

FROM REVOLUTION TO REVELATION -

STUDIES IN WORDSWORTH'S POETRY 1793-1798.

by

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Arts with Honours

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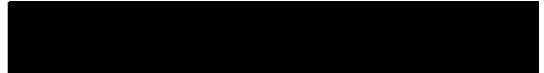
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-Studies in Wordsworth's Poetry 1793-1798

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Synopsis

This thesis traces the development in Wordsworth's faith in the millennial possibilities of revolution from its origins in the enthusiasm for political change generated by the French Revolution to its culmination in the faith achieved through revelation, through the imagination. Dealing extensively with the poetry leading up to The Lyrical Ballads, this thesis examines the significant, evolving idea of revolution from a sense of the millennial possibilities inherent in outward political change in society to the discovery of the possibilities of a revolution arising from within man, through the imagination. Essentially, the imagination is seen to have both a political origin, and a political as well as spiritual and aesthetic function.

Recently published poems, variants, and reconstructions from this period, The Salisbury Plain poems, The Borderers, The Ruined Cottage and The Pedlar, have thrown new light on a vital and formative development in Wordsworth's thinking and poetry. As Wordsworth's revolutionary faith changed from that in outward political change to a belief in change coming from within, his poetry underwent a transformation as he attempted to accommodate his evolving vision with appropriate forms. There is, consequently, a change from his earlier incendiary poetry of social protest to a more meditative and introspective, though still functionally political, poetic.

Rather than taking Wordsworth's later descriptions of the French Revolution and the subsequent discovery of the redemptive power of the imagination, central to The Prelude, The Recluse, and The Excursion, this thesis explores the growth, importance, and implications of a major idea in Wordsworth's poetry more directly, as it was occurring.

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INTRODUCTION

Much of Wordsworth's poetry composed during the 1790's was the product of a profound change in consciousness originating with the French Revolution. Wordsworth's early poetry charts and later, less directly, reflects a generation's hope for a new order of things and its disillusionment following upon the collapse of republican France. However, though disenchantment was to dominate Wordsworth's poetry for a time, it was to give way to Wordsworth's vision of the redemptive interchange between Nature and the human mind. Later, Wordsworth would attempt to show in his major works The Prelude, The Excursion, and the fragmentary Recluse, that the failure of the most important political revolution of his time could be subsumed in the triumph of the imagination, in a cognitive revolution originating from within man.

M.H. Abrams¹, Jonathan Wordsworth² and E.P. Thompson³ have recently commented on the millennialist expectations that were current in England prior and subsequent to the French Revolution. Coupled with this was the optimism in the power of human reason and a purely secular society which had come into being with the Enlightenment. The outbreak of revolution in France was seen by many, including Wordsworth, to be the beginning of a new age. The French Revolution was seen initially as the moment in which man would achieve the divinity latent within him through the radical reordering of society's political structure. In essence, chiliast and Enlightenment views of man and society coincided, producing the expectation that the new order could be realized in the present through the agency of human reason.

Between 1793 and the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century the vision informing Wordsworth's poetry remained essentially millennialist in nature. However, a shift had taken place within his vision of man, society, and Nature. His earlier poetry, Descriptive Sketches and the Salisbury Plain poems reveal Wordsworth's faith in man's capacity to transform society and the ground of his moral being through change in the external world. Following Paine, Godwin, and the French radicals, Wordsworth's early poetry testifies to the Enlightenment's faith in the possibilities of human reason in realizing man's perfectability. Descriptive Sketches and the Salisbury Plain poems

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- 1 M.H. Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism, Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature, (Norton; New York, 1971), pp.32-71.
 - 2 Jonathan Wordsworth, William Wordsworth, The Borders of Vision, (Oxford at the Clarendon Press; Oxford, 1982), pp.340-378.
 - 3 E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, (Penguin; Harmondsworth, 1968), pp.19-11, 385-441.

address themselves to social injustice and the need to achieve liberty and equality through the radical, egalitarian, restructuring of political institutions.

