Love of Mankind," he remarks his youthful obsession with human suffering in the midst of sublime nature:

> images of danger and distress,
> And suffering, *these took deepest hold of me*,
> Man suffering among awful powers and forms:

> Of this I heard, and saw enough to make
> The imagination restless; *nor was free*
> *Myself from frequent perils*.
>
> (211–16; italics added)

These lines are much more in keeping with the tenor of the poetry Wordsworth was writing in the years before the Revolution than were his assertions of socially oblivious communion with nature.[21] In particular, they accurately reflect the spirit of his only published prerevolutionary poem, "An Evening Walk," with its central episode of the female beggar, the first important figure of her type in the long line of Wordsworth's female outcasts and solitaries.

Wordsworth did not suddenly discover suffering humanity in 1791; it is not even accurate to say that humanity moved at that time from the periphery to the center of his concerns. What happened rather is that he discovered humanity *in a different way* than before, as the object of social oppression and the subject of political rights. Wordsworth's revolutionary experience represented both change and continuity in a preoccupation with the socially marginal with whom, as the lines quoted above suggest, he had always identified, if in oblique and complex ways. It transformed his understanding of, and his approach to, a preexisting social concern just as that concern helped prime him for revolution.

The true nature of that preexisting concern, however, is further buried in the second set of explanations Wordsworth offers in Book IX for his delay in taking up the revolutionary cause. There he attributes it not to an indifference to things political but to a personal history that enabled him to take politics for granted. He already possessed, he claimed, the freedom that the French were just now fighting for, which was for them "A gift that rather was come late than soon" (IX.254). As an Englishman, one furthermore from a locality where claims of wealth or blood brought no particular "attention or respect"; as a student at Cambridge, the republic of letters where all were equally "Scholars and Gentlemen," and "wealth and titles were in less esteem / Than talents and successful industry" (IX.218–37), Wordsworth already believed in "equal rights / And individual worth" and enjoyed their benefits. Even if all this were true, of course, there would still be the question of why these ideals should have sparked in 1791 a political ardor they had failed to arouse the previous year. Wordsworth avoids the obvious inference that something had changed for him. Aside from this, however, his description of himself radically misrepresented what was a far more complicated national, regional, and personal situation in 1790–91 than he cared to acknowledge in 1804.

It is true that the English constitutional structure had been a model of

liberty for some notable Frenchmen in the eighteenth century, though Wordsworth exaggerated and even mythified when he wrote of the welcome he received in 1790, "we bore a name / Honoured in France, the name of Englishmen" (VI.409–10). It is true too that the balance of large and small landowners in his native counties of Cumberland and Westmoreland differed from the one prevailing in many other areas in England in that these two counties contained a larger number of small freeholders than was the case elsewhere.[22] But the northern counties also had one of the most traditionally hierarchical political structures in unreformed eighteenth-century England. Powerful landed families exerted tight and extensive control over the electoral system. William Wordsworth knew the structure of political authority at first hand: his family was an integral part of it. His father John Wordsworth had been law-agent for Sir James Lowther (after 1784, Lord Lonsdale), a grandee who at the height of his political power personally controlled nine seats in the House of Commons, more than any other landholder in England.[23] The senior Wordsworth was essentially Lowther's political manager, buying up houses and land when Lowther moved into a new area, riding the circuit of the counties to keep the voters in line at election time with liberal expenditures for drink and other persuaders. It was not a popular position; Lowther was, according to one historian who studied his political career closely, "A megalomaniac . . . tyrannical, ruthless, without tact,"[24] and local dislike for him spilled over onto his agent. William Wordsworth knew this face of Cumberland "democracy" quite directly as well. In 1790–91, his family was still embroiled in a long-standing lawsuit against Sir James for recovery of a large sum of money he owed John Wordsworth when the latter died in 1783. As was customary for election agents, Wordsworth had apparently been spending his own money in Lowther's service, anticipating reimbursement upon the settling of accounts after the elections.[25] Lowther, however, had successfully abused his agent's trust, neither paying him during his lifetime nor reimbursing his estate after his death. As for Cambridge, Wordsworth's claims about its equality and integrity are contradicted not only by his own observations elsewhere in *The Prelude* (e.g., III.644–68) but by historical evidence that, despite the beginnings of efforts at reforming the university, it still seethed with intrigue, favoritism, and injustice and worldly success for its graduates depended on influence and connection rather than merit.[26]

There was perhaps good reason for not recounting the Lowther episode in 1804, when the France books of *The Prelude* were written. Lowther's heir had paid the debt voluntarily in that year, and Wordsworth was on good terms with the man who would later become his patron. But this understandable tact does not explain the other inconsistencies. Furthermore, Wordsworth concealed more than the conflict with Lowther in his

account of the events of his revolutionary conversion. There is something odd in general about the tone of that account. The explanation is autobiographical in form, a subnarrative within the larger narrative of the growth of the poet's mind that is the poem itself; but this section is more vague in description, more abrupt in transition, more distanced and impersonal than others. Its omissions and distortions are not sufficiently accounted for by the accepted critical notion that the poem was not meant as personal autobiography, that its major biographical alterations and dislocations were imposed in order that the spiritual design inherent in the life, which had become apparent to the mature poet only in retrospect, could stand revealed as the principle that was operative from the beginning.[27]

In this connection, Nicholas Roe points out a crucial difference between the radicalism of Coleridge and Wordsworth: Wordsworth's idea of revolution did not, as did Coleridge's, reflect the philosophic and religious concerns of radical Dissenters, and he did not share their belief in divine revelation.[28] Wordsworth in fact did not fit any of the usual patterns of English radicalism in the 1790s; he was Anglican and connected through his father's service with the landed interest, while most radicals were either Dissenters who had arrived at the demand for political change through their desire for religious freedom and equality or members of the middling classes who for economic reasons wanted parliamentary reform to end the royal patronage and aristocratic manipulation that made government costly and intrusive.[29] The inevitable conclusion that Wordsworth's political enthusiasm was "initially the product of personal experience and involvement," however, makes all the more mysterious the poet's attribution of so profound an effect to so inadequate a cause. By personal experience, Roe himself means simply the personal impact on Wordsworth of Michael Beaupuy and Abbé Grégoire, the aristocratic officer and the charismatic republican orator (later president of the Convention) who were present and politically active in Blois during Wordsworth's stay there in 1791–92. The unanswered question, however, is what made Wordsworth susceptible to their influence when he had withstood the pull of a more exuberant, less conflicted, revolutionary France the year before.

Wordsworth's second trip to France coincided with the ripening and convergence of a number of crises in his life. Although it is hardly evident from the account in *The Prelude*, the trip itself was a response to one crisis, and it soon generated another. The problem of Wordsworth's finances and his liaison with Annette Vallon have been discussed frequently in the Wordsworth literature, and they will need to be considered again here. What gave them point and force, however, was their connection to a more basic and less frequently mentioned issue, the crisis

of Wordsworth's poetic identity and poetic project. Wordsworth does allude to this problem, though in this case the scantiness of treatment is less a matter of suppression than of his own less than fully conscious appreciation of its motivating force. The developing crisis, however, which threatened his poetry with blockage and impasse, can be followed in the small body of work he had written up to the time of the trips.

"The Vale of Esthwaite," Wordsworth's longest boyhood poem, was written largely on the eve of his departure from Hawkshead Grammar School for Cambridge University at age seventeen. In form a descriptive poem with a strong admixture of "Gothic" or supernatural elements, it seems to be a variation on the conventional theme of leaving youth behind, with its acceptance, albeit reluctant, of the premise common to the poetic humanism of the eighteenth century that maturation involves a rejection of youthful fancy for mature reason and the moral truths it discloses through nature.[30] The conventional theme, however, reveals a strongly personal agenda. The poem is one of exile and loss, of rage and hope, of despair at the ephemerality and fragility of the containing structures of nature, and of wishful confidence that the poet has the power to sustain and fortify these structures through the right kind of imagination.

Derivative, melodramatic, and disjointed—only partly because the extant version of the poem is put together from fragments—"The Vale of Esthwaite" nevertheless has both real power and the unity of a deeply felt conflict. The cause of the young poet's pain is his imminent departure from the Vale, the only real home he has known since his mother's death in 1778, when he was eight years old. The identification of the Vale with the lost mother and the reawakened yearning for her at the prospect of yet another wrenching separation are explicit. Even if he is far away when he dies, Wordsworth says to the Vale, his soul will cast "the wistful view / the longing look alone on you"[31] because he has no other parent:

> For I must never share
> A tender parent's guardian care;
> Sure, from the world's unkind alarm,
> Returning to a mother's arm;
> Mist-eyed awhile upraise the head
> Else sinking to Death's joyless bed,
> And when by pain, by Death, depress'd
> Ah! sure it gentler sinks to rest.
> (514–21)

These lines would seem to be the earliest and most direct poetic evidence for Richard Onorato's psychological thesis that Wordsworth's lifelong quest for a vital relationship with nature was the unconscious rejec-

tion of the traumatic loss of his mother and the effort to restore her in substitute form.[32] Yet even in this youthful work, the longing for nature is riven by ambivalences not only about nature's goodness but about the desirability of its maternal role. The first part of the poem alternates between efforts to enumerate nature's sustaining pleasures and the irruption of fearful images that threaten to overwhelm and destroy these pleasures. Initially the images are drawn from the Gothic conventions of contemporary literature: druid spirits demand the author's sacrifice, ominous female forms haunt him in the dungeons of mysterious castles. Eventually, however, it is nature, the Vale herself, that appears as the threatening force: the Vale is "dark and dreary," the river flowing through it heaves along in "sleepy horror" (382), and on the rocks above stand terrifying forms of murder, suicide, and madness. Wordsworth abruptly apologizes to the stream for seeing it in such uncharacteristically harsh terms; his apology implies his disappointment and anger that it can no longer soothe his pain, as it has always done before (403). In the past, the Vale had consoled him for the death of his father, even, he adds in an apparent and jarring non sequitur, for his guilt at not having mourned him sufficiently (the present tense in the line "I mourn because I mourned no more" [433] suggests the guilt is not even now assuaged), and for the separation from his sister Dorothy. But now he is leaving the Vale itself, the one loss for which it obviously cannot console him. In the face of his terrors and his sense of betrayal—a sense none the less intense for its irrationality, because he is the one that is leaving—he struggles to hold on to the Vale with the thought that he can nonetheless still possess it in the future, through memory.

Wordsworth's apology is crucial but ambiguous. He might be apologizing to assuage nature for his anger because he cannot afford a retaliatory response, lest he lose what solace memory of the Vale might offer after he has left it, "Sick, trembling at the world unknown / And doubting what to call [his] own" (502–3). Such a purpose would make the apology tactical and insincere. There is, however, another possibility. Toward the end of the poem Wordsworth indicates that he knows he has projected his own gloomy and murderous feelings onto the Vale. In a sudden shift of address from nature to the imagination, he bids farewell to the "forms of Fear that float / Wild on the shipwreck of the thought," images produced by "fancy in a Demon's form" that "Rides through the clouds and swells the storm" (546–49). These words suggest that he has apologized for having blamed nature for what are really his own angry and fearful impulses.

Neither alternative, however, is acceptable to Wordsworth. The first implies the possibility that the Vale is not really beneficent, the second that it is only a screen for his imagination and therefore, if not threatening, yet without real power to comfort either. Wordsworth rejects the

first alternative and fatefully modifies the second. He blurs the implications of his apology by resolving his focus exclusively onto the Vale's nurturing aspects, which he then associates with Dorothy and his friend Fleming, whose love will also sustain him in the future. As for the imagination that has projected the "forms of fear" onto the Vale, he gives it up. He is able to bid it farewell, however, without jeopardizing the power of the Vale's image to sustain him in the future because what he is abandoning is "mere" fancy, the form of imagination associated with the palpably unreal, the superstitious, and hence the obviously subjective. He is even able to say goodbye to the more cheery and hopeful face of fancy that he also feels he must leave behind in growing up. He denies *its* reality by associating it with childhood and the infantile wish to be taken care of, which must be surrendered when one enters the adult world to support oneself "in Mammon's joyless mine" (559), whose true sounds are "toil's loud din or sorrow's groan" (560). But these concessions to maturation do not mean the complete surrender of imagination. The last verse of the poem (whose fragmentary nature admittedly makes it difficult to read with certainty) seems to suggest that there is a mature form of the imagination that need not be left behind as merely projective or illusorily wishful when the child grows to adulthood. The imagination that knows true beauty can combine with external beauty in nature to produce a "softer grace" that can overcome the "dreary gloom" of the world of work. In this sense Hartman is right in saying that "The Vale of Esthwaite" anticipates Wordsworth's later hope that the imagination can be married to the world. But his further assertion that the poem acknowledges the autonomy of the imagination is oversimplified and misleading. The poem is concerned with the possibility of hope for the poetic evocation—not the constitution—of a hospitable containing structure in nature, a structure whose comfort *cannot* be seen as the mere product of subjective wishfulness and whose occasional horror *can* be dismissed as the creation of juvenile "Gothic" fantasy. What is most striking and important about the end of "The Vale of Esthwaite" is the way Wordsworth splits the imagination in two. He identifies its "authentic" and potentially generative aspect with the aesthetic of the beautiful and sees that aspect of imagination as the organ for apprehending the objectively beautiful in nature—the pleasant, harmonious, and manageably-proportioned landscape that gives pleasure and is associated with love. "Fancy," however, is linked to the emotions and perceptions associated with the sublime—the lawless, the unbounded, the violent, and the terrifying—and seen as merely subjective and childish, to be suppressed and outgrown. It is fancy that Wordsworth sees as "autonomous" in Hartman's sense, but fancy is purely arbitrary and negative, a destructive power. Wordsworth deals with the images of his rage by splitting them off from "mature" imagina-

tion, but the maneuver creates a potential problem for his intended poetry of consolation because those images are the real sources of the imaginative power of the poem. That terrible power, however, has overwhelmed the beneficence of nature in the poem; hence it is greater than the (merely) beautiful nature whose evocation in future poetry is supposed to shelter him and contain it. In fusing his personal situation with concepts of the imagination, Wordsworth had exiled the sublime from his art and in the process cut himself off from the possibility of producing an image adequate to his needs.

These considerations also suggest that it is *conceptually*, hence methodologically, mistaken to distinguish between the mind of Wordsworth as poet and as individual psyche.[33] The poem reveals the intrinsic connection between the biographical and the poetic. I do not mean by this simply to underline the evident psychological elements in the content, structure, or language of the poem. Its broken narrative and wishful conclusion are obviously driven by the loneliness of a youth who has lost mother and father, is separated from his sister, and is about to leave the one substitute for them he has had. In the confessed disturbance of language and image, one can hear the "preternatural animal sensibility"[34] that caused his mother to worry about William more than any of her other children because of what she so early sensed as his greater capacities for good or evil,[35] the "stiff, moody and violent temperament" William himself acknowledged in the angry defiance, outbursts of violence, and suicidal impulses with which he reacted to the coldness and hostility of his guardian relatives.[36] A passage that sounds to the contemporary ear like psychoanalytic satire, interpolated in the poem after his first year at Cambridge, apostrophizes Dorothy with the reason that William is so attached to her—her resemblance to their dead mother:

> Sister, for whom I feel a love
> What warms a Brother far above,
> On you, as sad she marks the scene,
> Why does my heart so fondly lean?
> Why but because in you is given
> All, all, my soul would wish from Heaven?
> Why but because I fondly view,
> All, all that Heav'n has claimed, in you?
>
> (528–35)

But these biographical details do not add up to the "meaning" of the poem. Inherent not only in the poetic enterprise as Wordsworth views it in general but in the explicit consciousness that informs "The Vale of Esthwaite" is the idea that it requires the mind of a poet, dealing in specifi-

cally poetic means, to provide an answer to aloneness, fear, and rage. That the youthful Wordsworth generalized his personal alienation is inherent in his aestheticizing its solution. It is the "pencil" placed by the muses "in the hands of taste" that can alone fix "Each Beauty Art and nature knows" (564–67) in a permanence beyond time's effacement that will once again house the self and soften the harshness of the necessary but joyless toil that bare survival necessitates. But casting the personal issue in general aesthetic (and moral) terms does not make it less personal. If the poem only anticipates the desired end without achieving it, it also explains in terms of personal impulses the bifurcation of imagination that makes the realization of an adequate nature impossible—and sets the future problem of Wordsworth's poetry.

"An Evening Walk," which dates from Wordsworth's first years at Cambridge, is usually characterized as a typical eighteenth-century topographical or "loco-descriptive" poem in genre, a view the poet himself tried to reinforce in his old age when he linked its genesis with the memory of an experience at age fourteen that first made him aware of the "infinite variety of natural appearances" and with the resolution he then made to supply the omissions of previous poets by describing these appearances.[37] Written just a little more than a year after "The Vale of Esthwaite," however, this poem affirmed both Wordsworth's poetic identity and the particular poetic project announced in that earlier poem without succeeding in consolidating either. The poem is announced self-consciously as "The history of a *poet*'s evening" (52; italics added), though the specific vantage point and task of the poet are disclosed only implicitly in the process of the poem. The walk takes place in the vicinity of Hawkshead during a summer vacation from Cambridge. The poet contrasts his melancholy mood as a visitor to the landscape of his childhood with his former happiness as its inhabitant. His purpose in the poem is to prove to Dorothy through his description of nature that despite his sadness, "some joys to me remain" (150),[38] though the present "ebb of cheerfulness" means that at best only "Sad tides of joy" may be wrested "from Melancholy's hand" (21–22). Yet, as we have seen, "The Vale of Esthwaite" gave only mixed evidence of past cheerfulness and enjoyment of the pleasures of the Vale. The new poem really represents a continuation of the sense of loss in the old, and its problem is a more advanced and sophisticated version of what it was earlier: the adequacy of nature, or the adequacy of the poet's ability to see nature—Wordsworth does not and cannot distinguish between the two—as a structured whole that can contain and order conflict and above all include the outcast, the living emblem of disorder.

Looking back on his Cambridge years in 1804, Wordsworth remembered

> melancholy thoughts
> From personal and family regards,
> Wishing to hope without a hope; some fears
> About my future worldly maintenance,
> And, more than all, a strangeness in my mind,
> A feeling that I was not for that hour
> Nor for that place.
>
> (*Prelude*, III.75–81)

The mysterious sense of alienation, which went beyond the vexation of family and financial problems, was certainly not the result of social isolation. Wordsworth was later to criticize the superficiality of Cambridge life severely, but by his own account he entered into it with zest and a measure of success. His "heart / Was social, and loved idleness and joy," he admitted (III.234); he had a wide range of connections of all degrees of intimacy, "Companionships, friendships, acquaintances," and he "sauntered, played . . . rioted . . . talked / Unprofitable talk" (III.249–52)—a typical undergraduate. But beneath this surface sociability was a deep anxiety and unsettledness that it could not answer. Whether or not Wordsworth felt himself to be at that time, as he later said, a "chosen Son" endowed with "holy powers / And faculties" (III.81–83)—the phrase dates from 1798 and the end of a period of radical transformation—he seems to have believed at the earlier time that his salvation lay in poetry, as the only way to resolve the dilemma that "An Evening Walk" reveals.

The evening walk takes place in the late afternoon when the heat of the day no longer stuns life into uncomfortable immobility and the glaring light no longer conceals discrete objects in an undifferentiated haze. Noon is a time of forced, and therefore false, stasis and unity. Only later is it possible to discern—indeed it is impossible to avoid—the variety and ferment of which the world is actually constituted. The challenge for the poet is to compose the disharmonies and dangers he sees into a landscape in which opposites balance and dangers are offset by the sense of their necessary place in a structure that would be complete and harmonious. Hence the particular choices of detail, language, and figure. A group of potters goads a laden train of horses slowly up a steep road while a peasant shoots his sledge headlong down a path along the "fearful edge" of the cliff (109–12). The "Sweetly ferocious" cock stalks around his native walks with "firm tread but nervous feet" (129–31). One group of quarrymen toil deep in the bowels of the earth while others cross bridges high up on the cliffs or hang airily from baskets (145–50). These scenes and tropes, whether invented or borrowed from other poets, are selected as oppositions of height and depth, slowness and speed, work and effortless energy, passivity and power, safe servitude and dangerous freedom: the eye of the

poet unites them through description into the necessary constituents of a balanced totality. Everything has its proper place in a harmonized landscape both natural and human.

With one exception. Towards the middle of the poem, the poet comes upon a family of swans, which he describes at greater length than he has devoted to all the previous images. The male is appropriately arrogant and self-displaying (201–4), while the female, forgetting her "beauty's pride," is tenderly consumed with a "mother's care" of her cygnets (213–15). Their safe and comfortable home along the river's edge is an organic part of the natural world, nurtured by all the elements. Abruptly, the peaceful setting is broken *not* by a visual image (as virtually all readings of the poem seem to assume) but by an imagined one, an association: the image of a wretched and incomplete human family, a mother and children without a husband and father, who is away fighting in the American Revolution. They are impoverished, homeless, without resources or help, and the anguished mother is forced to watch her children freeze to death in her arms. The picture of their death is drawn out with searing, horrified vividness. It is as immediate as anything the poet has actually seen on his walk, made even more so by the minuteness of detail and the insistent cadence of a perceptual vocabulary:

> I *see* her now, deny'd to lay her head,
> On cold blue nights, in hut or straw-built shed . . .
> . . . .
> I *hear*, while in the forest depth he sees,
> The Moon's fix'd gaze between the opening trees,
> In broken sounds her elder grief demand.
> (257–63; italics added)

Despite the perceptual terms, however, the contrast between the swan and the beggar woman is not one of perceptions but of perceived landscape and imagination. With the image of the beggar woman, the inner world of the poet's terrors has broken in on, and at least momentarily effaced, the sensory world. The previous play of contrasts has got out of control because one visual image has called up counterassociations so powerful that they have overwhelmed the defensive containments of the poetic operation and driven the poet back to the sadness, loss, and alienation he set out to disprove, or overcome.

It is not the bare fact of consciousness, its separateness from nature in an absolute or ontological sense, onto which the poet is here thrown back by his imagination. Vertiginous freedom and the sense of finitude may well lurk at the bottom of every experience of exclusion, loss, or threat of death, as Kierkegaard thought, but stripping such experience down to the abstraction of "self-consciousness" misses not only its phenomenologi-

cal texture but the nature of the relationship between the ontological, the psychological, and the physical. Consciousness of ultimate separateness and the contingency of being, while not reducible to the pain of social aloneness or the threat of physical annihilation, are, so to speak, parasitical on them, since the vulnerability of the body or the possibility of non-recognition by others are the very meaning of finitude and so can disclose it.[39] The beggar woman's helpless, anguished isolation is not merely a figure for the autonomous imagination, nor is the repeated hammering of the language of coldness in the lines describing the children's state the displacement of an existential chill:

> —No more her breath can thaw their fingers cold,
> Their frozen arms her neck no more can fold;
> Scarce heard, their chattering lips her shoulders chill,
> And her cold back their colder bosoms thrill;
> All blind she wilders o'er the lightless heath,
> Led by Fear's cold wet hand, and dogg'd by Death.
>
> (281–86)

On the other hand, though undoubtedly "social" in that they are images of other people, these are not images of social protest or even social awareness in any political sense of the term. That the beggar's husband is imagined to be fighting in the American Revolution hints at the role of historical forces, human violence, the arbitrary power of governments, and human neglect in the woman's fate, but these are not Wordsworth's concern here either. He is neither attacking nor even attending to the social causation of poverty and misery. The irruption of the scene as imagination rather than perception and the near-obsessive fascination with the most painful details of suffering suggest identification rather than social observation or criticism.[40] The numbers of widowed and orphaned poor and of unemployed soldiers roaming the English countryside increased after the American Revolution, but the beggar woman is essentially a figure of Wordsworth's inner landscape, the adequation of a set of internal fears. Although it is impossible to say what are the exact elements of Wordsworth's identifications with the mother and her children, they center suggestively on the figures of a wife deprived of her husband, a destitute mother unable to take care of her children, and unprotected children exposed to starvation and death by freezing. The central experience is abandonment and deprivation, aloneness, homelessness, and the fear of annihilation, utter exclusion from the fullness of being. If the fascination with the plight of the husbandless woman also matches some fantasy of punishing an abandoning mother and/or displacing a father, it is also suitably punished by the helplessness of the children and their destruction. In any case, what is new in "An Evening Walk" by contrast with "The Vale

of Esthwaite" is that Wordsworth has found social correlates to personal problems that situate them in a peculiar space, one not wholly self and not wholly other, but a space that permits a movement back and forth between the two.

