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The political ideas of William Wordsworth

Addie S. Mitchell

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THE POLITICAL IDEAS OF WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY

ADDIE STABLER MITCHELL

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PREFACE

For years the charge of political apostasy hung over Wordsworth practically unchallenged, and until today the charge still persists in some degree. The present study does not attempt to follow the line of those who affirm or deny the apostasy charge, but its interest is in Wordsworth's political thought as a phase of the development of his mind. It is the feeling of the writer that Wordsworth was neither Whig nor Tory at any time in his life, that his thinking transcended that of party thought, that he appeared a political paradox because of the existence of two opposing tendencies in his character - love of liberty and regard for the permanent in mankind, and that these characteristics have their origin in the earlier consciousness and are noticeable throughout, even when Wordsworth seems most firmly attached to a definite party stand.

The interpretation of Wordsworth's political ideas has been made primarily from the writings of the poet himself, his poetry, his prose and letters. This, the writer feels, is as it should be, for Wordsworth has left a fairly complete and clear record of what is needed in an analysis of his political thought.

The writer wishes to express her indebtedness to Dr. N. P. Tillman, Chairman of the English Department, Atlanta University, for his untiring service in directing this study.
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CHAPTER I

POLITICAL IDEAS OF THE EARLY YEARS (1790-1793)

Unfortunately, one finds very little in Wordsworth's ancestry that accounts for his peculiar gifts. On his father's side, his descent can be traced from a line of yeomen, a line of forceful men, some of whom seem to have been active in private and public affairs. His father, John Wordsworth, was a lawyer of fair abilities having been an attorney at law and law agent to Sir James Lowther, afterwards Earl of Lonsdale.

Of his mother's antecedents very little is known. Christopher Wordsworth informs us that one of William's maternal ancestors was Richard Crackanthorpe, "one of the ablest and most learned divines in the most erudite age of English theology, the reign of James I."\(^1\) Legouis suggests that "those interested in symbolism will doubtless find an instance of it in these antecedents of a man who was destined so to weld together nature and theology as to form from them the most complete and most orthodox scheme of natural religion.\(^2\)

William Wordsworth, who was born in 1770, was one of five children born to John and Anne Wordsworth. The time of his infancy and childhood was passed at Cockermouth, and partly at Penrith, both of which are small market towns situated twenty-five miles apart, on the northern border of the mountainous region known as the Lake District. His early education was in a measure directed by his mother. She was not a woman of great attainments nor possessed with much pedagogical skill, but she was deeply religious, much devoted to

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1 Henry Reed, Memoirs of William Wordsworth (Boston, 1851), I, 30.
the Anglican Church, and she dealt wisely with her son.¹

In later years when reflecting on her method, Wordsworth commended her judgment in guiding his mental development. An insight into her educational creed, which consisted chiefly in faith in nature's beneficent instincts, may be gained from "The Prelude." The young Wordsworth was permitted to unfold his physical and mental powers mainly under nature's guidance and under the benign influence that flowed from his mother's heart. As Sneath puts it, "he grew up almost like the child of Rousseau's Emile with nature being allowed a comparatively free hand."² Such liberty proved to be an important influence in molding and fashioning his body and mind, and was in a measure responsible for the development of that love of nature which was so large a part of Wordsworth's life from youth to manhood.³

When Wordsworth was eight years of age, his mother died. Then began the separation of the family. Dorothy was sent to live with her grandmother at Penrith, and Richard and William were sent to school at Hawkshead. For William this was an auspicious turning point from which dates one of the happiest and most receptive portions of his life. From his ninth to his eighteenth year, Hawkshead was virtually his home. His father died in 1783, and the children were put in charge of their father's brother, Richard, and their mother's uncle, Christopher Cookson.

Born and brought up in the Lake Country which is famous for its natural beauty, Wordsworth spent much of his life in the presence of nature. Hills, mountains, valleys, rivers, lakes, and sea were his companions. It is in-

¹ E. Hershey Sneath, Wordsworth Poet of Nature and Poet of Man (Boston, 1912), p. 10.
² Ibid.
³ Reed, op. cit., p. 33.
teresting to note Wordsworth's own conception of the influence of nature upon his mental life during the first years spent in the place of his birth. There was something in his natural environment here that led the poet in later years to say:

Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up
Fostered alike by beauty and by fear:
Much favoured in my birthplace.  

The years spent at Hawkshead in Lancashire, where Wordsworth and his brother, Richard, attended school are more significant for the close touch with nature which they afforded than for the instruction that Wordsworth received. His keen sense of sight and sound and the unusual power of imagery associated with it, were called into activity by an environment such as the Lake District afforded in the neighborhood of Hawkshead and by the freedom of his school life which permitted many excursions into nature's domains. Hence, contact with nature became the most significant feature of this period.

Wordsworth's schoolmates were drawn from a wide range of society - sons of country clergymen and the professional and business men of north country towns, sons of villagers and small farmers. The boys lived frugally and on a plane of equality, lodging and boarding with Hawkshead families, of whose home life they became an integral part. Wordsworth's acquaintance extended from high to low throughout the neighborhood. He learned at Hawkshead to value at their just worth the intelligence and morality of the poor. He lived among them, ate at their tables, and played with their children.

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1 William Wordsworth, "The Prelude," ed. Ernest de Selincourt (London, 1926), I, 11, 301-303. All subsequent references to "The Prelude" unless otherwise stated are made to this edition, and are entered by book and line number.

No years of his life, perhaps, were richer in strong impressions, but they were impressions derived not from books, but from companions and the majesty and loveliness of the scenes around him — "from nature his life-long mistress, loved with the first heats of youth."  

Because Wordsworth's uncles discerned the talents of William and his brother, Christopher, they were sent to Cambridge in 1787, to continue their education as undergraduates at St. John's College. William was then seventeen years of age. In his poems he does not speak very enthusiastically of the benefits derived from his college life. He evidently was not in sympathy with much of the formal instruction there, nor did he have great reverence for those in authority. The general life of the college failed to appeal to him to any considerable extent. He felt that, by temperament and training, he was not fitted for such an environment. His only solace came from a consciousness of "holy powers and faculties" with which nature had endowed him. Often he withdrew from his comrades and the ordinary experiences of the day, and as he walked alone through the fields, his mind would return into itself and be refreshed. At times "as if awakened, summoned, roused, constrained," he says:

I looked for universal things; perused
The common countenance of earth and sky:

I called on both to teach me what they might;
Of turning the mind in upon herself,
Pored, watched, expected, listened, spread my thoughts.

It was during Wordsworth's stay at Cambridge that he decided to make his first trip to France. Wordsworth travelled in France for the first time in

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1 Ibid.
3 Ibid., 106-111.
1790, when he was not quite twenty-one years of age, and when he was still a young collegian of the undergraduate society at Cambridge.

Wordsworth’s early life and upbringing as well as his subsequent schooling were in the atmosphere of conservatism, thus it is no wonder that his early interest was in nature rather than in social movements. In his twenty-first year, Wordsworth became interested in political questions. It is not to be thought that the system of ideas known as Revolutionary had penetrated Cambridge without arousing his sympathetic interest, yet it is likely that with the indifference to politics which characterized Anglo-Saxon youth, Wordsworth failed to realize at that time the importance or even the dramatic values of the great world movement of which he was soon to catch a glimpse. He cared far more for landscape. Indeed, when he first travelled in France, for the most part on foot, the enjoyment of natural beauty was apparently his one absorbing passion. It is obvious that Wordsworth had no political intentions when he and his companion and fellow collegian, Robert Jones, set out on their journey; in planning a journey on foot from Calais to the Alps, he was willing to pass within a day’s march of Amiens and Rheims without breaking his bird-like flight to see their cathedrals, and within fifty miles of Paris without being drawn into what was then, more than ever, the heart of the world’s political circulation.¹

Wordsworth and his companion arrived in Calais on July 13, 1790, and set out next day on a "march of military speed" that carried them more than three hundred and fifty miles in two weeks. The entire trip lasted three months with hardly a day of rest. Writing to Jane Pollard from Furneott on October 6, 1790, Dorothy Wordsworth, his sister, quoted admiringly from a long letter

she had received from her brother, in which he expressed great enthusiasm for the grand and beautiful scenes he had beheld in France. The following passage is most interesting, for it reveals that the poet was totally unaware of the real significance of events then taking place in France.

We had perpetual occasion to observe that cheerfulness and sprightliness for which the French have always been remarkable. But I must remind you that we crossed at the time when the whole nation was mad with joy in consequence of the revolution. It was a most interesting period to be in France; and we had many delightful scenes, where the interest of the picture was owing solely to this cause.¹

Wordsworth and his friend encountered on this tour many a stirring symbol of the expectancy that was running through the nations of Europe. They landed at Calais "on the very eve of that great day" when the trees of Liberty were planted all over France. They met on their return

The Brabant armies on the fret For battle in the cause of liberty.²

But the exulting pulse that ran through the poet's veins could hardly yet pause to sympathize deeply even with what ordinarily would have appealed most directly to ardent youth. Of this he later wrote,

A stripling, scarcely of the household then Of social life, I looked upon these things As from a distance; heard, and saw, and felt - Was touched, but with no intimate concern.³

Nature had more of a charm for Wordsworth than even books. It was because of his love for nature that he resolved to slight the tradition of devoting

² "The Prelude," IX, 262-63.
³ Ibid., XI, 170-73.
the third summer's vacation to preparing for a competitive examination, as was the custom at St. John's College, and face the disapproval of friends that he might take this pedestrian tour. Obviously it was undertaken because at this time nature was supreme in his mind. He was on the alert, with an eye natively keen and a soul peculiarly sensitive to all that nature afforded in the way of beauty and grandeur.¹

Wordsworth returned to St. John's College in October, 1790, to complete his course. In January, 1791, he received the degree of Bachelor of Arts, left Cambridge and went to London with no definite plan and no fixed intentions as to his future career. He did not feel himself alert enough for the church; he felt that his mind was not properly disciplined for that holy office. He also shrank from the law. He had studied military history and the strategy of war with great interest and although he had seriously considered a military life, he soon dismissed the idea. He therefore repaired to London, and lived there for a time on a small allowance with no definite aim.² The following summary, at the opening of the ninth book of "The Prelude," gives a very loose account of the time he spent there:

Free as a colt at pasture on the hill,
I ranged at large, through London's wide domain,
Month after month.³

Although Wordsworth tarried in London for almost a year unmodified and indifferent, the current of things was sweeping him on to mingle in a fiercer tumult and to be caught in the tides of a more violent and feverish life. November 23, 1791, found Wordsworth waiting for favorable winds to take him

¹ Sneath, op. cit., p. 46.
² Meyers, op. cit., p. 15.
back to France. He wrote thence to Matthews:

I am now on my way to Orleans, where I purpose to pass the winter, and am detained here by adverse winds.... I expect I assure you considerable pleasure from my sojourn on the other side of the water, and some little improvement, which God knows I stand in sufficient need of.

Why did Wordsworth make choice of France? No doubt the agreeable impression produced by the French whom he had met on his long foot tour had something to do with his return. He had come to know men of all classes; he was on easy terms with the wanderers that he met along the high roads; he had come to know the enthusiasm of the French peasantry and the sufferings of the poor. They had charmed him by their manners, their alertness, and their speech. He knew the language fairly well by this time, and there was no doubt a more significant reason, in his sympathy with the Revolutionary spirit, now at its height. Love of adventure, a desire to be near the scene of great events, a feeling that the air of France would be good for him at that particular time when he was hesitating and France was rushing confidently forward - all these elements were doubtless present in his mind as motives.

One of the most decisive periods of the poet's life was the thirteen or fourteen months of this second visit to France. From the seclusion of Hawkshead, the sheltered luxury of Cambridge, the slow pace and quiet tone of English and Welsh parsonages and country-houses, he stepped, in a single day, into the brilliancy, the hardness, the peril and excitement of Revolutionary France. The contrast between the two countries would have been stimulating.

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1 Early Letters, p. 86. Here it will be noted that Matthews and others with whom Wordsworth corresponded were either his personal friends or friends of the Wordsworth family.
2 George M. Harper, op. cit., p. 80.
at any time; in 1791 it was almost overpowering. His sojourn in France enabled him to gather into the solidity of a system those faint impulses of his stay in London. It confirmed his doubts of the validity of the Anglican religion in which he had been brought up. It strengthened his implicit republicanism into an explicit and outspoken political creed, and shook his faith in the paramount excellence of his own country.¹

Until recently very little information has been available about Wordsworth's life in France, or about the entire period between 1790 and 1795 with which the writer is now concerned, except the abundant revelations of his inward growth which he made in "The Prelude." Such knowledge of his actions as we now possess is extremely valuable for this study, for even had he been no poet, but only the clear and passionate observer that he was, a record of his experiences would rank among the most precious documents of the Revolution. In later years, Wordsworth was unwilling to let the world know how extreme had been his opinions and how irregular his conduct; yet the agony of his spirit for a long time after his return from France showed that he had identified himself more completely with the Revolutionary cause and with French life than he was willing to admit in plain terms.² Hence, the 1802 version of "The Prelude" has been subjected to many changes which fail to reveal the young Wordsworth as he actually was between 1790 and 1795.

When the young Wordsworth set foot on French soil, near the end of November, 1791, the prospects for a successful issue of the Revolution were very

¹ Ibid., p. 82.
² Ibid.
bright. The movement was still apparently under the control of sober men whose object was to model a state after the English pattern, with constitution, hereditary sovereignty, and legal safeguards of personal freedom. The net result of the Constituent Assembly was such as would win the approval of all French patriots and nearly all progressive Englishmen. What generous and emancipated spirit could fail to applaud its great achievements? It had abolished feudal privileges, many of the nobles themselves renouncing voluntarily their immemorial advantages in local government. It had taken from the king and reserved for the representatives of the people the power to make laws, to impose taxes, and to declare war and peace. It had wiped out restrictions on agriculture, industry and internal trade. It had abolished titles and the law of primogeniture, and thus reduced the nobles to the rank of ordinary citizens. It had thrown open all civil and military careers to all citizens, regardless of birth and religion. It had replaced the ancient provinces with eighty-three departments nearly equal in size. It had begun a vast reform of the national finances. It had firmly established an equally great and necessary judicial reform by replacing the four hundred local systems of custom law with a uniform procedure, and setting on foot the work of codification. It had undertaken with equal energy, though perhaps too drastically, to reform the abuses of ecclesiastical power by granting freedom of worship to Jews and Protestants and admitting them to civil office, by destroying the corporate status of the Church, with respect to its right to hold property, thus nationalising its immense wealth.¹ The clergy

were in this way made public functionaries, and the State undertook to support them and the charities which previously were maintained by the Church. The Catholic religion in France was to be independent of the Pope.¹ This was the state of affairs into which Wordsworth stepped when he visited Revolutionary France in the autumn of 1791.

Some of these new laws were plainly in advance of public opinion, and it was evident before the close of the year, that they had occasioned an envenomed hostility; but Wordsworth, an English Protestant, of radical proclivities and already less than lukewarm in his attachment to Christianity, was not likely to resent their application in a country to whose past he was not attached, and whose present condition aroused in him the most enthusiastic hope.²

On the other hand, there were graver signs of disaster which even a youth might have read had he not been over-sanguine. The legislature sat in Paris, where it was subject to the threats of a populace which had tasted the wine of violence. Fanatical men governed the city, and were organizing its basest elements into an instrument of their will. The riots and bloodshed of the previous July seventeenth were a bad omen of what might happen again at any crisis. The Legislative Assembly had embittered the Catholics by taking severe measures against priests who would not swear allegiance to the constitution; and by confiscating the property of emigrant nobles, it had exasperated those who had given asylum to these refugees.³

¹ Ibid., p. 90.
³ Ibid., p. 4.
Wordsworth, just arrived in Paris, must have felt the thrill of this upheaval; he studied France during the very height of the revolutionary conflict and his observations of revolutionary life have by a rare piece of good fortune been recorded in "The Prelude," which was begun in 1799 and finished in 1805. This work is, on the face of it, an autobiographical poem written to describe the growth of the poet's mind. It presents, quite independent of any question of poetical interest, two other features of marked significance. It is, in the first place, insofar as it refers to the Revolution and its effect upon his views in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh books, an historical document which gives an invaluable record of first-hand reflection by a keen observer on some of the leading events of the Revolution. In the second place, Wordsworth's "Prelude" is a picture of the convictions which, obtained by Wordsworth in his youth, colored the whole of his life from 1802 to 1815. Therefore, the writer finds it necessary to refer often to his work, for it sets forth some of the poet's compressed thoughts on the Revolution, in his own words. Its later revised version of 1850 evidences many of the political changes effected in the later Wordsworth.

