

CHAPTER ONEWORDSWORTH'S EARLY RESPONSES TO REVOLUTION:REVOLUTIONARY ENTHUSIASM AND THE REJECTION OF POLITICAL ORTHODOXY

The significance of Wordsworth's Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff as a testament in prose of Wordsworth's early political beliefs and their origins has often been underrated. Mary Moorman, in William Wordsworth, The Early Years,¹ has adopted the accepted view of Wordsworth's Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff. She maintains that "the interest of the Letter lies not so much in the views it expresses, as in the tone of personal passion in which they are expressed".² She aligns herself with Legouis, who had similarly commented that Wordsworth's pamphlet breathes "an almost religious fervour and reflects the puritan austerity of his temperament, the austerity that is the vein of deeply felt passion".³ While placing the emphasis on the Letter as a statement of revolutionary enthusiasm, she also allows that Wordsworth "writes as a disciple of the old English Republicans and the Declaration of the Rights of Man".⁴

While one critical perspective on the Letter has dealt with it in passing as a gauge of Wordsworth's revolutionary enthusiasm, another has treated it in some detail as an index of the early influences upon him. Owen and Smyser, in their critical edition of the Letter, and in their commentary on it, document the likely sources of the Letter in the writings of seventeenth century English Republicans, and in the writings of the eighteenth century radicals in England and France. However, both approaches underplay the Letter's importance as a statement of beliefs central to a fuller understanding of Wordsworth's early responses to the French Revolution, and the idea of revolution, expressed in his subsequent poetry. The Letter, I shall argue, provides an essential key to establishing the context of Wordsworth's early revolutionary beliefs and poetry. Moreover, it serves as a document pinpointing the excesses against which Wordsworth later turned, and from which, in the process, arose much of his major poetry in The Prelude and The Excursion. At the same time,

1 Mary Moorman, William Wordsworth, A Biography, The Early Years 1770-1803, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1957), pp.225-9.

2 *ibid.*, p.226.

3 *ibid.*

4 *ibid.*

5 W.S.B. Owen and J.W. Smyser, eds. The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, vol.1, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974), pp.28-67.

as Moorman also notes,¹ the Letter harbours the seeds of experience and humanitarian compassion awaiting germination in the later poetry of The Ruined Cottage and Lyrical Ballads.

The Letter reveals Wordsworth amalgamating the philosophies of the English Republicans of the seventeenth century with those of the ideologues of revolutionary France and the contemporary, radical writings of English sympathizers of the French Revolution. It reveals the young Wordsworth searching for a philosophy which would bring freedom and equality to what he considered to be an oppressed populace. The Letter shows Wordsworth attempting to participate in a debate touching on the key-stone of the English political system - the Constitution - and its domination of the life of the individual.

Above all, it is the combination of these factors which both underlie and, for a time, dominate Wordsworth's poetry, that makes the Letter a necessary introduction to an understanding of Wordsworth's poetry of revolt, disillusionment and redemption.

In late November 1792, Wordsworth had returned from Paris to London. Joseph Johnson, who had earlier published the first part of Paine's Rights of Man, as well as works by Erasmus Darwin and Joseph Priestley, was publishing Wordsworth's Evening Walk and Descriptive Sketches. During the early months of 1793, three events occurred which were to figure largely in Wordsworth's political beliefs. On the twenty-first of January, Louis XVI was guillotined. On the eleventh of February, the Pitt Government declared war on France. As a consequence, fear of France and of revolution, and mistrust of democratic ideas, obsessed a large part of a reactionary English public. Earlier, on the twenty-fifth of January, Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff had republished his sermon, The Wisdom and Goodness of God in Having Made Both Rich and Poor. Its appendix,² a recantatory tract entitled Strictures on the French Revolution and the British Constitution revealed the Bishop turning away from his earlier, publicly proclaimed, liberal principles and from his support for the American and French Revolutions.

1 Mary Moorman, op.cit., p.226.

2 After its initial appearance in January, the Appendix was subsequently republished in the Gentleman's Magazine in July 1793. Wordsworth's reply was not composed until "June or shortly after" (Reed) Chronology, p.25. As Wordsworth deals with issues specifically confined to the Appendix, it may be assumed that it was to this later version of the Appendix that he was replying.