Subsequent to the subsidence of the Revolution into the Reign of Terror and its attendant bloodbath, Wordsworth's poetry reflects the uncertainty, doubt and despair of betrayed idealism. Its mainly fragmented and experimental quality reflects a loss of certainty and direction. While The Borderers is a rejection of the revolutionary belief in the apocalyptic power of human reason, it stands at the nadir of Wordsworth's disenchantment and alienation. However, during this period of spiritual turbulence a regenerative vision of man and Nature was also evolving. Wordsworth's philosophy of "The One Life" was also to be chiliastic in character. Rather than emphasizing man's potential to achieve change and perfectability by radically transforming the external world through reason, revolution could be achieved within man through the transformation of consciousness. For Wordsworth, Paradise could be achieved in the present through a revolution within man, revelation, rather than in the external world.

Traditionally accepted views of Wordsworth's intellectual and poetic development have usually been based on the account given in The Prelude. However, when poetry actually written during this period is examined, some variation with The Prelude becomes apparent. Rather than a series of abrupt and dramatic changes in outlook, a more even evolution becomes apparent. At first glance there is a clear cut division in Wordsworth's revolutionary beliefs. The early period of revolutionary enthusiasm between 1791 and 1794 corresponds with some degree of hindsight with poetry written between 1793 and 1796. The disillusionment and confusion with which Wordsworth's revolutionary engagement concludes becomes apparent in The Borderers. The subsequent change in Wordsworth's outlook, his turning to Nature and the imagination, finds expression in The Lyrical Ballads, The Ruined Cottage and The Pedlar.

The recovery and reconstruction of much of Wordsworth's earlier poetry has allowed a more accurate picture of Wordsworth's growth to emerge. Though de Selincourt's inclusion of variants and fragments from 1793 to 1796 throws some light on this period, the editions of early manuscripts and reconstructions recently published by Jonathan Wordsworth, Steven Parish and Stephen Gill in the Cornell editions of Wordsworth's poetry have enabled a more detailed and accurate picture of a vital period in Wordsworth's growth to be made. As drafts and revisions to the poetry written between 1793 and 1796 make clear, Wordsworth's development from radical revolutionary sympathizer to prophet of a redemptive vision of the human mind and nature did not occur in clearly distinct stages but in a process of continuing evolution.

The revisions of 1794 to Descriptive Sketches, The Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff and A Night on Salisbury Plain can be seen as inflammatory calls for revolution in society to remediate social inequality and the suffering of the poor. However, with the revisions to A Night on Salisbury Plain and the emergence of a new poem in its own right, Adventures on Salisbury Plain, a change becomes apparent. Wordsworth commences to lose faith in violent social change and turns within man, to compassion, for the means of overcoming the suffering resulting from social injustice.

With this transition from faith in revolution through apocalyptic social change to faith in the attainment of personal salvation through inner grace, an inner Paradise, Wordsworth's poetry changes. A series of fragments, increasingly psychological in orientation, follows. As yet there is little connection of the human mind with Nature. With The Borderers a complimentary rejection of the revolutionary ethos and its foundation on the misguided belief in the perfectability of man through reason takes place. It is at this stage, as Jonathan Wordsworth¹ has shown, that the divergent strands of Wordsworth's thinking coalesce under the influence of Coleridge. Until The Pedlar, Wordsworth's pantheistic view of man and Nature had achieved only fleeting poetic expression.² The Ruined Cottage had tenuously fused the redemptive love found in The Salisbury Plain poems with a reciprocating power in Nature. Subsequent poetry intended for The Recluse and The Lyrical Ballads, crystalized Wordsworth's belief in the apocalyptic power of the imagination.

Though it is rightly accepted that Wordsworth's belief in the revolutionary potential of the imagination was first intentionally expressed in The Pedlar, a study of earlier poetry shows an earlier reaching after the certainty of revelation. This change in outlook is altogether more gradual and piecemeal and more independently arrived at than usually accepted, relying less on Coleridge than on an innate logic within Wordsworth's own revolutionary outlook. In effect, when the poems of the period leading up to 1798 are examined, together with their revisions and associated fragments, an evolution becomes clearly apparent. Central to this evolution is the idea of revolution.

The importance of Wordsworth's concept and experience of revolution during the period 1793 to 1796 is reflected later, in Wordsworth's expansion of The Five-Book Prelude of 1804 to include five books on the French Revolution in the Thirteen Book Prelude of 1805. There is an obvious emphasis on the

1 See Jonathon Wordsworth, The Music of Humanity: A Critical Study of Wordsworth's 'Ruined Cottage', (London and York, 1969, pp.202-16.

2. See also H.W. Piper, The Active Universe, (London, 1962), pp.106-23.

role the experience of radical enthusiasm for revolution and subsequent disenchantment played on the growth of the imagination, and the discovery of the redemptive power of revelation.