The description of the miserable family, however, is broken off with a jarring abruptness so poetically awkward that the reader can almost feel Wordsworth's need to tear himself away from the pain of the scene and the compulsive inclination to dwell on it. The line that describes the children's fate, "Thy breast their death-bed, coffin'd in thine arms," is followed with "Sweet are the sounds that mingle from afar" as the poet returns from frightening imagination to cheering sensory presence, attentive now to the sounds of evening. But oncoming night brings with it another incipient crisis. "Unheeded night has overcome the vales, / On the dark earth the baffled vision fails" (363–64). The failure of vision is dangerous because "Naught else of man or life remains behind / To call from other worlds the wilder'd mind" (375–76). Even daylight has not been enough to prevent the mind from looking into those "other worlds"; darkness threatens to plunge the mind irretrievably back into its terrors because there will be no possibility of visual diversion for escape. Just at this point the rising moon, explicitly equated in the poem with the dawn of hope, produces a new vision, one again of the inner eye, a fantasy of the future. The metaphor is exquisitely ironic, since the "Moon's own morn" is as weak by comparison with the dawn as hope is in comparison with reality, or future fantasy with current fear. The vision is of a cottage— "Sole bourn, sole wish, sole object of my way" (410)—to be shared with Dorothy, a cottage where they will dwell together in "golden days" until their deaths.

Only after imagining the Edenic repose of that sanctuary, where pain will be nothing more than the sadness of everyday life—and not, by implication, the unnatural fear of freezing that haunts the pleasures of a summer's evening walk—can the poem reconstitute the full and harmonious natural scene. Now, however, it is a night scene that the poet describes, full of sounds, not sights. The poet has reconstituted a structure made up of simulacra of his own voice. It is an expression of the specifically poetic power, of speaking the comforting presence and unity of nature. But it is only after he has been able to imagine being housed with his sister once more that he is able to hear the harmony and use that voice to express the harmony he hears.

"An Evening Walk" thus gives some idea of the "melancholy thoughts" that haunted Wordsworth at Cambridge, as well as of the way he tried to deal with them. The feelings at war in the poem are precariousness and power. They are epitomized by two sounds the poem records in its last two lines:

> The distant forge's swinging thump profound;
> Or yell in the deep woods of lonely hound.
>
> (445–46)

Wordsworth senses the poetic power that will enable him to forge an image of nature great enough to contain even his sense of isolation and rage; forging it is the very act that gives him the place he otherwise does not have within it. But the poem questions whether he, and nature, are up to the task, whether his voice is nothing but a lonely desperate howl rather than a ringing productive hammer. Perhaps the natural material he has to work with is inadequate, threatening to disappear along with the light of day, threatening, above all, to disappear under the enormous pressure of his own inner life. What kind of succor could a nature so vulnerable to the onslaught of his own fantasy give him?

Here was the poetic crisis Wordsworth was facing on the eve of his trips to France. A passage from the 1797 version of "The Pedlar"—Wordsworth's "earliest sustained piece of autobiographical . . . writing," as Jonathan Wordsworth aptly calls it[41]—seems to corroborate more directly the troubled impasse of "An Evening Walk." The age reference indicates the period immediately following the composition of that poem.

> But now, before his twentieth year was passed,
> Accumulated feelings pressed his heart
> With an encreasing weight; he was o'erpowered
> By Nature, and his spirit was on fire
> With restless thoughts. His eye became disturbed,
> And many a time he wished the winds might rage
> When they were silent. Far more fondly now
> Than in his earlier season did he love
> Tempestuous nights, the uproar and the sounds
> That live in darkness. From his intellect,
> And from the stillness of abstracted thought,
> He sought repose in vain. I have heard him say
> That at this time he scanned the laws of light
> Amid the roar of torrents, where they send
> From hollow clefts up to the clearer air
> A cloud of mist, which in the shining sun
> Varies its rainbow hues. But vainly thus,
> And vainly by all other means he strove
> To mitigate the fever of his heart.
>
> ("Pedlar," 185–203)

Poetry provided the only promise Wordsworth had. If he doubted the power of his own perception or voice, there was little he could do but still

the doubts and keep writing; but if he doubted the power of the landscape, there was another recourse—to look to a more adequate landscape, one with power great enough to overwhelm and subdue the refractory imagination whose images of alienation and destruction seemed to burst through all containments.

Some such motive lay behind his desire to travel to the Continent to see the Alps. That mighty landscape, which had become part of the convention of the eighteenth-century sublime, might shore up a sense of nature whose frailty was under constant inner attack. As he hinted later in *The Prelude*, his poetic vocation seemed to depend upon it:

> But Nature then was sovereign in my heart,
> And mighty forms seizing a youthful fancy
> Had given a charter to irregular hopes.
>
> (VI.346–48)

Whether the 1790 walking tour even provisionally achieved his purpose must remain uncertain, because the first poetry resulting from it was finished only after he became a political partisan, when his conception of nature and the poet's relation to it had changed. Both the passage in his 1790 letter to Dorothy that refers to the "terrible majesty" of the Alps and their depiction in "Descriptive Sketches" suggest that he had encountered there images on the scale of his feelings and needs. But that poem is properly part of the revolutionary phase of Wordsworth's career. And that only developed when another crisis, this one connected with the material conditions of a poetic vocation, forced him to the Continent a second time. The new crisis posed the question of power in a new arena.

Lord Lonsdale's refusal to pay his debt to John Wordsworth's estate meant that William was financially, as well as physically and emotionally, dependent on his unsympathetic guardians, who had to pay for his education as well as his support. Despite their coldness—in good part no doubt because of it—William felt a strong sense of obligation to prepare for a career so that he could support himself and no longer be a financial burden upon them. For someone of his social background with a university education, this meant a career in law, medicine, the university, or the church, and as a well-connected Hawkshead boy at Cambridge, he had many opportunities for fellowships and preferments open to him.[42] At least for a short time, he half-fooled either himself, his relatives, or, given the psychosomatic indications, both, into believing he was serious about the law. "He wishes very much to be a lawyer," Dorothy wrote, "if his health will permit, but he is troubled with violent headaches and a pain in his side" (*Letters*, 7). The wish, if it ever really existed, did not last very long. Wordsworth not only did very little to prepare himself for anything

practical, he refused to take a systematic or ambitious approach to his own studies. A passage in *The Prelude* nicely captures the intricacies as well as the force of his rebelliousness—his conflict over it, the immobility it led to, and his exploitation of the impasse to sanction further rebellion:

> I was detached
> Internally from academic cares,
> From every hope of prowess and reward,
> And wished to be a lodger in that house
> Of letters, and no more—and should have been
> Even such, but for some personal concerns
> That hung about me in my own despite
> Perpetually, no heavy weight, but still
> A baffling and a hindrance, a controul
> Which made the thought of planning for myself
> A course of independent study seem
> An act of disobedience towards them
> Who loved me, proud rebellion and unkind.
> This bastard virtue—rather let it have
> A name it more deserves, this cowardise—
> Gave treacherous sanction to that over-love
> Of freedom planted in me from the very first,
> And indolence, by force of which I turned
> From regulations even of my own
> As from restraints and bonds.
>
> (VI.29–48)

Wordsworth alludes here to his refusal, despite high achievements in his first half-year at Cambridge, to take the courses or sit for the exams required to win honors and the fellowships that would have eased his guardians' financial burden. It was his guilt over this, he claimed, that prevented him even from embarking on an independent course of study, though he admits that the inhibition rationalized what he later judged as such "overlove of freedom" that he was glad not to be bound even by self-imposed tasks. In fact, it was not self-discipline he rejected, but any interference with his poetic ambitions.

> The Poet's soul was with me at that time,
> . . . .
> A thousand hopes
> were mine . . .
> . . . .
> Those were the days
> Which also first encouraged me to trust

> With firmness, hitherto but lightly touched
> With such a daring thought, that I might leave
> Some monument behind me which pure hearts
> Should reverence.
>
> (VI.55–69)

If Wordsworth was not interested even in reading independently, it was because in the heat of his own ambition and self-belief

> The instinctive humbleness,
> Upheld even by the very name and thought
> Of printed books and authorship, began
> To melt away; and further, the dread awe
> Of mighty names was softened down, and seemed
> Approachable. . . .
>
> (VI.69–74)

Why should he read when he could write, and join the company of the mighty?

At the end of his third year, instead of spending the vacation period preparing for final examinations, in which he might have earned an honors degree respectable enough for a fellowship and a good position and recouped his moral standing with his relatives, he decided to go on the walking tour. “An open slight / Of college cares and study was the scheme,” he admitted, though insisting that it was not “entertained without concern for those / To whom my worldly interests were dear” (VI.342–45). The only outward sign of that concern—mostly for Dorothy—was his not telling her or anyone about his intentions in advance. Supportive of William as she was, Dorothy was more attuned to the practicalities. “I am very anxious about him just now,” she wrote in the spring of 1790, “as he will shortly have to provide for himself. Next year he takes his degree; when he will go into orders I do not know, nor how he will employ himself; he must when he is three and twenty finally either go into orders or take pupils; he will be twenty by April” (*Letters*, 29). This is the first information about a change of career plan, but it is apparent that she took it more seriously than he did. When he returned to Cambridge after his first tour, he took the examinations for a degree without honors, spent the four months between January and May in London living on a small sum provided by his paternal uncle Richard Wordsworth and the next four in Wales at the home of a friend.

Dorothy reported that her brother was happy during this period; his own letters betray more ambivalence, but given his circumstances, a surprising absence of real concern. To his Cambridge friend William Mathews, he wrote on June 17 that he had passed his time in London in a

strange manner," alternating between strenuous activity and indolence, though not without "many very pleasant hours." Now, he said, "he was spending the time in a "very agreeable manner" and looking forward to a walking tour of Wales (*Letters*, 49–59). On August 3, in another letter to Mathews, he admitted with some apparent embarrassment that since coming to Wales he had not done anything, adding with guilty, yet defiant, self-mockery "I rather think my gaiety increases with my arrogance, as a spend-thrift grows more extravagant, the nearer he approximates to a final dissipation of his property" (*Letters*, 56). There was, in fact, some cause for William's insouciance. In early March of that year, an injunction that Lord Lonsdale had obtained in 1788 staying proceedings against him by the administrators of John Wordsworth's estate was dissolved. In a letter of May 23, Dorothy wrote that the outcome of the Lonsdale suit looked hopeful, and in late August, a verdict was given in the case in favor of the estate and the matter referred to an arbitrator for settlement of the exact amount to be paid by Lonsdale. It looked as if the Wordsworth children would obtain a real, if modest, economic independence, and William would be free to pursue a poet's vocation unhampered by the need for some other occupation.

By September, however, the insouciance was gone. A letter to Mathews on September 23 chided him for proposing that they both give up seeking a regular livelihood and take to the road. William's financial situation had suddenly changed. The arbitration had been delayed and was clearly not proceeding to a conclusion; it appeared that no money would be available very soon, if at all. And in early September, Wordsworth had received the offer of a curacy in Harwich from his cousin. Although he could not yet take up the living because he was not of age for Anglican orders, it now seemed he would ultimately have to do so. "[W]ere I so situated, as to be without relations to whom I were accountable for my actions, I should perhaps prefer your idea . . . to vegetating on a paltry curacy," he wrote Mathews. "Yet . . . I should not be able to reconcile to my ideas of right the thought of wandering about a country, without a certainty of being able to maintain myself" (*Letters*, 59). Wordsworth's hopes for financial and thus occupational independence had been apparently all but ended by Lonsdale, whom now even Dorothy, a lover of the monarchy and established society, called "the greatest of tyrants" (*Letters*, 65). A bleak and oppressive reality was closing in on him instead. The already galling dependency on his guardians was forcing him into a vocation he despised, a vocation which in any case could provide no support for almost two more years. The powder was being heaped up for an explosion. In a desperate effort to find a means of at least temporary support and a perhaps more palatable longer-term alternative—Dorothy had referred to the possibility in her letter of the previous year—he abruptly

decided to go to France again in order to learn enough of the language to become a companion and tutor to young gentlemen. It was there that the fuse was lit.

In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth made a suggestive parenthetical comment about the "feast, and dance and public revelry, / And sports and games" in which he had participated at Cambridge and especially during the summer vacation. They were, he remarked, "less pleasing in themselves, / Than as they were a badge glossy and fresh / Of manliness and freedom" (IV.274–77). Oblique as the comment is, it is one of the few he permitted himself about the sexual side of adolescence, the testing of virility and independence in competition and flirtation, but it suggests that "manliness and freedom" were an issue in this sphere of his life, as they were in terms of poetic identity and financial independence. There is no evidence, however, other than a passing reference Dorothy made to William's enjoying the company of the some young ladies on one of his summer vacation trips, of any romantic, let alone erotic, interest until his second trip to France. Suddenly, only a short time after his arrival in Orléans, where he had chosen to reside, in circumstances of heightened dependence, diminished prospects, and frustrated hope and ambition, he fell passionately in love.

So much has been written and so much made of Wordsworth's affair with Annette Vallon that it is easy in reaction to underestimate, if not entirely discount, its importance to his politics and his poetry. Seen in the light of the crises attending his trip to France, however, it takes on intensified and even new significance. Perhaps little can or should be made of the fact that she was four years his senior. But her correspondence reveals her as a warm, direct, giving, and adoring woman, as her later activities on behalf of hunted royalists show her idealistic, courageous, and capable of initiative. Although of a social status inferior to Wordsworth's, her personality and age doubtless made her appear to him strong as well as tender, a woman whose love and devotion were to be prized. In his baffled circumstances, his passion for her, and hers for him, were consolation, fulfillment, and defiance, a proof of strength and confirmation of worth. There is a striking coincidence in timing that supports the idea of a connection between Wordsworth's financial predicament and the love affair. Annette's and William's child was born on December 15, 1792. If she was a full-term baby, she was conceived in about the middle of March, six weeks or so after Wordsworth moved to Blois, Annette's home. As late as December 7, 1971, Dorothy was again entertaining hopes for a successful, even speedy conclusion to the Lonsdale suit (*Letters*, 65). But toward the end of February 1792, Lord Lonsdale alleged that the cause of the suit had been abated by the fact that one of the Wordsworth children had come of age. The suit came to rest indefinitely

at this point;[43] Lonsdale had finally succeeded in completely blocking the settlement, and by the end of February all prospects for financial independence from that source seemed gone forever. These facts suggest a more concrete referent than has ever been suggested to the lines in the story of Vaudracour and Julia that allude to Julia's becoming pregnant:

> whether through effect
> Of some delirious hour, or that the youth,
> *Seeing so many bars betwixt himself*
> *And the dear haven where he wished to be*
> *In honourable wedlock with his love*
> *Without a certain knowledge of his own*
> *Was inwardly prepared to turn aside*
> *From law and custom* and entrust himself
> To Nature for a happy end of all.
> (IX.596-604; italics added)

The language points to a partly conscious intention on Vaudracour's part not only to get Julia pregnant—her own desires regarding conception are not even considered—but to do so as a protest against the barriers to marriage and an act of defiance of law and custom. The impregnation was, even within the story's own narrative frame, a political act, a protest against paternal, social, religious, and traditional authority.

It can never of course be definitively proved that the story of Vaudracour and Julia is autobiographical, but much of its content, its place in *The Prelude*, the circumstance of its excision and independent publication, and certain details of its style make any other interpretation far more implausible. A love affair between social unequals, the opposition of family (Annette's Catholicism would have made it impossible for William to take Anglican orders, and his relatives did oppose her), the birth of an illegitimate child, the unhappy outcome, the decking of the story in the images of fiction and romance, the odd editorial comments of the poet-narrator, who, for example, reports the fact of Julia's pregnancy with "reluctance," although the story is supposedly about people unknown to him told at second hand, all make the personal significance inescapable. The spirit, however, as well as the letter, of the major details is also important. Like Vaudracour, Wordsworth had claimed the sexual prerogatives of manhood in defiance of both his own impotence in the world and an authority he knew would disapprove his behavior. The rash desire to force the issue and trust "nature" for a happy ending had only compounded his situation. Cheated out of the means of self-support by the high-handedness of an aristocrat who had manipulated the legal system, Wordsworth had with his act of assertive power only increased his helplessness and dependency, creating additional responsibilities he could

not manage. The issues of power and autonomy were seamless across the range of Wordsworth's self. Annette was the "dear haven where he wish'd to be," an expression cognate to his characterization of his wish for a "bourn" with Dorothy in "An Evening Walk." In taking her—the word is appropriate to his own sense of at least one of the motives of his desire for her—he had attempted to realize his long-held poetic vision of housing himself in nature, now however not through passive perception but by active appropriation, through the exercise of his own productive power. The love affair was itself symbolically a poetic consummation. In an almost incredible irony, the ultimate effect of his impregnating Annette would be to recreate in fact a version of the abandoned wife and mother of "An Evening Walk"; for the moment, however, a far different outcome seemed possible.

The story of Vaudracour and Julia, which ends with Julia forced into a convent and Vaudracour responsible for the death of his child by "some mistake or indiscretion," is set just before the outbreak of the French Revolution. Stunned by tragedy into an almost catatonic withdrawal from the world, Vaudracour could not be roused by "The voice of Freedom" that soon afterwards resounded throughout France, either by public hope or by "personal memory of his own deep wrongs" (IX.931–35). These lines explicitly link personal wrongs with a political struggle for freedom, suggesting the equation that Wordsworth himself made between his own cause and the Revolution. They imply a contrast between Vaudracour's fate and his own; unlike the tragic but pathetic figure who could not defy his father, Wordsworth was moved to political rebellion by his own ability to connect personal wrongs with their sociopolitical causes and to act on his knowledge.

As with the beginning of the love affair with Annette, the timing of events is too precise to be merely coincidental. Wordsworth's political engagement dates from the period after February 1792 in Blois, where he met Michael Beaupuy, his political mentor, and where later in the year he heard the speeches of Abbé Grégoire, whose visionary republicanism helped inspire his own early millenarian politics.[44] Wordsworth, as we have seen, had not responded to the substantial Dissenting presence at Cambridge that so influenced Coleridge.[45] Although he claimed to have read Burke, Paine, and other writers of "master pamphlets of the day" (IX.97), perhaps while resident in London in the spring of 1791, he had passed through Paris on the way to Orléans in November 1791 without lingering, pocketing a relict of the Bastille in a perfunctory gesture, "Affecting more emotion than I felt" (IX.71). Once arrived in Orléans, he had been able to converse quite comfortably with royalist officers because he was "indifferent" to the concerns of contemporary political debates (IX.201–7) and was neither offended by, nor took offense at, strongly held

and divisive ideas. The abrupt transformation of Wordsworth's political consciousness between December 1791 and February 1792, above all the impact on him of Beaupuy, can only be explained by the whole complex of issues that came to a climax in Lonsdale's final triumph and Annette's pregnancy.

Wordsworth noted a number of Beaupuy's qualities that reflected his own self-image and aspirations at the time—his coupling of meekness with enthusiasm "to the height / Of highest expectation" (IX.298–301), the passion that had once made him a successful *galant* but which now served the cause of freedom as well as it had the pursuit of love (IX.324). In particular, however, three of his characterizations of Beaupuy bring out the essentials of his own crises. "[T]hrough the events / Of that great change," Wordsworth wrote, Beaupuy "wandered in perfect faith, / As through a book, an old romance or tale / Of Fairy" (IX.305–9). He had the unquestioning belief and sense of mission of a Spenserian hero, and so could evoke Wordsworth's own identity as poetic fashioner of faith. But he was fitted to do so in the circumstances because he was *not* a poet but "one whom circumstance / Hath called upon to embody his deep sense / In action, give it outwardly a shape, / And that of benediction to the world" (IX.407–10). As a man of action, a soldier of the Revolution, Beaupuy was the ideal object of identification for the young man whose own inability to act had brought him to the point of rebellion. And the purpose of Beaupuy's action, his definition of the ideals of revolution, mirrored exactly the central concern of Wordsworth's poetic aspirations. The "hunger-bitten Girl" they met one day, creeping along with a cow tied to her arm and knitting "in a heartless mood / Of solitude" (IX.512–18) was in a direct line of succession from the female beggar of "An Evening Walk," and Beaupuy's agitated response to her—"'Tis against that / Which we are fighting" (IX.519–20)— alone made him Wordsworth's more confident and purposive alter ego. It validated Wordsworth's own connection of personal emotions to the public struggle for freedom and equality. The rescue of the impoverished girl, and everything she represented *for* Wordsworth and *as* Wordsworth, was to be effected now by politics *and* poetry, working together:

> I with him believed
> Devoutly that a spirit was abroad
> Which could not be withstood, that poverty,
> At least like this, would in a little time
> Be found no more, that we should see the earth
> Unthwarted in her wish to recompense
> The industrious, and the lowly child of toil,
> All institutes for ever blotted out

That legalized exclusion, empty pomp
Abolished, sensual state and cruel power,
Whether by edict of the one or few—
And finally, as sum and crown of all,
Should see the people having a strong hand
In making their own laws, whence better days
To all mankind.

(IX.520–34)

III) The Radical Wordsworth

i) The Phases of Radicalism

Wordsworth's revolutionary phase lasted from early 1792 until the middle of 1795. It is difficult to follow or document, its end even more elusive than its beginning, though the transformation that resulted from its crisis was more profound than the initial change and created the "historical" Wordsworth. He did not reflect on the process of his changing ideas and feelings in contemporaneous writings; his letters are few and relatively uninformative, and the retroactive account in *The Prelude*, while indispensable, must as usual be used with the greatest caution. Yet this is the crucial period for the formulation of the problem that was to be the focus of his greatest work.

Two quite different kinds of writing mark the brief period of Wordsworth's relatively unalloyed enthusiasm for the French Revolution. They are usually treated separately, but neither can be fully understood except in relation to the other. Shortly after his return to England in December 1792, he made his only foray into revolutionary political theory and polemic, the *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*. At about the same time, in early 1793, he published "Descriptive Sketches," which had been written during 1792, along with "An Evening Walk," which dated from before his revolutionary period. In the autumn of 1793, Wordsworth wrote the first version of the "Salisbury Plain" poems, "A Night on Salisbury Plain," and in 1794 revised "An Evening Walk" in keeping with his radical political views; with "Descriptive Sketches" these poems thus comprise the body of Wordsworth's "revolutionary" poetry. The revision of "Salisbury Plain" in the fall of 1795 represents the transition away from the Revolution and the writing of *The Borderers* in late 1796 and early 1797 the first reckoning with what had become its final meaning for him.

The choice of occasion for Wordsworth's only revolutionary political manifesto is theoretically and psychologically telling. Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff, had just published as an appendix to a previously printed

sermon a speech he had given against the Revolution. Watson been one of the few important figures within the established church to take a liberal attitude to Dissent and political reform; he had supported both the American revolutionaries and the French Revolution in its early years. He was also a professor at Cambridge and, despite the location of his see, a countryman of Wordsworth's, living as an absentee bishop on Lake Windermere in Westmoreland. Radicalism on the part of a leading English cleric who also had ties to his native counties was of great moral and emotional significance for Wordsworth. His new-found revolutionary zeal had not at first seemed to him incompatible with English patriotism; in the spring of 1792 he still could describe England to Mathews as a "free country, where every road is open, where talent and industry are more liberally rewarded than amongst any other nation of the universe" (*Letters*, 77). But this sentiment is hard to reconcile both with his reasons for becoming a revolutionary and with his political ideas at the very time he expressed it. His continuing faith in England suggests the intensity of his need to deny any split in his loyalties, as does the "moral shock" that he experienced when England went to war with France on February 1, 1793, an event that should not have surprised him if, as he claimed, he had not doubted that the day would come when England's rulers would turn against France (X.242–45). The support of figures like Watson for the Revolution helped make the compartmentalization of fact and the denial of emotion at least somewhat plausible. By the same token, Watson's apostasy made even more complete Wordsworth's sense of being groundless and adrift when war broke out, cut off by divided loyalties from the domestic landscape that he saw as his nurturant source and no longer "a green leaf on the blessed tree / Of my beloved country" (X.254–55).