An Evening Walk and Descriptive Sketches had revealed Wordsworth's growing awareness of the plight of the poor under the corruption and tyranny inevitable in monarchy. Implied in both works was the belief that revolution could be justified as an attempt to realize man's natural right of liberty. Watson's Appendix provided Wordsworth with the opportunity of developing and defending these nascent ideas. In effect, what had been marginal in these earlier poems developed into a manifesto of his ideas on man, and, on the ideal, Utopian existence which would be found in a democracy. Effectively, Wordsworth's Letter was a counter-attack on the British Government's condemnation of the French Revolution and the cause for political reform in England as much as it was a defense of the radicals' view-point.

The issues on which Watson wrote, and to which Wordsworth replied, were those which Edmund Burke had raised earlier, in 1790, in his Reflections. The debate between Wordsworth and the Bishop of Llandaff was a continuation of the ideological conflict between conservative and radical which Burke, Price, Priestley, and Paine had initiated before, and during, the outbreak of revolution in France. Burke's Reflections furnished the conservative reaction to revolution in France and reform in England, with a paradigm, a set of arguments that were later to be rehearsed with each real or imagined threat to the political and social stability of England in the 1790's. Watson's Appendix, written in response to the escalating violence in France, and the possibility of its repetition in England, was a plea for moderation modelled on Burke's Reflections. It was an extension and adaptation of Burkean ideology, and consequently took its place in the continuing debate on the English Constitution. At the same time, Wordsworth's Letter reveals a commitment to the paradigm of radical thought contained within the works of the English radical supporter, and self-proclaimed co-architect of the French Revolution, Thomas Paine.

The question at issue was the interpretation of the French Revolution, and its possible applications to, or effect on, English politics. English reactions to the French Revolution had come to be concerned with more than its merits and demerits. It had become a theoretical discussion of rights and government. Debate converged on the English Constitution. The terms of the debate were set by the irreconcilable points of view of the conservative Burke, and radical Paine.

From the beginning, Burke's views on the French Revolution were at odds with those of his contemporaries. The Whig, Fox, had enthusiastically written: "How much the greatest event it is that ever happened in the world! and how much the best!".¹ Dissenting from his fellow Whigs, Burke's response was one of unqualified condemnation of the French, and their English sympathisers: "What spectators, and what actors! England gazing with astonishment at a French struggle for liberty, and not knowing whether to blame or to applaud ... The spirit it is impossible not to admire, but the old Parisian ferocity has broken out in a shocking manner. If it should be character rather than accident, that the people are not fit for liberty and must have a strong hand like that of their former masters, to coerce them".² Burke's reverence for political institutions had led him to detest mob violence. The rioting and disorder that had spread from Paris to the rest of France after the fourteenth of July, the general break-down of the old administration, the enthusiastic wholesale abolition of ancient rights and privileges by the National Assembly, did little to convince Burke that the French were "fit for liberty". In his view, they were unable to combine orderly government with moderate, progressive, reform.

In his first letter to Depont, Burke had defined his views on personal liberty and its relation to society in terms which were soon to be echoed in his Reflections. He dissociated his concept of liberty from that put forward and practised by the revolutionaries in France: "It is not solitary, unconnected, individual, selfish liberty, as if every man was to regulate the whole of his conduct by his own will. The liberty I mean is social freedom. It is that state of things in which liberty is assumed by the equality of restraint³ ... This kind of liberty is, indeed, but another name for justice; ascertained by wise laws, and secured by well-constructed institutions ..."⁴

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- 1 Russell, Memorials and Correspondence of Charles James Fox, (London, 1894), II. p.361. Fox to Fitzpatrick, 30th July, 1789.
 - 2 Edmund Burke, Correspondence, ed. Alfred Cobban (Cambridge, 1967) VI. p. 9-12. Burke to Charlemont, 9th August, 1789.
 - 3 Watson presents a similar notion of the relationship between liberty and equality in the Appendix: The equality of men lie in "their being equally free from the dominion of each other, and in their being equally subjected to, and protected by, the same laws." p.26.
 - 4 Burke, Correspondence, VI. p.42. Burke to Depont, November, 1789.