When Wordsworth travelled in France proceeding first to Orleans and then to Blois, between which places he spent nearly a year, his political opinions were not definitely settled and he lacked the historical knowledge and the training in social philosophy requisite to defend them. He described his condition in "The Prelude,"

...I was unprepared
With needful knowledge, had abruptly passed
Into a theatre, whose stage was filled

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And busy with an action far advanced

At that time
Moreover, the first storm was overblown,
And the strong hand of outward violence locked up on quiet.\(^1\)

Wordsworth eventually became deeply interested in the course of these events, and finally he was identified in sympathy with what he deemed to be the sacred cause of the people. There were several political, literary and philosophical societies in the large French town that admitted him because he was an Englishman, and tolerated his criticisms because, being an Englishman, he was "unoriginal."\(^2\) As the poet put it,

...I gradually withdrew
Into a noisier world, and thus ere long
Became a patriot; and my heart was all
Given to the people, and my love was theirs.\(^3\)

The steps by which Wordsworth reached this position in the spring of 1792, are recounted in the rest of the ninth book of "The Prelude." His early attitude of vague idealism became firm principle, and at last the love of humanity, which had not yet found equal place in the poet's heart with love of nature, was raised to double throne.\(^4\) He became grounded in Revolutionary doctrine, the pamphlets of the day had convinced his reason, and among the officers stationed at Blois, there was one who viewed the patriotic uprising with the same generous feelings as the young Wordsworth. This was the nobly-born but republican general, Michael de Beaupuy, who loved the poor, and lived and labored for their sake. He had served in many parts of France, had been promoted

\(^1\) "The Prelude," IX, 93-110.
\(^3\) "The Prelude," IX, 111-114.
\(^4\) Harper, op. cit., p. 111.
slowly, and had lately been the chief figure in the politics of Mussidan. No other man had so great an influence upon Wordsworth's political views as Beaupuy.¹

The character and the intensity of the hopes inspired by the Revolution are curiously illustrated by Wordsworth's account of a conversation with General Michael Beaupuy, with whom Wordsworth formed a close friendship while staying at Blois in 1792. The General stood alone as an ardent Republican among the officers of the army stationed at the town. He was a man of personal charm who reinforced and stimulated Wordsworth's natural, and so to speak, classical Republicanism. The two friends chanced

One day to meet a hunger-bitten girl,
Who crept along fitting her languid gait
Unto a heifer's motion, by a cord
Tied to her arm, and picking thus from the lane
Its sustenance, while the girl with pallid hands
Was busy knitting in a heartless mood
Of solitude, and at the sight, my friend
In agitation said, 'Tis against that
That we are fighting, I with him believed
That a benignant spirit was abroad
Which might not be withstood, that poverty
Abject as this, would in a little time
Be found no more, that we should see the earth
Unwarranted in her wise to recompense
The meek, the lowly, patient 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 framing their own laws; whence better days
To all mankind.²

These verses are pregnant with meaning and throw immense light upon the republican creed of Wordsworth. Beaupuy was a Republican. We may conjecture:

1 Ibid., p. 86.
ture that Wordsworth, at the time of their meeting was unsettled in his views. He certainly intended to confer upon the mass of the people not only extended political rights but also relief from abject poverty. The words, "Tis against that that we are fighting" are on this point decisive. As Harper points out:

Wordsworth's republicanism was not the blind enthusiasm of a fanatic. It was not a faith without at least some rational foundation. The French Revolution had its intellectual side. One of the things that prepared the way for this great crisis was French philosophy of the eighteenth century. Many of the most ardent revolutionists were affected by the philosophy of Rousseau and the Encyclopaedists. The Revolution, of course, involved certain fundamental conceptions and principles concerning man - his nature, dignity, and rights, both natural and political - and the nature, functions, forms, and ends of political government.¹

The means by which Wordsworth proposed to reform society from top to bottom were apparently the destruction of privilege and arbitrary power and, as the crown of all, the giving to the people a strong hand in framing their own laws. From these two changes he looked to better days for all mankind. He was borne along by his enthusiasm and hopes for the cause of the people. Beaupuy and Wordsworth were, in 1792, devout republicans who hoped to obtain every kind of socialistic reform by means which would have met with the approval of zealous individualists. As Harper points out,

This position was in reality shared by all the leading French Revolutionists or Reformers of 1789-1792. They all hoped to see the earth unhwarmed, in her wish to recompense the meek, the lowly, patient child of toil or in other words, to destroy the injustice of man and to give free scope to the imaginary equity of nature. As legislators they amply acknowledged the right to property as a natural and sacred right which ought to be carefully respected and yet they intended to carry through reforms which should create days of joy and happiness for all mankind.²

¹ Harper, op. cit., p. 88.
² Ibid., p. 86.
The explanation of this revolutionary creed lies in the faith that the abolition of every privilege and the gaining or restoring to every citizen of full political rights would create a new heaven and a new earth. It would give free scope to Nature whose benevolence and good will to mankind are thwarted only by the vices of society, which in their turn are created by forgetfulness of, and contempt for, the natural rights of man. This brings to the foreground the profound influence of Rousseau and his doctrine of the infallibility of nature on Wordsworth.

Wordsworth shared with Rousseau the belief that men in a state of nature, in close contact with the earth, with animals and with other men have to rely on their own resources. It is also a fact that Wordsworth in his attitude toward nature was primarily occupied with apprehending her as good and beneficent in her offices, and to a very large extent he ignored her cruelty. The social aspect of the French Revolution, its glorious recognition of equal rights and common brotherhood seemed to him as he put it,

Nothing out of nature's certain course,
A gift that was come rather late than soon.  

Rousseau had preached revolt in his Social Contract, in his speeches, in his romantic writings, and in his conduct. He preached revolt in the name of nature against the vicious and artificial social system of his time. Believing like Rousseau that tillers of the soil and those in walks of life but little removed from them were leading natural and rational lives, Wordsworth was not made unhappy by the outbreak of a revolution which promised to restore the balance of human power and happiness.

Beaupuy's revolutionary principles were grounded on a thorough examination of the social philosophy which lay behind the movement. The annals of the Revolution present no purer spirit, none more unselfish, gallant, genial, and hopeful; he loved the poor and labored for their sake. Scorned by his brother officers, he rose above them by his patient dignity. He could afford to wait the verdict of time, serenely confident as he was in the justice of his cause. Of him the poet thought, when he wrote, "The Character of the Happy Warrior."\(^1\)

Wordsworth again depicts Beaupuy in "The Prelude" with many distinct and fine touches:

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Among that band of Officers was one,
Already hinted at, of other mould —
A patriot, thence rejected by the rest,
And with an oriental loathing spurned,
As of a different caste, a meeker man
Than this lived never, nor a more benign,
Meek though enthusiastic.

By birth he ranked
With the most noble, but unto the poor
Among mankind he was in service bound,
As by some tie invisible, oaths professed
To a religious order. Man he loved
As man; and, to the mean and the obscure,
And all the homely in their homely works,
Transferred a courtesy which had no air
Of condescension; but did rather seem
A passion and a gallantry...
A kind of radiant joy
Diffused around him, while he was intent
On works of love or freedom, or revolved
Complacently the progress of a cause,
Whereof he was a part: Yet this was meek
And placid, and took nothing from the man
That was delightful.\(^2\)
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Beaupuy was Wordsworth's instructor in branches of study for which he had, until their meeting, shown no aptitude. He awakened new interests,

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1 Harper, op. cit., p. 111.
gave him social consciousness, clothed for him, in garments of majestic association, the history of mankind. Henceforth the poet could no longer regard the chronicles of nations as a mere quarry for romantic incidents. History, he now saw, was organic. Heroism was but the eminent outcrop of deep popular virtues and aspirations. Creeds and sects took their place with national customs, as growths unconsciously implanted and irresistibly evolved. But in all this they saw the workings of a destiny, not blind and aimless, but moving towards a glorious end:

We summoned up the honourable deeds
Of ancient Story,

...and, finally, beheld
A living confirmation of the whole
Before us, in a people from the depth
Of shameful imbecility uprisen,
Fresh as the morning star. Elated we looked
Upon their virtues, saw, in rudest men,
Self-sacrifice the firmest; generous love,
And continence of mind, and sense of right,
Uppermost in the midst of fiercest strife.¹

The essence of Wordsworth's early political ideas lies in

Hatred of absolute rule, where will on one
Is law for all, and of that barren pride
In them who, by immunities unjust,
Between the sovereign and the people stand,
His helper and not theirs, laid stronger hold
Daily upon me, mixed with pity too
And love; for where hope is, there love will be
For the abject multitude.²

The very essence of the lines just quoted is an epitome of the philosophy which animated France and which became the crux and core of the Revolution. Examples of misery were not wanting, and Beaupuy used them as texts for discourses which established Wordsworth in his republican faith. Therefore

¹ Ibid., 364-389.
² Ibid., 501-508.
he says:

In this frame of mind
Reluctantly to England I returned,
Compelled by nothing less than absolute want
Of funds for my support, else well assured
That I both was and must be of small worth,
No better than an alien in my land,
I doubtless should have made a common cause
With some who perished, haply perished too,
A poor mistaken and bewildered offering.¹

Wordsworth returned from France to England towards the end of 1792. He was then a young man of not quite twenty-two years of age, and an avowed republican at a time when any democrat was by respectable Englishmen called a Jacabin, and was suspected at once of religious infidelity and of political treason.²

He had no means of influencing public opinion, but it is characteristic of his intense interest in public affairs that in 1793, he composed an elaborate "Apology for the French Revolution," a long letter addressed to Watson, Bishop of Llandaff, a Whig, who had previously attacked both the conduct and the political principles of the revolutionary leaders. This "Apology" proves Wordsworth's general acceptance in 1793 of the dogmas held by the French revolutionists. The strongest among Wordsworth's convictions at this time were that France had a right to choose for herself her own form of government and that England, the land of freedom, in 1793, had no right to invade the soil of France and force upon her a government which she detested.³ Wordsworth justified the execution of Louis XVI, and would reserve the passion of pity

¹ Ibid., X, 220-230.
² Dicey, op. cit., p. 53.
for worthier objects than a fallen king. He acknowledged the sanguinary
violence of the Revolution, but pleads that a time of revolution cannot
be a season of true liberty. He rejoiced in the confiscation of ecclesiastical property, and maintained the superiority of the Republican to
other forms of government on the ground that it identifies the interest
of the governors with those of the governed. He argued on behalf of the
reduction of the inequalities among citizens to those inevitable inequalities which government by representation involves, pointing out the urgent
need for Parliamentary reform in England. In his "Apology for the French
Revolution, 1793," he wrote:

It is not my intention to be illiberal; these latter expressions
have been forced from me by indignation. Your Lordship has given
proof that even religious controversy may be conducted without as-
perity; I hope I shall profit by your example. At the same time,
with a spirit which you may not approve—for it is a republican
spirit—I shall not preclude myself from any truths, however se-
vere, which I may think beneficial to the cause which I have under-
taken to defend.... Before I take notice of what you appear to have
laid down as principles, it may not be improper to advert to some in-
cidental opinions found at the commencement of your political confess-
on of faith.... At a period big with the fate of the human race, I am
sorry that you attach so much importance to the personal sufferings
of the late royal martyr.... You wish it to be supposed you are one
of those who are unpersuaded of the guilt of Louis XVI. If you had
attended to the history of the French Revolution as minutely as its
importance demands, so far from stopping to bewail his death, you
would rather have regretted that the blind fondness of his people
placed a human being in that monstrous situation which rendered him
unaccountable before a human tribunal.... Any other sorrow for the
death of Louis is irrational and weak. You approved of the object
which the French had in view when, in the infancy of the Revolution,
they were attempting to destroy arbitrary power, and to erect a temple
to Liberty on its remains. It is with surprise then that I find you
afterwards presuming to dictate to the world a servile adoption of
the British Constitution.... Twenty-five millions of Frenchmen have
felt that they could have no security for their liberties under any
modification of monarchical power. You cannot but observe that they
(the French) have only exercised that right in which, by your own con-
fession, liberty essentially resides. 1

1 William Wordsworth, "Apology for the French Revolution," The Prose
3-4.
The narrative which we have to follow in "The Prelude," beginning at line 236 of the tenth book, tells how deeply Wordsworth was absorbed in the interests of the Revolution. He was too absorbed, in fact, to have any interest in Nature, or to be able to hide himself in the country. So great was his absorption in French affairs that even the agitation for the abolition of the slave trade seemed to him a minor matter, for if France prospered, then Liberty of its own strength must assuredly spread to all parts of the world. From the beginning of the Revolution his heart had been won by France. He was convinced that the prosperity of France would promote the welfare of mankind; thus he lost interest in English affairs.

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

Subsequent chapters will show that the declaration of war by England against France, and the turn of the war from a war of liberty to a war of conquest, effected a change in Wordsworth's political ideas. Suffice it to say, that the early years, 1789-1793, found the young Wordsworth a poet vacillating between vague idealism and Republicanism and finally basing his faith on the ultimate success of Republicanism. He had been captured slowly and by degrees. The year 1789, which inflamed so many hearts and imaginations in England, left him almost untouched. In 1790, he travelled in France basking in its scenic beauties. It was the awakening, during his residence in France, from November, 1791, to December, 1792, which brought him

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into veritable contact with the Revolution and it was the prejudices of
his companions that quickened the Republican spirit in him, and led to
the conviction that if the French Revolution prospered, slavery, that
"most rotten branch of human shame," would vanish with a host of other
evils.

It was not long before he was identified in sympathy with what he deemed
to be the sacred cause of the people. As he came into closer contact
with the momentous situation, the French Revolution, he was profoundly impressed with its significance. In his enthusiasm, he saw it loom large with promise, not only for France, but for the whole world, and he followed its varying fortunes with anxious interest. It was soon evident that under the influence of political events, he was rapidly reaching a crisis in his career; for him the Revolution became, not merely a local movement but a movement with meaning for humanity at large:

It was a movement in the interest of a greater liberty for the race, which would prove a tremendous advantage to human progress. It carried with it larger rights for the masses, and less authority for the classes.  

He expressed his views during this early period, with the optimism of youth, believing in the essential goodness of human nature and in the supreme worth and might of the principles of moral reason; he was willing, if need be, to fight and die for his faith. The enthusiasm of his younger heart in greeting the Revolution was like the aching joys and dizzy raptures that filled him in the presence of Nature. Both in the history recorded in "The Prelude" and the account given in "The Excursion" of how the Solitary was awak-

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1 Ibid., 260.
2 E. Hershey Sneath, op. cit., p. 56.
3 George Harper, op. cit., p. 57.
ened from the despondency of his bereavement, there is evidence enough of the buoyancy and fervor of his early years. The dawn of liberty in France had, in his youth, enlisted his fervent sympathy. Although Wordsworth is chiefly acclaimed a nature poet, politics began to hold an important place in his life during this awakening in France and thereafter.

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive
But to be young was very Heaven! O times
Of custom, law, and statute, took at once
The attraction of a country in romance.  

These words recall the early enthusiasm of the French Revolution; they sum up, indeed, the noble aspirations in 1789 and 1790, of almost every man throughout Europe who valued the blessings of freedom and believed that the people of France were entering on the path of human progress.  

Wordsworth occupied a special and peculiar political position. He was in reality, as regards foreign policy neither a Whig nor a Tory. In welcoming the earlier stages of the revolt against despotism, all the Whigs, with the one exception of Burke, went together. They thought that the political heirs of those who, in 1688, opposed the tyranny of James II, must of necessity applaud Frenchmen who, in 1789, resisted the despotism of the Bourbons. Wordsworth went further than any Whig. He thought out a social and political doctrine of his own, seeing that the movement in France was the opening of a new era, and unlike Burke, welcoming it with enthusiasm.  

His life in France had attached him to the Girondins, a French political

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1 "The Prelude," IX, 280-283.
2 A. V. Dicey, op. cit., p. 12.
3 Ibid.
party of republicans, and he for a time adopted the political philosophy of
the Revolution. He believed with the Girondins that Louis XVI was prepared
to use foreign help in effecting the restoration of the royal power. His
early Republicanism enabled him to see that the French Revolution conferred,
in spite of the tremendous evils with which it was accomplished, some real
blessings upon mankind. Wordsworth became increasingly absorbed in his
friends' ardour, and the Revolution seemed to him big with all the hopes of
man. In a passage of "The Prelude" he has told us how he was on the point
of putting himself forward as a leader of the Girondist party when his funds
were stopped by his uncles and he was recalled to England.

While, in his own eyes, Wordsworth was a "patriot of the world," he was
in the eyes of his uncles and many other Englishmen, a young man of twenty-
two, travelling on a small allowance and running his head into unnecessary
dangers. His nephew, in the "Memoirs," wrote, "If he had remained longer
in the French capital, he would, in all probability, have fallen a victim
among the Brissotins with whom he was intimately connected." Wordsworth
reluctantly returned to England at the close of 1792.