The cause of Watson's about-face was of as much concern to Wordsworth as the fact of it. Watson turned against the Revolution as a direct consequence of the execution of Louis XVI in January 1793. From that point on to be a revolutionary was to approve and defend regicide, and Watson's recantation had for Wordsworth the force of a personal accusation. Watson, who had previously been a moral and psychological buffer between Wordsworth and the hostile rulers of England, now in effect abandoned him to their anger and rejection, thus reproducing the consequences of his father's death, which had left him to cold and disapproving relatives. Watson had in effect condemned Wordsworth's rebellion for freedom and power as complicity in murder. Wordsworth's pamphlet was at once a defiant defense of regicide against Watson's recently published expression of horror at the brutal establishment of the French republic and a bitterly sharp offensive on behalf of a republicanism well on the radical side of the spectrum of contemporary ideologies. The central political ideas expressed in the letter were unquestionably derivative, a mix

of Rousseau and contemporary French republicanism with Paine and British democratic radicalism. But Wordsworth's political synthesis is not only unique in its emphases; it contains some political ideas that are original and reflect his personal revolutionary agenda.[46]

No doubt, he conceded, a time of revolution was not a season of true liberty. Under the circumstances, political virtues had to be developed at the expense of moral ones. There were times when despotism was so stubborn and perverse that liberty had to borrow its methods "and in order to reign in peace must establish herself by violence."[47] Morally problematic as it might be, the use of violence was to be preferred to the continued existence of the present order, for the form of government that would replace it would be much freer. Government was at best but a necessary evil, Wordsworth argued in accord with the natural law tradition (*Prose Works*, 42); a republican form of government, as the freest, would be the least of evils. On this point he attacked Watson's claim that republicanism was the most odious of all tyrannies because it represented the tyranny of equals by introducing an argument about the psychology of liberty: it would in fact be much easier to defend against an abuse of power by those who were recognized as equals than by those whom people were taught to revere as superiors (36). Wordsworth's political starting point was a strong concept of universal individual liberty that entailed absolute equality and licensed violence to achieve it.

Wordsworth's enormous sensitivity to any form of social and political oppression led him to a unique version of the blend of republicanism and natural law concepts that constituted the most radical British political theorizing during the revolutionary period. He agreed with those critics of classical republicanism (and of Rousseau) who claimed that the size of modern states made direct democracy impossible and necessitated a system of political representation. But though he used the language of "interest" in discussing representation, implicitly taking the position of the advocates of commercial society against anticommercial republicanism, he flatly rejected wealth and property as a condition of political participation. As far as holding office was concerned, "A people will not hold out wealth as a criterion of integrity. . . . Virtues, talents, and acquirements are all that it will look for" (38). As for voting, peasants and mechanics were as qualified as anyone else: "[W]hat vast education is requisite to enable [one] to judge . . . which is most qualified by his industry and integrity to be intrusted with the care of the interests of himself and of his fellow citizens?" (38–39). Wordsworth reinforced his egalitarianism with language about the common good drawn from republicanism: so long as a single man in Great Britain had no suffrage in the election of a representative, the general will of the society of which he was a member was not

being expressed and he was merely a helot; Parliament as presently constituted was not the general will (46–47). Furthermore, to safeguard against the misuse of power by elected representatives, Wordsworth not only proposed to shorten the term of office and prohibit anyone from holding office twice in succession, he fell back on republican direct democracy to insist that the legislature would only propose and deliberate the laws, while the people alone would have the power to vote them (37).

Political radicalism thus appears to be for Wordsworth the result of a wider sense of exclusion, oppression, powerlessness, and humiliation. The predominant tone in the pamphlet is a sense of outrage over inequality and its malignant effects in every sphere of life, psychological and moral as well as economic and political. Wordsworth was particularly offended by the utter unjustifiability of the aristocracy's absolute monopoly of political and social power and the disparity between its claims to superiority and its moral and intellectual stature. "What services," he demanded, "can a man render to the state adequate to such a compensation that the making of laws, upon which the happiness of millions is to depend, shall be lodged in him and his posterity, however depraved may be their principles, however contemptible their understandings. . . . [W]hat services can a man render society to compensate for the outrage done to the dignity of our nature when we bind ourselves to address him and his posterity with humiliating circumlocution, calling him most noble, most honorable, most august, serene, excellent, eminent and so forth" (44). The note of narcissistic injury and rage in the conventional antiaristocratic rhetoric is unmistakable.

But the form of inequality in the existing order most disturbing to Wordsworth was the unnatural inequality of wealth, for which the political privileges of the aristocracy were responsible. The coupling of a radically individualist economic and political position with a concern to ameliorate poverty was Paineite in form[48] but personal to Wordsworth in its inspiration. Some distinction of wealth would always attend superior talents and industry, he acknowledged, but it was through their control of the legislative system that the aristocracy had passed laws such as primogeniture, enclosure acts, and the setting of arbitrarily low wages for workers that created "the present *forced* disproportion of . . . possession" (43; italics added). Wordsworth's rural poor once again make their appearance, now as the victims not of nature or fate but of political manipulation and oppression. The special emphasis on the extremes of poverty that push people to the margins of society and beyond reflects above all the concern of his poetry with those whose lives were emblems of the precariousness of existence. He condemned aristocratic manipulation for blocking any hope of putting an end to mendicancy, which he described as a

constant shock to the feelings of humanity. Specifically, this manipulation was responsible for the miseries entailed upon the marriage of those who were not rich, miseries that "tempt the bulk of mankind to fly to that promiscuous intercourse to which they are impelled by the instincts of nature, and the dreadful satisfaction of escaping the prospect of infants, sad fruit of such intercourse, whom they are unable to support" (43). We can read here not only the story of his daughter's birth and the fate he feared for her but the shock to his own moral sensibility, the shame of a manhood potent (and heedless) enough to procreate, but not powerful enough to support its offspring, and, in the oxymoron "dreadful satisfaction," a hint of guilt at the temptation to escape such responsibilities.

If obliquely acknowledged guilt and shame intensified Wordsworth's anger, however, the pamphlet expresses no doubt about where ultimate responsibility for this situation lay. Wordsworth was most venomous in his anger at Watson's defense of the British judicial system, the root cause of his most urgent personal problems. "I congratulate your lordship upon your enthusiastic fondness for the judicial proceedings of this country. I am happy to find you have passed through life without having your fleece torn from your back, in the thorny labyrinth of litigation. . . . 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. . . . [Y]our lordship cannot, I presume, be ignorant of our never-ending process, the verbosity of unintelligible statutes and the perpetual continuity in our judicial decisions" (47).

The political-psychological theme of the *Letter* is wounded personal power—the "outrage done to the dignity of our nature" by humiliating deference and by the material obstacles to freedom and self-respect in the poverty caused by the unequal distribution of political authority and the resulting aristocratic manipulation of society. The remedy is the appropriation of power, through the equality that would be created by the elimination of social hierarchy and the institution of democratic republicanism. But perhaps the most striking aspect of this appropriation is Wordsworth's readiness to defend the use of violence to overthrow the old order. It represents an integration of the destructive anger he had long felt but had tried to suppress in his poetry. Wordsworth could assimilate violence when it was transformed from private rage against an abandoning nature or frustrating and humiliating authorities into the shared legitimate anger of victims of a universal injustice.

In the thematics of his poetry, Wordsworth's ability to integrate political power and violence meant the possibility of desegregating and reappropriating the sublime, which had been split off and excluded in his earlier work because it was associated with hostility, rage, and the power of de-

struction. This appropriation is the central aesthetic event of "Descriptive Sketches." Structurally, "Descriptive Sketches" is a more complicated version of "An Evening Walk." Like the latter, its avowed purpose is to seek a balm for sadness, though here the sadness goes beyond emptiness or loss to include some unnamed source of self-chastisement or guilt. The poet is led on his walk "lur'd by hope her sorrows to remove / A heart, that could not much itself approve."[49] And as in "An Evening Walk," the vision of nature's consoling unification of opposites is disrupted by scenes of loneliness, suffering, and death, though in "Descriptive Sketches," rupture and repair, repeated a number of times with different human figures, become a structuring pattern for the whole poem.

Thematically, however, there are two major changes from the previous poem. The human suffering that the poet encounters here is frequently—though not always—linked causally with political oppression, or "slavery," and he now looks to a political remedy for it, a revolution of liberty that will restore an original natural state of freedom and integration. And the strength for such an uprising will come from humanity's—the poet's—direct appropriation of the terrible power of sublime nature.

There are, at the same time, severe, and in the end unresolved, tensions in the solution the poem calls for. For one, the poet is never wholly secure in his will to believe that the cause of human suffering results from human actions. Although recent commentators like Eric Birdsall are obviously right in insisting on the political meaning of the poem,[50] it oscillates between visionary scenes of Alpine freedom and peace and pessimistic outbursts couched in the language of an eternal human condition. It is, for example, after the evocation of "the traces of primeval man" still left in the Alps, the hardy descendants of that ur-Man, "Nature's Child," who once inhabited the mountains, "free, alone and wild," that the poem raises the lament:

> Soon flies the little joy to man allow'd,
> And tears before him travel like a cloud.
> For come Diseases on, and Penury's rage,
> Labour, and Pain, and Grief, and joyless Age,
> And Conscience dogging close his bleeding way
> Cries out, and leads her Spectres to their prey,
> 'Till Hope-deserted, long in vain his breath
> Implores the dreadful untried sleep of Death.
> ("Descriptive Sketches," 636–43)

And again, after the rousing call at the end of the poem for the French Revolution to end conquest, famine, oppression, and persecution, the poet urges his traveling companion in the last lines of the poem to forget for the night "the dead load of mortal ills" and renew "when the rosy

summits glow / At morn, our various journey sad and slow" (812–13). The cankers of mortality and guilt lie like an unassimilable, potentially fatal source of infection, at the center of political hope.

But there is also another source of tension in the poem, potentially just as disruptive—that between the individual and the social sources of salvation. This tension also haunts the poem from the beginning. The poet's encounter with the Grison gypsy, "sole human tenant of the piny waste," who is hurled with her child to her death by a sudden mountain storm, first triggers a reflection on the benefits of social solidarity:

> —The mind condemn'd, without reprieve, to go
> O'er life's long deserts with its charge of woe,
> With sad congratulations joins the train,
> Where beasts and man together o'er the plain
> Move on,—a mighty caravan of pain;
> Hope, strength, and courage, social suffering brings,
> Freshening the waste of sand with shades and springs.
> (192–97)

But despite the comforts of socially-shared suffering on the plain and the contrast of the gypsy's lonely fate in the mountains, the poet prefers the isolated, dangerous life on the desolate and stormy heights of the mountains, in the face of the very elements that killed her:

> Mid stormy vapours ever driven by,
> Where ospreys, cormorants, and herons cry,
> Where hardly giv'n the hopeless waste to chear,
> Deny'd the bread of life the foodful ear,
> Dwindles the pear on autumn's latest spray,
> And apple sickens pale in summer's ray,
> *Ev'n here Content has fix'd her smiling reign*
> *With Independence child of high Disdain.*
> (317–24; italics added)

Although the mountain offers neither fellowship nor material sustenance, it offers something better, independence, which the language expressly characterizes as a reaction of disdain for its hardships and dangers and perhaps also for those not courageous enough to brave them.

The strength for that freedom is obtained not from social solidarity but from the very source of danger and terror itself. As the storm clears, the sun emerges from the clouds and deluges the immense mountain vista with fire. Wordsworth underscored the significance of this moment in a long footnote that signals his breakthrough to the aesthetics—and power—of the sublime. He was going, he says, to give the title of "Picturesque" to the sketches in the poem, but this would have given his reader only "a very imperfect idea of those emotions which [the Alps] have the

irresistible power to give the most impassioned imaginations."[51] This power, "which distinguishes the Alps from all other scenery"—an underscoring of the inadequacy of the domestic landscape of "An Evening Walk"—derives from images that "disdain the pencil." The phrase echoes the "pencil of taste" in the "Vale of Esthwaite" and is a rejection of its aesthetics of moderation; "taste" yields to the "impassioned imagination" that alone grasps infinite power and unity. The Alps cannot be represented pictorially, for painting demands contrasts of shading, whereas the sublimity of this scene depended on the impression of unity given it by "that deluge of light, or rather fire, in which nature had wrapped the immense forms around me." But what pictorial representation cannot achieve, poetry apparently can. And that is precisely the point of the whole passage. The poet is able to appropriate the awful majesty of the fiery mountains for himself, through the representation of "the fire-clad eagle's wheeling form," which blazes "Triumphant on the bosom of the storm" (338–39). With the eagle, the poet has slipped the bonds of earth and soars in triumphant freedom sustained by the very power that destroyed the gypsy.

The sublime, however, cannot be wholly mediated by the figure of the eagle; Wordsworth is too aware of his difference, his humanity, to rest there. Immediately the scene shifts from the sky to a lake below, where:

> Behind his sail the peasant strives to shun
> The west that burns like one dilated sun,
> Where in a mighty crucible expire
> The mountains, glowing hot, like coals of fire.
>
> (344–47)

The power of the sun, which consumes the mountains, seems too strong for humanity to withstand, at least when figured as peasant, poor, threatened, and isolated. But in another abrupt shift the "overaw'd" peasant suspends his oars before the suddenly-introduced shrine of William Tell, the heroic fighter for Swiss freedom against the Austrians. The identification with mighty heroes of old raises the weak and fearful individual above his own terror to a state of near divine power:

> And who but feels a power of strong controul,
> Felt only there, oppress his labouring soul,
> Who walks, where honour'd men of ancient days
> Have wrought with god-like arm the deeds of praise?
>
> (352–55)

Having imaginatively effected this connection with past political power, the poet can once again appropriate the power of nature, rather than fear it, not only through a natural symbol but as man. He can withstand the sun by identifying with "god-like" men who have sublimated destructive

energy in the service of human liberation. The political, however, appears not in the form of social solidarity but in the form of heroic, that is, individual, political action; it is the ancient hero who is expressly linked to divine power.

Yet even this moment is precarious. As the poet stands alone, "Sublime upon this far-surveying cone" (366–67), he immediately catches sight of the chamois hunter, a man who though of "fearless step," is soon nonetheless endangered and destroyed, like the gypsy, by the power of nature. The poetic appropriation of nature's power proves evanescent. It is not enough to walk where dead heroes fought, revering them as figures of the past without living connection to the present. Continuing power resides only in a self-conscious identification with their lives, which demands reenactment. Hence, when the theme of power returns, it is in the vision of the ancient Swiss mountain dweller, the ancestor of those contemporary inhabitants who still preserve some of their forefathers' virtues and the model for the contemporary struggle for freedom in Europe:

> Once Man entirely free, alone and wild
> Was bless'd as he was free—for he was Nature's child.
> He, all superior but his god disdain'd,
> Walk'd none restraining, and by none restrain'd.
> Confess'd no law, but what his reason taught,
> Did all he wish'd and wish'd but what he ought.
>
> (520–25)

Here is the desired union of man and nature, man absolutely free and unconflictedly ethical. And his descendants retain in their self-aware filiation with their ancestor at least some of the lineaments of sublimity, the connection to infinity.

> Uncertain thro' his fierce uncultur'd soul
> Like lighted tempests troubled transports roll;
> To viewless realms his Spirit towers amain,
> Beyond the senses and their little reign.
> And oft, when pass'd that solemn vision by,
> He holds with God himself communion high.
>
> (546–51)

Even this image will give way in the unceasing oscillations of the poem. But what is again noteworthy about it is that, though derived in part from the memory of a collective struggle against tyranny, it is a vision of solitary power. The figure of man is not generic, he is the lone individual, the "fire-clad eagle" in human form, communing by himself with God, not part of "the train / Where beasts and man together o'er the plain / Move on." There is an insistent blurring in the poem between collective and

personal power that is not simply equivalent to a shuttling between political and aesthetic power. The appropriated power of the poet is not just imaginative: the poet is identified both with the artist of the sublime and with a series of hero-warriors, some of whom, like Sidney, were also poets (356–64). The full self-representation of the poet is of the poet-warrior who conquers with sword as well as with pen.

This sense of personal power and conquest is in conflict not only with the collective aspect of political struggle but with the positive ideals of the battle for freedom. The invocation to the Revolution near the conclusion of the poem consists of two tonally distinct wishes. The first expresses the hope for the birth of a peaceful and virtuous new order from the flames of the struggle, an order in which

> Nature, as in her prime, her virgin reign
> Begins, and Love and Truth compose her train;
> With pulseless hand and fix'd unwearied gaze
> Unbreathing Justice her still beam surveys.
>
> (784–87)

But this pacific vision is followed by a warrior's plea to God to allow freedom to triumph over all her enemies, who are listed in a litany of anger: Conquest, Avarice, Pride, Death, Famine, Oppression, Machination, Persecution, Discord. The litany reaches its crescendo in a fervent prayer for the utter destruction of arrogant kings who pretend to omnipotence:

> 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.
>
> (808–9)

The emotions and purposes of personal power inextricably but discernibly interwoven with those of communal purpose seem for this brief moment to dominate the mixture, before they are suppressed in the closing image of tomorrow's "sad and slow" journey.

Wordsworth's next poem, while picking up directly on the rageful desire to destroy the oppressor, tilts the balance between individual anger and social aims back toward the latter; perhaps more accurately, it strives for a more organic relationship between them. "A Night on Salisbury Plain" takes up the female beggar who breaks into "An Evening Walk" with the unwelcome but inevitable force of the return of the repressed and makes her a sustained focus of attention, sympathy, protest, and conscious identification. She is not the sole center of the poem but one of its two foci, together with the lonely traveler on the plain who encounters her.

Wordsworth makes a point of their affinity and similarity—"her soul forever widowed of delight, / He too had withered young in sorrow's blight"[52]—and it is the field of tension between them—attraction, congruence, and difference—that determines the shape and thrust of the poem.

Commentators have noted the extraordinary bleakness of the poem's setting and mood, the preternatural emptiness of the plain that seems to bespeak an aloneness beyond even that of a hungry and weary traveler in an isolated place.[53] The writing of the poem and the event which inspired it took place at a low point of desperation for Wordsworth. He was still unemployed—the hoped-for post of tutor had not materialized—and now even further separated from Annette and their child by the war between their countries. His relatives were furious at the news of his liaison with Annette and his desire to marry her; he was no longer welcome to visit Dorothy at their uncle's home, and the offer of a curacy was either withdrawn or made conditional on his giving Annette up.[54] Meanwhile as the prospects for reunion and marriage were diminishing, she was writing pitiful letters expressing her love and longing for him and her continuing trust in him. When his friend William Calvert offered to pay for a joint tour of England and Wales in July and August of 1793, Wordsworth had every reason to embrace the opportunity for temporary financial support and diversion. The breakdown of their carriage and Wordsworth's forced walk alone along the plain must have seemed like the climax and symbol of his troubles.

"A Night on Salisbury Plain" transforms the chance event into a signifier of his current ideas on the ultimate meaning and possible resolution of those troubles. The poem's first four verses establish as the context for both its characters and its reflections the threat of suffering and loss familiar from "The Vale of Esthwaite," "An Evening Walk," and "Descriptive Sketches"; the melodramatic Gothic imagery that pervades the first and recurs in Wordsworth's early poetry at the points of greatest inner turmoil returns here as the poem's setting. The nature and meaning of contemporary suffering are defined in a contrast with the imagined predicament of the savages who inhabited Salisbury Plain in prehistoric times. Fearful and precarious as their lot was, they had nothing better to compare it with, and they at least enjoyed the consolation of a shared predicament. The suffering of the contemporary poor of the plain may be less than that of its ancestral inhabitants in physical terms, but psychologically it is far greater:

> The thoughts which bow the kindly spirits down
> And break the springs of joy, their deadly weight
> Derive from memory of pleasures flown

Which haunts us in some sad reverse of fate,
Or from reflection on the state
Of those who on the couch Affluence rest
By laughing Fortune's sparkling cup elate,
While we of comfort reft, by pain depressed,
No other pillow know than Penury's iron breast.
("Salisbury Plain," 19–27)

The two alternatives offered in the verse to explain modern suffering correspond to the conflict between the permanent and the sociohistorical causes of human suffering that alternate in "Descriptive Sketches." The "sad reverse of fate" could in the circumstances well derive from an autobiographical reflection, but a later verse suggests that Wordsworth intends an ontological rather than a merely accidental origin for human pain with the reference to the memory of previous pleasures:

Unhappy man! Thy sole delightful hour
Flies first; it is thy miserable dower
Only to taste of joy that thou may'st pine
A loss, which rolling suns shall ne'er restore.
New suns roll on and scatter as they shine
No second spring, but pain, till death release thee, thine.
(220–25)

Wordsworth's present loss has thus become a reminder or emblem of an early loss that is figured as inevitable and irrecoverable. There seems to be an inconsistency here that vitiates the contrast between modern and primitive man. The previous happiness with which memory compares the present is obviously childhood, and surely primitives have the same basis of comparison. But the inconsistency, while weakening the rhetorical force of the contrast between primitive and modern man, does not alter the central ambiguity: Wordsworth is still uncertain whether the unhappiness he is describing stems from the human condition or changeable conditions. Significantly Wordsworth for the first time here explicitly links the ontological with the psychological, timeless joy and absolute presence with early childhood.

Both the female vagrant and the traveler are avatars of modern unhappiness. The traveler in this early version of the poem is a virtually disembodied consciousness; only in the revision of 1795 will he acquire a history. The woman, however, is a much more substantial character than the beggar of "An Evening Walk," and only partly because the range of referents for her includes the earlier character. Given the time of composition, it is hard to read her poignant fate without reading Annette into her, a temptation reinforced by the erotic details of her description in stanza 24.

But there are also striking similarities between the female vagrant's biography and Wordsworth's own. Like him, she had lost her mother, then her father. Her father had been cheated out of his possessions, so that his death left her both orphaned and destitute. She too had fallen in love, and lost her beloved to war, in her case permanently. The facelessness of the traveler, qualified only by the reinforcing hint of his own early sorrow, makes him a mirror for the woman, but his otherness makes him a sympathizer, an observer, and someone in a position to console or at least make the attempt.

> Along the fiery east the Sun, a show
> More gorgeous still! pursued his proud career.
> But human sufferings and that tale of woe
> Had dimmed the traveller's eye with Pity's tear,
> And in the youthful mourner's doom severe
> He half forgot the terrors of the night,
> Striving with counsel sweet her soul to chear,
> Her soul for ever widowed of delight.
> He too had withered young in sorrow's deadly blight.
>
> (397–405)

The sequence, diction, and syntax of this stanza condense an entire narrative that recapitulates and modifies the events of "An Evening Walk." The traveler's native preference and inclination is for a solitary relationship with the glories of the sun, but the emotion aroused by human suffering occludes them. At the same time, sympathy for another helps him suppress his own terrors, which, like those in "An Evening Walk," threaten the poet/traveler most intensely at night, when the sun is eclipsed. Externalizing suffering in the woman—not by projecting or even displacing it but by focusing on the genuinely suffering other while retaining some consciousness of his own similarity—enables him to become active, no longer simply a passive sufferer but a comforter. Setting off the last line of the stanza as a separate sentence, Wordsworth makes its point of view an ambiguous consciousness; while the narrator is aware that the traveler identifies with the vagrant, it is at least questionable whether the traveler himself knows this. The sentence also brings the stanza full circle, suggesting that the traveler's original fascination with the sun is itself compensatory.