For Burke, liberty was dependent upon the security guaranteed by the Constitution, and was ultimately sanctioned by the monarchy. Later, in his letter to Depont, Burke makes clear his belief in the inseparability of freedom from the security guaranteed by the monarchy. Revolution is not a means to liberty. Liberty cannot exist in the vacuum created by revolution, and as an end in itself. It relies upon the institutions of society: "You have made a revolution, but not a reformation. You may have subverted monarchy, but not recovered freedom."¹ While the French Revolution elicited from Burke a condemnation of its principles, means and ends, the attempt to introduce reform along similar lines into England drove Burke to an unbridled outcry against radicalism. When, on the fourth of November 1789, Dr Richard Price delivered a sermon glorifying the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688 and its principles, Burke felt the English Constitution to be in such jeopardy that a more virulent attack on radicalism was necessitated.

Price's sermon escalated the Constitutional debate in England. It served both to lay the foundation for Paine's and Wordsworth's attack on Burkean political orthodoxy, and as the opportunity occasioning Burke's defense of constitutionalism in Reflections. In the Sermon, Price had defined in particular the acquired rights of Englishmen: "Let us, in particular, take care not to forget the principles of the Revolution ... First, the right to liberty of conscience in religious matters. Secondly, the right to resist power when abused. And thirdly, the right to choose our own governors, to cashier them for misconduct; and to frame a government for ourselves."²

Subsequently, Price stated his belief that the French Revolution was to furnish an example for similar assertions of man's fundamental rights throughout the world: "And now, methinks, I see the ardour for liberty catching and spreading: a general amendment beginning in human affairs; the dominion of kings changed from the dominion of laws, and the dominion of priests giving way to the dominion of reason and conscience ... Tremble all ye oppressors of the world! ... Restore to mankind their rights; and consent to the correction of abuses, before they and you are destroyed altogether."³

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- 1 *ibid.*, Watson, like Burke, maintained that the Revolution had instated a worse form of tyranny than that which it had supplanted.
 - 2 Richard Price, "A Discourse on the Love of Our Country", in The Debate on the French Revolution, 1789-1800, ed. Alfred Cobban (London, 1960) pp.59-64. Paine opens his Rights of Man quoting Price; Rights of Man, 1, p.2.
 - 3 *ibid.*

Price, like his radical successors Paine and Wordsworth, saw the French Revolution heralding a Utopia in which man would exist in the full realization of his natural rights.

Burke believed that the Dissenters and Constitutional reformers were intending to introduce into England the disastrous policies of the French Revolution. In November 1790, he published the Reflections in an effort to arouse the people of England to an awareness of this danger. In the first part, Burke orchestrated the themes which he wished to instil into the minds of the English public. He attacked Price, and the Revolution Society, rebutting their interpretation of the revolution of 1688. He showed that the English Constitution was based on principles opposite in nature to those that had inspired the French Revolution, and excited the enthusiasm of its English admirers. Advocating a "mixed constitution", he demonstrated the importance of the hereditary principle in government. At the same time, Burke pointed out the vulnerability of the new French institutions to corruption and manipulation at the hands of opportunists and theoreticians. He attributed this to the failure of the national assembly to maintain respect for tradition and religion, and to preserve, while reforming, its ancient institutions.

In the first part of the Reflections, Burke had set out to prove the virtues and superiority of the English Constitution, particularly over the French "Constitution". In the second part, Burke offered straightforward criticisms of the new government in France. He considered in turn the legislature the executive, the judicature, the army, and public finance. The two parts of the Reflections were unified and dominated by Burke's vision of the English Constitution, and by his necessary rejection of the "rights of man" philosophy. For Burke, the English Constitution was:

the happy effect of following Nature, which is wisdom without reflection, and above it By a constitutional policy, working after the pattern of Nature ... our political system is placed in a just correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world ... preserving the method of Nature in the conduct of the state. ¹

The Constitution was the means through which man's social existence was linked with the natural, moral, order. It was the means whereby man fulfilled God's

1. Burke, Correspondence, VI.p.460.

design for him in the scheme of the creation. From this premise, Burke concluded that the end of man's social existence was good and virtue. Civil society was the realm of reason and order: "Good order is the foundation of all good things."¹ In society, order was established on the twin foundations of religion and property.

Burke's constitution was prescriptive.² It was a social contract sanctioned both by voluntary agreement and natural law. It could not be altered at will, or by force. Its principle constituents were the monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, or the House of Commons. Burke held that monarchy was the "key-stone that binds together the noble and well-constructed arch of the Constitution".³ It was "the presiding and connecting principle of the whole".⁴ As the constitution was the constitution of freedom ensuring the balancing of interests, the monarchy was effectively the bulwark of liberty.