1 Dicey, op. cit., p. 19.
2 Reed, op. cit., p. 52.
CHAPTER II

POLITICAL IDEAS OF THE FORMATIVE YEARS (1793-1798)

From this point forward in the political development of Wordsworth, this study differs from previous descriptions of this period, in that the writer has not used "The Prelude" as a primary source of information for Wordsworth's development after 1793. The writer has worked from the assumption that the best evidence of the political position held by Wordsworth from 1793 to 1798 is not found in "The Prelude," which save for a few lines was composed after the period with which this chapter concerns itself, but in the poems and letters that he wrote between 1793 and 1798. So far as the writer has been able to ascertain, the letters have never been tampered with, whereas an investigation of the various texts of "The Prelude" reveals that the passages upon which most critics have based the tradition of Wordsworth's depression and recovery have been so extensively altered, qualified and manipulated as to render them practically worthless as true evidence. Many lines from the original version were deleted from later versions. There is an extraordinary discrepancy between the 1805 passages of "The Prelude" in which Wordsworth describes the progress of his recovery from this crisis, and the version to which he gave his final approval.1

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1 It has long been known that Wordsworth revised "The Prelude" in his later years, and conjectures have been inevitable on the character and extent of that revision. It was in the early months of 1798 that Wordsworth conceived the idea of writing a history of the growth of his own mind, and in 1804, the original version containing only five books was completed. For thirty-five years Wordsworth continually went back to "The Prelude" retouching and revising it. Between 1804 and 1850, eight more complete books and a conclusion were added. Although the poem was not published in his lifetime, the version which appeared in 1850 differed in many respects from that of 1804. See e.g., The Prelude, ed. Ernest de Selincourt (London, 1927). In this edition the two versions of the poem are placed side by side for the convenience of the reader.
The years between 1793 and 1802 were years of storm and stress for Wordsworth. His position upon returning to England as an established revolutionist, was extremely uncomfortable in 1793, and for nearly three years thereafter.\footnote{George W. Meyer, *Wordsworth's Formative Years* (Michigan, 1943), p. 158.} He had no home and was obliged to live with friends and relatives. He had no profession, and was less inclined than ever to become a clergyman, thus disappointing his family. His principles were abhorrent to them; he was a republican; he was not orthodox.\footnote{William Harper, *op. cit.*, p. 128.}

Immediately upon arriving in England, Wordsworth busied himself with preparing for the press his first volume of poetry, "Descriptive Sketches," which was printed very early in 1793 and followed immediately by a second slim volume entitled "An Evening Walk." In a passage of "Descriptive Sketches," (ll. 283ff) where Wordsworth painted the picture of "Uri's Lake," the influence of his experience in revolutionary France in 1791 and 1792 asserts itself, so that the poem acquires significance as a transitional document. A larger world is opened up to the reader of his poetry when Wordsworth, for the first time in his career, manifested an open interest in politics, and when the joys which he found emanating from nature, from the contemplation of domestic bliss, and from the exercise of humanitarianism became dependent upon and subordinate to the basic requirement of political liberty.\footnote{George W. Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 159.}

Wordsworth insisted that in spite of many disadvantages, the people who lived on the shores of Uri were truly happy. The single fact that the dis-
trict afforded materials with which "Freedom" could make herself a suitable "crest" compensated them abundantly for their lack of more trivial sources of satisfaction:

Ev' here Content has fix'd her smiling reign
With Independence child of high Disdain
Exulting mid the winter of the skies,
And often grasps her sword, and often eyes
Her Crest a bough of Winter's bleakest pine,
Strange "weeds" and alpine plants her helm entwine,
And wildly - pausing oft she hangs aghast,
While thrills the "Spartan fife" between the blast.¹

The truth of the matter is that the natives of this region were doubly happy: they experienced not only the inestimable advantages of present political liberty, but also the salutary influence of a long tradition of liberty and independence, a tradition ennobled by the mighty name of William Tell. Wordsworth specifically described the powerful effect of this tradition of freedom upon a local boatman, who had been caught on the lake in his boat during a violent storm.

But lo! the boatman over-aw'd before
The pictur'd fane of Tell suspends his ear:
Confused the Marathonian tale appears,
While burn in his full eyes the glorious tears.
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 of the deeds of praise.²

The patriotic inspiration that results inevitably from such a vision as this was not limited to particular individuals or to the residents of any one district of Switzerland. Further on in "Descriptive Sketches" Wordsworth...
worth suggested that Switzerland's glorious record of liberty was an irresistible influence for good with every inhabitant of the country. This happy circumstance, according to Wordsworth, was one of the various traces yet remaining in republican Switzerland of a bygone Golden Age:

Once man entirely free, alone and wild,
Was blessed as 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. 1

These verses the writer has quoted at length because they have been generally neglected by Wordsworth's critics, and because they are the most significant passages in "Descriptive Sketches" to the study of Wordsworth's political views. They are incontrovertible proof, first of all, that Wordsworth possessed as early as 1793 many of the ideas to which he later gave immortal expression in his political sonnets. They reveal, moreover, his disposition to go "beyond the senses and their little reign" in his quest for essential truth. They show, in fact, that in 1792 and 1793, when Wordsworth was fresh from his experience in republican and free-thinking France - when his revolutionary enthusiasm had reached its highest, his political convictions were unmistakably interwoven with and dependent upon sheer pious mysticism, just as they were some ten years later when the mature Wordsworth was well along the road to conservatism in politics and orthodoxy in religion.

When Wordsworth set foot on English soil in the winter of 1792-93, he had been drinking deep at the springs of French optimism. His reason had been convinced by the "master-pamphlets" of the day expounding political philosophy;

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1 Ibid., II. 315-320.
he had been long enough under the spell of Michael Beaupuy to be convinced of the perfectibility of man and the efficacy of republican government. He was full of hope for the future. He was in love with France, where he had experienced the thrill of history in the making and intimate association with at least one man who was making visible contributions to human progress.

Wordsworth doubtless entertained the belief that England would fall in step behind enlightened France, cast off the hated fetters of monarchy, and march triumphantly forward to the millennium that was certain to follow the establishment of universal justice and equality under republican auspices. Before the catastrophes of 1793, Wordsworth conceived of England as a sanctuary of freedom, despite the fact that she was ruled by a king and despite the fact that she harbored tyrannical descendants of the feudal age who successfully employed their medieval power to cheat worthy young men of their patrimony.\(^1\) That Wordsworth held his country in such high esteem during his residence in France, we know from the contents of the letter he wrote on May 17, 1792, urging his friend Matthews away from melancholy: "Educated as you have been you ought to be above despair. You have the happiness of being born in a free country, where every road is open, and where talents and industry are more liberally rewarded than amongst any nation of the universe."\(^2\)

But this faith in England, unshaken so far as we know before his return, was destined to complete destruction in the early months of 1793. Whatever was the extent of his hope when he arrived in England in 1793, not only for the status of political freedom in his native land, but also for a happy

\(^1\) George W. Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 90.
solution of his personal difficulties, he was doomed to immediate and bitter disillusion and disappointment. He discovered almost immediately after his return that he was penniless and likely to continue so for an indefinite period of time; that because of the injustice prevalent in England there was little or no chance of his obtaining a home for himself and for the French girl, Annette Vallon, who was the mother of his illegitimate daughter, Caroline, and that he was likely to become a pariah in his native land and in the heart of his own family by virtue of his political beliefs which staunch and unselfish conviction caused him to support. However bitter Wordsworth's disappointment may have been, and however dark the future may have appeared to him in January 1793, sharper disappointments and blacker days were still to come. On February 1, Wordsworth's despair for the favorable course of the Revolution and for the political integrity of England went to its lowest depth, for on that day England went to war against France, the country where - so Wordsworth thought - the hopes of all mankind centered.

Pitt's declaration of war against France was a terrible shock to him - the first great shock his moral nature had ever received. He loved his country, yet, convinced that his country was now in the wrong, he felt himself compelled to rejoice when disaster overtook British arms. As high as was his trust, so low was his despair, when his own country, which he had heard Frenchmen praise for her love of liberty, declared war upon the land of his hopes:

2 George W. Meyer, op. cit., p. 94.
What then, were my emotions, when in arms
Britain put forth her free-born strength in league.
Oh, pity and shame! with those confederate powers.\(^1\)

His moral nature, he said, had received no shock down to that very moment.
All else had been progress; this was revolution. The order of his attachments was inverted. Old loyalty to native land, instead of becoming merged in a more comprehensive allegiance to human welfare, was found to be a principle of evil.\(^2\)

In the main outline, such it might be said
Was my condition, till with open war
Britain opposed the liberties of France.
This threw me first out of the pale of love;
Soured and corrupted, upwards to the source,
My sentiments; was not, as hitherto,
A swallowing up of lesser things in great,
But change of them into their contraries;
And thus a way was opened for mistakes
And false conclusions, in degree as gross,
In kind more dangerous.\(^3\)

Wordsworth still claimed loyalty to his country, but England's declaration of war filled him with horror and indignation; as to this his own words are clear:

Oh! much have they to account for, who could tear,
By violence, at one decisive rent,
From the best youth in England their dear pride,
In which worst losses easily might mean
The best of names, when patriotic love
Did of itself in modesty give way,
Like the precursor when the Deity
Is come Whose harbinger he was; a time
In which apostasy from ancient faith
Seemed but conversion to a higher creed;
Within a season dangerous and wild,
A time when sage Experience would have snatched
Flowers out of any hedge-row to compose
A chaplet in contempt of his grey locks.\(^4\)

\(^1\) "The Prelude," \(X\), 263-65.
\(^3\) "The Prelude," \(XI\), 175-183.
\(^4\) "The Prelude," \(X\), 310-314.
Love for France became with Wordsworth a passion. Loyalty to his native land changed into something like hatred of England as the ally of oppressors. This statement is not too strong, for in the words of the poet,

I rejoiced,
Yea afterwards - truth most painful to record!
Exulted, in the triumph of my soul,
When Englishmen by thousands were o'er thrown,
Left without glory on the field or driven,
Brave hearts! to shameful flight.
It was a grief - grief call it not,
'Twas anything but that. ¹

In what must have been the bitterest sort of triumph, he rejoiced, "yea, exulted," and when in church prayers were offered up or praises for English victories, he sat silent and "Fed on the day of vengeance yet to come."²

It is against this background of chagrin and personal despair that we must here take note of Wordsworth's Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff, written early in 1793. Richard Watson, the Bishop of Llandaff, had published on January 15, a sermon on "The Wisdom and Goodness of God in Having Made Both Rich and Poor," which he supplemented ten days later, after the news of the execution of Louis XVI had reached England, with an "Appendix" full of strictures on the French Revolution. It was this Appendix in which the Bishop undertook to condemn the principles of the French Revolution and to praise with all the authority and unction pertaining to his holy station, the divine efficacy and providential benignity of the British Constitution and of British government under that constitution, that inflamed Wordsworth - already predisposed to cry out angrily against abuses from which he, himself, was suffering - and first moved him to compose the bitter and comprehensive social criticism of

¹ Ibid., 283-289.
² Ibid., 299.
England that was to be his chief political preoccupation for at least two years.  

In his reply, Wordsworth took pains to provide the complacent Bishop with some inkling of what there was in England to complain of on the score of liberty. The general outline of "The Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff" contains Wordsworth's spirited defense of republicanism, his arguments against monarchy, and his attack upon contemporary English society.

Biographers have been content to discover in this reply to Watson no more than evidence showing that Wordsworth was a republican in 1793. They regard the letter, in other words, merely as more abundant proof of what was already obvious in the concluding lines of "Descriptive Sketches" already cited. Legouis remarks, for example, that "The Letter to Watson...contains the most complete statement of Wordsworth's political and social ideas in his twenty-third year," and proceeds to a disquisition upon the general state of the patriotic sentiment of eighteenth-century Europe. Harper, after briefly summarizing and praising the letter, advances impatiently to his study of "Guilt and Sorrow."

Neither, however, makes a concise distinction between the stage of development represented in the reply to Watson and that reflected in "Descriptive Sketches," and both fail to recognize in the letter, Wordsworth's first clear and specific statement, not only of his republican faith in 1793, but also of those political, social, and educational principles which were to provide the materials for "Guilt and Sorrow" as well as the very

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basis and foundation of "Lyrical Ballads."  

It is true that the "Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff" and the later lines of "Descriptive Sketches" are alike in that both are dedicated to the support of Wordsworth's new republican ideal. A comparison of the two documents reveals, however, considerable differences between Wordsworth's first and second efforts to champion republican principles. In the former, Wordsworth was clearly hopeful of seeing the early realization of his ideal. Apparently convinced that the French Revolution was divine in origin and purpose and that it would therefore be guaranteed a prosperous course and a successful conclusion, Wordsworth was satisfied in "Descriptive Sketches" to utter vague generalities about the blessings of liberty, as he found them in Switzerland and France, and about the curse of slavery, as he found it in Savoy, which the writer has previously cited at the outset of this chapter.  

Full of the rosy optimism of inexperience and youth, he seemed to have been certain that because republican government was, in his estimation, superior to monarchial government, all nations would very soon, if not immediately, discard their antiquated forms of political administration in favor of a more just and efficient republican model. Kings and emperors, of course, might be expected to object and to offer some resistance, but their contrary efforts must prove vain before the irresistible might of republican crusaders.  

In short, nothing in "Descriptive Sketches" suggests that Wordsworth understood that freedom, even with the help of God and France, was not likely to spread

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2 See pp. 2-4.
throughout the civilized world in the twinkling of an eye.

In the interval between his return to England and his composition of the reply to Watson, Wordsworth experienced his baptism of fire. The tempestuous emotions which he felt in the early weeks of 1793, his disappointment at learning of the wretched state of his finances, his anxiety over the desperate situation of Annette and Caroline, his despair at the prevalence of injustice in his native land and at the declaration of war between England and France, his resentment of the treatment meted out to him by his Uncle William - all these things somehow combined to produce in him some degree of intellectual, if not emotional, maturity. At last he understood that the world was no dream, that ideals did not realize themselves. The world, instead, was a stage in time and space on which was acted an eternal struggle between the forces of good and evil.

In England, all about him, the forces of evil, already powerful, were gaining strength; his republican ideal was threatened by a public opinion whetted to sharp hostility by such arguments from vested authority as those of Richard Watson. Ready and eager for the fray, he brought to the contest a clearly focused political and social point of view, an abundance of concrete information on the condition of England, and a program for the future. He sought to provide not merely an affirmation but also a demonstration of the excellence of republican principles, and he based his indictment of despotism and monarchical society, not upon broad, general allusions to the unhappiness

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1 In 1792, when Wordsworth sympathized deepest with the cause of the French patriots and hastened from Orleans to Paris ready to offer himself as a leader, his funds were cut off and he was recalled to England by his uncle who was irritated by his conduct. This Wordsworth forever deemed as an undignified hindrance. See F. W. H. Meyer, op. cit., p. 19.

2 George W. Meyer, op. cit., p. 102.
regnant in Savoy, a land of which he knew almost nothing, but upon specific facts derived from his personal knowledge of English government and society.\(^1\) It is this direct and detailed criticism of the evils of English government and society, and Wordsworth's recommendations for their elimination or alleviation that constitute the chief strength of the "Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff" and give it considerable significance for the study of Wordsworth's political ideas.

In the introductory paragraphs of his reply to Watson, Wordsworth avowed that his spirit would not meet with the Bishop's approval, "for it is a republican spirit."\(^2\) He confessed that he was little touched by the death of Louis XVI, of whose guilt he was fully persuaded. In stern and judicial terms he wrote:

> At a period big with the fate of the human race, I am sorry that you attach so much importance to the personal sufferings of the late royal martyr, and that an anxiety for the issue of the present convulsions should not have prevented you from joining in the idle cry of modish lamentation which has resounded from the court to the cottage.\(^3\)

Wordsworth asserted that he, himself, regretted that sombre event only because it took place without regular legal process, and because the poor king, by the nature of his unnatural position above other men, had been "precluded from attaining even a moderate knowledge of common life, and from feeling a particular share in the interests of mankind.... Any other sorrow for the death of Louis is irrational and weak."\(^4\) He even excused, or explain-

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1. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
ed the other executions which had shocked Watson, by asserting that liberty was unfortunately "obliged to borrow the very arms of Despotism to overthrow him, and in order to reign in peace, must establish herself by violence."¹ Further he asserted that liberty deplored such stern necessity, but the safety of the people, her supreme law, was her consolation.

Here in his "Letter to the Bishop" Wordsworth defended the appropriation of church property by the French nation, charging the higher clergy with vice, jobbery, and hypocrisy. He argued on the superiority of an equalitarian republic over a monarchy and a system of privilege; he attacked the British penal code, pleaded in favor of giving much executive power to the legislature, condemned the hereditary principle, and declared that "the office of kings is a trial to which human virtue is not equal."² A legislator, he said, being aware "that extremes of poverty and riches have a necessary tendency to corrupt the human heart, will banish from his code all laws such as the unnatural monster of primogeniture, and such as encourage associations against labor and all monopolies and distinctions unfavorable to the poor."³ Wordsworth made the very keen observation that law-makers "have justly left unprotected that most important part of property, not less real because it has no material existence, that which ought to enable the laborer to provide food for himself and his family."⁴ He called for wise and salutary regulations counteracting that inequality among mankind which proceeds from the present fixed disproportion of their possessions. He objected to nobility

¹ Ibid.
² Ibid., p. 78.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
on several grounds, one of which was that it had a necessary tendency to dishonor labor. He advocated manhood franchise, declaring that "if there is a single man in Great Britain who has no suffrage in the election of a representative, the will of the society of which he is a member is not generally expressed; he is a Helot in that society."^1

Thus Wordsworth set out to do all in his power to destroy Watson's influence by exposing his errors and his ignorance. He attacked his opponent's stand in regard to the execution of Louis XVI, the necessity of violence in a time of revolution, and the confiscation of church property in France. He supported all three of these issues of the French Revolution on the humanitarian ground that, whereas a few people suffered therefrom, the great masses of French people benefited immensely.^2

Ample evidence is presented to show that the dreadful social consequence of such monopolistic legislation, the legislation characteristic of monarchial form of government are everywhere visible in England. They are seen in the "depopulation of the country, in the necessary reliance of the poor upon the ostentatious bounty of their oppressors, in the class of wretches called mendicants who shock the feelings of humanity."^3 The fearful results of monarchy are pointed out, finally, not only in the tendency to dishonest labor, in the hypocrisy and sycophancy of intercourse in private life and in a general integration of human dignity, but in that "infatuation which is now giving up to the sword so large a portion of the poor, and consigning the rest to the more slow and more painful consumption of want."^4 All of this, Words-
worth found insupportable, and his remarks upon the necessity for violence in France, make it perfectly clear that he now favored recourse to open revolt, if need be for the safety of the people.