There is a continual interfusing of dialogues in the poem, an internal dialogue, only partly conscious, within the traveler, a dialogue between traveler and vagrant, and finally, one between the narrator and both characters. Toward the end of the poem the narrator emerges as the observer, commentator, and consoler. He bids farewell to the pair, generalizes their condition, and calls for a remedy. Although there is an undertone of

metaphysical despair throughout, the narrator's analysis implicates domestic oppression, debasing work, and the imperial ambitions of nations as the causes of human misery; the poem is clearly in the political vein of "Descriptive Sketches." But in this poem a new note is sounded. Although the last stanza seems to breathe the same militant spirit—"Heroes of Truth pursue your march, uptear / Th' oppressors dungeon from the deepest base" (541–42)—the appeal is not to violence but to the "herculean mace of Reason," whose light alone, in the mixed metaphors of the stanza, will cause "foul Error's monster race" to die. Salvation is not to be found in armed might. Attacking the nations for resorting to war, the poet asks:

> Or whence but from the labours of the sage
> Can poor benighted mortals gain the meed
> Of happiness and virtue, how assuage
> But by his gentle words their self-consuming rage?
>
> (510–13)

This is the first evidence that Wordsworth, just a year after he had defended it, was turning against violence as a solution to the problems of oppression and misery. The next lines are a direct allusion to the Terror in France and the harm it was doing to the aims of the Revolution with its methods.

> Insensate they who think, at Wisdom's porch
> That Exile, Terror, Bonds and Force may stand:
> That Truth with human blood can feed her torch,
> And Justice balance with her gory hand
> Scales whose dire weights of human heads demand
> A Nero's arm.
>
> (514–19)

The two stanzas together suggest nonetheless a lingering tendency to excuse or at least understand the Revolution's turn to murderous violence. Its rage is indeed self-destructive, but it is an expression of the justified anger of the helpless victims, among whom Wordsworth clearly reckoned himself. The latter stanza ends with a hint of the conflict and guilt, already foreshadowed in "Descriptive Sketches," that will become so prominent a theme in 1795–97 in the revision of "Salisbury Plain" and in *The Borderers*. Guilt is unavoidable as long as the poet continues to hold law and authority largely responsible for the violence he has begun to abhor, since to blame authority is in some measure still to condone that violence.

> Must Law with iron scourge
> Still torture crimes that grew a monstrous band

Formed by his care, and still his victim urge,
With voice that breathes despair, to death's tremendous verge?
(519–22)

The "sage" of line 510 whose wisdom will replace violence seems to be William Godwin. "Salisbury Plain" shows that by the early winter of 1794 when the poem was completed, Wordsworth was acquainted with Godwin's *An Enquiry into Political Justice*, which offered the certainty of progress and perfectibility while repudiating any recourse to action, specifically revolutionary violence, in achieving that end.[55] Wordsworth's turn to Godwin was not unusual among English radicals at this time. There was a tendency to move away from Paine and revolutionary radicalism towards Godwin's necessitarian and pacifist rationalism as Terror in France and repression at home made loyalty to the Revolution increasingly problematic both morally and politically. For a brief moment, Godwin was the hero of the radical movement in England, the man whose theories offered a continuing purchase on the radical hopes that historical reality threatened to ruin. But in the case of this phase of Wordsworth's life, as in the preceding one, it is important not only to know what his political mentor said, but, above all, what Wordsworth made of it for his own purposes; the two are far from the same.

Book X of *The Prelude* documents in well-known passages Wordsworth's individual struggle with a revolution going bad, indeed mad, as "Tyrants, strong before / In devilish pleas" multiplied their crimes, murdering indiscriminately "Friends, enemies, of all parties, ages, ranks, / Head after head, and never heads enough / For those who bade them fall" (X.307–36). He describes his own nightly visions of despair, tyranny, and implements of death, his nightmares in which he pleaded "before unjust tribunals" with a sense of treachery and desertion in his own soul—a description that seems to match the conflicted sense of both personal guilt and unjust law touched on in "A Night on Salisbury Plain." But evidence from that earlier time suggests that *The Prelude* rather overdraws the inner struggle of the period from late 1793 to perhaps mid-1795. Even the odd structure of Book X tells a more complicated story. The narrative of events is so obscured and fractured that it is difficult to realize at first reading that at the point where Wordsworth tells of his exultation at Robespierre's fall, the narrative backtracks to the beginning of the Revolution. The most exuberantly hopeful and untroubled expression of optimism—"Bliss was in that dawn to be alive"—*follows* his account of bitter inner torment and guilt during the Terror. The hearkening back to the first flush of revolutionary enthusiasm at this point in the poem could be a formally appropriate rendering of Wordsworth's conflict at the time it describes, evidence of his difficulty in accepting the guilt and disappointment of 1793–94; in fact, however, the state of mind it registers accords

with what the letters and poetry of 1794 indicate about Wordsworth's mood and ideas at that time. Paradoxically, Wordsworth reached the peak of his hope, and his most extreme radical position, during the period he eschewed violent revolution, a position that took him beyond anything dreamed of in the political ideology of the Revolution.

The letters to his friend Mathews certainly confirm the Godwinian rejection of the Revolution. "I recoil," he wrote in June 1794, "from the bare idea of revolution. . . . [N]eed I add that I am a determined enemy to every species of violence?" (*Letters*, 124). But the context of this often-quoted remark was a forceful and unequivocal condemnation of "monarchical and aristocratic governments," of which he disapproved, "however modified," so strongly that he could still say that if there were no gradual and constant reform of abuses, even a revolution might be desirable. This was the same year that he discussed with Mathews a plan for collaborating on a literary and political periodical and made clear his radical commitments so that there be no misunderstanding between the partners: "You know perhaps already that I am of that odious class of men called democrats, and of that class I shall forever continue" (*Letters*, 119). But by far the most illuminating material from that year is the extensive and significant revision of "An Evening Walk" that Wordsworth undertook with the help of Dorothy between April and September of 1794 at Windy Brow.

The revisions made the poem twice as long as the original. Some additions simply extend the descriptions of nature, but the longest and most important passages express strong belief in a new faith that can unite social concern with a sense of personal uniqueness and infinite power. In a reworking of a Horation ode that he inserted into the poem, Wordsworth asserts that proper homage to nature (represented in the stream beside which the poet walks) does not demand, as in the original ode, the ancient sacrifice of a kid just reaching the age of desire and battle—a symbol for Wordsworth's own sexuality and desire for power—but rather certain qualities of the mind:

> Harmonious thoughts, a soul by Truth refined,
> Entire affection for all human kind;
> A heart that vibrates evermore, awake
> To feelings for all forms that Life can take,
> That wider still its sympathy extends,
> And sees not any line where being ends;
> Sees sense, through Nature's rudest form betrayed,
> Tremble obscure in fountain, rock, and shade;
> And while a secret power those forms endears
> Their social accents never vainly hears.
>
> (123–32)

These lines are notable not only for their Godwinian themes of universal benevolence through truth but as an embryonic version of the doctrine of the "One Life," an idea for which Wordsworth did not have to await Coleridge.[56] Above all, however, the last lines advert to Wordsworth's two current concerns, the desire for personal power and for social connectedness; to his implied fears that they conflict with one another; and to the wish that they would not. He hopes that the mind that is favored enough to see into the secret power of nature's forms and so into eternal being does not thereby miss their social meaning. A later passage amplifies both the secret power and the dilemma it creates. Those favoured souls, taught either by the poet's "Fancy" or by the Godwinian philosopher's "Thought" to see into the unity of all things, are "proud beyond all limits to aspire" and mount "through the fields of thought on wings of fire" (209–10). But such minds are even happier

> If, like the sun, their [] love surrounds
> The [] world to life's remotest bounds,
> Yet not extinguishes the warmer fire
> Round which the close domestic train retire;
> If but to them these farms an emblem yield,
> Home, their gay garden, and the world, their field;
> While that, more near, demands minuter cares,
> Yet this its proper tendance duly shares.
>
> (213–20)

The central metaphors—the fire-clad eagle and the sun—are continued from the poststorm epiphany in "Descriptive Sketches." Through them Wordsworth denominates the aspiration of the "Godwinian" poet, armed with Truth, to grasp infinity without sacrificing the domestic and the human. Here for the first time Wordsworth states the ambition that will both power and stymie his central poetic project a few years later. Never again, however, will he make as explicit his consciousness that his ambition has two components in uneasy relationship with one another and that one of them is a sense of personal power so great as to threaten to compromise the individuality of anything other than itself. For one who would be like the sun and contain infinity—the metaphor becomes uneasy here as Wordsworth, in the image of the sun surrounding the world, forces together illumination and possession—there is a danger of extinguishing the little fires of personal concern that warm other people. At one point Wordsworth gives away his deepest and truest intention by placing himself, or rather, the individual mind armed with the Truth, above the sun itself:

> Roll on, till, hurled from thy bright throne sublime,
> Thyself confess the mighty arm of Time;

> Thy star must perish, but triumphant Truth
> Shall tend a brightening lamp in endless youth.
>
> (337–40)

Appropriately, it was just at this point in his development that Wordsworth first introduced the name of Milton directly into his poetry. He had of course been there all along, but only with his current sense of power could Wordsworth dream of identifying with him directly. The Milton he evoked was at once the political Milton, the republican poet, but also the blind Milton who despite the outer darkness supplied an inner light greater than any mere external light could ever be.

> So Virtue, fallen on times to gloom consigned
> Makes round her path the light she cannot find,
> And by her own internal lamp fulfills,
> And asks no other star what Virtue wills,
> Acknowledging, though round her Danger lurk,
> And Fear, no night in which she cannot work;
> In dangerous night so Milton worked alone,
> Cheared by a secret lustre all his own,
> That with the deepening darkness clearer shone.
>
> (680–88)

These lines have particular resonance in Wordsworth's development; they represent an amazing reversal of the poem's first version, with its climactic expression of his own fear of the night that eclipses the sensory perception he thought necessary in order for him to be able to constitute nature as home. Now he, like Milton, needs neither the sun nor visual perception. He too has the "secret lustre," which, though it enables him to penetrate nature's secret, is not derived from it and does not depend on it; to the contrary, it is all the brighter when not distracted by external light.

This is not, however, a comfortable place for Wordsworth to rest. In the poem's revised conclusion, the poet-walker descends from his heights to commune with the common people:

> —Who now, resigning for the night the feast
> Of Fancy, Leisure, Liberty, and Taste,
> Can pass without a pause the silent door,
> Where sweet Oblivion clasps the cottage poor?
>
> (771–74)

Night does not overcome him, as it did in the first version of "An Evening Walk"; he voluntarily suspends his power to join with the humble. The precincts of the poor, however, yield a "moral interest" to "subtle thought," which, if it does not resurrect the grander claims for the poet's

mind, at least undermines the most important rival claimants to preeminence. The huts of the poor are in the neighborhood of a ruined abbey, beside a stream, but neither of the two, religious edifice or natural entity, has the power to comfort the cottagers.

> Here sleep sheds a more refreshing dew
> Than yon dark abbey's tenants ever drew
> From the soft streamlet idly murmuring near
> At will—but now constrained with toil to rear
> The deep night-hammer that incessant falls
> And shakes the [] ruin's neighbouring walls.
>
> (797–802)

Religion is defunct, and nature—which even in its pristine form could not sufficiently refresh—has now been subdued and enslaved by commercial enterprise. The same human enterprise, turned to virtuous ends, the poem implies, could refresh the poor more thoroughly than even sleep could by altering their condition rather than by merely supplementing it with the balm of temporary oblivion.

ii) The Crisis

That Wordsworth underwent some sort of crisis of belief between about the middle of 1795 and late 1796 is evident not only from what he said later in *The Prelude* but from the radical new direction his work took as a result at the time. The problem has always been to determine not only exactly when this crisis took place but more important, just what it consisted of. Part of the difficulty is that again there is little contemporary evidence for a subjective *feeling* of crisis on Wordsworth's part. His letters, as well as those of Dorothy, from the Racedown period, the supposed peak of the crisis, report them both generally cheerful, if somewhat isolated, though Wordsworth certainly had a lengthy fallow spell in the winter and spring of 1796, as he wrote Mathews on March 21, 1796. "As to writing it is out of the question" (*Letters*, 169). More than a year earlier, on January 7, 1795, he had written Mathews an apology for the interruption and late despatch of a letter, telling him cryptically, "I have lately undergone much uneasiness of mind" (*Letters*, 138). The uneasiness might have been connected with his comments on John Horne Tooke in the first part of the letter; one of the leading radicals of the day, Tooke had just been acquitted of charges of high treason. "He seems to me," Wordsworth wrote, "to be a man much swayed by personal considerations, one who has courted persecution, and that rather from a wish to vex powerful individuals than to be an instrument of public good" (*Letters*, 137). In light of Wordsworth's later autocritique, the charge against Horne Tooke

might seem to conceal anxieties about the point of his own political involvement, but if so, they were slight and without any obvious immediate consequence. The rest of the letter reaffirms the need for peaceful reform, and the series of personal meetings with his "sage," William Godwin, in the first half of 1795 lay yet ahead of him. The letter to Mathews seems too early to be relevant to the crisis.

Roe suggests that the meetings with Godwin represented the high point of Wordsworth's allegiance to the author of *Political Justice*, but also the beginning of a gradual erosion of confidence in him, a process that took place not in a single moment of breakdown but over a year.[57] If any aspect of the personal encounter, or of Godwin's personality, produced such an effect on Wordsworth, there is no evidence of it, unless silence itself is evidence. Wordsworth could be much swayed by personalities, as the effect of Beaupuy testified, but only when he was ready to be. At any rate there are no hints of a sudden disappointing experience in 1795–96, let alone a shock of dismay such as the one Wordsworth reported when England went to war against France in 1793. To expect or look for one, however, may be the wrong approach. The dynamic of crisis was adequately driven by the play of tensions within Wordsworth's ideas and the development they underwent. Given the conflict between the already-suspect personal anger and aggrandizement inherent in his appropriation of the natural sublime—no matter how closely the "inner light" was identified with Miltonic republican virtue—and his wish to make power work for all of mankind, the potential for an internal rupture in his sensibility and work was there from the beginning of his revolutionary involvement. At the same time, there was already available within the components of his political position an element that with some modifications could be developed into a full-blown alternative to radicalism. This may well have cushioned the shock of self-awareness and allowed the rapid and apparently relatively easy transition from theoretical radicalism to the astounding quietism—astounding certainly by contrast with his previous treatment of similar themes—of "The Ruined Cottage" and "The Pedlar" in 1797.

Four works give the material for whatever notion we can have of the deep structure of the crisis. The first chronologically is the revision of "A Night on Salisbury Plain" that Wordsworth made in the fall of 1795 at Racedown, where he had moved after his spring residence in London. The change is extreme, and remarkable. The lonely, faceless traveler of the first version of the poem becomes a much more central character. He is now an impoverished sailor who had been impressed into war and then cheated by the "slaves of office" out of his just claims to reward for his service. Returning to his family starving and empty-handed, he robs and

kills a man within sight of his home; fearful of punishment, he then flees, abandoning his wife and children.

The sailor's story radically deforms the symmetry of the earlier version. The traveler can no longer unconflictedly identify with the female vagrant. She is an oppressed innocent, while he, however much the victim of unjust powers, is nonetheless a criminal. The morning light that cheers her, a light to which in the first version the traveler called her attention in an effort to console her, now only frightens him. When they meet a man on the road beating his little son, the sailor tries to intervene in the name of "manhood" (632) but is reduced to cold sweat when the father calls him a vagabond and a knave. And when the sailor suddenly notices that the child's wound is in exactly the same place where he fatally struck his own victim, his thoughts shift jarringly from the boy to himself, from sympathy to a self-condemnation whose hyperbole turns into almost mawkish self-pity: "Yet happy thou, poor boy! compared with me; / Suffering, not doing ill, fate far more mild" (651–52). Improbably, but significantly, it is the sailor's guilty suffering that makes the father reproach himself and stop the beating. Contrition succeeds where intervention fails or is halted by the would-be savior's implication in the evil he would stop.

The sailor's cup of bitterness overflows when the vagrant comes upon a dying woman and summons him to help. She turns out to be his wife; his act of murder has created the circumstances that have led to her death. He confesses his crime, though only after he is recognized, and he is executed. The ending is ambiguous, but not quite in the way suggested by Roe and others. He interprets Wordsworth as implicitly arguing the Godwinian position that the sailor's criminal behavior is the inevitable product of his circumstances, while also inconsistently calling for the Paineite virtue of compassion, in an unsuccessful effort to reconcile contradictory philosophies.[58] Although partly true, this seems less to the point than the fact that Wordsworth is now openly grappling with a profound sense of guilt for behavior he feels as murderous, while, at the same time, rejecting the integrity and legitimacy of the political and legal system that would pass judgment and execute punishment:

> Blest be for once the stroke which ends, tho' late,
> The pangs which from thy halls of terror came,
> Thou who of Justice bear'st the violated name!
>
> (817–19)

Understanding Wordsworth's crisis hinges on correctly interpreting this sense of guilt, a complex matter because it demands sensitivity not only to the difference between literature and biography but also to the literary ambiguities of the texts themselves. The "Fragment of a Gothic

Tale," *The Borderers*, and the last four books of the 1805 *Prelude*, taken together, however, suggest both that the guilt was decidedly personal and that Wordsworth's historical and philosophical conceptualization of his inner conflicts transfigured the personal issues to universal and epochal significance.

"This was the time," Wordsworth later wrote of his "Godwinian" phase,

> when, all things tending fast
> To depravation, the [P]hilosophy
> That promised to abstract the hope of man
> Out of his feelings, to be fixed thenceforth
> For ever in a purer element,
> Found ready welcome.
>
> (X.805–10)

James Chandler has argued that the "philosophy" referred to in the passage is not Godwin's but the ideas of the French Ideologues, whose version of Enlightenment radicalism got a serious hearing during the early years of the Directorate (1795–97) and reached England in 1796–97.[59] The timing of English access to Ideologue thought, however, is not quite right for the onset of Wordsworth's crisis, and the evidence for Wordsworth's direct knowledge of the ideas of Destutt de Tracy is admittedly thin.[60] At that time the word "Philosophy" capitalized generally referred to the work of Godwin,[61] and above all, the importance for Wordsworth of Godwin's stress on the primacy of private judgment speaks for his greater influence on that aspect of Wordsworth's rationalism. But though establishing the intellectual context is a necessary aid in interpreting Wordsworth's language, it is more important to see how Wordsworth transmuted contemporary radical theory into something uniquely his own.

One of the things that Wordsworth emphasized in the retrospect of 1805 was the rationalist fetishizing of reason for defensive purposes, as a disguise for the irrational, a place "Where passions had the privilege to work, / And never hear the sound of their own names" (X.811–13). The hidden passions to which he referred were first broached in the "Fragment of a 'Gothic' Tale" and more fully explored in *The Borderers*, both of which date from 1796. A young man plans to murder a blind old man, who believes that he is being led to safety during a violent storm. Just as the youth is about to strike, a terrible sound "of uncouth horror," like a "painful outcry strange, to living ear unknown," shocks him into immobility and wakens the old man—now called the sailor, a link to "Salisbury Plain."[62] The closing lines anticipate, if crudely, the language that will later, in the 1799 *Prelude*, describe the effects of the "spots of time" in vitalizing the imagination:

And, when returning thought began to wake,
In bare remembrance of that sound there dwelt
Such power as made his joints with terror quake;
And all which he, that night, had seen or felt
Showed like the shapes delusion loves to deem
Sights that obey the dead or phantoms of a dream.

(215–20)

Kenneth Johnston writes that it would be as difficult to deny Wordsworth's emotional involvement in the "grotesque situations" of the story as to prove it, but that "it is impossible to deny his powerful imaginative empathy for situations in which poor, old suffering humanity is in mortal danger from the very persons best placed to aid it."[63] Where Johnston is looking ahead to the pattern that will lead to *The Recluse*, this poem is the first in which that situation occurs, and it represents a notable innovation. Up to this point, the important suffering victims of Wordsworth's poetry had been women. The focus of the sailor's guilt in the 1795 "Adventures on Salisbury Plain," for example, is the wife of the man he has killed, rather than the victim himself. Now, however, a new kind of victim is introduced into Wordsworth's work. He is as shadowy as the reasons for the youth's murderous intentions toward him. Those are quite unmotivated, irrational compulsions deriving from a strangely deformed personality seemingly opaque to both character and author. On the way across a precarious bridge into the castle that is to be their refuge from the storm, the youth is seized by an impulse to hurl the helpless old man to his death, and the urge to murder is perversely only intensified by the man's offer to make the youth his heir in gratitude for saving him:

His hopes the youth to fatal dreams had lent
And from that hour had laboured with the curse
Of evil thoughts, nor had the least event
Not owned a meaning monstrous and perverse;
And now these latter words were words of blood
And all the man had said but served to nurse
Purpose most foul with most unnatural food.

(134–40)

The figure of the youth represents a deepening exploration of guilt, and his features connect this guilt more closely to Wordsworth than do those of the sailor in "Adventures on Salisbury Plain." The emphasis on youth itself is significant: the guilt here stems not from an impulsive act in response to intolerable and unjust external circumstances, but from the character of youth itself, from unspecified "hopes" that somehow turn into evil dreams that cause death. The stanza gives its own license to the

interpretation of the minutest detail since, in its own words, the "least event" had a sinister meaning for the youth himself. Why the old man's offer should inflame his perversity can only be conjectured, given the poverty of detail, but the conflict between youth and age on which the poem partly hinges suggests that the man's generosity seems to the youth like its opposite. The old man's offer to take the youth into his home and make him his heir can only remind him of his youthfulness and dependency, all the more galling given the old man's feebleness. The poem remained a fragment because the thinness of the characters and situations gave it no way to develop. It is the sketchy, abortive introduction of a new and disturbing theme—guilt over destructive urges against venerable figures of authority. Wordsworth tended to make the Gothic element prominent when his material was most disturbing and not yet poetically worked through; since "The Vale of Esthwaite," the supernatural was the easiest entrance for him to the preconscious sense of the terrible dimension of sublime power.

What was hint and mystery in the "Fragment" became a fully developed drama-tract just a few months later in *The Borderers*. The hybrid term reflects the criticism that prevented the staging of *The Borderers* in 1797, criticism that Wordsworth himself acknowledged to be just. The formal failure, if that is what it is, cannot simply be ascribed to Wordsworth's lack of dramatic gifts or the fact that the play was a first effort in the genre. Wordsworth was attempting too many things with it. The desire to become a dramatist was an appeal for a public voice and role and an audience more immediate than poetry could bring, at a point where Wordsworth believed he had an important message to deliver. As a manifesto, it was in its way the counterpart to the *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*; its form, however, represented both a renunciation of direct politics and a claim to a place with the greatest in English literature.

The parallels with *Othello* and *King Lear* are staples of critical analysis of the play. *Hamlet* has been less noticed as a source for its structure and for the character of Mortimer, but it is no less relevant. In *The Borderers*, the young man's motive for wanting to kill an old man is his belief that the old man has committed a heinous crime. As it turns out, he has been deluded by his supposed friend, who has lied about an innocent man in order to seduce his companion into murder. But the young man has not simply been innocently seduced; his vulnerability testifies to a malign spirit that he ultimately recognizes as an independent source of guilt, a spirit that makes it impossible for him to put all the blame on his friend and exculpate himself.