In essence, both Burke and Paine believed that they were championing the cause of liberty. For Burke, liberty was guaranteed by a constitution which consisted of counter-balancing the interests of rival classes and power groups. However, Paine believed that the liberty belonging by right to man could only co-exist with equality of interests and classes. For Paine, freedom implied equality: "her residence is in the undistinguished multitude of rich and poor ... belonging to neither she is patroness of all".⁵ Representative government of a flexible and dynamic nature was the means by which Paine believed that the conflicting interests of individuals could be reconciled and liberty ensured:

The true and only basis of representative government is equality of rights. Every man has the right to one vote, and no more ...⁶

- 1 Edmund Burke, Reflections, Vol.2. of Collected Works (London: George Bell and Sons, 1892) p.514.
- 2 Burke, Reform and Representation in the House of Commons, (1782), Works, Vol. VI, pp.146ff. "Our constitution is a prescriptive constitution, it is a constitution whose sole authority is that it has existed time out of mind ... Your King, your lords, your judges, your juries, grand and little, all are prescriptive ..." See also J.G. Pocock "Burke and the Ancient Constitution" Historical Journal, III 1960, and Paul Lucas, "Edmund Burke's Doctrine of Prescription", Historical Journal, 1968.
- 3 Burke, Works, Vol. IV. p.418.
- 4 ibid
- 5 Thomas Paine, Rights of Man, Henry Collins, (Pelican; London) 1979), p.240.
- 6 ibid., p.223.

Inevitably, monarchy and any form of prescriptive constitution which favoured the nobility and King over the masses, was at variance with Paine's idea of human rights and democracy. In order to assert popular sovereignty and ensure the furtherance of common interests, Paine advocated a gradualist approach to revolution. Rather than violent social upheaval, Paine advocated a two-fold approach to political reform, education of the masses in their political rights and the forming of a convention or assembly which would ensure liberty and equality for all. Paine maintained that "the moral principle of revolution was to instruct, not destroy".¹ Moreover, once the popular assembly had secured the survival of representative government, a constitution embodying the rights of man would be drawn up and a democracy instituted.

Burke did not share Paine's optimistic belief that freedom was to be achieved merely by enacting a new, republican, constitution. The French were not ready for the democracy which they were trying to establish:

"... The people, along with their political servitude, have thrown off the yoke of laws and morals² ... I doubt whether in the end France is susceptible of the Democracy that is the Spirit, and in a good measure too, the form of the constitution they have in hand."³

Burke had differentiated between three essential types of political change: reform, revolution, and rebellion. The French Revolution was revolution without reform; it was rebellion. Reformation, or "conservative revolution", resulted in the correction of an abuse. It respected the basic principles and institutions of society. A radical revolution destroys them. The revolutionaries in France, then, were attempting "a regeneration of the moral constitution of man ... everything supposes a total revolution in all principles of reason, prudence, and moral feeling".⁵

1 Paine, op.cit., p.234.

2 Watson echoes this charge, asserting that if the "passions are not regulated by religion or controlled by law" anarchy will result. Appendix, p.27.

3 Edmund Burke, Correspondence, (Cambridge, 1967) VI, p.23-4. Burke to William Windham.

4 E.g. The "Glorious Revolution" of 1688. See Reflections, p.295: "A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation ..." For Burke's treatment of the 1688 Revolution see Reflections (London, 1892), Vol.V.p.474. Burke also pointed out that the enlightenment and rights which the revolutionaries held forth as humane, progressive and liberating were, in actuality, transformed into their opposites: "massacre, torture, hanging!. These are your rights of men!", Reflections, p.491.

The variance between Paine's ideal of revolution through gradualist reform and the bloody reality of political upheaval in France was however seen as defensible. A firmly entrenched and unmalleable despotism, such as existed in France, would never allow a change of its very essence. Paine believed that in such a case, the morality of ends over means could be validated if the end was the realization of man's rights of freedom and equality:

Revolutions have for their object a change in the moral condition of government and with this change ... civilization will be left to the abundance of which it is now deprived.¹

Defending, but not advocating, violent revolution, Paine attributed the extremities of change in France to the contempt for man and his rights innate in monarchical government. It supports his belief in revolution as a process entailing the enlightenment of the masses and political action through delegation, discussion and change in accordance with the general will.