Wordsworth advocated that violence be employed only as a last resort and even then, for as short a time as possible. He admitted that violence and revolution were productive of results not wholly desirable. In a period of revolution, he perceived that political virtues were developed at the expense of moral ones, and the sweet emotions of compassion, evidently dangerous when traitors are to be punished, are too often altogether smothered. Once the salutary change to republicanism has been effected, and once the oppressive principle of monarchy has been forcibly thrust into the past, education would play its part and men would live at peace with one another. "It is the province of education," Wordsworth declared, "to rectify the erroneous notions which a habit of oppression, and even resistance, may have created, and to soften this ferocity of character proceeding from the suspension of social virtues." He contended further that only education could create a race of men, who being truly free, would look upon their fathers as only enfranchised.

It is important to note at this point that Wordsworth already understood that education was the only means by which true liberty could be achieved. The mere destruction or forcible removal from office of the oppressors would not guarantee the disappearance of injustice or the establishment of genuine freedom. Satisfactory social and political progress must be slow and difficult of attainment, but come it would, once the canker of monarchical preju-

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1 Ibid., p. 82.
dice had been extirpated and the seed of republican truth planted in its place.¹

Thus Wordsworth gave expression in the "Letter to the Bishop" not only to a deep enthusiasm for the French Revolution and the republican form of government, but also to a specific criticism of English life and society, to a confidence in the efficacy of education, and a firm faith in the perfectibility of the common man.² His criticism of England, Wordsworth was soon to make the matter of his poem "Guilt and Sorrow," his most bitter and provocative poem. His articles of faith, his confidence in education and the inexhaustible virtues of the common people — first openly declared in the spring of 1793, when he had more reasons to give up hope for the future and turn pessimist than he was ever to have again, were to become, as subsequent discourse will disclose, the basic principles of Wordsworth's mature philosophy.

The obvious conflict between the inborn love of England on the one hand and vehement sympathy with France on the other, as long as she was the defender of liberty, was to Wordsworth, the tragedy of the war. It was during these trying times of the poet, 1794-95, that he was slowly but surely attracted to Godwinism. Because his faith in England had begun to waver, he began to rationalize along Godwinian lines and became a disciple of Godwin. This did not mean the acceptance of his master's political theory alone, but of his system as a whole.³

It is pertinent to this study to note that Godwin's Political Justice was

¹ Ibid.
² George W. Meyer, op. cit., p. 106.
³ Hugh Fausset, op. cit., p. 126.
for the most part devoted to ethical and political considerations, that he was a determinist who argued for the doctrine of necessity. Justice, he contended, was the whole duty of man and his criterion of justice was the greatest good of the greatest number: "utility, as it regards precipitant beings is the only basis of moral and political truth."\(^1\) Reason was deemed the only organ whereby man could discover what was just: "to a rational being there can be but one rule of conduct, justice, and one mode of ascertaining that rule, the exercise of his understanding."\(^2\) Morality was a matter of knowledge: "the most essential part of virtue consists in the incessantly seeking to inform ourselves more accurately upon the subject of utility and right."\(^3\)

Godwin affirmed these principles unhesitatingly as if they must be admitted by every thinking person to whom they were stated. He held that since man is a moral being and all his actions are either just or unjust, he has no rights, no moral options, but only duties. There is no place for deeds of gratitude, for pardon, for partiality to friends or kindred, for vindicative punishment. Marriage falls under his disapproval, insofar as it is a relation maintained solely in virtue of a promise. Creeds and similar fixed affirmations of belief lose their binding power, for he maintained that if one ceases from the habit of being able to recall this evidence (that upon which the validity of a tenet depends), his belief is no longer a per-

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ception, but a prejudice.¹

Some of these principles of rationalism are to be found distinctly echoed in Wordsworth's "The Borderers," and in his "Guilt and Sorrow," which indicate that he was imbued with Godwin's doctrine that "under the system of necessity the ideas of guilt, crime, desert, and accountableness, have no place."²

Wordsworth's situation at the time he began to compose "Guilt and Sorrow" was this, in the early part of 1793, humanity and the French Revolution had been his sole interest. In July of 1793, he broke away from London and the vivid pulse of political life, and threw himself on nature with the passionate addiction of the senses which is described in the Tintern poem and the twelfth book of "The Prelude." Out of the mood resulting from his seclusion and his acceptance of Godwinism proceeded "Guilt and Sorrow" which clearly underscores Wordsworth's turn to rationalism.³

The poem brings before us in a solemn setting of desolate natural scenery, three utterly desolate but primitively noble souls. Of humanity, we are reminded only by the swinging chains of a moorland gibbet and the distant prospect of a town jail. The following will serve as an analysis of the story of "Guilt and Sorrow."

A sailor, taken by the press gang, had served in Portland Bay during the period of the American wars and was returning to his wife and family, on demobilization, when he was deprived by fraud of the whole of his small savings.

¹ Ibid., p. 87.
² Ibid.
³ H. W. Garrod, op. cit., p. 82.
Hitherto he had been the gentlest and best of men, so mild that he would not rob a bird of its food. But now, as he neared his home, the sense of his misfortune brought to him an excess amount of melancholy fury in which he murdered and robbed a traveller. Fleeing from justice, he met, as he wandered over Salisbury Plain, a woman whom the war had robbed of both husband and children, and who now for three years had lived the life of a vagrant and a thief. The two shelter from the storm, and the woman narrated her story to the man. When the storm had abated the two made their way together to a rustic inn, where they were kindly received.

While they were there, a country cart arrived, in which lay a woman in the last stages of consumption. This woman explained the circumstances under which she had been driven from her home. A traveller had been found murdered hard by, and suspicion of the crime had fallen upon her absent husband who was a sailor, and who had been seen, it was alleged, in the neighborhood. She protested his innocence, knowing him to be the gentlest and best of men, so mild that he would not rob a bird of its food. Recognition followed, and the husband implored his wife's forgiveness. The wife was by that time past speech, but blessed him with a look, and died. Underscoring as it does that sin and crime are apt to start from their very opposite qualities, an idea to which Godwin would have given his assent, and which is easily recognized as conformable to his view of human nature, this poem is purely Godwinian. Garrod said that, "Guilt and Sorrow" is a distinctively morbid attack on the whole social order, produced under the influence of Godwinism. Somewhere about the summer of 1795, his (Wordsworth's) conversion

1 Ibid.
to Godwinism became absolute and complete. 1

The nature of this change, and of the new opinions, is set out with
great elaboration in the eleventh book of "The Prelude." Especially sig-
nificant are the lines in which he said that his ambition now was to

Build social upon personal liberty
Which, to the blind restraints of general laws
Superior, magisterially adopts
One guide, the light of circumstances flashed
Upon an independent intellect. 2

Here we have expressed the extreme of Godwinian individualism, the anar-
chic doctrines that the sole guide of action is the reason of the individual.
Pure rationalism can never be expected to win the favor of more than a small
minority even among reflective men, but its voice is, in no age, altogether
silent. 3 The pure word of the Revolution, a creed to which Wordsworth clung
with passionate fervor, is condensed in a few articles. They lie more or
less scattered in Godwin's Political Justice. The first concerns prophecy:
to conceive an order of society totally different from that which is now be-
fore our eyes, and to judge of the advantages that would accrue from its in-
stitutions are the prerogatives only of a few favored minds.

The second concerns prerogatives. They are the higher orders of society
that find or imagine they find, their advantage in injustice, and are eager
to invent arguments for its defense. The third concerns the wisdom of com-
mon people: the vulgar have no such interest, and submit to the reign of in-
justice from habit only and want of reflection. A very short period is enough

1 Ibid., p. 83.
2 "The Prelude," XI, 240-44.
for them to imbibe the sentiments of patriotism and liberty. The fourth concerns property: my neighbor has just as much right to put an end to my existence with a dagger or poison as to deny me that pecuniary assistance without which my intellectual attainments or my moral exertions will be materially injured. The fifth concerns priests: their prosperity depends upon the reception of particular opinions in the world; they must therefore be enemies to freedom of inquiry; they must have a bias upon their minds impressed by something different from the force of evidence. ¹

Everyone of these articles was affirmed by Wordsworth, either graphically in his early poems, or dogmatically in his reply to Bishop Watson, or by implication in his letters to Matthews. Wordsworth, one of the first and one of the greatest converts, adhered to the Godwinian system for six years.² As Graham noted, "He conquered love of country with love of mankind. He rebuked with a reasoned hatred of war, the elementary instincts of a people in arms. It is significant that Wordsworth, one of the greatest poets who crossed the threshold of the nineteenth century, was for a time a votary in the temple of nationalism, a temple nobly bare and generously open whether for entrance or egress, and that he could not compel himself to remain."³

It seems, then, from these bits of evidence, that during his various sojourns in London, between 1793 and September 1795, amounting in all to many months, Wordsworth lived in at least occasional connection with "The Godwin Circle," which included Godwin, Fawcett, Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft,

¹ William Godwin, op. cit., p. 6.
² H. W. Garrod, op. cit., p. 72.
Southey and others, some of whom were under the ban of public censure for holding democratic principles. They sympathized with the French Revolution; they opposed the war. The center of political disaffection was to be found somewhere within this circle. More and more as the Revolution went to extremes, and the military success of France exasperated and consolidated English patriotism, the possession of extreme democratic ideals was narrowed down to members of this group, so far as the intellectual society of England was concerned. The independence of character and the confidence in rational deduction made them radicals in politics.¹

According to Godwin, if there be political government at all, its authority ultimately rests with individuals, and in such political government they are not bound together by social contract, but by open deliberation with reference to common concerns. Of that Godwin wrote, "The true and only adequate apology of government is necessity; the office of common deliberation is solely to supply the most eligible means of meeting that necessity."² We can note here the emphasis laid on the individual and the less political government, the better. Wordsworth was captivated by this spirit of rationalism; even Godwin's utopianism was converted into the poet's social dream. In the eleventh book of "The Prelude," he exclaimed:

What delight!
How glorious! in self-knowledge and self-rule,
To look through all the frailties of the world,
And, with a resolute mastery shaking off
Infirmitities of nature, time and place,
Build social upon personal Liberty.
Which to the blind restraints of general laws
Superior, magisterially adopts

² Godwin, op. cit., p. 10.
One guide, the light of circumstances,  
Flashed upon independent intellect."

This spirit of nationalism, so characteristic of the age and so manifest in Godwin's political philosophy, was applied by Wordsworth to the study of social and political institutions. The poet who beheld things with the eye of the imagination was converted into the philosopher who viewed them with the eye of reason."

In a letter to his friend, Francis Wrangham, written in 1795, Wordsworth said that he desired to publish a poem, the object of which "is partly to expose the vices of the penal law and the calamities of war as they affect individuals."³ Four long letters from Wordsworth in the North to Matthews in London, written between May 1794 and January 1795, presented him in this new and rather surprising light. He wished Matthews to understand distinctly what his political sentiments were as they set out to edit a magazine in London. In such a work as they had in mind, he wrote, "it would be impossible not to inculcate principles of government and forms of social order of one kind or another."⁴ His confession of political faith was brief and unequivocal:

"I solemnly affirm that in no writings of mine will I ever admit of any sentiments which can have the least doctrines which are now enforced by banishment, imprisonment...or other than pregnant with every species of misery. You know perhaps already that I am of that odious class of men called democrats, and of that class, I shall forever continue."⁵

Writing again from Whitehaven in June of inflammatory political opinions, he

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¹ "The Prelude," XI, 235-244.
² Harper, op. cit., p. 199.
³ Prose Works, III, 235.
⁴ Ibid., p. 232.
⁵ Ibid.
said that he had read with great pleasure the explicit avowal of Matthews' political sentiments, and in return would set forth his own in more detail. Thus he wrote, "I disapprove of monarchial and aristocratical governments, however modified. Hereditary distinctions, and privileged orders of every species, I think must necessarily counteract the progress of human improvement. Hence it follows, that I am not among the two admirers of the British Constitution."¹

Two causes were at work, he said, subverting the constitution: first, the bad conduct of men in power, and second, "the changes of opinion respecting matters of government which within these few years have rapidly taken place in the minds of speculative men."² To hasten these changes he advised,

I would give every additional energy in my power. I recoil from the very idea of revolution. I am a determined enemy to every species of violence. I see no connection...between justice and the sword - between reason and bonds. I deplore the condition of the French, and think that we can only be guarded from the same scourge by the undaunted efforts of good men... I severely condemn all inflammatory addresses to the passions of men. I know that the multitude walk in darkness. I would put into each man's hands a lantern, to guide him; and not have him to set out upon his journey depending for illumination on abortive flashes of lightning or the coruscations of transitory meteors.³

Wordsworth's political program through 1798 seems to be vague. He mentioned no definite reform which he wished to see established except "granting complete liberty to the Press."⁴ With all the changes that had taken place since he had first become interested in the cause of the Revolution - the fortunes and misfortunes, the successes and failures - this really was his

¹ Ibid., p. 233.
² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid., p. 234.
general state of mind until his own country entered into the war.

What rational justification had England for this step? In his judgment she had none; and her action shattered his confidence in the essential harmony between the world of reality and the world of rationality. He forsook the light by which his sentiments had been

...By faith maintained
Of inward consciousness, and hope
That laid her hand upon her object.

The years 1796-97 found Wordsworth engaged in a blank verse tragedy, "The Borderers," the position of which, in the evolution of Wordsworth's political views is equally as important as "Guilt and Sorrow." In the preface to the play Wordsworth wrote, in language which might have come from Godwin himself, that his point of departure had been the awful truth that sin and crime are apt to spring from their opposite qualities. Legouis pointed out that the play marked a significant change in Wordsworth's attitude toward society and its evils. He called attention to the fact that Wordsworth, by the time he wrote "The Borderers" had thought more deeply about the sources of evil and had carefully observed the unpromising direction events had taken under Robespierre in republican France, that he no longer placed the blame for evils of the world upon social and political institutions, that Wordsworth concluded that evil is inherent in man's limited and imperfect nature.

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1 E. Hershey Sneath, op. cit., p. 58.
2 "The Prelude," XI, 201-203.
3 See for example, Ernest de Selincourt, "Wordsworth's Preface to the Borderers," Poetical Works, 171-172.
4 The Early Life, pp. 276-77.
This discovery, Legouis continued, caused Wordsworth to despair of reforming society. Subsequent critics, who have concerned themselves with political commitments of Wordsworth and his interest in the evils of society have agreed with Legouis and have repeated his contention that Wordsworth made no effort in "The Borderers" to strike at the social and political wrongs which he attacked so bitterly several years previously. To these critics, in short, "Guilt and Sorrow" and "The Borderers" bear no relationship to one another so far as Wordsworth's attitude towards politics was concerned. The writer here differs with those critics, and holds that Wordsworth made a conscious effort in the latter poem to avoid the outspoken and exaggerated political and social criticism that we find in the former, but his political point of view had not totally changed.

Note that the events described in the earlier poem take place in the England that Wordsworth knew; the action of "The Borderers" taking place during the reign of Henry III is so remote in time that whatever the play contains of social comment seems to lack applicability to the England of the 1790's. In the Fenwick note to "The Borderers" Wordsworth declared: "As to the scene and period of action, little more was required for my purpose than the absence of established Law and Government; so that the agents might be at liberty to act on their own impulses...." This suggests as Legouis recorded that Wordsworth had progressed beyond the stage in which he held the naive opinion that evil and distress would vanish if England would follow the enlightened French and introduce political change.

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1 See Preface to "The Borderers," op. cit., p. 172.
2 Ibid.
3 The Early Life, p. 277.
Robespierre, the Terror, and French aggression no doubt did much to shatter Wordsworth's faith in the political panaceas and to lead him to the wise conclusion that old wrongs are not righted over night. The emphasis of "The Borderers" falls upon this newly discovered ethical principle and the duty of the individual to live according to its dictates, not upon the inalienable right of the individual to receive just treatment from his government.