Coming at the end of Wordsworth's evolution from poet of revolution in society to prophet of inner revolution, The Prospectus to the Recluse clarifies the change which had taken place in Wordsworth's outlook:

... Paradise, and groves
Elysian, Fortunate Fields ... why should they be
... a mere fiction of what never was?
For the discerning intellect of Man,
When wedded to this goodly universe
In love and holy passion, shall find these
A simple produce of the common day.¹

The same enthusiasm was later to be accorded to the French Revolution in Wordsworth's enraptured description of it in The Prelude:

... 't was a time when Europe was rejoiced,
France standing on the top of golden hours,
And human nature seeming born again.²

In retrospect, Wordsworth's evoking of the enchantment inherent in the revolutionary's enthusiasm are only partially born out by the writings of this period. What does emerge from the inflammatory conclusions to Descriptive Sketches and A Night on Salisbury Plain is an uncompromising anger at social injustice and call for apocalyptic change. In any event, rage and realism dominate Wordsworth's poetry of social protest, sparked by the French Revolution.

Though direct reference to the French Revolution occurs spasmodically, mainly in Descriptive Sketches, the idea of revolution permeates Wordsworth's major poetry until as late as, and beyond, The Excursion. Initially, Wordsworth equates revolution with violence and change. Arendt's definition of the revolutionary's outlook is particularly apt:

... only where change occurs in the sense of a new beginning, where violence is used to constitute an altogether different form of government, to bring about the formation of a new body politic, where the liberation from oppression aims at least at the constitution of freedom can we speak of revolution.³

1 William Wordsworth, "The Prospectus to the Recluse", in M.H. Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism, (Norton; New York, 1971), p.467, ll.47-55.

2 William Wordsworth, The Prelude, ed. J. Wordsworth et.al. (Norton, New York, 1979) Bk.VI.ll.353-5.

3 Hannah Arendt, On Revolution, (Penguin; Harmondsworth, 1979), p.35.

However, over the period between 1793 and 1796, Wordsworth's concept of revolution changes to one more approximating Paul Tillich's definition of revelation:

... the manifestation of what concerns us ultimately ... the mystery which is revealed is of ultimate concern to us because it is the ground of our being. Revelation ... means the manifestation of something within the context of ordinary experience which transcends the ordinary context of experience.¹

In "Tintern Abbey", Wordsworth describes the nature and power of revelation in similar terms:

Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.²

In particular, Wordsworth emphasizes that the active role that the empathetic imagination, or excursive power of mind, plays is the creation:

Of eye and ear, both what they half create
And what perceive,³

In the Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth was to develop and explore the evolving idea of the imagination and the pantheistic philosophy of "The One Life". At the same time, aspects of his earlier poetry of social protest, his description of the existences of outcasts and solitaries, were to a large degree, to be continued in The Lyrical Ballads.

However, the guiding aesthetic of these poems is removed from the essentially political, revolutionary, intent of his preceding poetry. More an end product of Wordsworth's period of revolutionary enthusiasm and disenchantment, The Lyrical Ballads are more diversified in scope than his earlier poetry. They deal less with Wordsworth's own developing ideas on revolution and revelation and are more the product of the influence of Coleridge on Wordsworth.

Moreover, by the time of the publication of The Lyrical Ballads, the direct impact of the French Revolution had diminished. Wordsworth, instead had turned to provincial England for inspiration. The idea of revolution had, in effect, evolved by this time from the political to the aesthetic sphere.

- 1 Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology, (University of Chicago Press, 1967), p.110.
- 2 William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey", Lyrical Ballads, ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones, (Methuen; London, 1981), II.45-9.
- 3 *ibid.*, II.107-8. c.f. Coleridge's definitions of the primary and secondary imagination in Ch.XIII. of Biographia Literaria.

Significantly, in The Prelude, a dominant aspect of Wordsworth's experience of the French Revolution is seen in retrospect to have been inseparable from Wordsworth's aesthetic evolution. In any event, The Prelude and the poetry leading up to The Lyrical Ballads testify to the political origins of the imagination, in both its aesthetic and revelational aspects. This study, then, confines itself to the period in Wordsworth's development during which the idea of revolution evolved from political change to the fundamental change in consciousness brought about through Wordsworth's discovery of the power of the imagination and revelation.