Watson had written the Appendix to his republished sermon in the light of events which Burke had prophesied two years earlier. The period intervening between the publication of Burke's Reflections and Watson's Appendix had seen the publication of Paine's Rights of Man, and the formulation and dissemination of a republican, Jacobin, philosophy in England. Discontent with the obsolete and oppressive English political establishment had found its critics and spokesmen in Paine, Mackintosh,² and the now proliferating corresponding societies³. Their enthusiasm for the French Revolution, and for reforming the constitution in England, had created "the recent danger to our constitution"⁴ which had led Watson to denounce publicly the radical dissenting, and reforming movements in English society. Watson believed that the English public, particularly the lower classes, had been dangerously misled by subversive radicals advocating manhood suffrage, annual elections, and reform in parliament. The stability of England seemed threatened from within and without. With England facing imminent crisis, Watson as spokesman for conservatism, hoped to "calm the perturbation which had been lately excited, and still subsisted in the minds of the lower classes of the community".⁵

1 Paine, op.cit. p.234.

2 Mackintosh's major contribution to the radical stream in English politics in the 1790's was his Vindica Gallicae, a defense of the French Revolution against Burke's criticisms of it in the Reflections. Selections from it are to be found in Cobban, op.cit., pp.92-4, 159-67, 195-6. Like Paine and Wordsworth, he advocated the restitution of the people's rights of liberty, and equality through the institution of democracy.

3 For an account of the Corresponding Societies, see E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, op.cit., Pt 1, Lincoln, Some Political Ideas of Dissent in England 1763-1800, Ch.1 and VI, Goodwin, Chs.1,6,&7, and P.A. Brown, The French Revolution in English History, pp.13-26.

4 Watson, Appendix, p.25.

5 ibid.

The Appendix opens with Watson defending his changing attitude to the French Revolution. In effect, Watson maintains that he is not guilty of political apostasy, but that the course of the French Revolution had changed so drastically that it no longer remained faithful to the principles and objectives with which it had begun, and of which Watson had approved. Watson had supported the French in their initial struggle for freedom against the tyranny of an absolute monarch:

I have no hesitation in declaring, that the object which the French seemed to have in view at the commencement of their revolution had my hearty approbation. The object was to free themselves and their prosperity from arbitrary power. ¹

Watson had believed that the French were following the English example of 1688. He had expected France to adopt the system of the mixed constitution, or limited monarchy, which had evolved in England. At the same time, Watson qualified his initial statement of support for the French with an adjunct on revolutionary morality: "It is one thing to approve of an end, another to approve of the means by which an end is accomplished ..., I did not approve of the means by which the first revolution was effected in France."²

Watson had hoped for the moderation of reform rather than the excesses of revolution. He had believed that liberty and equality would be restored to the people by a constitution that limited the power of monarchy and consulted the will of the people.³ In the initial stages of the revolution, it had seemed that the French would adopt the format of a mixed, balanced, constitution. However, as ideologies tended away from moderation and the English model of government toward democracy, Watson felt that his faith had been betrayed: "The French had abandoned the constitution they had at first established, and have changed it for another. No one can repudiate with more truth than I do, both the means and the end of this change."⁴

1 ibid.

2 ibid., Watson continues: "I thought that it would have been a wiser measure to have abridged the oppressive privileges, and to have lessened the enormous number of the nobility, than to have abolished the order. I thought that the State ought not in justice to have seized any part of the property of the Church ... I thought that the King was not only treated with unmerited indignity, but that too little authority was left him to enable him, as the chief executive magistrate, to be useful to the State."

3 ibid., p.24. Watson refers to the "fixed, impartial, deliberate voice of law enacted by the general suffrage of a free people". ibid.,p.26.

4 ibid.,p.24.

By abolishing monarchy and allowing free reign to the populace, Watson believed that one form of tyranny had been replaced by another. The moderation which should have resulted from the counterbalancing of monarch, aristocracy, and populace had been thrown aside in favour of the unrestrained expression of the general will, in favour of "the most odious of all tyrannies, the tyranny of their equals".¹

The Appendix, then, has as its thesis Watson's misgivings about revolutionary morality and its republican goal. In the body of the Appendix he elaborates on his initial anti-republican polemic. He depicts the chaos that would ensue if similar measures were adopted in England. Following Burke, he contrasts an idealized English Constitution with the illusory, socially disruptive, ideals of the French Revolution. The present form of constitutional monarchy, and the social hierarchy attendant upon it, were to be preserved intact, even at the unacknowledged cost of inequality and injustice. The bloody spectacle of unrestrained liberty in France had convinced Watson, like Burke, that man is incapable of surviving without prescriptive political, legal and religious institutions.²