A brief sketch or summary of "The Borderers" will suffice to give the reader an idea of the nature of the shift of emphasis undertaken by Wordsworth. The play is the story of the intellectual and moral seduction of an innately noble man, Marmaduke, who possessed the essential human sensibilities, with compassion being his ruling motive for action. He had become, in this play, the leader of a band of outlaws, largely, it appears, because he could thus most freely indulge his ardor for benevolence. He had succeeded in transforming his men into ministers of peace and order; even Oswald, the villain admitted that

\[
\text{Aged men with tears} \\
\text{Have blessed their steps, the fatherless retire} \\
\text{For shelter to their banners.}  \\
\]

Into the band of outlaws directed by the energetic philanthropist, Marmaduke, came the sinister Oswald, who had adopted a philosophy of life diametrically opposed to that of Marmaduke. Complete indifference to all human feelings, particularly to compassion had become his master-bias. Reason ruled in his mind instead of pity, for reason had shown him how to escape from remorse to a moral eminence beyond good and evil. He set out to con-

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1 "The Borderers," II, 11.62-64.
duct Marmaduke to this same height trying first to break down his feeling for morality and pity. He declared that misery was not sacred but degrading and that pity came only through the seduction of reason by the "wiles of woman and the craft of age."  

Since Oswald had murdered an innocent man and had attained remorse, with pitiless logic, he craftily arranged a similar crime for Marmaduke, hoping to break down the power which pity exercised in Marmaduke's mind and to substitute his sort of mechanically rational justice. "Justice," he argued,

> Admitting no resistance, binds alike  
> The feeble and the strong. She need not here  
> Her bonds and chains, which  
> Make the mighty feeble.  

To carry out his program, Oswald put into Marmaduke's power, Herbert, a helpless, blind old man, the noble and pathetic father of Idonea. Idonea was the girl whom the chief adored. Oswald then made Marmaduke believe that this pitiful old man had committed an unspeakable series of crimes - that he had stolen Idonea and deceived her into believing him to be her father, that he had planned to sell her to the old lecher, Clifford, that he had been basely false to the most precious of natural affections.

Oswald supplied the apparent proof of these facts so artfully that Marmaduke, himself, believed that he had seen the guilt, had touched it and had felt it in his heart. He conceived it to be an act of justice to compass this false father's death and was immediately ready to act on Oswald's designs believing all to be true.

Thus resolved, he took the poor Herbert out upon the moor to dispatch him,
but pity crossed the path of his resolve and weakened his will. Instead of slaying the old man outright, he left him to die alone in the storm. Later Eldred, a good hearted peasant, found the suffering Herbert on the moor, muttering something about his daughter.

When Oswald felt certain that the crime had been committed as planned, he revealed to Marmaduke the truth. Upon learning that Herbert was an innocent man, Marmaduke became filled with horror and revolted against the entire philosophy of Oswald, against his exaltation of reason and returned to his natural compassion with double force. He clung to remorse, pity and suffering. Finally he bade farewell to his band of outlaws and told them that he had condemned himself to be a solitary wanderer over the face of the earth:

But over waste and wild,
In search of nothing that this earth can give,
But expiation, will I wander on—
A man by pain and thought compelled to live,
Yet loathing life—till anger is appeased
In Heaven, and Mercy gives me leave to die.1

Wordsworth found a potent force for good existing in the heart of man. It is a mistake, however, to believe that this tragedy, "The Borderers," was his farewell to reform. Despite his shift of emphasis, from the right to the responsibilities of the individual, and despite his efforts to detach the action of his tragedy from the events of his own day by making it remote in point of time, Wordsworth had by no means absolved British social and political institutions from their share of blame for the wrongs and dislocations which he saw about him. He continued to describe in this poem

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1 Ibid., III, 11,330-35.
many evils which we associate not with the England of Henry III, but with
Wordsworth's own experience in the England of the 1790's.

"The Borderers" of 1797 does, then, record a change in Wordsworth's
attitude towards the evils of English politics which he castigated in his
earlier works; he had not lost sight of these evils, but his point of view
had changed. Here he refrained from underscoring the causes of the repre-
hensible actions of the beggar woman and Eldred and made no attempt to ac-
count for the glaring inequality in the distribution of wealth between the
degenerate nobility and the virtuous peasantry. In his letter to the Bishop
and "Guilt and Sorrow," he had been certain that monarchy was responsible
for all such evils and economic discrepancies. In "The Borderers" there was
scarcely a trace remaining of his hatred of monarchy and his zeal for a demo-
cratic government. He was content to let his reader believe that Clifford
was rich and a villain, that Eldred was poor but essentially noble, simply
because Providence, whose ways are inscrutable, had so decreed.

This did not mean that Wordsworth had lost faith in reform or that he
was a pacifist, ready to accept things as they were, but rather that he had
shifted his emphasis from the evil caused by monarchial institutions to the
good that resides in the hearts of common men. Although he had adopted a
new method of reform, and although his manner of attack had changed, Words-
worth's desire to remake the world according to his own ideal continued un-
abated.
CHAPTER III

POLITICAL IDEAS OF THE MIDDLE YEARS (1798-1815)

As early as 1798, it had become clear to Wordsworth that France had become not a defender, but the assailant of national liberty. As he put it,

But when events
Brought less encouragement, and unto these
The immediate proof of principles no more
Could be entrusted; while the events themselves,
Worn out in greatness, stripped of novelty
Less occupied the mind, and sentiments

But now, become oppressors in their turn,
Frenchmen had changed a war of self defence
Which they had struggled for; and mounted up,
Openly, in the view of earth and heaven,
The scale of liberty.

Wordsworth at first, it is true, refused to admit this unwelcome conclusion, and for a time clung more strongly than ever to his old opinion. But his keen eye for actual facts made him, though unwillingly, accept the conclusion that France was fighting no longer for independence but for conquest. The strength of this belief was increased after 1798, by the events of each succeeding year, and in fact, was firmly established long before the great catastrophe of 1804 occurred.

In 1800, Wordsworth, a man of over thirty years, and at his height as a poet and thinker, began pressing upon England the necessity and the duty of waging a remorseless war against France for the overthrow of that Napoleonic despotism which threatened destruction to the freedom of England and of every other European country which still possessed or claimed national independence. To express his chagrin he said in "The Prelude,"

2 A. V. Dicey, op. cit., p. 54.
...Finally to seal up all the gains of France,
A Pope is summoned in to crown an Emperor.  

When Wordsworth perceived the altered character of the war with France, his full patriotic love for England had been restored and increased. The process of reconciliation with his own country was assisted by his German tour in 1798; from this journey in foreign lands seems to date his realization that he still had a motherland and that the hold of England over his affections was stronger than he had known. In a well-known verse of one of the Lucy poems is reflected the awakening in his heart of patriotic sentiment which was destined in time to fill the void left by the collapse of republican enthusiasm. The poems with regard to Lucy, whatever the circumstances, whether real or imaginary, which gave rise to them, were composed in Germany in 1799. We may feel sure that the verses -

I travelled among unknown men,
In lands beyond the sea;
Nor England, did I know till then
What love I bore to thee -

express his reborn passionate, though not undiscriminating love for his mother country. Note, however, that the feelings which led the poet from or after 1800 to urge on the war with France, imply no diminution in his continuous condemnation of the war with France from 1793 to 1798. We witness here a change of circumstances but not the slightest change of principle in Wordsworth.

From 1802, Wordsworth, on the subject of war with France, entirely agreed for practical purposes with the best Tories of his time. He felt that to

1 "The Prelude," X, 358-60.
put an end to the Treaty of Amiens and to carry on the war against Napoleonic despotism was for England both a necessity and a duty. He entirely disagreed with the Whig opposition who, preaching a policy of peace, clung to the delusion that somehow Napoleon represented the cause of liberty. Wordsworth occupied a place as an English statesman between 1802 and 1818, perceiving with clearness both the needs of the English people and the absolute necessity of persisting in war and basing it upon the true principles of international right and justice.¹

During the years from 1802 to 1808, while Wordsworth lived in Grasmere Vale, he was obviously back to his old habits preoccupied with nature, but he also wrote sonnets which evince a deep interest in the social and political events and conditions of the time. In them a genuine humanity and patriotism were manifested. He portrayed, not only a love for his own people, but also a true cosmopolitan spirit. A number of these sonnets seem to have been inspired by a visit to Calais in 1802, when political conditions were in sharp contrast with the promise and hope of his previous visit. He seemed anxious about the effect of conditions there on his own country because of the close proximity of France to England.²

Wordsworth feared the power of Napoleon, and was anxious about the threatened liberties of the people. Not only political and social conditions disturbed him, especially as they existed in England. The increase of wealth had been attended by an increase in the complexity of life, and by a commercializing and materializing tendency. His fear gave rise to two well-known sonnets, which are among his best. In one, "O Friend! I Know Not Which Way

¹ Dicey, op. cit., p. 76.
² Sneath, op. cit., p. 193.
I Must Look," the vanity and parade of his country is lamented, and a feeling expressed that the march of wealth is productive of mischief. The famous sonnet on Milton showed him in despair over the state of things at home:

Milton thou shouldst be living at this hour:  
England hath need of thee: she is a fen  
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword and pen,  
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,  
Hath forfeited their ancient English dower  
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;  
Oh! raise us up, return to us again;  
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.¹

But such words were sometimes supplanted by others which breathed a stronger faith and hope, especially with reference to politics, as in the sonnet, "It is Not to be Thought of that the Flood." In this sonnet the poet averred that it was impossible to think of British freedom perishing in bogs and sands, and in the sonnet, "When I Have Borne in Memory What Was Tamed," he expressed his appreciation of England as a bulwark for the cause of men.²

Anxious moods seemed to predominate this patriotic observer who was full of a strong love of freedom. As a consequence there were still other sonnets dedicated to Liberty or National Independence. Napoleon's sway and ambitious projects seemed to be a disturbing influence with him, and most of these earliest sonnets were born of his observations and reflections concerning the movements of the French tyrant. A study of these sonnets reveals his concern over events as well as his anticipation of a possible, if not indeed a probable, invasion of England by Napoleon.³

³ Sneath, op. cit., p. 193.
The French conqueror had amassed a large army for this purpose, and the English people were on fire with patriotic zeal to defend their land and liberties. It was natural that such a liberty-loving poet as Wordsworth should celebrate in advance, by anticipation, the inevitable result of such an attempt on the part of the French ruler.

In 1806, matters reached a crisis with England. Napoleon had conquered the Germans; another power had been laid low, and on November 21, he issued a decree for the blockade of England.\(^1\) Wordsworth, as a consequence, wrote another sonnet dedicated to Liberty which showed his political interest, and in which he recognized the fact that England's safety now depended upon herself. Here again he anticipated rejoicing over victory. In his "November, 1806,\(^2\) he wrote,

\begin{quote}
We shall exult, if they who rule the land
Be men who hold its many blessings dear,
Wise, upright, valiant, not a servile band,
Who are to judge of danger which they fear,
And honour which they do not understand.
\end{quote}

The true import of these poems dedicated to National Independence lies in the social and political movements of the age.

The poem "Character of the Happy Warrior," dated 1806, needs recognition here because of the light it throws on the genuine patriotism of the middle years of the man, as well as presenting in a large measure, his view of the life of a true warrior, and his exalted ideal of what a servant of the nation should be. This poem, if read in connection with "Poems Dedicated to National Independence and Liberty" will illustrate Wordsworth's devotion to

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1 For complete discussion of the progress of the French Revolution, see G. L. Dickinson, Revolution and Reaction in Modern France (London, 1892), pp. 56-60.
2 "November, 1806," ll. 10-14.
the best interests of the State, as well as his lofty conception of the ideals which ought to control those who govern. According to the poet, the happy warrior is the man of generosity, whose high endeavors guide him; who is diligent to learn; who makes his moral being his prime care; who turns suffering to gain; who is compassionate and placable, pure and tender, and makes reason his law, who rises to high position by open means, and will stand there honorably or retire; who understands his trust, and stands faithful to it, whose powers shed a gracious influence about him, who meets tremendous issues with the joyousness of a lover, who abides by the law in the midst of conflict, and proves equal to the need of any call.

Man existing under government seemed to be an engaging theme with Wordsworth, and the political conditions of the time impelled him to song. Occasionally we have poems of denunciation, as in the sonnets on Napoleon, and the traitorous Elector of Saxony. Again there are songs of praise, as in the case of the poems on Charles Fox, the leader of Parliament, and Lord Nelson, the hero of Trafalgar. Sometimes his song was one of lament over prevailing conditions, and there were notes of anxious fear because of the trend of events; and again, there were songs of hope, with a trumpet call to the brave to stand fast for liberty and courageously do the duty of the hour. Sometimes he beheld the persistent triumph of wrong, and his faith in God almost gave way, as is evident in the sonnet, "October, 1803." At other times, his faith looked through the clouds and darkness and gained a vision of the ultimate victory of right.

Our poet, despite the beauty of Grasmere Vale, which so persistently enchanted him, was not, during these stirring years, merely the poet of nature, but also the poet of man, in close touch with him in the humble walks of
life, and keeping his eye fixed upon the great social and political issues of the time, solicitous for his well-being, an ardent patriot, guarding with zealous interest the liberties of his own country and continuing, as of old, "a patriot of the world." ¹

Though quietly housed in 1806–1807, at Coleorton, away from the political strife of the times, and surrounded by the calm and peace of nature, Wordsworth did not lose sight of man. He was alive to current events, and kept a steady eye on the ambitious movements of the French monarch. Several political sonnets, thirty in fact, belonging to this period were inspired by the poet's interest in the political movements of his time. One is entitled "A Prophecy," which was suggested by the action of Frederick Augustus, Elector of Saxony, who made a treaty with Napoleon, in which he showed himself to be in league with France. The sonnet pronounced woe upon the "Bavarian" who was the "first open traitor to the German name."

High deeds, O Germans, are to come from you! Thus in your books the record shall be found,

Stirred by the breeze; they rose, a Nation, true, True to herself - the mighty Germany, She of the Danube and the Northern Sea, All power was given her in the dreadful trance; Those new-born kings she withered like a flame; Woe to them all! but heaviest woe and shame To that Bavarian who could first advance His banner in accursed league with France, First open traitor to the German name.

A better known sonnet, and one which Wordsworth regarded as the best he had written up to this time is entitled "Thought of a Briton on the Subju-

¹ Sneath, op. cit., p. 203.
The preceding sonnet, it belongs to the poems "Dedicated to National Independence and Liberty." Napoleon, who by this time, had conquered practically the entire continent in his quest for a world empire, evidently continued to be a source of anxiety to Wordsworth. In the sonnet, the poet called attention to the fruitless efforts of the Swiss in their fight against the invader, and enjoined upon the Swiss to cleave to the voice of the sea though liberty be driven from the land.

There came a Tyrant, and with holy glee
Thou fought' st against him; but has vainly striven;
Thou from thy Alpine holds at length art driven,
Where not a torrent murmurs heard by thee.

Then cleave, O cleave to that which still is left;
For high souled maid, what sorrow would it be
That mountain floods should thunder as before,
And ocean bellow from his rocky shore,
And neither awful voice be heard by thee.

It is obvious that owing largely to the conduct of the French, political conditions in England and on the continent were such that Wordsworth became deeply engrossed in them. This intense interest in the political welfare of man lay at the basis of much of his poetical activity, as is evident from the sonnets herein cited and from his many other poems dedicated to National Independence and Liberty. How intense and absorbing it was at this time can be fully appreciated only through an examination of his essay "The Convention of Cintra," and his private letters written to the editor of the "Courier," to Captain Pasley, Miss Fenwick and others, besides the political sonnets composed at this time. Concerning the great political tract, "The Convention of Cintra," Knight said:

1 "Thought of a Briton on the Subjugation of Switzerland," ll. 5-14.
A study of this essay - and it deserves to be studied not only for the wisdom it contains but for the splendour of its form - will dispel the notion that Wordsworth was a mere recluse student of nature, little interested in human affairs and the aspirations of oppressed nationalities. It was from a certain vantage ground, as a dweller among the mountains away from the strife of parties, that he was best able to judge these things.¹

Furthermore, in a letter to Miss Fenwick, Wordsworth himself said,

It would not be easy to conceive with what a depth of feeling I entered into the struggle carried on by the Spaniards for their deliverance from the usurped power of the French. Many times have I gone...as late as two o'clock in the morning to meet the carrier bringing the newspaper from Keswick. Imperfect traces of the state of mine in which I then was may be found in my tract on the Convention of Cintra, as well as in the "Sonnets dedicated to Liberty."²

The Convention of Cintra was an agreement, signed at Cintra, in which the French who were waging war in Spain and Portugal and who had been defeated by Arthur Wellesley, agreed to withdraw from Portugal to France, on condition that they should be permitted to retire without sacrifice of arms or other effects. The signing of this agreement by the British generals caused widespread indignation in England, and the government was compelled to court martial them. The trial, however, ended in their acquittal.³

Wordsworth's essays, according to the Advertisement prefacing it, "originated in the opposition which was made by his majesty's ministers to the expression in public meetings and otherwise, of the opinions and feelings concerning the Convention of Cintra."⁴ It was written in November and December 1808, and appeared in 1809. The elaborate title of the pamphlet indicated:  

¹ William Knight, The Life of William Wordsworth (Edinburgh, 1889), II, 126.  
² Henry Reed, Memoirs of William Wordsworth (Boston, 1851), I, 383.  
³ Sneath, op. cit., p. 243.  
⁴ Prose Works, I, 111.
cated its content. It read, "Concerning the Relation of Great Britain, Spain, and Portugal, to each other, and to the Common Enemy, at this crisis, and specifically as affected by the Convention of Cintra; the whole brought to the test of those principles, by which alone the Independence and Freedom of Nations can be Preserved and Recovered."