It would be almost perverse to deny Wordsworth's partial identification with Mortimer, the "hero" of the play, and with Rivers, its villain. As

if content and context were not sufficient, Wordsworth virtually avowed the former by pseudonymously signing the name "Mortimer" to a poem printed the day before he left London after the rejection of *The Borderers* at Covent Garden (*Prose Works*, 1:344), and the repetition of Rivers's creed of independence in *The Prelude* as, at one time, Wordsworth's own, cements the identification with him. But of course the identifications are not complete or exact, nor do they exhaust the meaning of the characters, and not only for the obvious formal and aesthetic reasons. Robert Osborn writes that Rivers's "obscurity" is the "result of a complex evolution from the various sources on which Wordsworth drew and of the need to create a character who would fulfill a complex function in relationship to Mortimer."[64] But his illuminating demonstration of the connections between Rivers and Milton's Satan, Godwin's Caleb Williams, and others[65] does not preclude a source for the pair of chief characters and their interaction in Wordsworth's own psychological, political, and philosophical concerns and does not in any case address Wordsworth's transformation of his sources for his own purposes. The characters, however, are not simple transcriptions of the "real" Wordsworth"; they are extrapolations from, and developments of possibilities inherent in, his emotions and beliefs before and during his crisis, constructs that go beyond biographical fact to explore and experiment with the psychological causes, social consequences, and moral and spiritual implications of those beliefs.

Rivers's and Mortimer's commission of identical crimes marks them to that extent as the same person. But they commit their "murders" for different reasons and with different degrees of self-consciousness. Each represents an element of Wordsworth's self-perceived motives and character; the conflict between them is the representation of an inner conflict over how to interpret behavior that Wordsworth perceived and judged in retrospect to have been wrong. It is not, however, the motives of the two men that prove mutually exclusive; though logically and emotionally incompatible, they can coexist psychologically, and if one self-representation was more flattering, or at least more exculpatory than the other, both coexisted within Wordsworth. But Rivers's moral-philosophical solution, the one Wordsworth saw himself as following in his "Godwinian" period, is humanly, morally unacceptable to Mortimer, and the latter's utter repudiation of this solution is not only Wordsworth's repudiation of his ideological radicalism but his ultimate demystification of it. Moreover, the demystification works both ways, for through Rivers, Wordsworth exposes the underside of Mortimer's "finer" emotions as well. The "repetition compulsion" effect of the play, often noted, is not exact, for it accomplishes what repetition intends but usually does not achieve: a different ending. Within the frame of his conflict, Mortimer faces the deed—if not quite the need that drove him to it—and the remorse that Rivers rejects.

He does not become Wordsworth, but, by exorcising his guilt, he prepares the way for Wordsworth.

Rivers is tricked into his crime because of wounded "honor"—or narcissistic pride. "In my youth / I was the pleasure of all hearts—the darling of every tongue," he tells Mortimer, and so was ripe for the incitements of the crew of the ship on which he was sailing against the captain they hated. Convinced by them that the captain was hatching some "foul conspiracy" against him, he "brooded o'er [his] injuries deserted / By man and nature" (*Borderers*, 4.2.17–18)—rather large words for such personal circumstances, perhaps, but reminiscent of the story of Vaudracour's sense of desertion both by his father and by the nature he trusted vainly for a happy end to all. There is even a rough familial parallel in both stories: the captain is the father of the woman to whom Rivers is engaged, and further complicating the relationship between future son-and father-in-law, she has specifically charged Rivers to stand by her father and never abandon him. When he reproaches the captain for his "treachery," the captain, a man of "imperious" temper, strikes Rivers, sending him into a fury that only the intervention of the crew modulates; instead of killing the captain, Rivers is persuaded to abandon him to his death on a barren island.

The figure of the captain condenses many possible external biographical and internal poetic referents. The captain's "conspiracy" brings to mind Lord Lonsdale and the manipulation of justice, as well as the relatives who had frustrated Wordsworth's independence and opposed his marriage. The captain as father is the dramatic parallel to Baron Herbert, father of Mortimer's beloved Mathilda, the man Mortimer later abandons, and so points, as David Erdman has argued, to Annette Vallon and her "royal father"—the French king whose execution Wordsworth had approved.[66] Osborn has also pointed out the fascinating connection between the fictional mutiny in *The Borderers* and the mutiny on the *Bounty*, with which Wordsworth had a coincidental personal involvement. Fletcher Christian, the mutineer, had been a schoolmate of Wordsworth's at Hawkshead and his brother Edward, who defended Fletcher at the mutiny trial, was also the lawyer for the Wordsworths in the suit against Lonsdale. When in 1796, there appeared in the press a purported extract from Fletcher Christian's journal exonerating Captain Bligh, Wordsworth, who knew it to be a forgery, wrote one of his rare letters to the press denouncing it. Osborn suggests that Wordsworth wrote the letter because he feared, consciously or unconsciously, that Fletcher had been mistaken in believing that Bligh was hostile to him, the implication being that Wordsworth denounced the forgery in order to still his own doubts about Bligh's guilt.[67] But this could only have mat-

tered to Wordsworth in the larger context of his fears that his own "mutiny" against British authority, or authority in general, had been unjustified and had had purely personal sources. By the time of *The Borderers* there is no longer any ambiguity, at least in the fiction: authority is innocent. Rivers insists, repeatedly and almost gleefully, in the face of Mortimer's growing horror, "The man was famished and he was innocent," "Had never wronged me," "I had been deceived," "I had been betrayed" (4.2.63, 65, 68, 70). Any point for point correspondence between this fictional exculpation of authority and Wordsworth's biography is undercut by the fact that in the unpublished Juvenal satires he composed at this time, Wordsworth was unremittingly sarcastic and hostile to the British and French monarchies and the aristocracy; nevertheless, the fictions show the direction Wordsworth was going.

In Rivers's case, however, the play's emphasis is less on his motive for abandoning the captain than on its consequence. Rivers's pride makes it impossible for him to accept the humiliation of deception, misdeed, and above all, remorse. Driven by the need to avoid shame at all cost, he uses his intellect to fashion a novel rationalization; his mind becomes a philosopher's stone transmuting the dross of humiliation into the gold of justification and power. "I saw that every possible shape of action / Might lead to good—I saw it and burst forth / Thirsting for some exploit of power and terror" (4.2.108–10). To a degree, Rivers's language is rationalist: even his sleep, he says of the new energy that powered even his dreams, "was linked to purposes of reason" (4.2.123–25). But Rivers is not a Godwinian rationalist nor, above all, is he simply adopting an available creed. In contrast to Godwin—though like Robespierre and the Ideologues—he uses the belief in reason to excuse murder; Rivers is in this sense the living refutation of Godwin's "passionless" reason. More than that, he sees himself as doing something absolutely novel in the history of thought and ethics. He abolishes remorse by rejecting the objective standards on which the feeling of remorse depends, and so becomes the sole warrant for his actions, an existentialist before his time.

> In these my lonely wonderings I perceived
> What mighty objects do impress their forms
> To build this our intellectual being,
> And felt if aught on earth deserved a curse,
> 'Twas that worst principle of all that dooms
> A thing so great to perish self-consumed.
> —So much for my remorse.
>
> (4.2.133–39)

Previous interpretations, whether they identify Rivers's ideology with Godwin, the French Ideologues, or Robespierre, have failed to take into

account the significance of Rivers's belief that he is unique, that he is broaching a new idea no one else has even seen, an idea whose time is yet to come.

> When from these forms I turned to contemplate
> The opinions and the uses of the world,
> I seemed a being who had passed *alone*
> Beyond the visible barriers of the world
> And travelled into things to come.
>
> (4.2.141–45; italics added)

Whatever Rivers/Wordsworth has taken from contemporary thought, he has transformed into something else. In one sense it would not matter if he were actually correct about this: it would only matter that he believed it to be so for his sense of isolation, uniqueness, and grandeur. But in fact Rivers does represent an ideology importantly different from either revolutionary or Godwinian rationalism. This point is obscured because Wordsworth's language on the subject is confusing; it does draw on contemporary sources to say something new, and Wordsworth is confused about exactly what he is saying. In Rivers's most famous statement of his philosophy, however, the one repeated in *The Prelude*, and the one supposedly most Godwinian in content, the radical innovation is clearly present. Significantly, it comes *before* Rivers's confession to Mortimer, as a statement not about himself but about Mortimer, when he believes Mortimer has transcended his own halfway deed by actually and purposely killing Herbert.

> You have taught mankind to seek the measure of justice
> By diving for it into their own bosoms.
> Today you have thrown off a tyranny
> That lives but by the torpid acquiescence
> Of our emasculated souls, *the tyranny*
> *Of moralists and saints and lawgivers.*
> You have obeyed the only law that wisdom
> Can ever recognize: the immediate law
> Flashed from the light of circumstances
> Upon an independent intellect.
> Thenceforth new prospects ought to open on you,
> Your faculties should grow with the occasion.
>
> (3.5.24–35; italics added)

This is more Nietzschean or Sartrian than Godwinian—or would be if Wordsworth did not try to conflate the idea of radical autonomy with some lingering concept of objective "wisdom." But the assertion that the creed that informs Mortimer's action is a rebellion against the tyranny of

"moralists, saints, and lawgivers" means that it is something different from the ethical, theological, and legal foundations of the whole previous history of moral and political theory. Unlike all previous political theorizing, its wisdom is not that of objective laws of whatever origin or sanction. Rivers's "independent intellect" is a purely subjective warrant for its own actions, not one whose autonomy is justified by its possession of universal principles. It is this that ultimately separates it from Godwin's assertion of the supremacy of private judgment, which for Godwin was still rooted in Dissenting theology and justified only by conscience's sure knowledge of absolute truths of reason. Rivers's position is that of situational ethics without the absolute ethical standards; he must innovate not only in applying standards but in inventing them.

The position Wordsworth ascribes to Rivers explains far better than any form of eighteenth-century rationalism Wordsworth's own moral crisis as he later described it in *The Prelude*. "What delight!" he recalls, with somewhat heavy-handed irony, of his most radical phase,

> How glorious!—in self-knowledge and self-rule
> To look through all the frailties of the world,
> And, with a resolute mastery shaking off
> *The accidents of nature, time, and place,*
> *That make up the weak being of the past*,
> Build social freedom on its only basis:
> The freedom of the individual mind,
> Which, *to the blind restraints of general laws*
> *Superior*, magisterially adopts
> One guide—the light of circumstances, flashed
> Upon an independent intellect.
>
> (X.818–24; italics added)

This passage makes explicit the contrast between Wordsworth's understanding of the "independent intellect" and the other rival candidates for supreme principle of authority—"the weak being of the past," a reference to history and tradition (which in 1805 was a tribute to Wordsworth's growing Burkeanism),[68] and the restraints of "general laws," the natural-law common denominator of all eighteenth-century rationalism and of much more weight for the Wordsworth of 1792–95 than the reverence for tradition he had already shed with his adoption of Paineite political theory. The steady beat of self-referential and grandiose terms—"self-knowledge," "self-rule," "resolute mastery," "superior," "magisterial"—reinforces Wordsworth's confession that he has been holding himself absolutely free and authoritative, above all principle other than his own individuality, and underlines the contradiction between the goal of asserting his individuality and that of building "social freedom." Words-

worth is not operating within any kind of recognizable rationalist or natural law tradition at this point.

This foundationless self-belief lay at the bottom of the crisis of relativism reported in *The Prelude*. It was not a conventional rationalism that made it impossible for "all passions, motions, shapes of faith" to establish their titles and honors before the bar of reason. Even Godwin, the opponent of the passions, at least in the first edition of *Political Justice*, did not hold rationalism and benevolence to be in conflict; to the contrary, benevolence and humanitarianism were for him necessary truths of reason.[69] In the well-known preface to *The Borderers* where Wordsworth sketched the self-referential "Rivers" type, he wrote, "Let us suppose a young man of great intellectual powers, *yet without any solid principles of genuine benevolence*. His master passions are pride and the love of distinction.—He has deeply imbibed a spirit of enterprise in a tumultuous age. He goes into the world and is betrayed into a great crime" (*Prose Works*, 1:76; italics added). Wordsworth's was not a Godwinian crisis, unless it was that of his own un-Godwinian version of Godwin's "private judgement." It was a crisis of the deification of pure individuality, bouyed by the sense of personal power. It is important also to distinguish this notion from the idea of "egotism" as it has been applied to Wordsworth since Keats's famous characterization of the "egotistical sublime."[70] Individuality is a paradoxical concept that validates the self in general as absolutely self-authorizing, not merely out of some personal grandiosity but precisely as a matter of principle, as a new norm of legitimate authority, but its effect is therefore to elevate the unique self of its declarer to a position of supremacy. It was not Wordsworth's personal failing but the inner logic of the principle that left him, as he tried to find in the idea of individuality a warrant for his desires and beliefs

> endlessly perplexed
> With impulse, motive, right and wrong, the ground
> Of moral obligation—what the rule,
> And what the sanction—till, demanding proof,
> And seeking it in everything, I lost
> All feeling of conviction, and, in fine,
> Sick, wearied out with contrarieties,
> Yielded up moral questions in despair.
>
> (*Prelude*, X.893–900)

This nihilistic result was logically inevitable; having precisely rejected the idea of rule and sanction, there could be no "ground" of moral obligation that could be appealed to for proof.

But if Wordsworth came to this conclusion, he does not have Rivers do so. As he presents the radical position through Rivers's development,

that position makes possible Rivers's feeling of recovery from the narcissistic wound that comes from concern about the opinion of others, through a sense not merely of superiority, but of historical uniqueness and prescience (though the need to seduce Mortimer suggests that Rivers's new-found self-containment is precarious, if not illusory):

> Is not shame, I said,
> A mean acknowledgement of a tribunal
> Blind in its essence, a most base surrender
> Of our own knowledge to the world's ignorance?
> I had been nourished by the sickly food
> Of popular applause. I now perceived
> That we are praised by men because they see in us
> The image of themselves; that a *great mind*
> *Outlives its age* and is pursued with obloquy
> Because its movements are not understood.
> (4.2.148–155; italics added)

This is Wordsworth's judgment both of what his ideology of 1794–95 psychologically entailed in principle and of what his own motives were then, or how at least they could and might have to be seen had he persisted in that ideology. Rivers is the furthest extrapolation of one of Wordsworth's self-interpretations. An almost throw-away line, uttered about Rivers by a minor character in the play, makes a striking connection between Rivers's beliefs and the transformative experience Wordsworth described in "Descriptive Sketches" after watching the storm in the mountains. Discussing Rivers's superstitious nature with other members of their band, Lennox reports that Rivers has said about his beliefs, "I hold of spirits, and the sun in heaven" (3.4.32). Since 1792, eagle and sun had been recurrent images for Wordsworth's sense of his appropriation of the sublime in nature.

There is another aspect of the new principle of individuality represented by Rivers that must be made precise. Both Hartman and Osborn, while linking Rivers's principles to the self-awareness and separateness born of the commission of a crime, diminish the significance of the crime into a symbol for the ontological separateness of man from nature. Thus, Osborn takes at face value Rivers's discourse on the peripeties of action—"Action is transitory, a step, a blow— / . . . / 'Tis done—and in the after vacancy / We wonder at ourselves like men betrayed" (3.5.60–64). He interprets this to mean that "Any action is in some sense a curse against nature, awakening us to guilty self-consciousness."[71] This is not far from Hartman's idea that the "crime against nature" is a universal stage in the growth of the mind[72] and therefore need not even be an act committed by

the protagonist but may be a betrayal from the outside, by the gods, for example, so long as it leaves man in a state of isolation.

This misses what is absolutely central to Wordsworth's new sense of individuality—that it is a general *principle* and yet is inseparable from the *personal* sense of grandiosity and power, which is destructive and murderous because it *wishes* to eliminate rivals and usurp infinity. This is the same realization that created such tension for Schlegel between the goal of personal totality that leads to polemic and combat with others (manifested in his desire to be the "critical dictator" of Germany) and his goal of *Symphilosophie*. As Lennox says of Rivers, "Passion is life to him, / And breath and being; where he cannot govern / He will destroy—you know he hates us all" (3.4.11–13). Whether or not these features are inherent in any concept of individuality is beside the point; they were intrinsic to Wordsworth's, born as they were out of the psychological and historical experience that produced his idea. They invest the imagery of surgical violation, rape, and profanation in which Wordsworth describes his effort to destroy the claims of anything other than the self to be a foundation, including not least the previously ultimate ground, nature herself:

> I took the knife in hand,
> And, stopping not at parts less sensitive,
> Endeavoured with my best of skill to probe
> The living body of society
> Even to the heart. I pushed without remorse
> My speculations forward, yea, set foot
> On Nature's holiest places.
>
> (*Prelude*, X.872–78)

Denaturing or neutralizing the element of personal violence in Wordsworth's conception eliminates one of the essential features that made Wordsworth need to abandon it. The "accidentally" psychological and historical dimension of the "apocalyptic" were for Wordsworth the essence of his experience of the "ontological" truth of the autonomy of consciousness.

This is even clearer in Mortimer's story. If Rivers is the extrapolation of Wordsworth after Louis XVI's execution, the Terror, and his adaptation of Godwin, Mortimer is the more idealistic, more naive Wordsworth before the crimes and their rationalization. But neither Mortimer's idealism nor his naiveté save him from an inner conflict whose underside is at times more terrible than Rivers's blatancy. In some ways he is closer to Wordsworth than Rivers is, and his situation tells more, however indirectly, about Wordsworth's sense of his *initial* revolutionary motivations.

The play furnishes two perspectives on Mortimer, as it does on Rivers—that offered by his own actions and words and that offered by the perceptions of others, primarily Rivers. Given his clarified consciousness, however, Rivers is a far more insightful and consciously ironic observer of Mortimer than Mortimer can be of him; his words often serve for both and help bridge the two characters. In the outline of the main plot, Mortimer is the self-appointed young leader of a band of fighters who are trying to keep the peace and administer rough justice along the Scottish-English border during the interregnum created by the barons' uprising against Henry III in the thirteenth century. He is in love with Mathilda, daughter of the elderly Baron Herbert, a nobleman who has fought heroically in the Crusades only to be dispossessed of his estates during his absence. Blinded while saving his young daughter from a fire during the battle of Antioch, Herbert was forced to give up her care when they returned to England and has only recently been reunited with her as the play opens. Mathilda wishes to marry Mortimer, but the match has been undermined by the plotting of Rivers, Mortimer's older adviser and second-in-command. Rivers has convinced Herbert that Mortimer is nothing but an outlaw bent on booty, and so incited him to an unalterable opposition to the match that his loyal and grateful daughter will not defy. At the same time he has turned Mortimer violently against Herbert by manufacturing evidence that he is not Mathilda's father but a virtual white slaver who has purchased her from a poor beggar and intends to turn her over for profit to the degenerate Lord Clifford.

The first full portrait of Mortimer is a flattering description addressed by Rivers to Mortimer himself; its complex, savage irony, working on many levels simultaneously, reveals the essentials of the historical, psychological, and aesthetic-philosophical situation in which Mortimer operates. Encouraging Mortimer's resolution to punish Herbert by death, Rivers alludes first to the historical setting that makes such justice not only socially necessary but ethically noble, even glorious:

> Happy are we
> Who live in these disputed tracts that own
> No law but what each man makes for himself.
> Here justice has indeed a field of triumph!
>
> (2.1.51–54)

The breakdown of traditional authority—the parallel with the French Revolution is unmistakable—has created new possibilities of freedom and morality. His next words, however, are aimed directly at the vanity interwoven with Mortimer's moral sense and in their ambiguity both pique and mock it.

Self-stationed here,
Upon these savage confines we have seen you
Stand like an isthmus ’twixt two stormy seas
That checked their fury at your bidding—
. . . .
Your single virtue has transformed a band
Of fierce barbarians into ministers
Of beauty and of order. . . .
. . . .
Benevolence that has not the heart to use
The wholesome ministry of pain and evil
Is powerless and contemptible: as yet
Your virtues, the spontaneous growth of instinct,
From rigorous souls can claim but little praise.
To-day you will assume a character
More awful and sublime.

(2.1.60–79)

Rivers’s reference to Mortimer’s “single virtue” that all by itself has transformed barbarians into “ministers of beauty and order” is reminiscent of Hölderlin’s Hyperion sarcastically raging at himself for believing he could liberate and regenerate Greece—another symbol for the French Revolution—with a band of robbers.[73] It points up the grandiosity behind Mortimer’s self-appointed mission while urging it on; by executing Herbert he will receive the acclaim he deserves but has been denied and will above all become “awful and sublime.” The irony here is double at least. Rivers is urging an ethic far different from what Mortimer realizes, an ethic that in the traditional sense, as we have seen, is the abrogation of all ethics, but still holds an appeal to which Rivers believes Mortimer is vulnerable. In Rivers’s argument there is a strong echo of the position Wordsworth himself took in the *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff* that benevolent ends sometimes require, in the wonderful oxymoron, “the wholesome ministry of pain and evil.” This is the Wordsworth of 1796–97 mercilessly exposing the Wordsworth of 1792–93 through the Wordsworth of 1794–95. It is interesting that Mortimer gives his age as twenty-three (5.3.238), which was Wordsworth’s age in 1793.

The key to Mortimer’s character in the play is his Hamlet-like hesitation to kill Herbert and the excessive guilt he feels for a death that he only accidentally brings about, a death which in any case he has had reason to believe is well-deserved. The point, of course, is that he never fully believes in Herbert’s guilt and the accident is not simply an accident. David Erdman attributes “the erosion of [Mortimer’s] whole system of values”

to his "failure to recognize a Father,"[74] but Mortimer's failure is not wholly passive; he *wishes* to believe Rivers' story. Michael Friedman goes to the opposite extreme when he says that "*The Borderers* is a play about a man who murders a father in order to obtain a wife."[75] This explicitly oedipal formulation is not so much wrong as overly reductive and careless about the nuances of Mortimer's ambivalence. Erdman is after all partly right. A good part of Mortimer's rage at Herbert is the result of Rivers's successful plot, buttressed by apparently hard evidence—the testimony of Mathilda's putative mother—to convince Mortimer that Herbert is not her real father. The problem for Mortimer's resolve is that his intuition and emotions constantly get in the way of his reason. It is not only that he repeatedly senses Herbert's innocence (2.3.69–71) and notes the similarities of father and daughter (2.3.212, 288–89), his own yearning for a father enables him to recognize the father in Herbert (2.3.417; 3.3.12, 63–68; 4.2.178–80). At one point the peasant who has met Herbert on the heath, seeing Mortimer's distress, solicitously asks, "but you are troubled; / Perhaps you are his son?" (5.2.39–40). Yet despite all the premonitions that stay his hand from murder, Mortimer never lets them break through to confront Herbert directly with his suspicions. And in the end, his "forgetting" to return the belt that contains Herbert's food dooms Herbert to death when he abandons him on the heath.

Mortimer brings about Herbert's death in part then, as Friedman says, because he is a paternal obstacle to his possession of Mathilda. Toward the end of the play Mortimer as much as admits it when he tries to shift responsibility for what he has done to Mathilda, his words resonant with Adam's ur-attempt to blame woman for his own desire and transgression: "The fault's not mine— / If she had never lived I had not done it" (5.3.38–39). But Adam's words were intended as a defense against the ultimate and original sin—the rebellion against the absolute, against divine authority. From the beginning of the play Mortimer's hesitation seems related to fears of an even greater evil and corruption in himself than the urge to remove a frustrating father.

From the moment he confronts the prospect of judging and punishing Herbert, Mortimer senses an excitement in himself that quite goes against the desire for justice:

> Rivers! I have loved
> To be the friend and father of the helpless,
> A comforter of sorrow—there is something
> Which looks like a *transition* in my soul,
> And yet is not.
>
> (2.1.89–93)

His excitement makes him aware for the first time of something in him that he realizes has always been there. He is confronted with it again when he is unable to kill Herbert in the castle:

> Is not the depth
> Of this man's crimes beyond the reach of thought?
> And yet in plumbing the abyss of vengeance
> Something I strike upon which turns my thoughts
> Back to myself—I think again—my breast
> Concenters all the terrors of the universe,
> I look at him and tremble like a child.
>
> (2.3.59–65)

Ambiguous as the passage is, Mortimer's recoil from killing Herbert is clearly enough connected with a sense of evil in himself even greater than the "crimes beyond the reach of thought" of which Herbert is guilty, an evil whose enormity "Concenters all the terrors of the universe." This conviction of an internal evil of infinite magnitude seriously undermines any sense of the righteousness or efficacy of his self-appointed role as protector of the helpless on the border. "We look," he says to his follower Lacy early in the play

> But at the surface of things, we hear
> Of towns in flames, fields ravaged, young and old
> Driven out in flocks to want and nakedness,
> Then grasp our swords and rush upon a cure
> That flatters us, because it asks not thought.
> The deeper malady is better hid—
> The world is poisoned at the heart.
>
> (2.3.337–44)

He does not say at this point what the deeper malady is, but a short while later, when Rivers presents him with another piece of false evidence against Herbert, Mortimer's furious reaction seems grotesquely inappropriate:

> Now for the corner stone of my philosophy:
> I would not give a denier for the man
> Who would not chuck his babe beneath the chin
> And send it with a fillip to its grave.
>
> (3.2.92–95)

Rivers's response, "Nay, you leave me behind," refers not only to his failure to understand; the enormity of Mortimer's nihilism and satanism exceeds even his own and does not seem rationally linked with the provocation.