Llandaff's charge that the parliamentary reformers in England were attempting to introduce a popular tyranny aroused Wordsworth's indignation. Wordsworth's defence of the republican cause, both in France and England, and of man's universal political rights, provided the immediate impetus for responding to Watson's allegations in the Appendix. Remaining faithful to his liberal Christian principles, Watson had condemned all forms of tyranny. He had advocated the via media of constitutional monarchy. Like Burke, Watson found the English parliamentary system a bastion of moderation for imperfect man. Wordsworth, however, believed that the religious, legal, and political restraints of constitutionalism were, in themselves, another form of tyranny. Moreover, the restrictive view of human nature that moulded conservative political theory was opposed to Wordsworth's view of man as a free, benevolent, and autonomous moral agent, capable of moulding his own destiny.

1 Watson, op.cit.,p.25. c.f. Burke's previously stated objections to democracy, and Hobbes' attack on democracy in De Cive, 11,270. For Paine this amounted to the "general will", a concept defined by Rousseau in The Social Contract.

2 This is reminiscent of Burke's defense of traditionalism in the Reflections: "We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations and of ages." Works, Vol.II, p.359.

In the Letter, Wordsworth proclaims his political faith. He upholds the principles of the French Revolution, and defines revolutionary morality. He deals with current events and proposes radical measures for political and social reform in England. He confronts the reality of injustice and oppression brought about by England's divisive and corrupt social and political institutions. Finally, he outlines the ideal democratic society with which he would replace the political inequalities perpetuated by an antiquated social contract - the English Constitution.

Wordsworth's opening denunciation of Watson is twofold. He attacks Watson as an advocate of the decaying, tyrannical, and, morally bankrupt political establishments in France and England. At the same time, he berates the irresponsibility of Watson in publicly proclaiming the change in his political faith. At a time when ministers of the Church in England had become "advocates of slavery civil and religious",¹ Watson had seemed almost alone as "the defender of truth and political charity".² Watson's apostasy seemed to Wordsworth a betrayal of the liberal, Christian principles which Watson had earlier upheld, and still claimed to represent. Wordsworth takes Watson's recoil from regicide and the excesses of unrestrained liberty as a sophistical attempt at consigning the English to perpetual enslavement under a despotic political system.

Before proceeding to a comprehensive analysis of Watson's arguments, Wordsworth had to counter the objections to republicanism raised by the execution of Louis XVI. Watson had deplored the "sanguinary and savage"³ means employed by the French to bring into being their new republic. He found in them evidence of the "humiliating picture of humanity, when its passions are not regulated by religion, or controlled by law".⁴ Regicide was both the ultimate act of immorality and the inevitable assertion of the new order's independence from the old. The death of Louis fully revealed to Watson the cost and immorality of revolutionary republicanism. "My heart sinks within me when I see the alter of liberty streaming with the blood of the monarch himself."⁵

1 Wordsworth, A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff, Prose Works, ed. Owen and Smyser, Vol.1.p.31.

2 *ibid.*

3 Watson, *op.cit.*,p.25. c.f. Burke Reflections, p.349-50, condemns the "scheme of a barbarous philosophy ... which makes the murder of a king, or a queen, ... or a father only common homicide ... a sort of homicide much the most pardonable." Reason would make "regicide, and parricide, and sacrilege (prejudice) but fictions of superstition, corrupting jurisprudence by destroying its simplicity."

4 *ibid.* The similarity to Burke's view on the French Revolution is evident.

5 Watson, *op.cit.*,p.25.

With the execution of Louis, it was too late for a purely Utopian apologia. All pleas on behalf of ongoing revolutionary events had necessarily to depart from a defense of the Utopian dream to a rationalization of real events. Wordsworth's Letter is a rationalized defense of the reality of the French Revolution. The death of Louis could be justified as tyrannicide, and as a necessary step in fully implementing a republic in France. It could also be used on a more universal level to point out the defects of monarchy, and, by implication, the advantages of republican democracy.