In the essay, Wordsworth traced the history of the English and the Spaniards in their alliance against the French who were seeking in the peninsula war, to subjugate Spain and Portugal, emphasizing specially the moral basis of the union, and the supremacy of moral over physical force, the tyranny of the French, and the humiliation and suffering of the Spanish and Portuguese. He then called attention to the fact that when the British had defeated the French at Vimeiro and were apparently in a position to put speedy end to Napoleon's aggressions, their generals entered into a treaty by which the French alone actually profited, and in which the Spanish and Portuguese received less consideration than a common enemy. He vigorously protested against the action of the generals, accused them of having exceeded their authority, discoursed on the feelings of sorrow and indignation which their conduct aroused in England, and remarked on the attitude of the government against the people in their expression of sorrow and righteous anger.  

This work is important as a definite exposition of Wordsworth's political philosophy sixteen years after his "Letter to Bishop Watson." Here he seemed to consider the moral aspects of the case and his constant efforts were to apply principles of eternal verity. From the beginning he manifest-

ed a righteous indignation at what seemed to him a great injustice both to England and to her allies involved in the treaty. The paper resembled the spirit of Milton's vigorous pamphlets.¹

During the writing of the essay, Wordsworth composed several sonnets. One written in 1808, and published in 1815, bore the title "Composed while the Author was engaged in Writing a Tract - Occasioned by the Convention of Cintra, 1808." Here he considered the fate of Spain in the light of Napoleon's ambitious program. Not in the midst of a slavish, selfish, human world, but in the sublime school of nature did he weigh the hopes and fears of suffering Spain. He held in his heart the wrong and injustice done to this oppressed people, and tried to determine, with a measure of hope, what time would bring to them.

In 1809, Wordsworth wrote fourteen more sonnets which belong to the political group. They indicated how intensely interested he was in the political situation of the time, and how anxiously his mind and heart were fixed on the liberties of those who were the victims of Napoleon's campaign of subjugation. We can see Wordsworth in them, as a real champion of universal justice. Six of these sonnets related to the Tyrolese, and celebrated, for the most part, their resistance of the French. The first of them was addressed to Hofer, the principal leader of the Tyrolese, and memorialized the leadership of the godlike warrior, and the bravery of his undaunted followers.

The second is a spirited address to liberty to advance and move through the long chain of the Alps. The third called "Feelings of the Tyrolese" exploits the firm conviction of these brave people that it is their duty,

¹ Sneath, op. cit., p. 245.
"with weapons grasped in fearless hands,"¹ to assert their virtue and to vindicate mankind. The fourth questions the value of knowledge to elevate the will and make the passions subservient to reason in view of the fact that sapient Germany with all her great schools of learning, must lie depressed beneath the brutal sword. In contrasting her action with that of the Tyrolese, he said:

A few strong instincts and a few plain rules,
Among the herdsmen of the Alps, have wrought
More for mankind at this unhappy day
Than all the pride of intellect and thought.²

The remaining sonnets, belonging to the year 1809 deal with the political conditions of the time, with the fifth being a tribute to the moral purpose which animated those brave shepherds in their struggle against the invader, while in the last, he reproached Austria for her action in ceding the Tyrol to France. Many of these sonnets laud heroes that would not yield to Napoleon, such as Palafox and his band, the heroic defenders of Saragossa; Schill, the brave Prussian, who strove to liberate Germany from the power of the French. Gustavus IV, the Swede, "who never did to fortune bend the knee,"³ is given great praise and his conduct in this respect is contrasted with Napoleon’s in still another sonnet, "Look now on that Adventurer who hath Paid."

It goes without saying that aside from the work done from time to time on "The Excursion", nearly all of Wordsworth’s poetic activity in 1810 was engaged with political sonnets. Like those of the previous year, they re-

¹ "Feelings of the Tyrolese," 1. 14.
³ "Call not the Royal Swede Unfortunate," 1. 2.
late almost entirely to political events on the continent, and the brave resistance of the Spaniards to Napoleon. These sonnets like those dedicated to liberty and independence evince intense loyalty to man. There is no partisanship here, no provincial patriotism, no circumscribed love of freedom. Wordsworth loved liberty and justice not merely as an Englishman, but as a man and for all men. They belong to men as men, and the poet's soul is aflame with indignation when men are ruthlessly stripped of them whether they be his compatriots or not.

During these years, Wordsworth was just as ardently the patriot of the world as in the early part of the French Revolution, if not indeed, more so. He watched the course of events in Europe with profound emotion and anxious thought. Man was dear to his soul and the glorious principles of liberty and independence were conceived of as his birthright. His soul was stirred with just and profound indignation as he noted these principles threatened by the aggressions of a mighty power — a power apparently bent on subjugating the civilized world. Hence, the superb sonnets of this period breathe love of liberty and love of man, and hurl powerful denunciations at tyranny and the tyrant.¹

Finally within the sphere of politics, Wordsworth exhibited unusual qualities as a poet. His patriotic poems, especially the political sonnets, revealed his political ideas. He was comparatively free from blind partisanship, and a purely emotional patriotism. There was sanity in his political fervor. Moral ideals dominated his views and feelings. A profound love of country was tempered by a sublime sense of duty, which made him bold to re-

broke his own nation for shortcomings and failures. To him a government's power did not lie in might, but in right. Like the prophets of old, he lifted his voice against wickedness in high places. Neither was his patriotism provincial. In this respect, he was a citizen of the world. All men were loved as brothers; national limits did not constitute limits to his love; early he became a patriot of the world and remained such.  

Despising injustice and tyranny wherever he found it, he was champion and defender of the rights of men regardless of nationality. The poems which he dedicated to liberty and independence are, in this respect, a genuine contribution to English verse. As Myers so succinctly put it,  

They will bear comparison with the noblest productions of a literature rich in political poetry and prose, and are worthy of comparison with the noblest passages of patriotic verse or prose which all our history has inspired - the passages where Shakespeare brings his rays to focus on 'this earth, this realm, this England,' - or where the dread of national dishonor has kindled Chatham to an iron glas, or where Milton rises from the polemic into the prophet and Burke from the partisan into the philosopher...are not to be surpassed in poetic or political significance. He had not swayed senates, nor directed policies, not gathered into one ardent bosom all the spirit of a heroic age, but he had deeply felt that it is what makes the greatness of nations... No man more unwaveringly disdained unrighteous empire or kept the might of moral forces more steadfastly in view. Not Stein could place a manlier reliance on 'a few strong instincts and a few plain rules;' not Fichte could invoke more convincingly the 'great allies' which work with 'man's unconquerable mind.'

By this time the reader must be cognizant of the fact that the writer contends that Wordsworth's political development was consistent, that he maintained the principles of his earlier years though tempered, more and more as he aged, with conservatism. "The Prelude" being the most intimate revela-

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1 Ibid., p. 313.
2 Ibid.
3 George W. Myers, op. cit., p. 78.
tions of his experiences and personal beliefs was subject to changes which softened the statement of Wordsworth's earlier political views, making them more conservative and orthodox. The great variorum edition of this work by Ernest de Selincourt confirms this statement, for he has placed side by side two versions of the poem which was altered by Wordsworth between the time he began it, in the last decade of the eighteenth century, and its publication after his death.¹ For these reasons, the writer has not depended solely upon "The Prelude" in estimating the extent of the contrast between Wordsworth as he was before middle life and Wordsworth as he was after the profound change which came over him during middle life.

Two more reliable poems which mark the turning point in his life, the beginning of a seemingly complete reversal of his speculative views are "Ode to Duty," and "Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle." In the former he wrote,

I, loving freedom, and untried;
No sport of every random gust,
Yet being to myself a guide,
Too blindly have reposed my trust;
And oft, when in my heart was heard
Thy timely mandate, I deferred
The task, in smoother walks to stray;
But thee I now would serve more strictly,
If I may.

Through no disturbance of my soul,
Or strong compunction in me wrought,
I supplicate for thy control;
But in the quietness of thought;
Me this unchartered freedom tires;
I feel the weight of chance-desires;
My hopes no more must change their name,
I long for a repose that ever is the same.

Here Wordsworth expressed his view of the ultimate source of duty and
his belief in the physical world as governed by moral law. His attitude
toward man's freedom here, noted Stallknecht in Strange Seas, was different
from that expressed in "The Prelude." In the ode, Wordsworth had less con-

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defidence in man's ability to make his own moral decisions than he did in
"The Prelude." He seemed to be saying in the "Ode to Duty" that what urged
him on now, was not so much good counsel as habit; so that his condition is
not that he is able to do right, but rather that he is unable to do wrong. 2

Again in his "Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle,

Wordsworth declared,

I have submitted to a new control;
A power is gone, which nothing can restore;
A deep distress hath humanized my soul.

Not for a moment could I now behold
A smiling sea, and be what I have been;
The feeling of my loss will ne'er be old;
This, which I know, I speak with mind serene.

But welcome fortitude, and patient cheer,
And frequent sights of what is to be borne!
Such sights, or worse, as are before me here,—
Not without hope we suffer and we mourn. 3

1 "Ode to Duty," ll. 25-49.
2 N. P. Stallknecht, Strange Seas (New York, 1933), p. 76.
3 "Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle," ll. 34-40;
57-60.
Of this poem, Edith Batho says, "His grief turned him towards the Christian faith in the form it was familiar to him, and in a very considerable degree his acceptance of the terms and methods through which religion takes on a specifically Christian character was caused by political consideration." Wordsworth had in view the general welfare of his country as well as his own personal needs.

At an earlier stage, Wordsworth had swung far to one extreme in political and social philosophy; farther in that direction, he could hardly have gone. The apparent failure of the French Revolution and the real danger to English liberty from the ambitions of Napoleon necessitated the altering of his course unless he were to become futile. Real consistency demanded a readjustment of old principles to the new facts, rather than a reckless continuance in the course of protest.

The conservatism of friends with whom he was not associated had its effect on him, not the least among whom were Walter Scott, Sir George and Lady Beaumont. What was his stand in the middle years? It cannot be denied that his views on the whole subject of class distinctions were greatly modified. His admiration went out more and more to the privileged classes, to persons of distinction and to notable events in history. The poor and humble still figured in his poetry but in smaller proportions. Liberty remained dear to him, but equality which was a vastly more important and imperilled principle, now became a matter of doubt and endless qualifications. The change may not have amounted to apostasy, but it was certainly reactionary. The reaction

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was political rather than spiritual; physical rather than intellectual.¹

Even as late as 1808, he had not entirely abandoned the principles of
of the Enlightenment and insofar as he had done so, it was not on the grounds
of abstract preference, but because he was driven by the seeming logic of
events and the force of vulgar opinion. By 1813, his political opinions
had taken their final bent. In a letter to Wrangham, dated August 28, 1818,
he declared that he favoured "resistance of Bonaparte by force of arms and
adherence to the British Constitution in with-holding political power from
the Roman Catholics."² Later in a letter to Lord Lonsdale, dated February,
1814, he wrote, "If the Press be properly curbed, the Poor Laws gradually
reformed, provision made for new Churches to keep pace with the population
...order may yet be preserved among us, and the people remain free and
happy."³

Here Wordsworth seemed to be a respectable old Tory, fearing disorder and
the free press, depending on the church as an ally of the State, and disap-
proving of the present tendencies. He further admitted his willingness to
see an armed force cover the land for the sake of balance and gradation of
power.⁴

"The Excursion" of 1814 further demonstrates the failure of Revolutionary
hopes and the resulting prostration of those who held them. He made the
theme of his poem, what causes despondency, and by what means it may be over-
come. Book I bears a resemblance to earlier works in that the life of the

¹Ibid.
²Henry Reed, op. cit., p. 380.
³Ibid., p. 385.
⁴Harper, op. cit., p. 493.
poor is described as if from within, while war is considered from an economic standpoint and without regard for national pride, glory and honor.

A wanderer related the story of a poor woman whose happy home was broken up by the plague of war, but who endured her fate with quiet courage. The nine books of "The Excursion" vary greatly in content with the Sixth and Seventh Books giving a eulogy on the State and Church of England, and the Eighth criticizing science, the rise of the manufacturing industry and the degradation of the agricultural population, while the Ninth Book points out the value of state schools and compulsory education in eloquent terms.

Though Wordsworth deplored the degradation of the common people by the Industrial Revolution, he held out the hope of betterment through educational and humanitarian reforms. He referred to enemies of freedom and democracy as "half-honest men, and men of feeble purpose."\(^1\) Coleridge said of "The Excursion" and its author, "Wordsworth had become convinced by this time, through the joint operation of his own experience, feelings, and reason, that certain old truths were important which had been too much taken for granted or ignored."\(^2\)

Unquestionably, Wordsworth, at this stage of his development, was inclining in a direction and to an attitude which was the very opposite of that he had maintained under Godwin's influence. Though the poet recanted from the political philosophy of the Revolution, he still preserved those sympathies which made him the poet of the Revolution. He scorned the fundamental doctrine of aristocracy, namely, that God had seen fit, in his inscrut-

\(^1\) "The Excursion," V, 1. 850.
\(^2\) George W. Meyer, op. cit., p. 220.
able wisdom, to withhold from the mass of mankind the perception of those moral truths upon which political coherence depends.¹ In a passage of great eloquence, he asserted the equality of all men in the world of sense, reason, imagination, conscience and the assurance of immortality concluding:

The smoke ascends
To heaven as lightly from the cottage-hearth
As from the haughtiest palace. He, whose soul
Ponders this true equality, may walk
The fields of earth with gratitude, and hope;
Yet, in that meditation, will he find
Motive to sadder grief, as we have found;
Lamenting ancient virtues overthrown,
And for the injustice grieving, that hath made
So wide a difference between man and man.²

Wordsworth, in the middle years as we have had abundant opportunity to observe, deemed himself, and hitherto justly deemed himself, the Milton of his age. It is perhaps not too much to say that his chief interest was political. The peculiarities of his art were due to political principles. In the crisis of the age he felt it his duty to speak in behalf of the highest national good.³

Harper has well-labelled these years "The Crisis of Middle Life,"⁴ for indeed they mark the turning point in the life of Wordsworth about which so many critics have concerned themselves. The writer agrees with Harper who holds that many considerations after the Battle of Waterloo demanded that Wordsworth should devote his powers to stemming the tide of reaction. A people not naturally lustful for military glory had turned aside from peace-

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¹ Harper, op. cit., p. 495.
⁴ Ibid., p. 452.
ful pursuits to take part in a twenty years' war, and had been victorious. The nation was now absolutely safe from foreign danger. It had nothing further to gain from keeping up a great armament or fostering a war-like spirit. On the contrary, its industries being prostrate, its debt enormous, its taxation high and ill-apportioned, its working class impoverished and starving, its land-owners and capitalists in possession of undue advantage, its schools, colleges, scientific societies, and charities unsettled, what it needed was internal reform.

Public law had been tampered with by the authorities; the liberties of the people had been infringed; the progress of democracy had been checked; it seemed as if political and social idealists had been rebuked by some divine voice, and to the thunder of destiny meaner tongues did not fail to add their taunting chorus. It was a second Restoration without the personal corruption and the public glitter.

In consequence of these conditions existent in Wordsworth's native land, he, from this point and for the rest of his life, failed to see the vision of England eye to eye with his contemporaries; he rejoiced with the rejoicing, and seldom made a political prediction without discriminating thought and careful consideration. The decline in moral vigor which had first become apparent twelve or fourteen years earlier began more and more to manifest itself. Hence, Wordsworth appeared to many, on the surface, as the lost leader, "whose defection, accompanied as it was by regular face-about of his special party, was an event to deplore."