All this suggests another meaning for the passage above in which Mortimer describes how his desire for vengeance turns his thoughts back upon himself in terror. If the thought of striking Herbert makes him "tremble like a child" and concentrates all the terrors of the universe in his breast, it is because it would be not just a parricidal blow but one at the principle of divinity and authority itself. Rivers's assumption of absolute authority came as a rationalization after the fact of accidental transgression; Mortimer is planning future action and is obscurely conscious that his intended act means arrogating to himself the authority and holiness he attributes to Herbert as well as the unholy power to destroy innocence and helplessness without a qualm. He becomes God and Satan simultaneously.

It is this deeper sense of the desire behind his vengeance that makes executing Herbert impossible for Mortimer. From this point of view, the interpretations of Erdman and Friedman are only partial constituents of a more complete explanation. With all necessary allowance once again for the problems of reductionism and evidence, their separate but not mutually exclusive conclusions are persuasive, even, in a way, unavoidable. Erdman, without actually saying that Mathilda is Annette and Herbert the king of France draws a point-for-point correspondence between Wordsworth's political involvements and conflicts and the characters and situations of the play. "[T]he debate," he writes, "over the justice and necessity of the dethronement, trial and execution of Louis XVI is recapitulated in the central moral conflict in *The Borderers*."[76] More generally, he argues that the play expresses Wordsworth's growing Burkeanism, an interpretation much extended by Chandler. "In *The Borderers* . . . the error . . . is a contempt for the grey locks of tradition. In this sense grey-headed father Herbert is Custom, Law, Ancient Faith, the Constitution (in Burke's sense): and only in this wide sense is the king significant to Wordsworth."[77] Friedman, stressing the triangular nature of the father-daughter-lover conflict, makes blunt assertions about Wordsworth's own "Oedipus complex." If the theorizing goes beyond the evidence, the suggestion is a plausible personal referent for the mainspring of Mortimer's actions and conflicts. For that matter other biographical figures are equally likely candidates for the overdetermined personal sources of Herbert. Mortimer believes Herbert guilty of what Wordsworth had accused Lonsdale of: the responsibility, in Lonsdale's case indirect, for frustrating his dream of love through selfish inclinations and even worse, perhaps dooming his beloved to poverty and sexual exploitation. The identification links Herbert with Rivers's captain and through him and Captain Bligh again to the British establishment against whom Wordsworth was rebelling.

But all of these associations, psychological and political, took on their lethal power only when they were interpreted in the light of the radical

ideology of Wordsworth's second revolutionary phase, between 1794 and 1795. It was when the psychological and political motives were filtered through his radicalized idea of individuality that both they and it could be seen for what they were. Neither the political nor the psychological interpretations exhaust the meaning of the characters of the play. In all of them, but perhaps especially in Herbert, there remains a node of mystery that escapes the boundaries of any or even all of these determinants. One of the most moving of the moments that evokes this irreducible mystery is Mortimer's outcry as he collapses unable to kill Herbert in the castle:

> Murder! asleep! blind! old! alone! betray'd!
> Drugg'd and in darkness! Here to strike the blow,
> Visible only to the eye of God!
>
> (2.3.203–5)

At this awful moment it is not at all clear who Herbert "is." Perhaps there are faint echoes of the sick, weak, dying widower father Wordsworth attended at age thirteen. But Mortimer's horror seems to stem from the contrast between the utter helplessness of his victim and his own contrasting absolute power over him. It is the theme that has haunted Wordsworth's poetry from the first, only now, through the political phase, there has been a reversal in which Wordsworth is all-powerful and the object of his anger is the fragile being on the margins that he himself once was. It was when Wordsworth became aware of what was associated for him with the idea of the "independent intellect"—a self-divinization whose aim, far from benevolence, was destructive omnipotence—that he recoiled from radical individuality with a shock of horror. Its reverberations are seen in Mortimer's self-sentencing to the fate of the wandering Jew (5.3.264–75), whose voice would never be heard by human ear—the ultimate punishment for a poet.

But the energy of the recoil was not wholly negative. For implicit in the rebellion, and available when the rebellion was abjured, was that source of power—nature—that had been not so much rebelled against as wholly internalized into the self. It had only to be partially restored to its externality to provide a new position, one much safer, but one that would enable Wordsworth to retain a modified principle of individuality, and with it the position of moralist, prophet, and poetic innovator.

IV) A Tenuous Resolution

For Wordsworth to return to nature, however, was not an easy step. Since 1792 his relationship with it had been mediated by politics. He had been able to perceive nature as sublime and to appropriate its power by

sublimating his own ambitions and rages in an identification with heroic fighters for freedom, dignity, and benevolence. But, having come to suspect his own motives through reflection on the hidden personal absolutism of his revolutionary principle of individuality, he had abandoned political radicalism, and the integrated structure of self, social world, and nature he had built on it was no longer tenable. He was left with two problems that had both personal and poetic bearing. The loss of political mediation provided a complete rupture of his connectedness with nature and with humanity; his relationship to each had been rendered problematic and had to be reconceived. Once he had politicized his identification with the world's outcasts he could no longer return them to the ambiguous status the female beggar had occupied in "An Evening Walk" as the twice-removed object of a mindscape within a landscape. On the other hand, once he had exposed the dangerous meaning of his politicization, the outcasts could no longer be the objects of politically reformist concern. But the aesthetic moves made possible by the political phase could not be undone. Having restored the sublime to nature and assimilated its force into himself, he could not return to the merely picturesque, whose inadequacy in any case had helped trigger his poetic and political crises.

Both of these dilemmas are poignantly expressed in "Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree," which date from the spring of 1797 and reflect Wordsworth's state after finishing *The Borderers*. The abrupt, urgent beginning, "Nay, Traveller! rest"[78] is a plea to the busy reader who would find no immediate reason to linger at the barren yew-tree bower, or, by extension, to pause with the poem, which is the story of the man who made the bower. It is apparently without human interest, being far from any habitation, and does not pulse with natural life either. Yet the sound of the waves lapping the shore—the still small voice of the poet—may speak a meaning through the emptiness itself.

For the bower is the image of the man who fashioned it, and his fate is the message. The description of the man contains the familiar phrases of Wordsworth's self-portraits.

> He was one who owned
> No common soul. In youth by science nursed,
> And led by nature into a wild scene
> Of lofty hopes, he to the world went forth
> A favoured Being, knowing no desire
> Which genius did not hallow; 'gainst the taint
> Of dissolute tongues, and jealousy, and hate,
> And scorn,—against all enemies prepared,
> All but neglect. The world, for so it thought,
> Owed him no service; wherefore he at once

> With indignation turned himself away,
> And with the food of pride sustained his soul
> In solitude.
>
> (12–24)

Crucial features of this self-portrait had already appeared in *The Borderers* and in the prefatory essay describing the Rivers's type, and they would recur, not always in the same combination, throughout Wordsworth's poetry. The composite picture is of a specially favored being, who plunges in youth into turbulent and hopeful times with great ambitions justified by his genius, but who is beset, contradictorily, by both envious hatred and neglect. Angry at his treatment, he withdraws from social life and sustains himself with the "food of pride"—a description that condenses both the period of Wordsworth's belief in radical individuality and of his recoil from it into political immobility. That recoil left him bereft, with a diminished sense of nature, of whose sublimity he felt unworthy, and isolated from men, from whose fellowship he felt excluded by the consciousness of his own self-concern.

> these gloomy boughs
> Had charms for him; and here he loved to sit,
> His only visitants a straggling sheep,
> The stone-chat, or the glancing sand-piper:
> And on these barren rocks . . .
> . . . .
> Fixing his downcast eye, he many an hour
> A morbid pleasure nourished, tracing here
> An emblem of his own unfrutful life:
> And, lifting up his head, he then would gaze
> On the more distant scene,—how lovely 'tis
> Thou seest,—and he would gaze till it became
> Far lovelier, and his heart could not sustain
> The beauty, still more beauteous! Nor, that time,
> When nature had subdued him to herself,
> Would he forget those Beings to whose minds
> Warm from the labours of benevolence
> The world, and human life, appeared a scene
> Of kindred loveliness: then he would sigh,
> Inly disturbed, to think that others felt
> What he must never feel. . . .
>
> (24–44)

But this self-pitying isolation is untenable. The "lost Man" whose fancy fed on "visionary views" dies; his death is a lesson that a different solution

to his dilemma is necessary. The hortatory ending admonishes the reader against the sins that created that dilemma:

> know that pride,
> Howe'er disguised in its own majesty,
> Is littleness . . .
> . . . . . .
> The man whose eye
> Is ever on himself doth look on one,
> The least of Nature's works, one who might move
> The wise man to that scorn which wisdom holds
> Unlawful, ever.
>
> (50–59)

But more poignant and relevant to the immediate situation is what must be seen as Wordsworth's self-admonition not to linger in guilt and immobility once the sin has been committed:

> True dignity abides with him alone
> Who, in the silent hour of inward thought,
> *Can still suspect, and still revere himself*,
> In lowliness of heart.
>
> (61–64; italics added)

Presently, "the silent hour of inward thought" will yield metaphysical visions of oneness with Nature, but here the issue is starkly, brilliantly psychological and moral: the ability, in Wordsworth's wonderful phrase, to "still suspect, and still revere oneself," the ultimate paradox where self-reverence runs the danger of vainglory but self-blame destroys the self-regard necessary for experiencing the sublime.

Wordsworth's task was to find the way to realize this paradox. A fragment of poetry from that period titled "Argument for Suicide" suggests how much that achievement would cost him. Compressed and ambiguous to the point of unintelligibility, it is a tortured return to the theme of violence with which Wordsworth had been wrestling since his defense of regicide.

> Send this man to the mine, this to the battle,
> Famish an aged beggar at your gates,
> And let him die by inches—but for worlds
> Lift not your hand against him—Live, live on,
> As if this earth owned neither steel nor arsenic,
> A rope, a river, or a standing pool.
> Live, if you dread the pains of hell, or think
> Your corpse would quarrel with a stake—alas

> Has misery then no friend?—if you would die
> By license, call the dropsy and the stone
> And let them end you—strange it is;
> And most fantastic are the magic circles
> Drawn round the thing called life—till we have learned
> To prize it less, we ne'er shall learn to prize
> The things worth living for.[79]

It is not clear whether the opening lines are a sarcastic attack on the rulers of society, who in effect commit murder indirectly by letting the poor die through customary social policy, or a desperately grotesque recommendation of the writer for putting them out of their misery. In either case the lines reflect the agonizing dilemma facing one who has abjured a revolutionary political solution to the problem of poverty. He must either rail impotently at the criminal hypocrisy of established society, or, more horribly, support it by himself wishing for the death of the poor as the only solution to their suffering. The ironic exhortation beginning "Live, live on"—the plea for suicide—is also ambiguous; is it to the suffering poor, who are too frightened of the afterlife to end their real misery here on earth, or is it to the writer, who needs to punish himself for the terrible policy to which he sees no alternative? With regard to the second possibility, Johnston nicely observes, "The desire to kill a suffering fellow being arises from a very deep appreciation of life—and an arrogant one. Under guise of wishing to put the sufferer out of his misery, it may mask a need to remove a threat to one's sanity, either from an excess of empathy or from a sense of guilt."[80] The concluding moral of "Argument for Suicide," that the taboos against suicide and murder are irrational because they fetishize mere survival at the expense of truly human life, contains the deepest irony of all in the context of Wordsworth's development. Having abandoned revolution because it licensed murder in the name of individuality, he has come to the position that one must accept the death of the poor—and one's own death—as the price of learning to prize "The things worth living for."

The ultimate exemplar of learning "to prize life less" is given in "The Ruined Cottage," written in the summer of 1797; the meaning of "the things worth living for" is clarified in the additions to it in early 1798 called "The Pedlar." In retrospect, though the step obviously could not have been predicted, it seems inevitable that Wordsworth should have effected the recovery from his revolutionary crisis through a new solution to the problem of the poor and abandoned woman. Since "An Evening Walk" she had been the figure through whom Wordsworth had, in a complex network of identifications, connected his feelings about himself with

the social world. In her first incarnation, she was the figure of human vulnerability and the threat of annihilation. In her politicized form, she was a victim of sociohistorical conditions whose suffering could be ended forever by political change. As Margaret in "The Ruined Cottage," she is the embodiment of the human condition and a sacrifice offered up by the poet to a new vision of reconciliation with human destiny.

As if to close the circle, "The Ruined Cottage" opens with a passage adapted from the opening lines of "An Evening Walk." Wordsworth is signaling that the very landscape whose harmony had been disrupted by the appearance of the female vagrant will be the scene of restoration. But the process is the reverse of "An Evening Walk." The only harmony initially present in the landscape exists for "the dreaming man" wishfully imagined by the young traveler, whose own journey across the meadow is exhausting and beset with the discomforts of slippery ground, heat, and buzzing insects. Nature to him is inhospitable. He has not yet learned to approach it in ways that can make it a haven; the landscape will have to be his scene of instruction. His pain is only intensified at first by the sight of the ruined cottage and the terrible story of Margaret's decline and death told to him by the Pedlar. But it is through that story—or more precisely, that story-telling, in which the narrator's attitude is the key—that enlightenment and reconciliation will come.

Mary Jacobus has neatly summarized the new significance of this version of the female vagrant: "The suffering of a single, ordinary woman is invested with the tragic significance of mortality itself. The symbolic method by which the decay of the cottage is identified with Margaret's own decline serves as a general metaphor for human transience. Now, the death of the individual and all that dies with him is reconciled by invoking the permanence of nature."[81] In Margaret, Wordsworth has realized the theme of human fatedness to suffering that haunted his poetry even at its most political, undercutting even then the possibility of a reformist solution. Margaret and her family are undone by external forces, accidents of nature and war, but these are not seen as modifiable causes of destruction. On the other hand, Wordsworth is not simply implying that poor harvests and war are ineluctable conditions of human existence and hence permanent sources of suffering. If they are the necessary conditions of Margaret's disintegration, they are not sufficient. It is Margaret's response to her losses that is the core of her collapse. Critics like De Quincey are on to something when they accuse Margaret of "criminal indulgence" for giving in to her despair and causing the death of her child by refusing to go on living.[82] It is that very refusal, the consequence of her attachment to her absent husband, which is the essence of Margaret's "mortality," the symptom of the human condition.

This aspect of her situation suggests, however, that Margaret is not just "a single, ordinary woman." Whatever Everywoman might look like, Wordsworth has gone to pains to give Margaret distinctive and unusual features. Her extreme benevolence alone, represented in her holding up to thirsty travelers water drawn from her well—a biblical allusion to Rebecca—and in her capacity to love all who come by her cottage, marks her as special, if not unique. But this characteristic by itself would only make the story a stereotypical emblem of the age-old challenge to faith inherent in the words uttered by the Pedlar, "The good die first / And they whose hearts are dry as summer dust / Burn to the socket."[83] Much more striking, partly because it is the constantly reiterated theme of her downfall, is her all-consuming longing for her husband Robert, which supersedes not only concern for self-preservation but maternal feeling as well. She deteriorates because as time passes and he does not return, she ceases to do what she needs to do—garden, spin, maintain the cottage—to sustain herself and her children. Wordsworth has her acknowledge this to the Pedlar, even judge it in apparent moral terms: "'I am changed, / And to myself,' said she, 'have done much wrong, / And to this helpless infant'" (405–7). But beyond her words she shows no remorse or contrition, and her admission has no consequence for her actions. What is more, not only does the Pedlar never admonish her, he does not seem to see her behavior as culpable. More even than does Margaret herself, he accepts it as a fact of nature. What is remarkable is the collusion between the two of them that consecrates the inevitability of her longing and the inertia it produces.[84]

This collusion points back to Wordsworth's lament in "A Night on Salisbury Plain" that it is man's "miserable dower / Only to taste of joy" that he may "pine / A loss, which rolling suns shall ne'er restore." The Pedlar takes Margaret's behavior for granted because it represents his own point of view, which, as these lines show, is also that of the poet. Loss is inevitable and irrecoverable, and human life is marked forever by an infinite and unsatisfiable longing. On one level the Pedlar is identified with Margaret, as the traveler on Salisbury Plain is with the female vagrant—as Wordsworth always is with his female outcasts. In this case there is a particularly striking piece of confirmatory evidence in a fragment of 1797 obviously related to "The Ruined Cottage" but not included in the poem.[85] A baker's cart passes the home of an impoverished widow—a prefigurement of Margaret—without stopping:

> She said: "that waggon does not care for us"—
> The words were simple, but her look and voice
> Made up their meaning, and bespoke a mind

> Which being long neglected, and denied
> The common food of hope, was now become
> Sick and extravagant,—by *strong access*
> *Of momentary pangs driven to that state*
> *In which all past experience melts away,*
> *And the rebellious heart to its own will*
> *Fashions the laws of nature*.
> (*Poetical Works*, 1:316.55–65; italics added)

The "rebellious heart fashioning the laws of nature to its own will" connects Margaret with Rivers in *The Borderers* as well as Wordsworth.

But that is not to say that Margaret is a projection of the poet. Even in her early incarnation in Wordsworth's poetry, where her features depended heavily on borrowings from other writers, the female outcast was meant as the representation of a real other; this was inherent in the nature of the problems with which Wordsworth was wrestling. The power of "The Ruined Cottage," as most critics have agreed, lies precisely in its brilliant, restrained, above all authentic evocation of the emotions of another person.[86] Indeed, as Johnston has pointed out, the evocation is so effective that it runs the danger of sensationalism.[87] The Pedlar himself warns against the temptations of his story, the "wantonness" of drawing "momentary pleasure" from the misery of the dead (280–84), a contradiction that would make no sense but for the voluptuous, almost sadomasochistic fascination with the relentlessness of Margaret's suffering and the sexual imagery in which some of it is presented.

> She is dead.
> The worm is on her cheek, and this poor hut,
> Stripped of its outward garb of household flowers,
> Of rose and jasmine, offers to the wind
> A cold bare wall whose earthy top is tricked
> With weeds and rank spear-grass. She is dead,
> And nettles rot and adders sun themselves
> Where we have sat together while she nursed
> Her infant at her bosom.
> (157–65)

There is a mysterious intimacy in the Pedlar's connection with Margaret that communicates itself to the traveler; though he never knew her, he is drawn to her personally: "In my own despite / I thought of that poor woman as of one / Whom I had known and loved" (264–66). All of this suggests that the "poor woman" has been layered over with powerful associations to Annette Vallon. Margaret's almost hallucinatory certainty that Robert will return despite all evidence to the contrary is powerfully rem-

iniscent of the tone of childlike hope and anticipation in the letters Annette was writing from France in 1793; even if Wordsworth did not see all of them, the tenor of her attachment, which after all he knew at first hand, resembles that of Margaret's to Robert. And there is the curious specificity of the "Five tedious years" that Margaret "lingered in unquiet widowhood / A wife, and widow" (482–84) before she died. It was almost exactly five years before the poem was written that Wordsworth had left Annette, and her status was precisely what he ascribed to Margaret; among her friends, Annette was in fact known as both "Madame Williams" and "Veuve [widow] Williams."[88]

Wordsworth was coming to terms with a great many things in the figure of Margaret: his own unappeased longing for his mother, his sense of precariousness and imminent annihilation, his guilt over Annette, his empathy with those who reminded him of any or all of these. The remorseless rehearsal of Margaret's accelerating decline, spontaneously begun by the Pedlar, broken off in grief and taken up again only at the almost reluctant bidding of the narrator in a rhythm of compulsion and repulsion, has about it something of the quality of an endurance test; it is as if both are trying to see how much they can bear. Only if the test is ultimate, only if the traveler's pain is extended to the limit of endurance by an encounter with his worst fears can it be cathartic. In "An Evening Walk" the poet pulls abruptly away from the image of the dying woman and her children because he has no way of integrating it and coming to terms with it. The behavior of the traveler in "The Ruined Cottage" is in telling contrast. Although he does turn aside in weakness,[89] he nonetheless "reviewed that Woman's suff'rings" and "blessed her with an impotence of grief," then "traced with milder interest / That secret spirit of humanity / Which mid the calm oblivious tendencies / Of nature, 'mid her plants, her weeds, and flowers, / And silent overgrowings, still survived" (498–506). It is only when the Pedlar sees the traveler able to face human impotence and still find the spirit of humanity in the remains of human artifacts overgrown by nature, that he knows that he will be able to understand his lesson:

> My Friend, enough to sorrow have you given,
> The purposes of wisdom ask no more;
> Be wise and chearful, and no longer read
> The forms of things with an unworthy eye.
> She sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here.
> I well remember that those very plumes,
> Those weeds, and the high spear-grass on that wall,
> By mist and silent rain-drops silver'd o'er,
> As once I passed did to my heart convey

> So still an image of tranquillity,
> So calm and still, and looked so beautiful
> Amid the uneasy thoughts which filled my mind,
> That what we feel of sorrow and despair
> From ruin and from change, and all the grief
> The passing shews of being leave behind,
> Appeared an idle dream that could not live
> Where meditation was. I turned away
> And walked along my road in happiness.
>
> (508–25)

The consolation for transience and nothingness is the eternity of nature, for the ugliness of life it is the sense that even the useless weeds, whose encroachment on the cottage was a symptom of its decay, can be as tranquil and beautiful as anything in nature. Nature is one, and humans too are part of its eternity and tranquil beauty—"She sleeps in the calm earth and peace is here." An important transition has taken place within the poem and through the poem. The longing that has been unappeased and unappeasable directed at an absent love is fulfilled when its object is displaced to nature herself.

But this displacement raises an obvious question in the light of Wordsworth's previous poetry. What enabled him to accomplish now what he wanted but was unable to achieve as far back as "An Evening Walk," when nature—or his ability to imagine nature—proved unequal to the task? The answer is that two necessary conditions had been fulfilled, one explicitly mentioned in "An Evening Walk" itself, the other only inherent in the nature of the crisis in that poem but finally fulfilled through Wordsworth's revolutionary period. The first condition was that he was finally in residence with Dorothy. At Racedown, where "The Ruined Cottage" was written, he shared with her that "gilded" cottage that he had declared the "Sole bourn, sole wish, sole object" of his way, the home whose evocation in the earlier poem had been the precondition of imagining the peaceful evening scene with which it ended. Now it was the realized condition of the healing vision of nature that enabled him to accommodate Margaret's destruction. Wordsworth twice paid tribute to Dorothy's role in his recovery. A famous passage in *The Prelude* makes the temporal connection explicit and emphasizes Dorothy's maternal functioning both as occasional monitor who yet does not compromise his independence and as omnipresent security and reminder of his better self.

> then it was
> That the beloved woman in whose sight
> Those days were passed—now speaking in a voice
> Of sudden admonition, like a brook

That does but cross a lonely road; and now
Seen, heard and felt, and caught at every turn,
Companion never lost through many a league—
Maintained for me a saving intercourse
With my true self . . .

. . . .

She, in the midst of all, preserved me still
A poet, made me seek beneath that name
My office upon earth, and nowhere else.
And lastly, Nature's self, by human love
Assisted, through the wary labyrinth
Conducted me again to open day.

(X.907–24)

The other tribute to Dorothy, biographically less direct but conceptually more important, was of course in "Tintern Abbey."