1 J. M. Thompson, op. cit., p. 460.
2 Ibid., p. 461.
3 Grosart, op. cit., I, Preface, p. xxxvii.
It is widely known that the period 1815-1850, with which this chapter is concerned, is one about which there has been a great deal of controversy and conjecture. Many critics and even contemporaries of Wordsworth have been inclined to advance diverse and often conflicting ideas concerning the changes in the political ideas of the later Wordsworth. Many charges have been made against the aging poet, not the least of which were: (1) that he recanted completely from earlier views, (2) that he became a teacher of subversive political doctrine, (3) that he was an apostate from the cause of liberty, (4) that he became a pacifist and repudiated much that he defended in his youth. Further, Wordsworth has been accused of deserting the Whigs and becoming indifferent and silent to the cause of nationalism. To English Whigs from 1830-1850, he was a deserter from liberalism, who, frightened by the French Revolution, had in later life become an out-and-out Tory. More than one writer has brought against him the charge of premature aging, of ossification, of timidity leading to a withdrawal into a comfortable conservatism. It has been alleged, finally, that he ceased after 1825 or 1826, to take any interest whatever in the political events of the day, and that he had written heroically and divinely against the tyranny of Napoleon, but was quite indifferent to the successive tyrannies, e.g. in Spain which disgraced the succeeding times.¹

The writer takes the position that there were changes in the later Wordsworth which one cannot fail to recognize, but that these changes were not as complete as many liberals of his day alleged, that his political revolution in sentiment was not as complete as some of his biographers and contemporaries represented it, and that Wordsworth's political development was a consistent development — a steady growth to a logical and reasonable end. The writer further holds that Wordsworth might have changed his mind on certain points, but as Hale White justly argued, "he would not have sanctioned, by continuing to write and reprint, poems which he had come to think definitely wrong or mistaken in their opinions."¹

That Wordsworth changed is common knowledge; on this point Wordsworth himself was in agreement for in 1821 he wrote in reply to a letter from his friend, Losh, inquiring about his alleged changes in political opinion:

I should think that I had lived to little purpose if my notions on the subject of government had undergone no modification. My youth must, in that case, have been without enthusiasm, and my manhood endued with small capacity of profiting by reflection. I abandoned France and her rulers when they abandoned the struggle for liberty, gave themselves up to tyranny, and endeavored to enslave the world. I disapproved of the war at its commencement... but after Bonaparte had violated the independence of Switzerland, my heart turned against him and against the nation that could submit to be the instrument of such outrage. Here it was that I parted, in feeling from the Whigs, and to a certain degree united with their adversaries....

There are three great domestic questions at hand, the liberty of the press, parliamentary reform, and Roman Catholic Concession.... A free discussion of public measures through the press, I deem the only safeguard of liberty; without it, I have neither confidence in kings, parliaments, judges, or divines, but the press, so potent for good, is scarcely less so for evil. I am therefore for vigorous restrictions. When I was young, I thought it derogatory to human nature to set up property in preference to person as a title for legislative power. That notion has vanished.... If any plan could be contrived for throwing the representation fairly into the hands of the property of

¹ Hale White, op. cit., p. 25.
the country and not leaving it so much in the hands of large proprietors as it now is, it should have my best support. 1

In a letter to Frederick Bentinak on his political affairs Wordsworth continued in the same vein:

What I am most afraid of is, alterations in the consistency, and in the duration of Parliament, which will bring it more and more under the dominion of the lower and lowest classes. On this account I fear the proposed Corporation Reform, as a step towards household suffrage, vote by ballot, etc. As to the union of the Tories and Whigs in Parliament, I see no prospect of it whatever. 2

Herein lie some of Wordsworth's political opinions and commitments stated in his own terms. What was the further extent and nature of Wordsworth's changes? Actual changes which the writer considers significant because they represent and reveal to a certain degree a new Wordsworth after 1815 were:

(1) a change in point of view and method of attack on world problems, (2) a growing apathy and indifference to English affairs, (3) a gradual expansion of patriotism and nationalism adapted to the main and immediate object of raising the spirit of England and elevating the moral tone, (4) a lessening of the fervor, ardour, passion, enthusiasm, and impatience with the onslaught of old age, (5) a gradual turn to the respectable, the conservative, the Tory position.

At the outset, the reader must recognize certain facts admitted by all competent critics as to Wordsworth's changes of opinion. As to his later years from 1815, Sir Leslie Stephen, a biographer of singular impartiality and one intimately acquainted with Wordsworth's life and work wrote,

He had become respectable and conservative. To the Liberals he

1 Prose Works, II, 268.
2 Ibid., p. 289.
appeared to be a renegade.... Wordsworth's "Thanksgiving Ode" of 1815... shows how completely he shared the conservative view. Although the evolution of his opinions was both honest and intelligible, it led to a practical alliance with Toryism. He took a keen interest in local politics, as appears from his letters to Lord Lonsdale... and in 1818, published two addresses to the Westmoreland freeholders in support of the Tory party. He was alarmed by the discontent of that period, and fully approved of the repressive measures. At a later period he was strongly opposed to Catholic emancipation, and thought the Reform Bill would lead to a disastrous revolution. In January 13, 1819, he was placed on the commission of the peace for Westmoreland.1

In 1793, the early Wordsworth anticipated no alternative to the violent destruction of tyrants, whereas in 1836, he had some hope of their peaceful conversion. This, the writer holds, constitutes a change. Revisions in Wordsworth's poems have been adduced to prove a change from the revolutionary to the conservative, however, careful consideration of "Descriptive Sketches" will establish that Wordsworth's thought had developed and deepened rather than completely changed. As late as 1820, the original ending of "Descriptive Sketches" survived with only few changes, still containing an unclouded anticipation of the new earth -

Nature, as in her prime, her virgin reign
Begins, and Love and Truth compose her train;
While with a pulseless hand, and steadfast gaze,
Unbreathing Justice her still beam surveys;2

whereas in 1836, Wordsworth substituted for them a passage which recognized that the new earth has not, in fact, come to maturity, but even here he was not despairing. Experience had taught him that men would not achieve their earthly paradise until they had striven for it in the right way and with right aims. The 1836 version reads,

1 Dictionary of National Biography, LXIII, 22.
2 "Descriptive Sketches," Original Version, ll. 780-784.
All cannot be; the promise is too fair
For creatures doomed to breathe terrestrial air,
Yet not for this will sober reason frown
Upon that promise, nor the hope disown,
She knows that only from high aims ensue
Rich guerdons, and to them alone are due.

Here Wordsworth averred that something would be achieved, though not all that is hoped for. This is not despair, and the passage which follows shows even more clearly how Wordsworth's thought had developed and deepened rather than totally changed. In the 1793 edition of "Descriptive Sketches," (ll. 792ff) the reader will note the bombast, the enthusiasm, and the assurance of Wordsworth:

O give, great God, to Freedom's waves to ride
Sublime o'er Conquest avarice, and Pride,
To break, the vales where Death with Famine scow'rs,
And dark Oppression builds her thick-ribb'd tow'rs;
Where Persecution decks with ghastly smiles
Her bed, his mountains and Ambition piles;
Where Discord stalks dilating, every hour,
Like lightnings eager for the Almighty Sword;
Give them, beneath their breast while Gladness springs
To brood the nations o'er with Nile-like wings;
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.

In the last revision of 1836, the bombast has been removed and the grammar simplified with the result that the lines (now 652-66) are more effective in their anticipation of the irresistible advance of Freedom:

Great God! by whom the strifes of men are weighed
In an impartial balance, give thine aid
To the just cause; and, oh! do thou preside
Over the mighty stream now spreading wide.

1 Ibid., Version of 1836, ll. 645-50.
2 Ibid., Original Version, ll. 792-801.
So shall its waters, from the heavens supplied
In copious showers, from earth by wholesome springs,
Brood o'er the long-parched lands with Nile-like wings
And grant that every sceptred child of clay,
Who cries, presumptuous, "Here the flood shall stay,"
May in its progress see thy guiding hand,
And cease the acknowledged purpose to withstand;
Or swept in anger from the insulted shore,
Sink with his servile bands, to rise no more.1

Here we note the change to which was previously referred, namely, Wordsworth's later hope for the peaceful conversion of tyrants. This hope that the world may be set free without bloodshed or violence is not obvious in this particular poem until 1836, but as early as 1794 Wordsworth, writing to his friend Matthews, expressed his horror of the revolutionary violence which he had certainly not condemned a year before:

I conceive that a more excellent system of civil policy might be established amongst us; yet, in my ardour to attain the goal, I do not forget the nature of the ground where the race is to be run. The destruction of those institutions which I condemn appears to me to be hastening on too rapidly. I recoil from the bare idea of a Revolution.... When I observe the people should be enlightened upon the subject of politics, I severely condemn all inflammatory addresses to the passions of men, even when it is intended to direct those passions to a good purpose.2

Many years later, April 1, 1832, Wordsworth wrote, "I have witnessed one revolution in a foreign country, and I have not courage to think of facing another of our own."3 This is sometimes quoted as evidence of political timidity, but it is no stronger than the words of his letter of 1794, when at twenty-four years of age, Wordsworth was thought to be filled with reckless, radical, revolutionary ardour. Even two years earlier in a letter to

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1 Ibid., Version of 1836, 11. 652-72.
2 Reed, op. cit., p. 278.
3 Ibid., p. 300.
Matthews he had shown more steadiness and coolness of judgment than most of his critics would allow him at that time. He wrote in 1793,

It will be impossible to make any material alteration in the Constitution to reinstate the clergy in their ancient guilty splendour, impossible to give an existence to the 'noblesse' similar to that it before enjoyed, impossible to add much to the authority of the king.¹

It is obvious that Wordsworth, at the height of his revolutionary ardour was aware of opposition and as time passed he became less and less willing to expose his own country to anguish which might be prevented by the methods of patience.²

To agree with Crabb Robinson that Wordsworth "lost his love of liberty, not his humanity but his confidence in mankind,"³ is to disqualify the letters and poems of the writer himself as evidence of his political views, which remained in later life consistent in principle with early views and only changed in method of attack, and in the obvious lessening of enthusiasm and fervor.

Wordsworth was also cognizant of the fact that men accused him of inconsistency and desertion. In a pert retort of 1818, he said, "If I were addressing those who have dealt so liberally with the words 'renegade', 'apostate', etc., I should retort the charge upon them, and say 'You have been deluded by places and persons while I have stuck to principles."⁴ Wordsworth pointed out what those principles were to which he stuck; that there ought to be sympathy for the Liberal and Nationalist Party in other coun-

¹ Prose Works, II, 76.
² Edith Batho, op. cit., p. 127.
³ Crabb Robinson, op. cit., p. 68.
⁴ Prose Works, III, 67.
tries, but that sympathy gave no title to interfere in the domestic concerns of those countries.1

It seems unfair to suggest that Wordsworth became a pacifist in the usual sense of the term, but it is possible to observe his becoming more and more uncertain of the good of employing violence even in the righteous cause of freedom. He finally deemed violence as the last, most desperate, weapon to be used. Note for instance his "Ode of 1815,"

Thy most dreaded instrument,
In working out a pure intent,
Is man - arrayed for mutual slaughter,
Yea, carnage is thy daughter!2

No more in 1809 and 1815 than in 1833, did he consider war and turmoil desirable, and as he grew older, he grew firmer in his trust in the justice of the cause, whether the cause were a struggle with Napoleon, the freeing of Italy, or the spread of political freedom in England itself. What he experienced was not a failure of courage, but an increase of faith, combined with a clearer comprehension of the dangers of internecine strife.3

Wordsworth’s views on political conditions in England itself were those of an idealist with a strong sense of reality and history. He concerned himself with the state of England as it was in consequence of centuries of slow growth, with the problem of bringing about reforms that, in an imperfect world of imperfect men ruled by passion more than by reason, would not do more harm than good. He considered the problem of uniting liberty and

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1 Ibid.
3 Edith Batho, op. cit., p.146.
stability at a time when both were threatened by social changes, by a long war and a peace, which did not bring all the relief that was hoped from it.\footnote{Ibid., p. 153.}

In matters of internal politics, Wordsworth acted on two constant principles. One was that of the necessity of managing political reforms so that they did not bring about anarchy, reaction, and the repetition of the struggle for liberty. The other, the more fundamental, was that of the necessity of unity within the country. On one side, this principle combined with early loyalties and an innate and increasing love of old and familiar things to produce what his distressed Liberal friends called Toryism and his enemies called apostasy. On the other, it combined with indignant compassion and the sense of the nobility of man to produce what was so far in advance of most contemporary radicalism as not to be recognized for the dangerous stuff that it was.\footnote{Ibid.}

Did Wordsworth desert the Whigs? Wordsworth never deserted the Whigs, for he had never been a Whig. In his youth, he was a Republican, and from 1802 (for thirteen years at least) he was the ally and the friend of Tories with whom he agreed on the leading questions of the day.\footnote{A. V. Dicey, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 107.} Wordsworth had many general objections to the Whigs; they had not behaved well during the war, particularly during the later stages of it; they had conducted themselves, as he put it, "more like allies to a military despot, who was attempting to enslave the world, and to whom their own country was an object
of paramount hatred, than like honest Englishmen, who breathed the air of liberty from their cradles.\footnote{Prose Works, III, 264.} He looked upon them as men who, at the supreme crisis of England's fate, had failed as a party in their duty to their country. To unite with the Whigs was to Wordsworth an impossibility. He preferred to help to keep the Whigs out, rather than to trust to the moderating effect of power which has been noted in governments of a later day. The best way to keep them out was to help the Tories to get in; but disapproval of the Whigs did not, for him, connote approval of the Tories, who were already only comparatively, not positively deserving.

Wordsworth pointed out that the faults of the Tory government were the failure to uphold the Established Church and encouragement of her adversaries, and far worse, neglect of the sufferings of the poor, whose cause was not a subject of popular clamour, but whose severance from the rich was the greatest of national dangers. In his Address to the Free Holders of Westmoreland in 1818, he made this clear when he said,

\ldots I must express my disapprobation of the patronage afforded by several persons in power, to a society by which is virtually propagated the notion that Priesthood, and of course our own inestimable Church Establishment, is superfluous. I condemn their sanction of the malevolent and senseless abuse heaped upon the Clergy in the matter of Tythes, through the medium of papers circulated by the Agricultural Board. I deprecate the course which some of them take in the Catholic Question, as unconstitutional; and deplore the want of discernment evinced by men who persuade themselves that the discontents prevalent in Ireland will be either removed or abated by such concessions. With these errors and weaknesses the members of the administration (as appears to me) may be justly reproached, and still heavier charges will lie against them if the correction of the Poor Law be longer deferred.\footnote{Prose Works, II, 287-288.}

Worse than the disunity caused by religious and political opinions in the
governing classes was the disunity caused by diversity of interest between governors and the governed, between rich and poor, and in a smaller sphere between servants and masters. ¹ It was the gravest of his accusations against the Ministry in 1818 that they were ignoring the necessity for Poor Law reform. This social reform, generally, and Parliamentary reform are all connected in Wordsworth's mind.

A survey almost strictly chronological such as the writer has made in the foregoing chapter will bring out the connection of the subjects and the essential consistency of Wordsworth's thought. From time to time his opinion of the expediency of details varies, and at one period he seemed to be denouncing what, both before and after, he acknowledged to be the idea, but "Wordsworth always ended with a corrected version of his first ideas."² It is to neglect half of the evidence to assert that there was any fundamental change in his principles of action. The letter addressed, though not sent, to the Bishop of Llandaff in 1793, expressed in the strongest terms the poet's early political ideas. It was the work of a young man of generous enthusiasms but little experience, who believed that a few changes in the external arrangements of society would, men being naturally reasonable, lead to complete happiness. Universal and equal suffrage, recourse to a referendum before laws are finally passed, parliaments of short duration, the prohibition of re-election after a certain period of service³—these would prove to be remedies for almost all the evils of society. There was much

¹ Ibid., p. 290.
² Edith Batho, op. cit., p. 165.
³ Compare Wordsworth's "Letter to the Bishop," 1793, with his letter to Lady Frederick Bentinak on his political affairs, 1832. Prose Works, I, 76; also II, 289.
immaturity of thought here, but much also which Wordsworth retained to the end of his life. Universal and equal suffrage, for example, he looked upon in later years as an unmitigated evil if it were granted hastily to those who were not ready to receive it, but it still remained for him the ultimate goal.

It is not enough either to say simply that Wordsworth was in 1818 supporting the Lowther candidates, and that he had therefore accepted the Tory view of politics, or that his plea for gradual reform was in effect a plea to let things remain as they were. As we have had ample opportunity to see, he took the opportunity to speak severely of the Tory government. But though he could not altogether approve of the Tories, they were at least better than the Whigs. They had at least taken the right attitude towards Napoleon, and if a Tory government were sufficiently egged on by its supporters, it might carry through reforms of social miseries and even of parliamentary representation at a pace which would not endanger the stability of society.¹

Wordsworth was engaged in practical politics for one whole year, 1818, during which time he sought to manipulate the local franchise so as to increase his party's vote. He served as Lord Lonsdale's lieutenant and defended the Tory candidate, William Lowther, against Henry Brougham, whom the Whigs had set up. It seems to be parliamentary representation which convinced many of Wordsworth's critics that he had become a thorough Tory. In 1809, he had written to Daniel Stuart, "Books will do nothing of themselves nor institutions without books. Two things are absolutely wanted in

¹ Edith Bathe, op. cit., p. 170.
this country - a thorough reform in Parliament and a new course of education.\(^1\) Parliamentary reform and education were already closely connected in his mind. Two months later, on May 25, writing again to Stuart and speaking more fully on parliamentary reform, Wordsworth had written,

The misfortune of this question of reform is that the one party sees nothing in it but dangers, and the other nothing but hopes and promises. For my part, I think the dangers and difficulties great, but not insurmountable. Whereas if there be not a reform, the destruction of the liberties of the country is inevitable.\(^2\)

Wordsworth was not opposed to parliamentary reform, but a reform which would have satisfied him would not have been one which satisfied the Whig large proprietors any more than it would have pleased most Tories; it would have been one which gave a predominant influence to those classes which seemed to him to contribute most to the best life of the country.\(^3\)

It is important to realize that, as he saw it, nothing but evil could be expected from any change in parliamentary representation which shifted the balance of political power to any marked extent more particularly if a heavy advantage were suddenly given to men who were unaccustomed to any reckonings but those of financial profit and loss. It was natural that a man who had, in his youth seen face to face the violence of the revolutionary struggle in France, should have felt the danger of the Reform Act becoming the commencement of anarchy and revolution in England. Most interesting of his letters on this point is the one to Lord Lonsdale in 1831, immediately preceding the Reform Act, in which he stated that "the scheme of

\(^1\) Reed, op. cit., p. 315.
\(^2\) Ibid., p. 320.
\(^3\) Edith Batho, op. cit., p. 179.
regulating representation by arbitrary lines of property or numbers was
impracticable, and such distinctions would melt away before the inflamed
passions of the people.\(^1\)

Wordsworth's constant mind is revealed here through citations from
earlier writings, but there are other evidences of later date which should
not be overlooked, of which this extract from a letter, February 1832, is
very typical:

Could a conservative Ministry be established, the certain ruin
that will follow on the passing of this bill might be avoided.
Thousands of respectable people have supported both bills...from
fear that otherwise no reform at all would take place. Such men
would be ready to support more moderate plans if they found the
executive in hands that could be relied upon.\(^2\)

The Reform Bill of 1832, which Wordsworth disliked, was passed, and some
of his poems of 1833 expressed his apprehensions of coming trouble, but it
is characteristic of him that he included one which looked beyond the stormy
immediate future to better times - he could never despair ultimately of Eng¬
land. Thus he wrote,

\begin{quote}
Despond who will - I heard a voice exclaim,
'Though fierce the assault, and shatter'd the defence,
It cannot be that Britain's social frame,
The glorious work of time and providence,
Before a flying season's rash pretence
Should fall; that She, whose virtue put to shame,
When Europe prostrate lay, the conqueror's aim,
Should perish, self-subverted.' Black and dense
The cloud is; but brings that a day of doom to Liberty?\(^3\)
\end{quote}

Wordsworth himself protested against being called an Anti-Reformer, and
explained his objections to the Bill after it became an act, in a letter to

\(^1\) Reed, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 316.
\(^2\) Ibid., p. 318.
\(^3\) "Poems Composed or Suggested During a Tour in 1833," \textit{ibid.}, 11. 1–9. XXI.
Crabb Robinson in 1833, and declared that "an unbridled Democracy is the worst of all Tyrannies."¹ What he disliked most was the shifting of the balance of power to one class, and the artificial uniformity of the franchise. The consequences which Wordsworth saw to the Reform Act did not follow as quickly as he expected, nor were they as violent as he predicted, but the Bristol Riots, and the July Revolution² which stirred up all the revolutionary elements in England did, as Wordsworth insisted, show want of courage in yielding to the threat of force; there was plenty of inflammable matter about, if there had been such leaders ready in England as there had been in France.

Wordsworth was then a prophet, as much as he was a Tory or a conservative. His disapproval of the Reform Act was due to his conviction that it was a hasty and ill-considered attempt to deal with problems which needed careful and gradual solution. It promised far more than it could perform and Wordsworth did not see in political changes of this kind which the Reform Act introduced any real remedy for the social evils which arose from human sin and folly. His faith in governments did not increase with age, but his faith in his fellows, though it was sometimes staggered, was never destroyed.³

In the last years of his life, indeed, he is more easily recognizable than ten or twenty years earlier, as the same man who in the nineties had declared that if there was a single man in Great Britain who had no suf-

¹ Reed, op. cit., p. 322.
³ Edith Batho, op. cit., p. 191.
frage in the election of the representatives, the will of the nation was not generally expressed.\(^1\) He did again look forward to a time when education and general enlightenment had done their work. Wordsworth on the question of Chartism here comes to the foreground. He disliked intensely the proposal of the secret ballot, which he regarded as both cowardly and likely to lead to fraud. This is held by some critics to be proof of reactionary views. However, as late as 1846, Thomas Cooper, a Chartist leader and author, recorded in his *Cooper's Journals* and reprinted in his autobiography of 1872, a conversation that passed between Wordsworth and himself which sheds great light on Wordsworth's attitude towards Chartism. Cooper, when just out of prison for some form of sedition, called on Wordsworth. He was at once received; he was astounded and cheered by the dictum of the poet,

You Chartists are right: you have a right to votes, only you take the wrong way to obtain them. You must avoid physical violence. There will be great changes on the continent when the present King of the French dies. The different government will have to give constitutions to their people, for knowledge is spreading, and constitutional liberty is sure to follow. The people are sure to have the franchise as knowledge increases; but you will not get all you seek at once, and you must never seek it again by physical force; it will only make you longer about it.\(^2\)

Here in Wordsworth, at the age of seventy-six, the spirit of the old revolutionist and of the friend of the Girondins was still alive. He might not have thought much of the Whigs, but within four years of his death, Wordsworth was certainly no Tory.

In 1843, Wordsworth avowed that he was a Democrat; in 1844, he was accused of having protested against the proposed railway through the Lake Dis-

\(^1\) Note e. g. chap. 2, p. 12.

trict and of condemning machinery. In reality, it was not the use of machines, but the exploiting of human beings as if they too were machines that he condemned. As to the railroads, he did not object to the fixing of a terminus at the Bowness end of Windermere, but his objections were the reasonable ones— that access to the Lakes was already easy and further railways would spoil the very seclusion which is one of the charms of the Lake District.  

Wordsworth's principles may have led him into bad political economy, but they were principles of humanity, and he, himself, would have accepted almost as a compliment, the accusation of bad political economy with which his critics so profusely labelled him. If he was mistaken, it was in the direction of humanity, in the same direction as a generous-minded labour leader. In his "Postscript of 1835", Wordsworth opposed Trade Unions, but it was on the grounds that such unions made their members slaves to their leaders. He preferred to urge cooperation, justice from masters to men, and the formation of co-operative societies. In reality, apart from names, Wordsworth in these later years, was upholding the ideals of his youth: Liberty, Fraternity, and even Equality, since the latter was endangered by class war far more than by any other foe.

Education came first in his list of requirements; the wanderer in the Ninth book of "The Excursion" had urged the necessity of elementary education provided by the state, and thirty years later, when he dictated the

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1 Edith Batho, op. cit., p. 205.
2 Ibid.
4 Edith Batho, op. cit., p. 311.
Wordsworth still maintained his point of view. Let us note what he had to say in 1843.

Reviewing at this late period, 1843, what I put into the mouths of my interlocutors a few years after the commencement of the century, I grieve that so little progress has been made in diminishing the evils deplored, or promoting the benefits of education which the "Wanderer" anticipates.

Still concerned with the dangerous ignorance of the working class, Wordsworth wrote to Crabb Robinson, December 8, 1844,

We are all much concerned for the distracted state of the Church, and the labouring poor. As to the former, it may in time work to some good, for the latter, I cannot foresee any material benefit. They multiply in all directions, the standard of civilization being so low among them, evil proceeding from ignorance for which the upper classes have not virtue enough to prepare a remedy or material palliation.

On the positive side, Wordsworth went further than many of his philanthropic contemporaries by pointing out that it was not only the poor who needed educating. He had written in 1808, "begin your education at the top of society; let the head go in the right course, and the tail will follow." Twenty years later in writing to Montagu, he still maintained the same idea when he said,

We are on fire with zeal to educate the poor, which would be all very well if that zeal did not blind us to what we stand still more in need of, an improved education of the middle and upper classes; which ought to begin in our great public schools, thence ascend to the universities and descend to the very nursery.

Wordsworth's ideal of education then was the free development of the whole being, without forcing interference, or a too patronizing attitude towards

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1 Reed, op. cit., p. 403.
2 Ibid., p. 406.
3 Ibid., p. 200.
the poor, who are, Wordsworth repeated more than once, not the only people who needed to be educated.

The question of Negro Slavery has been mentioned as one of the iniquities on which Wordsworth was not outspoken, but a study of his correspondence and his autobiography will reveal that he expressed his readiness to do what he could to help the cause of abolition in the United States. Mary Howitt, in the summer of 1845, gave a lively account derived from her husband who was visiting Wordsworth when an American general called and advocated slavery. Wordsworth’s answer was, “Think of the man coming, of all things, to this house with a defence of slavery! But he got nothing by it. Mr. Howitt and I gave it to him pretty well.”

Furthermore in a letter to Benjamin Dockray he wrote,

No man can deplore more than I do a state of slavery in itself. I do not only deplore; but I abhor it, if it could be got rid of without the introduction of something worse, which I fear would not be the case with respect to the West Indies, if the question be dealt with in the way many excellent men are so eagerly set upon. Wordsworth pointed out repeatedly in this letter to Dockray that he abhorred slavery but he also pointed out the indubitable facts that in many states of society it had been a check upon worse evils, that certain unwise abolitionists had incited West Indian Negroes to attack their former masters, and that the English people, “having formerly sanctioned and even encouraged slavery, have no right now to try to get out of the business cheaply.”

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1 Ibid., p. 415.
2 Ibid., p. 417.
3 Ibid.
On another form of man's inhumanity to man, the penal system, Wordsworth's later utterances have given great offence because humanitarians have noted that he opposed the complete abolition of the penalty of death, without investigation of his arguments.\(^1\) In the "Sonnets upon the Punishment of Death," written in 1839, when its abolition for certain offences had led to the consideration of its entire abolition, Wordsworth thought aloud, as he often did in so many of his poems.

His conclusions in this matter were not, except in one respect, inconsistent with his earlier thought. Let us recall that in his early letter to the Bishop, he had defended the right of the State to use violence in order to establish peace and right government. That argument is repeated in the "Sonnets", particularly the eighth, but some of his other arguments seem inconsistent, for instance: the victims of the criminal after all deserve as much compassion as the criminal (III); death is not the greatest of evils (IV, IX, XII),\(^2\) or even the least merciful of punishments; imprisonment for life is far more hopeless and cruel, and transportation for life, which he had favored in the Godwinian days when he wrote "The Convict," Wordsworth was now tempted to refute. He concluded that the certainty and approach of death might lead to the criminal's repentance:

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Ah, think how one compelled for life to abide
Locken in a dungeon needs must eat the heart
Out of his own humanity, and part
With every hope that mutual cares provide;
And, should a less unnatural doom confide
In life-long exile on a savage coast,
Soon the relapsing penitent may boast
Of yet more heinous guilt, with fiercer pride.
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\(^1\) Edith Batho, op. cit., p. 222.

\(^2\) "Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death." Poetical Works, pp. 761-64.

Compare point of view with that expressed in "The Convict." Ibid., p. 62.
Hence thoughtful Mercy, mercy sage and pure,  
Sanctions the forfeiture that Law demands,  
Leaving the final issue in His hands  
Whose goodness knows no change,  
Whose love is sure, who sees, foresees;  
Who cannot judge amiss,  
And waits at will the contrite soul to bliss.¹

Wordsworth was a merciful man and hoped that the awful rod might at last drop from "Law's firm hand for lack of use."² There were grave doubts of the validity quoted by opponents of capital punishment with the object of proving that it was no longer necessary, but in spite of these doubts, in the last decade of his life, Wordsworth had not lost faith in the possibility of a golden world.³

¹ Sonnet XI, ibid., p. 763.  
² Ibid., XIII, ll. 13-14.  
³ Edith Batho, op. cit., p. 225.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

For the purpose of this study the writer has divided Wordsworth's political activity into four periods: (1) the years from 1789 to 1793 when Wordsworth entered into the consciousness of his youth, the period of fervent raptures and visionary powers of eye and soul; (2) from 1793 to 1798 when his patriotism superseded his devotion to wild theories; (3) from 1798 to 1815 when he felt it was his duty to marshal the forces of England against the menace of Napoleon, and (4) from 1815 through the remainder of his life, when he devoted a good bit of his time to domestic affairs and seemed fearful that England might follow the course of France with its unbridled democracy.

During the first twenty-one years of the poet's life, he had not looked at man in his more serious social relationships. When he first went to France, he was not interested in social problems. Nature was to him all in all, yet he was interested in people, in human nature. Wordsworth was then, during this period, blank politically. He was no republican; he was no Whig. Politics held no place in his thinking.

Leaving the university, Wordsworth landed in France in the midst of intense revolutionary times, young and sensitive, with the intention of enjoying the landscape and learning the French language. He passed through Paris untouched by the deeper significance of the Revolution. First at Orleans, and later at Blois, for a while, he lived in disinterested quiet in his place of abode.

This might be considered a strange indifference on the part of a youth newly graduated from Cambridge with its lively interest in contemporary po-
itical affairs, for the Revolution had begun some two years earlier and had not failed to shake all England. He had visited London in the midst of the parliamentary debates for and against English sympathy with France, and he had, no doubt, at least heard discussed Burke's strong reply to all revolutionary principles. He admitted a cautious and conservative aloofness in spite of his youthful interest when he said:

Like others, I had skimmed and sometimes read
With care, the master-pamphlets of the day;
Nor wanted such half-insight as grew wild
Upon that meagre soil, helped out by talk
And public news; but having never seen
A chronicle that might suffice to show
When the main organs of the public power
Had sprung, their transmigrations, when and how
Accomplished, giving thus unto events
A form and body; all things were to me
Loose and disjointed, and the affections
Left without a vital interest.  

Here are both of the main characteristics of the poet at work. He did not lack the enthusiasm of youth for the Revolution, but he was held in check by his sturdy reason that demanded more than emotionalism. He needed proof of the legitimacy of the cause. He insisted on ocular proof. No one who would understand Wordsworth the man must overlook this dual nature so strong in him that in his political thinking he is practically always as much Tory as Whig and yet neither at any one time. Such was Wordsworth when he settled at Blois.

It was during his stay in France that Wordsworth was first awakened politically. When he saw mankind being exploited, when he saw and sensed the suffering of the poor, he became violently enthusiastic for the cause of the French and what the French Revolution promised - Liberty, Equality, and

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Fraternity. Wordsworth threw himself wholeheartedly into the fray and would have definitely joined the revolutionary forces if he had not been compelled to return home by his uncle and the lack of funds.

Aflame with enthusiasm for the Revolution and hope for its ultimate success, Wordsworth returned home in December, 1792. One might say that he had given his heart to France and when England joined forces with the enemies of France, he was more than shocked; he was confounded. His devotion to France had become superior to his patriotism; he rejoiced in the defeats of the English, for Britain opposed the liberties of France.

In 1793, Wordsworth came under the influence of Godwin, who advocated that men needed but to know the right to follow it, and it was this doctrine of reason that sustained him during the years 1793 and 1797 — extremely difficult years for one whose hopes lay in France. He clung to France tenaciously and essentially to his old attitude toward the Revolution throughout his life. But a change came in France, and he found his old patriotic love awakening. France was no longer fighting for her own freedom but for conquest. Here was a change in circumstance. England's cause was now just, and from 1802 to 1815, the strength of Wordsworth's attack was against Napoleon, the enemy of England and national freedom. The poems of this period literally breathe defiance and contempt for Napoleon and insist on nationalism. Wordsworth had an abiding faith in and love for England and he saw clearly that Napoleon meant the destruction of national boundaries.

It is no wonder that Wordsworth emerged from his long fight against Napoleon for nationalism, more of a conservative than he had appeared before. As a matter of fact, he was older. And the years usually bring moderation and circumspection. He had seen the horrors and mistakes of the Revolution
and shuddered to think of their repetition on English soil. Thus somewhat awe-stricken at the extreme to which man would go when given unbridled freedom, Wordsworth recoiled. The sub-current of conservatism lying dormant in him and so inherent because of his early training and home life now come to the foreground. But even in the conservatism of maturity Wordsworth was by no means a Tory, and far from being a political apostate, Wordsworth was a good bit of a trail-blazer. He was following the dictates of a consciousness controlled by the conditioning of his childhood. The whole of his childhood seems to point to independence and individualism, strength of courage and love of freedom. There was, again, the conservative influence of his mother in those few early years, and though she allowed him freedom, she must have taken special care to instruct this doubtful lad in the way of constraint and convention.

Such was the main course of Wordsworth's political ideas, and such the probable causes of the paradox between his early and later political faith and practical acts. However much some may insist on calling him a "lost leader" the facts of his life and writings reveal him as ever constant to his own highest ideals, sincere and honest in every way. Truly, he was neither Whig nor Tory, but a strong adherent to first principles in his political thinking.

Wordsworth was from the beginning to the end, passionate against injustice and wrong, but he saw that their roots went deeper than he had realized in the years of the French Revolution, and that remedies must be more profound. It was neither strange nor indicative of retrogression that he came, in his old age, to trust in the slow and patient processes of divine action and in those gradual changes in human institutions which imitate them, rather
than in the hasty measures which promise well and lead to confusion.

In 1838, Wordsworth in "Blest Statesman He Whose Mind's Unselfish Will," the fourth in a group of sonnets dedicated to Liberty and Order, summed up his final political stand when he said,

Perilous is sweeping change all chance unsound.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

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