The second condition of Wordsworth's recovery was the transformation of the image of nature, which meant transformation also of the imagination that could conceive it, so that it could withstand and contain the horror of Margaret's fate. It is this transformation that is accomplished in the figure of the Pedlar, whose history and philosophy were added to "The Ruined Cottage" only in the winter and spring of 1798. The first version of spring 1797 did not have any of the consolatory material discussed above and ended with the Pedlar's uninterpreted "and here she died / Last human tenant of these ruined walls." There has been much debate over whether the addition of the overt philosophical editorializing strengthens or weakens the poem. Whatever the judgment of its merit, current critical consensus on its origin is that Wordsworth turned to explicit philosophizing only under the influence of Coleridge, who entered his life in a sustained way in the summer of 1797, and that the purpose of the philosophical additions was to invest the Pedlar with metaphysical authority that would make him a plausible interpreter of Margaret's suffering.[90] The debate, but even more the emphasis on Coleridge, seems somewhat overdrawn, or more precisely, wrongly construed. The explicit consolation of the passage at the end of MS. D, a version of the poem dating from 1799, is implicit all along in "The Ruined Cottage"—it was after all the very purpose of the poem—and *The Borderers* is evidence enough that Wordsworth was not only thinking in philosophical terms before he met Coleridge but in terms of making philosophical statements. (It is interesting in this connection that a letter from one of Wordsworth's relatives to another describing the events surrounding the failure of the play reports that "the metaphysical obscurity of one character, was the great reason of its rejection" (*Letters*, 197). Unquestionably

Coleridge's more theoretical mind and wider reading were a powerful stimulus to a more self-conscious and self-confident philosophizing, but to attribute the very impulse to Coleridge is to misconstrue the whole course of Wordsworth's development.[91] Coleridge played a role in relationship to Wordsworth analogous to the role Schleiermacher played for Schlegel—functioning as a like-minded but strongly individual self who could enter into confirmatory dialogue and enable the other to crystallize latent thought. The more interesting question, however, is whether the Pedlar's philosophy does in fact make him a plausible interpreter of Margaret's experience. I want to argue that it does not, that in some sense Wordsworth was aware of that fact, and that this accounts for the excision of the Pedlar material from MS. D, for the future difficulties with the poem, and for much of his difficulty in completing *The Recluse*. The very imagination that could conceive a nature powerful enough to contain Margaret's fate undercut nature's objective power.

Jonathan Wordsworth has argued that "The Pedlar" is about the unity of man and nature, and that it was only later, with "Tintern Abbey" and especially *The Prelude*, that Wordsworth's faith in the "one life" uniting them began to weaken.[92] But from the very beginning of Wordsworth's description of their relationship in "The Pedlar," the focus is on the *activity* of the Pedlar in relationship to nature. As a child

> deep feelings had impressed
> Great objects on his mind . . .
> . . . .
> With these impressions would he still compare
> All his ideal stores, his shapes and forms,
> And, being still unsatisfied with aught
> Of dimmer character, he thence attained
> An *active* power to fasten images
> Upon his brain, and on their picture lines
> Intensely brooded . . .
>
> (30–42)

The italics are Wordsworth's, and every verb in the passage is self-referential and active; the only slight hedging is in the first line, where his feelings, rather than he himself, are said to act as autonomous agents. As the section continues, the emphasis on the mind's activity in producing the image of sublime nature increases:

> in the after day
> Of boyhood, many an hour in caves forlorn
> And in the hollow depths of naked crags
> He sate, and even in their fixed lineaments,
> Or from the power of a peculiar eye,

Or by creative feeling overborne,
Or by predominance of thought oppressed,
Even in their fixed and steady lineaments
He traced an ebbing and a flowing mind
Expression ever varying.

(48–57)

Of the three alternatives Wordsworth offers to explain how the "fixed and steady lineaments" of caves and crags took on the ebbing and flowing character of the mind, only one is perceptual, and even its ostensibly passive nature is undercut by the epithet "peculiar." The other two refer to intellectual activity and the creative imagination. Although Wordsworth wishes to insist on the objective presence of the living characteristics of nature through the repeated use of a perceptual vocabulary, the rhetoric of intensity continually pushes beyond sight to confound it with other faculties:

But in the mountains did he FEEL his faith,
There did he see the writing. All things there
Breathed immortality, revolving life,
And greatness still revolving, infinite.
There littleness was not, the least of things
Seemed infinite, and there his spirit shaped
Her prospects—nor did he *believe*; he saw.

(122–28)

The insistence on passive vision—contradicted by the italicizing of its opposite, "belief"—is lame in any case after the capitalizing of "feeling." Furthermore, what Wordsworth says he saw in the mountains is *writing*, and though the intended reference is to the true text of scripture, the idea of "writing" removes the object from the naive field of perception to the arena of interpretation, that is, from immediate objective presence to mediated existence. The ultimately uncontainable force of the mind's activity bursts through undisguisedly near the end of the poem:

From deep analogies *by thought supplied*,
Or consciousness not to be subdued,
To every natural form, rock, fruit, and flower,
Even the loose stones that cover the highway,
He gave a moral life; he saw them feel
Or *linked them* to some feeling.
. . . .
He had a world about him—'twas his own,
He made it.

(330–40; italics added)

The Pedlar is not a passive receiver of the consolations of eternal and objective nature, he *supplies* nature with the qualities that can console him.

Certainly Wordsworth also proclaims in the poem his vision of the one life in all things (217–18). But the real counterpart of the active mind within the poem is not the unity of mind and nature in the one life; it is the independent power of nature. And what is especially striking and important about the power of nature is that it is most often asserted in such a way as not to complement the active mind but in fact to efface it. When nature is evoked, the activity of the mind recedes or is absent; the mind becomes a humble vessel, a pure receptacle.

> But he had felt the power
> Of Nature, and already was prepared
> By his intense conceptions to receive
> Deeply the lesson deep of love, which he
> Whom Nature, by whatever means, has taught
> To feel intensely, cannot but receive.
>
> (86–91)

> yet was his heart
> Lowly, for he was meek in gratitude
> Oft as he called to mind those exstacies,
> And whence they flowed; and from them he acquired
> Wisdom which works through patience—thence he learned
> In many a calmer hour of sober thought
> To look on Nature with an humble heart,
> Self-questioned where it did not understand,
> And with a superstitious eye of love.
>
> (131–39)

> From Nature and her overflowing soul
> He had received so much that all his thoughts
> Were steeped in feeling.
>
> (203–5)

The characteristic trope in "The Pedlar" is *not* the "one life" but the oscillation between declarations of the absolute power of mind on the one hand and the absolute power of nature on the other. And what renders this apparently contradictory oscillation intelligible is yet another movement between active and passive, contained in the first, in which the activity is of quite a different character. That second oscillation is present in the difficult and ambiguous lines describing the Pedlar's epiphany in the mountains, where it is unclear to whom the different attributes belong, to him or to nature, and who is doing what to whom:

Oh then what soul was his, when on the tops
Of the high mountains he beheld the sun
Rise up and bathe the world in light. He looked,
The ocean and the earth beneath him lay
In gladness and deep joy. The clouds were touched,
And in their silent faces he did read
Unutterable love. Sound needed none,
Nor any voice of joy: *his spirit drank*
The spectacle. Sensation, soul, and form,
All melted into him; they swallowed up
His animal being. In them did he live,
And by them did he live—they were his life.
In such an access of mind, in such high hour
Of visitation from the living God,
He did not feel the God, he felt his works.

(94–106; italics added)

Jonathan Wordsworth points out the confusions in the passage. Sensation, soul, and form would seem to belong to the Pedlar, but they melt into him from the outside. His spirit actively drinks in the spectacle, but his being is passively swallowed up. The whole process is described as both "an access of mind" and a "visitation from the living God."[93] This last contradiction is congruent with a contradiction between creative mind and creative Nature. But the first two confusions represent activity as an active passivity, a taking in of the outside that can also be experienced as a being absorbed by the outside. The metaphors of drinking in and being swallowed up point plainly to the origin and nature of this dual experience. It is the relationship of infant and mother, in which the boundaries between the two are effaced and the child experiences the mother's power and bounty as his or her own while at the same time feeling contained within her.

Elsewhere Wordsworth is even more explicit about the maternal nature of the Pedlar's bond with nature.

Nature was at his heart, and he perceived,
Though yet he knew not how, a wasting power
In all things which from her sweet influence
Might tend to wean him.

(158–61)[94]

It is in the image of the maternal relationship that the apparent contradiction between the role of mind and nature is resolved in "The Pedlar"—not that it ceases to be a contradiction, but it is made to correspond to a contradictory actual experience. What is involved is not necessarily a psy-

chological "regression" to an earlier stage but the poetic use of a regressive metaphor to stage a reconciliation. And through this metaphor it is finally apparent how Wordsworth has resolved the crisis of individuality. The vast claims Rivers makes for the absolute autonomy of the self are retained, indeed they are extended: the mind creates a unified yet infinite world. Nothing is lost, nothing is out of place, everything is related to everything else as parts of one whole, and everything lasts forever. The ability to create such a world depends wholly on the uniqueness of the Pedlar's spontaneous experience. That the Pedlar is "untaught, / In the dead lore of schools undisciplined" is precisely the condition of the possibility of such creation. He is an original, whose world-making is the negation of all previous thought, all external influence. Yet that very individuality is dependent not only in its origins but for its continuing sustenance on the very unity that it creates. That is why his "*being*" can become both "sublime and comprehensive" (129–30) while *he* remains lowly and meek in gratitude (132). This distinction between his being and his self is not "merely" rhetorical; it is the necessary splitting of the self through which Wordsworth can "still suspect, and still revere himself." The sublimity and comprehensiveness of the self is real, but it is also separable from the self because it is the gift of the Other, or rather, it is the presence of the Other. It is, in fact, the selfother within the self,[95] that part of the self Wordsworth sees as created through the internalization of what is sublime and comprehensive in nature. This presence, in all its infinite greatness, is wholly love. In it, all the dangers of infinite individuality have been eradicated by the attribution of the self's original and absolute power to a wholly benign source, so that when the self internalizes and exercises that power, the self cannot but be benign also. The problem for Wordsworth is that despite the distinction he wishes to make, he is unable to separate the "being" of the self and the self in wholly isolated compartments. His own self-awareness, which is the process of the poem itself, shuttles between the two, carrying the only half-suppressed news that what has been internalized has itself been created, that for the adult—and the poet—at any rate, internalization can be neither passive nor innocent but is an act of endowing the self with power. The external is already endowed before it is internalized and this fact is inescapable because the wish to see nature infinite in itself is an effort at escape from the self's frightening wish for its own infinity.

In the light of this reading of "The Pedlar," it seems to me necessary to reconsider once again the dating of the "Prospectus" to *The Recluse*, whose spirit and statement of aims accord so well with the philosophy of "The Pedlar." Older scholarship long assumed that the "Prospectus" was written at about the same time, in the late winter or early spring of 1798,

but more recently, it has been assigned to a later date somewhere between 1800 and 1806.[96] Two kinds of arguments have been offered against the earlier dating—manuscript and textual. Manuscript evidence, however, as Jonathan Wordsworth points out, is unhelpful and remains inconclusive.[97] The textual argument is essentially twofold; first, that the only evidence in favor of the earlier dating is the resemblance of the opening words of the "Prospectus"—"On Man, on Nature and on human Life"—to Wordsworth's statement of his plan for *The Recluse* in the letter of March 1798 to James Tobin; and second, that the theme and language of the "Prospectus" bear far less similarity to writings from the spring of 1798 than to those of 1800 such as "Michael" and the "Glad Preamble" that appears later as the opening of Book I of *The Prelude*. The first point of course holds only if the second is true, and the second is a matter of interpretation. The currently favored interpretation can be sustained, however, only if one ignores not only the central role that Wordsworth assigned the active mind in "The Pedlar" but the whole dialectic of that poem. The triumphalist assertion in the "Prospectus" that enables Wordsworth to defy Jehovah's strength and terror and surpass Milton's Christian epic with his humanistic one captures not only the spirit of that heady spring of 1798 when Wordsworth had discovered his new message, but the spirit of "The Pedlar" as well.

> The darkest pit
> Of the profoundest hell, night, chaos, death
> Nor aught of blinder vacancy scoop'd out
> By help of dreams, can breed such fear and awe
> As fall upon me when I look
> Into my soul, into the soul of man
> My haunt, and the main region of my song
>
> (257.23–29)

Furthermore, if as I have argued, the "one life" exists in "The Pedlar" only in the context of a relationship between mind and nature, that relationship closely matches the famous idea in the "Prospectus" that paradisal unity need not be looked for only in history because "minds / Once wedded to this outward frame of things / In love, finds these the growth of the common day" (38–40). The "Prospectus" reproduces in much bolder and more compressed form the paradox of "The Pedlar." The mind of man is a sublime force higher and greater than heaven itself, existing in worlds "To which the Heaven of heavens is but a veil" (18). Yet its power, which makes the poet unafraid of Jehovah himself, is conditional, dependent on "this outward frame of things" to which it must be wedded in love to produce the Eden. The dependency holds even if the egalitarian relationship of marriage suggests a more balanced and stable depen-

dency than the shifting domination submission of the mother-child dyad. There is one other striking piece of evidence for the earlier date. At the close, Wordsworth refers to himself as "In part a Fellow citizen, in part / An outl[aw], and a borderer of his age" (69–70), a self-reference that makes most sense in close proximity to the writing of *The Borderers* and the emotions connected with it.

If, however, the reading of "The Pedlar" I have ventured shows it to be closer in spirit to the "Prospectus" than has been previously suggested, it also helps to explain why the project announced in the "Prospectus" faced internal difficulties that ultimately prevented its ever coming to fruition. The proclamation of the absolute power of mind generates the immediate need to retreat to a regressive metaphor of maternal dependency. Even in the "Prospectus," the status of the mind as the sublime is reduced right after its annunciation to that of equal partnership with nature in marital union. In "Tintern Abbey," however, written a few months after "The Pedlar," the regression to dependency on the feminine is deeper, as we have seen, paralleling that of "The Pedlar" itself. "Tintern Abbey," furthermore, makes clear the cost of regression in relationship to other people and to the possibilities of social theory. In the dyadic relationship with nature, other selves are effaced because the essential problem has become the adjustment and regulation of the absolute self through a contradictory relationship with absolute nature (or an absolute counterpart female human, Dorothy, who is not an other but an alter ego). To be more precise, it is not true that others are simply obliterated. Just as all human artifacts have been blended into nature, all humans have blended into the hermit, who is at home alone with nature. Contrary to Levinson's assertion,[98] the vagrants she sees Wordsworth ignoring *are* explicitly in the poem, and they carry with them the intertextual weight of all the vagrants in Wordsworth's previous poetry. Their treatment in "Tintern Abbey" is a version of the solution he constructed for the problem of the vagrant through Margaret in "The Ruined Cottage." Just as he identified his plight with theirs ever since "An Evening Walk," he gathers them back to himself in the figure of the lonely hermit in "Tintern Abbey." But the hermit is no less "objective" a social figure than the vagrant; Wordsworth does not simply "subjectify" previously social figures by replacing them with his own consciousness. Identification is still mediated through social figures. Nevertheless, by blending the vagrants into the hermit, he does transform the existence of those in whom he once found his own image, those whom he had once chosen to try to save by revolutionary action. The hermit may be as poor as the vagrant, living as "houseless" in his cave as they in the woods. But unlike them, he has transcended his material situation by understanding his material suffering as an emblem of a finitude that can be overcome if it is rightly understood as the avenue to

infinity. The move is an end-run around the basic premise of all social theory, the hypothesis of the social causation of misery.

That is not to say that Wordsworth understood himself this way, or that he did not try to have something like a social theory. There did, after all, seem to be a counterpart social vision to the hermit's lone communion with nature in Wordsworth's "implicit conviction about the human imagination as best thriving in a subsistence, agrarian economy of owner occupiers"[99] bound together by natural sympathy, a conviction expressed in poems such as "The Old Cumberland Beggar" and "Michael." But these poems represent only one part of the grand project Wordsworth announced to Tobin in March 1798. They omit the dimension of "Man" understood in terms of the vast claims for the human mind he intended to make. And it was the impossibility of integrating these claims with a social theory that defeated Wordsworth's larger project.

The best evidence for this thesis is in both Wordsworth's impetus to write the *Two-Part Prelude* of 1799 and the outcome of the poem itself. The 1799 *Prelude* is the climax of the effort at resolution I have traced so far, the best evidence of its tenuousness and partial failure, and the explanation of why Wordsworth would never complete the poetic project he announced with such hope the previous year.

It has been argued that the early *Prelude* is a much more unified poem with a stronger sense of formal structure than the 1805 version;[100] what is certainly true is that the structure of the 1799 *Prelude* reveals much about the nature of Wordsworth's conflict that was obscured in its later revision and expansion. One of the most important, and damaging, changes was the removal of the "spots of time" passage from its original position at the climax of Wordsworth's early recollections of childhood, where it takes on a crucial meaning not readily seen from its later placement far removed from them. Separating those memories that ostensibly revivify imagination from the other early memories and from the "infant babe" passage that followed them almost immediately in the original *Prelude* destroyed the narrative that told the crucial story.

The notoriously enigmatic question with which the poem abruptly begins, "What is for this," has occasioned endless interpretation; whatever else is true, it is unquestionably a lament for Wordsworth's apparent inability to carry out the poetic program he had announced to Tobin and discussed with Coleridge. With characteristic directness, Jonathan Wordsworth has said that Wordsworth wrote the 1799 *Prelude* to find out why he could not write the poem he was supposed to and that he went back to childhood in order to try to find out what was wrong.[101] The opening complaint, "Was it for this / That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved / To blend his murmurs with my nurse's song" (1.1–3), makes clear that he

went back to memories of childhood also because, as "The Pedlar" had already claimed, he felt he had been prepared by his special relationship with nature in childhood for his great poetic task. Yet the sequence of memories that follows almost immediately tells a story that contradicts the privileged harmony evoked in the poem's first images, a story of childhood crimes. "The Pedlar" had stated that the poet's mind was nurtured in terror as well as love; it now emerges that the terror was the result of acts the poet remembers committing as a child, acts that in emotionally direct, if cognitively obscure, ways have conditioned the nature of his mind's power and led to the blockage he now experiences.

The initially benign memories of oneness with sun, stream, and field in early childhood play cannot be sustained; they modulate rapidly into an image of the four year old standing "alone / A naked savage in the thunder shower" (1.25–26). In the episodes immediately following, the "savage" is remembered as an older boy snaring woodcocks and stealing them from others' traps, robbing eggs from ravens' nests, and stealing a shepherd's boat to row across the lake at night. All of these are acts of "stealth and troubled pleasure" (1.90–91), as the boat-stealing episode is explicitly called. They involve challenges both to nature and to others' rights to her, declarations of superiority through thefts that are experienced as acts of destruction or of violent appropriation, and that are often followed by fears of retaliation. The boy trapping birds is not simply a thief but a "fell destroyer"; and after despoiling his competitors as well, he hears "Low breathings coming after me" (1.47). In the egg-robbing episode he celebrates a double triumph, turning an ignoble act to glory and defying mortality itself. Climbing precariously high on an almost sheer ridge of rock above the ravens' nest, he feels, instead of the expectable terror, a superhuman sensation of being suspended on air, buoyed by the very wind that threatens him (1.65). And in stealing the boat, the boy disables the shepherd and displaces him in the enjoyment of a "troubled pleasure" whose description virtually proclaims power, aggression, and sensuality: "I . . . struck the oars, and struck again / . . . . / twenty times / I dipped my oars into the silent lake, / And as I rose upon the stroke my boat / Went heaving through the water" (1.87, 103–6). Little wonder that the cliff that suddenly looms above a nearby hill as he moves further into the lake appears as an avenging giant striding after him.

Even the apparently unconflicted pleasure of the skating scene that follows the accounts of these crimes is described in military and hunting metaphors, partly hidden, partly displayed, in its brilliant onomatopoeic rendering: "All shod with steel / We hissed along the polished ice in games / Confederate, imitative of the chase" (1.156–58). And when the young Wordsworth stops short on his skates to enjoy the dizziness, he experiences the surrounding cliffs wheeling by him as the earth turning

on its axis, the boy himself the very axis of the turning world. The theme of conflict, competition, and troubled triumph continues even into the quieter indoor amusements that Wordsworth recounts immediately afterwards. Tic-tac-toe is played with "head opposed to head, / In strife too humble to be named in verse," and the cards used in games are a "thick-ribbed army" led on "to the combat" (1.211–15).

Activities such as these impressed upon everything in nature—and in social life—for the young Wordsworth "the characters / Of danger or desire" (1.195–96), a fine phrase that neatly summarizes the significance of all the experiences the poet remembers in these first explorations of his childhood. The impressions are more accurately rendered conjunctively than disjunctively—danger *and* desire—for the objects of desire, or the desiring itself, were fraught with danger. His remembered reaction to the danger was equally significant. Thinking about the boat-stealing episode afterwards, the boy did not recall his fear or sense of threat; the emotion was isolated, the sensory images were repressed into a "darkness—call it solitude, / Or blank desertion" and displaced by "huge and mighty forms that do not live / Like living men" moving "slowly through my mind" (1.127–28). Thus external punitive forces were converted into only vaguely ominous internal powers, embodiments of a relatively benign transcendence of empirical perception, a sublimity stripped of anger, if not of awesomeness. The precipitating event itself—the trespass—becomes nothing but an occasion for the experience of these forces and loses its character as forbidden desire and act.

Crimes of destruction, appropriation, and aggrandizement, fear of retaliation, defensive neutralization through suppression of feeling and conversion of external sensory image to vague internal construct: this is the overall pattern of the chain of memory associations opening the poem.[102] The same pattern continues into the climactic memories of the first book, the "spots of time." The bridge to those more portentous memories, with their ostensible ability to repair the imaginative power, is the mysterious "drowned man" episode, which abruptly and ominously raises the emotional stakes of the already dangerous memory game by introducing the theme of death. Wordsworth remembers a scene in which, unlike all the others recalled so far, he was ostensibly passive, an observer rather than an actor; the passivity is as if in offset to the gravity of the event. Yet it is easy to sense in the description of his behavior the uneasiness of complicity and guilt. Catching sight of a pile of clothing across Esthwaite Lake, he watched for half an hour, until it grew too dark to see, for someone to recover them. He must have thought something was wrong, though he did nothing about it, because he returned to the scene the next day. He does not even report his return directly, however, as if troubled by his fascination. Rather the next lines describe men dragging the lake

the following day, and the sudden apparition of the dead man rising "bolt upright" with his ghastly face—an image reminiscent of the cliff that "upreared its head" and followed the boy who had stolen the shepherd's boat. This episode, however, has no reported antecedents. It is described with narrative objectivity, almost without hint of any subjective reaction, and it is quickly submerged into a bland general reference to "numerous accidents in flood or field" (1.280) that impressed his mind "With images to which in following years / far other feelings were attached" (1.284–85). This memory too is clearly fraught with suppressed danger.

The two spots of time that follow are even more opaque, and their opacity seems in proportion to the even greater degree of danger they hold. Wordsworth recalls going riding with a servant while visiting his grandparents at Penrith when he was five years old. Although he was "an urchin, one who scarce / Could hold a bridle," he had, he says, "ambitious hopes." The hopes are not specified but the language suggests that the little boy wanted to be a grownup man: the phrase "I mounted" emphasizes his independence, just as the description of himself and the servant as "a pair of horsemen" asserts his equality with the adult. After only a short while, the boy as separated from "honest James" by "some mischance." The epithet, which seems to absolve the servant of blame, and the shift in the characterization of James from "encourager and guide" to "comrade" two lines later, at the point of separation, carry the strong implication that the two were separated not by accident but by the boy's willful act. The power and meaning of that act emerge in the images that follow. Frightened—though significantly it is James who is described as lost—the boy dismounts, and leading his horse down into a valley comes across the site where a man was executed for murdering his wife. Just what Wordsworth knew about the event as a boy is uncertain, for all that was visible then was a long green ridge of turf, "Whose shape was like a grave"; gibbet and bones are mentioned only as being no longer there. Furthermore, the description of the murder conflates two crimes, one of which, the one mentioned in the poem, Wordsworth could not have known about as a boy of this age because it had occurred not near Penrith but Hawkshead, where he did not go until four years later. Clearly the "memory" of 1798 is part retrospective creation. What is significant about it, however, is the association of murder with the boy's desire for independence and with the act of losing the adult authority whose guiding presence was embodiment and reminder of his lack of independence.

The "spot of time," however, does not come to focus on any of the components of this part of the event, that is, on the place of crime and punishment. Indeed, Wordsworth tells us abruptly, "I left the spot" and reascended the slope, as if it were too dangerous to linger at that depth of memory and desire. Instead, the boy's perception, and the poet's mem-

ory, focus on the "naked pool," the beacon on the "lonely eminence," and the girl with the pitcher on her head forcing her way against the wind. These "symbols" are hard to read, as commentators have noted; in one sense they are not meant to be read at all. They *may* suggest the frightened yet splendid isolation of the boy who having got rid of his adult guardian, plays at being the lone man, and the equivocal identities and inner struggles that his conflicted aims generate. But above all they are screen images, displacements to the periphery of frightening events that concentrate attention *away* from the content that is the center of emotional power while retaining all of its force. Even more than the "huge and mighty forms" that moved through his mind after the boat-stealing episode, the displaced images of pool, beacon, and girl neutralize events and feelings while functioning in their reinscription as evidence of internal transcendence, the "visionary dreariness" that invests the otherwise admittedly "ordinary sight." In this case memory is fixated on external visual images, that are better suited because of their externality and concreteness to hold more powerful and frightening impulses at bay.

The same dynamic operates in the second of the two spots, Wordsworth's memory of waiting for horses to take him and his brothers home from school for Christmas vacation when he was thirteen years old. Ten days after his return, his father died; the boy experienced this event as a "chastisement" from God who thus "corrected . . . desires" he had felt while waiting on the crag. The desires are not specified; as with the "drowned man" and Penrith episodes, ellipsis frustrates narrative and psychological connectedness. Weiskel has argued that punishment, let alone such dire punishment, for the presumably innocent desire of wanting to go home makes sense only if the desire was not innocent at all but an unconscious wish for his father's death.[103] To the details he adduces in support of this assumption, I would add Wordsworth's emphasis on his position high on the crag as he anxiously scanned for the horses. He describes it as "an eminence" overlooking all possible approaches and then underlines the superiority of his vantage point with repetition: "Thither I repaired / Up to the highest summit" (1.340–41). His sense of guilt seems to be connected with the assumption of preeminent position. Although his brothers were with him, the language of the passage indicates he climbed up by himself and waited above them alone. He refers to himself later upon his return home as "A dweller in my father's house" (351), as if to separate himself from his father's domain. And the sensory images to which this spot of time is fixed include the same emphasis on singleness, lonely isolation, and restless elements as in the first spot: a "single sheep," the "one blasted tree," "the bleak music" of an old stone wall, and "the wind and sleety rain" that accompanied his vigil for the horses (1.360–62). The similarity of the two spots in their elements and

structure suggests an even greater closeness. Age five is the heart of the child's oedipal rebellion, as the onset of puberty is its repetition. Both episodes deal with a child's claim to autonomy and authority that is made at the cost of a desire to get rid of his father or the father's agent[104] and is punished by the imaginings of retaliatory death. And in both, the complex of wishes, fantasies, and fears is displaced onto obsessively fixed sensory images peripheral to the main event that, by keeping attention focused on the outside, prevent awareness of their inner meaning.

The spots of time are the climactic events in the chain of remembered crimes that Wordsworth's effort to understand his writing block has provoked. Superficially, the structure of the spots seems to bear out Weiskel's claim about how the spots of time restore the blocked imagination to its creative functioning. "The reviving of the imaginative power which the spots of time effect," he writes, "depends upon the continued repression of the signified"—that is, the external objects or events, like the grave-shaped ridge of turf, or the death of his father, which are not part of the visionary experience.[105] The very working of the imagination *is* its implication that the intensely-charged images (wind-blown girl, blasted tree) have a mysterious or transcendent meaning, and imagination produces this impression by refusing to supply the symbolic connection of these images with the other external objects. In this way, imagination "saves" itself as a creative or meaning-producing force by refusing the causal connections that would make purely external objects the causes of its meanings. But while Weiskel correctly, it seems to me, describes the process by which Wordsworth's mind suppresses its own knowledge in the spots of time, his overly abstract explanation finally concerns itself with the formal conditions of the symbolic function in Wordsworth, with the question of whether symbolism originates in the mind or in the external world; he thus pushes aside the *content* of the meaning of the spots of time, which he himself identifies as death, or death-wish, thus subtly colluding with Wordsworth's defensive maneuver. That is why Weiskel goes wrong, in a crucial way, in believing that the spots actually *do* revive the imagination. This is what Wordsworth claims they do, but the fact is that in the original poetic context of 1798 they do not succeed in overcoming the blockage of imagination that has stymied his writing of *The Recluse*. Wordsworth backhandedly acknowledges this to the addressee of the poem, Coleridge. "[M]y hope has been," he writes at the end of part one of the first *Prelude*,

> that I might fetch
> Reproaches from my former years, whose power
> May spur me on, in manhood now mature,
> To honourable toil. *Yet should it be*

That this is but an impotent desire—
That I by such inquiry am not taught
To understand myself . . .
. . . .
need I dread from thee
Harsh judgements if I am so loth to quit
Those recollected hours that have the charm
Of visionary things, and lovely forms
And sweet sensations, that throw back our life
And make our infancy a visible scene
On which the sun is shining?
(1.453–64; italics added)

Wordsworth acknowledges here both that he is not able to proceed with the writing of his philosophical poem on the power of imagination and that he has not understood himself sufficiently to learn why. He indicates instead, in his appeal to Coleridge's forbearance, that he is going to linger in childhood and to focus on happy memories, which in view of what has come before must be seen as a defense against what recollection has in fact revealed. If and when the poem continues, the "visionary dreariness" of murderous power will give way to an infancy "On which the sun is shining." Wordsworth's internal struggle is evident in some lines just after the original manuscript of part one that were not incorporated in the final version of 1799, lines that were written at the time of an abortive attempt to start the second part. "Here we pause / Doubtful; or lingering with a truant heart, / Slow and of stationary character, / Rarely adventurous, studious more of peace / And soothing quiet which we here have found" (*1799 Prelude*, 13n.). He seems to have feared that any resumption of the poem might take him where he did not wish again to tread—back to memories of "criminal" initiatives in childhood, with their ominous implications for the meaning of individuality in adulthood.

That such a danger existed is evident in the initial memory recounted in part two, which Wordsworth resumed only after many months delay. It is a memory of boat races on Lake Windermere, the boys beating along the lake "With rival oars" (2.56). But now, something different happens; the issues of competition and triumph are explicitly raised only to be denied. All the races end on islands whose descriptions ("musical with birds / That sang for ever") mark their mythic character as sheltered paradises free from strife.

In such a race,
So ended, disappointment could be none,
Uneasiness, or pain, or jealousy;

> We rested in the shade, all pleased alike,
> Conquered or conqueror. Thus our selfishness
> Was mellowed down, and thus the pride of strength
> And the vainglory of superior skill
> Were interfused with objects which subdued
> And tempered them, and gradually produced
> A quiet independence of the heart.
>
> (2.63–72)

The struggle in this episode between the urge to competitive superiority and the need to subdue it in the interests of unity, harmony, and "quiet independence" (with its linguistic echoes of "Tintern Abbey") initiates an oscillation between memories of adventuresome boldness and retreat to protection and succor. An account of an aggressively overambitious schoolboy expedition on horseback to a destination "too distant far / For any cautious man" (2.106–7) shifts abruptly to the description of a boat ride in the shelter of a tunnel of overhanging tree branches, which ends with the boys being fed by the inhabitants of a neighboring mansion-house as they sit in the "covert" beneath the trees. This memory of womb-like nurturance in turn triggers another memory of feelings of warm attachment to the scene, expressed in lines taken almost directly from his boyhood poem "The Vale of Esthwaite," from the passage in which he laments having to leave the only home he knows, the substitute for his dead mother, to go up to Cambridge:

> And there I said,
> That beauteous sight before me, there I said
> (*Then first beginning in my thoughts to mark*
> *That sense of dim similitude which links*
> *Our moral feelings with external forms*)
> That in whatever region I should close
> My mortal life I would remember you,
> Fair scenes—that dying I would think on you,
> My soul would send a longing look to you.
>
> (2.161–69; italics added)

Here Wordsworth says explicitly that his first awareness of the symbolic *meaning* of external objects (as opposed to the empty signifying or symbolic *functioning* of the spots of time) took place in a state of maternal connectedness with nature. That meaning, as he says addressing Coleridge some lines later, is the "unity of all" (2.256) that is prior to the man-made distinctions of reason; but what must be noticed is that the sense of unity has been produced in the poem by a regression in memory to a preindividuated state of being, one developmentally prior to the in-

dependent, destructively aggressive initiatives of separateness that mark its first part. The regressive sequence of memories has prepared us for the famous "infant babe" passage.

Much can and has been said both about the insights of this amazing passage into the mother-infant relationship and about its significance for an understanding of the biographical origins of Wordsworth's longing for unity with nature.[106] A number of features of the passage, however, bear directly on the present discussion of the function of regression in Wordsworth. The first is the detailed description of what the symbiotic connection between mother and infant achieves for the child. The mother's passion for the child acts on him as an "awakening breeze" (a metaphor with a long future of displacements in Wordsworth), and in conjunction with her possession of the world, which he sees through her eyes and which bears for him the meaning she gives it, her love empowers the child. Her passion for him and her power over the world enable him to unify it, "to combine / In one appearance all the elements / And parts of the same object, else detached / And loth to coalesce" (2.276–80); she thus functions as his transcendental ego in the Kantian sense, producing the unity of apperception without which the experience of an organized world is impossible. Further, however, her passion and power enable him to "irradiate and exalt" the world into a sublimity that transcends mere sense perception and establishes its beauty and permanence. In the 1850 *Prelude*, Wordsworth added a few lines that make this process more explicit. "Is there a flower, to which he points with hand / Too weak to gather it, already love / drawn from love's purest earthly fount for him / Hath beautified that flower" (II.245–48). Finally, the passion of his mother's gaze allows him to feel connected with being, so that he is "No outcast . . . bewildered and depressed" (2.289–91). It is in the context of the mother-child relationship that Wordsworth's "indifference" to the priority of mind or nature seems much less astonishing than it does from the perspective of a "mature" sense of logic and reality. In the boundaryless triangular relationship that links infant, mother, and mother's world, there is no distinction between his mind and hers, between what he produces as "an agent of the one great mind" and what he receives through the perception already produced for him by that same mind.

Secondly, and most important, the location of the whole passage in the development of the poem provides a crucial insight into the psychological structure of the sublime imagination in Wordsworth, the imagination that, as we have seen, is the source of individuality's absolute power. My point here can be made most clearly by contrasting it with the positions of Weiskel and Hartman. Using psychoanalytic concepts to explicate the "deep structure" of the sublime experience, Weiskel summarizes the self's encounter with an object that inspires terror and awe: "the excessive

object excites a wish to be inundated, which yields an anxiety of incorporation; this anxiety is met by a reaction formation against the wish which precipitates a recapitulation of the Oedipus complex; this in turn yields a feeling of guilt (superego anxiety) and is resolved through identification (introjection)." In Weiskel's interpretation of this sequence of reactions, the "oedipal" response to the object that inspires sublime emotions—the competitive desire for its power—is secondary, a defense against a more primitive "pre-oedipal" relationship, the fear of being engulfed by it: "The wish to be inundated is reversed into a wish to possess." Furthermore, since in Weiskel's estimation that aspect of the Oedipus complex that involves the aggressive wish against the father is not crucial to the defensive maneuver against the fear of being overwhelmed by the sublime object, aggression is only "structurally motivated and fails to impress us as authentic."[107] The self's aim, in other words, is only to possess the sublime object, not to destroy it; any aggressiveness toward it is incidental.

In any case, however, Weiskel does not believe that Wordsworth's particular version of the sublime ever reached the point of an oedipal defense and identification with the sublime object. Wordsworth's "egotistical sublime" remained at the level of a dependent relationship with the external object, in which both the subject and the object poles, ego and nature, are retained intact. Wordsworth's defense against engulfment "worked" by obfuscating the issue of priority—was the power in him or in the object, or both?[109]

Although Hartman eschews Freudian vocabulary on this issue, his view of Wordsworth's sublime is rather similar. He points out that the common factor in many of Wordsworth's childhood memories is a violation of nature, which he sees as the result not of the boy's aggression against it but of his separation from it. It is not clear why Hartman thinks of separation as violation, but the result is that he misses the theme of murder in the spots of time. "[W]here it [the violation of nature] is secret, as in the two spots of time (for no clear desecration has occurred), we must assume that the boy's very *awareness* of his individuality—a prophetic or anticipatory awareness nourished by self-isolating circumstances—reacts on him as already a violation."[109] But the "self-isolating circumstances" in the spots of time are themselves acts of rebellion and violence, though not against nature; and if they are anticipatory for the child, they are retroactive for the poet, who remembers them in the light of a present assertiveness of the power of his mind.

It is difficult to know just how to take Weiskel's psychoanalytic categories, since he rejects a biographical/psychological approach as reductionist and accidental to the ultimate structure of the sublime. His categories seem to be metaphors for that structure, though why he should think

them useful metaphors if the sublime is the more fundamental category is a question. In Wordsworth's poetry, however, psychological and familial configurations seem to be real experiences in and through which the sublime is experienced. And the psychodynamic story they tell is exactly the opposite of the one Weiskel narrates. The present analysis of the structure of the *1799 Prelude* shows clearly that for Wordsworth the regressive "pre-oedipal" memories of the "dual unity" of mother and child were defenses against memories of frightening "oedipal" rivalries rather than the other way around. More exactly, they are defenses against rivalries for power that included also important pre-oedipal conflicts with nature (mother) herself and the sibling (schoolmate) competitors for her, all of which came to a head and were organized in Wordsworth's memory under the domination of the oedipal conflict as evidenced in the spots of time. While the memories of conflict and usurpation of power were able to drive the poem forward up to a certain point, they could *not* renew the blocked poetic project of *The Recluse*. In fact, as the end of part one shows, they led to a new impasse within *The Prelude* itself, an impasse that was only undone by the regression of the second part of the poem, which resolves the relation of mind and nature into a more radical version of the ending of "Tintern Abbey." It is not the oedipal structure of the spots of time but the pre-oedipal structure of the "infant babe" passage that Wordsworth calls "the first / Poetic spirit of our human life" (2:305–6); in the autobiographical reminiscences of his mother that follow he attributes to this "first poetic spirit" his own poetic origins, his connection with nature after she died, and his ability to drink from her "the visionary power" (2:360). It is in the context of those memories and that relationship that he can then boldly declare the power of his own mind without fear, in a passage that might otherwise seem like an incongruous irruption of the very thing he is suppressing:

> An auxiliar light
> Came from my mind, which on the setting sun
> Bestowed new splendour; the melodious birds,
> The gentle breezes, fountains that ran on
> Murmuring so sweetly in themselves, obeyed
> A like dominion, and the midnight storm
> Grew darker in the presence of my eye.
> Hence my obeisance, my devotion hence,
> And *hence* my transport.
>
> (2:417–26)

The mind's light is auxiliar, not the sole or even primary creative force, as it is auxiliar in the original connection with the mother, where it does not *seem* contradictory that his "dominion" should also be his "obeisance" and

his "devotion"; it is the infant's "transport" to "know" a situation that is at once absolute power and absolute security. It is within the framework of this experience that towards the end of the poem Wordsworth recaptures the position of "Tintern Abbey" and "The Pedlar": "I felt the sentiment of being spread / O'er all that moves, and all that seemeth still / . . . / in all things / I saw one life and it was joy" (2:450–51, 459–60). Safely ensconced in the dyad of mother and child, and only then, the mind can exert a benign dominion. When the mind rears itself up to undertake on its own the great self-imposed task of *The Recluse*, to encompass the whole of reality, it runs into its own fearsome claims to infinity and has to fight itself again.

But in at least two crucial ways, psychoanalytic categories, accurate as they may be in rendering the psychological atmosphere of Wordsworth's metaphors, are misleading, or at least radically incomplete. One way has already been alluded to: the relationship between the psychological and the ontological. The vision of the one life *is* a vision of timeless infinite unity, whether as propensity of mind or as feature of the world, and this desire goes beyond the usual biological or intrafamilial meaning of psychoanalytic categories of motivation. But this fact does not mean that psychoanalytic categories ought to be reduced to metaphors of ontological categories, any more than the reverse. It does mean that ontological or religious dimensions of human experience are phenomenologically lived in, through, and with the biological and psychological dimensions. It is fathers and mothers and lovers that are divinized and rebelled against and fused with in order to establish the divinity of the self.[110]

Secondly, the poem does not end with the metaphysical vision of the one life. In the lines that follow it, the visionary experience is explicitly offered as a response to a historical situation, to "these times of fear, / This melancholy waste of hopes o'erthrown" (2:479–80), when former political idealists turn in their disappointment with the French Revolution against all "visionary minds" that might hope for the unity of mankind. The "sentiment of being" spread over everything and the "one life" in all things seems in this context to be meant as a compensatory vision for the revolutionary hopes of political and social unity. Against the disillusioned, the indifferent, and the apathetic, against those who indulge their *Schadenfreude* at the discomfiture of revolutionary idealists or retreat into selfishness in the name of social order, Wordsworth asserts that "in this time of dereliction and dismay, I yet / Despair not of our nature, but retain / A more than Roman confidence, a faith / That fails not" (2:486–90). The end of the poem appears to make explicit what was only implicit in the link between *The Borderers* and "The Pedlar" or in the structure of "Tintern Abbey," the framing political context of Wordsworth's venture into the poetics of imagination in 1798. Nevertheless, the intimation that the so-

cial solidarity of the "one life" is the main compensation *The Prelude* holds out for the failed social and political hopes of the Revolution is misleading. As we know, the abruptly introduced reference to "hopes o'erthrown" was a response to a letter from Coleridge dating from September 1799 in which he begged Wordsworth to write a poem addressed to those who "have thrown up all hopes of amelioration of mankind, and are sinking into an almost epicurean selfishness."[111] But for Wordsworth, the real compensation his poem offered was a replacement for the hopes of the absolute authority of individuality, abandoned of course in part because of its incompatability with the ideal of social solidarity. The consoling vision of the one life is part of a dialectic in one of whose moments all of nature obeys the "dominion" of the poet's mind. What a classical psychoanalytic reading ignores is that the regression in the *1799 Prelude* arises from a historically new sense of selfhood that has given oedipal impulses ultimate significance for the displacement of authority. All of the childhood memories in *The Prelude* are recollections reinterpreted in the light of the recent present. Their causal force for Wordsworth's poetic project and problem runs in the opposite direction from that normally assumed in psychoanalysis, from the present to the past; the memories have been poetically and ideologically potentiated by the radically new concept of selfhood Wordsworth generated out of the practice and the theory of modern revolutionary freedom. In turn those memories have forced him back further to yet another childhood "memory," or conceit, of the mother-infant dyad, potentiated by the present need to sustain the concept of a wholly autonomous self in a context of complete safety. As with Schlegel, it is the structuring of the contradiction between autonomy and dependency in the form of an infant-mother relationship that allows the writer to compartmentalize the contradiction uncontaminated by the corrosiveness of mature self-consciousness.[112]

What this means for the possibility of a genuinely *social* theory can be seen in the peculiarities of a poem that has been taken to be a locus classicus of Wordsworth's immediate postrevolutionary social ideas. "Michael," according to David Simpson, is "Wordsworth's most detailed exposition of the virtues of the rural statesman's life, and of the tragedy of its disappearance,"[113] but seen in this way, he concedes, the poem creates some difficulties. Contemporary indications suggest that it was common in eighteenth-century discussions of rural decline to focus on the relations between social classes as its cause. Wordsworth not only avoids any such implications in the poem but makes Luke's moral disintegration result from his willing co-optation by urban corruption. It seems necessary to Simpson therefore to hypothesize that Wordsworth was consciously or unconsciously uncomfortable with the "real background" to the events he

narrates and chose to avoid it.[114] In fact, however, the problem disappears when the a priori assumption about the primarily social meaning of Wordsworth's poem is dropped. "Michael" is not "about" the decline of rural life as a socioeconomic fact at all, though it may well have this event as its historical background. As Wordsworth expressly says in the poem, he was drawn to tales of shepherds *not* because he loved such men "For their own sakes, but for the fields and hills / Where was their occupation and abode."[115] The subject of the poem is nature, more precisely, the right human understanding of and relationship to nature. Furthermore, it is about right relationship to nature as a precondition for poetry, that is, for the poetry that can save the unconditional authority of the self through its complete subordination to nature. Once again Wordsworth is explicit: he is writing the poem

> For the delight of a few natural hearts,
> And with yet fonder feeling, for the sake
> Of youthful Poets, who among these Hills
> Will be my second self when I am gone.[116]

Wordsworth looks to the immortality of his own individuality—not simple egotism but as we have seen, a necessary dimension of his general concept of individuality itself—through those poets who in repeating his understanding of nature will be incarnations of himself. It is central to this understanding that it is within the power of the individual to create the right connection with nature. That is why Wordsworth makes Luke responsible for his own corruption, rather than focusing on the external temptations that are its occasion. It is not that Wordsworth did not aspire to write social poetry; the project of *The Recluse* is ample evidence that he did. His doctrine of the self, however, only allowed for a social vision in which others were alter egos, struggling with his problem.

Wordsworth was not at this point interested in questions of social hierarchy or the distribution of political power, as he had been between 1792 and 1795. Unquestionably, "Michael" rests on the contrast between the good life of rootedness in landed property handed down from father to son and the evil ways of urban commerce. But it is the attitude to nature and to time that was primarily at stake for Wordsworth in this opposition between country and city, not the issue of social relationships. It is only in the rural life that nature is revered as sacred, not exploited, and it is only in a patrimonial society that the sense of nature's eternity can be preserved. The city and commerce are the very essence of ephemerality and of the utilitarian attitude that denies the objectivity and permanence of matter. What was essential for Wordsworth was to find absolute meaning in everything as it was, not to change it, for the human power to change detracted from the power of nature. Above all, he needed to find

meaning in what had been the very emblem of exclusion from being, the poor, the vagrant, the social outcast. The point of "The Old Cumberland Beggar," written in 1798 during the composition of "The Ruined Cottage," is not so much the specific social role that the beggar supposedly plays as a stimulant to habits of charity but that "'Tis Nature's law / . . . that none / the meanest of created things, / . . . should exist / Divorced from good."[117] Although Chandler is certainly right that some of the poem's ideas are Burkean, its admonition to politicians not to consider the beggar a burden to be got rid of is not primarily intended as part of a Burkean argument that political change most often does more harm than good. Burke's notion of "prescription," the presumption in favor of the status quo, has ineradicably utilitarian—as well of course as ideological—implications. Wordsworth's position was metaphysical. Even the apparently useless and excluded is part of Being. Certainly the social implications of that metaphysical position shaded easily into a Burkean political philosophy. It was only as the doctrine of the self's subordination to nature gave way to a more orthodox religious belief, however, that the self would be resubordinated to a traditional divinity in a more conventional and straightforward way, and only then could Wordsworth come to a more genuinely social and political theory, a theory that as Chander has shown was strongly Burkean in cast, complete with Burkean views of social hierarchy and political deference. Only in the unassimilated residue of *The Prelude*, on which Wordsworth continued to work all his life, did the radical self continue to lead the underground existence to which he relegated it, continually fearful of its implications, as the post-1805 revisions of *The Prelude* show, but still able to sustain the tenuous synthesis that allowed it a precarious existence.