Watson had deplored the regicide, finding in it grounds to condemn the English republicans. Wordsworth, however, deprecates Watson's "idle cry of modish lamentation".¹ He sees it as misdirected pity, rather than a rational evaluation of Louis' guilt.² Watson had held that Louis could not be judged by his subjects. However, Wordsworth maintains that it was this very lack of accountability that led to Louis' downfall. When the will of the monarch ran counter to the general will, there could be one of two outcomes: tyranny or revolution. Wordsworth, addressing Watson, states that "so far from stopping to bewail his death, you would rather have regretted that the blind fondness of his people had placed a human being in that monstrous situation which rendered him accountable before a human tribunal".³ Wordsworth proceeds to contrast the "unaccountability" of absolute monarchy with the accountability of republican democracy.

Wordsworth was later to refer to himself as a "member of that odious class of men called democrats".⁴ It was as a self-professed republican that he took Watson, and reactionary conservatism, to task in the Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff. At the same time Wordsworth directed the impetus of

1 Wordsworth, op.cit.p.32.

2 "Louis' guilt" - See Cobban, A History of Modern France, (Pelican, 1981) Vol.1, 1715-1799, pp.210-11. In letters discovered after Louis' arrest, it was revealed that Louis had undertaken a treasonous correspondence with the Austrians. In an attempt to reassert his power, he had sought Austrian help, effectively declaring war against his own people. Wordsworth is also referring to Louis' crime of tyranny. Louis' execution was held by the revolutionaries to be just on both accounts.

3 Wordsworth, op.cit.,p.33.

4 Wordsworth, Letters, The Early Years, (Oxford, 1978), pp.118-20. Letter to Mathews, 23rd May 1794. He continues "and of that class I shall continue for ever". R.R. Palmer in his article "Notes on the Use of the Word Democracy 1789-99". Political Science Quarterly, 1953, pp.203-226, points out that "democrat" and "democracy" did not come into common usage until after 1793. "Republican" was the most common description of radicals seeking popular sovereignty. "Jacobin" was just as frequent, though in England it acquired a pejorative sense and was used by reactionary circles to condemn all forms of political deviancy.

the Letter towards the moral regeneration that would occur with the abolition of monarchy and a corrupt nobility and Church. The prejudices and ignorance that they had fostered in order to perpetuate their power had so debased man's reason, will, and his moral nature as to make him a willing party to his own enslavement. Wordsworth cites Rousseau, stating that:

Reflecting on the degraded state of the mass of mankind, a philosopher will lament that oppression is not odious to them, that the iron, while it eats the soul, is not felt to enter it ...¹

Through the Letter, Wordsworth was attempting to rouse his fellow Englishmen to an awareness of their enslavement, and of the Utopian potential of revolutionary democracy. Monarchy corrupted. By abolishing it, Wordsworth held that morality would be restored in the realization of man's political rights. In the place of monarchy, Wordsworth proposed popular sovereignty. With minimal infringement of rights and morality, the republic and its laws would express the general will of the people. They would reflect the unconstrained moral nature of the people. Liberty, equality and virtue would co-exist in a united, rationally ordered, state.

Wordsworth inherited and developed Milton's concept of the moral foundation and the end of the state.² He adopted aspects of Harrington's ideal Commonwealth,³ such as legislative representation, manhood suffrage, division of legislative and executive power between two chambers, rotation in office, the identity of the interests of governor and governed, and the power of the people to finally inscribe laws. Algernon Sydney provided him with an account of the

1 Wordsworth, *ibid.*, p.36, quoting Rousseau, Du Contract Social, II, p.26.

2 In particular, Milton's Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth. For an account of Milton's impact on Wordsworth, and the currency of Milton's ideas in revolutionary France, particularly amongst the Brissotins, with whom Wordsworth was intimately associated in 1792, "Wordsworth and the English Republican Traditions" *J.E.G.P.* XLVII, 1948, pp.107-26. See Z.S. Fink. Written in 1660, Milton's Ready and Easy Way outlines a republican constitution and condemns monarchy.

3 For an outline of Harrington's contribution to political thought see Gooch, *op.cit.*, pp.241-57. In her article, Fink discusses the influence of Harrington's Oceana on Wordsworth's thought, particularly in the Letter. It is worth noting that many of the ideas and innovations which Fink attributes to Harrington, were adopted by Wordsworth from Paine, and from republican ideas current in France.

ability of monarchy to corrupt a whole society, in its search for unlimited power. From the seventeenth century English republicans, then, Wordsworth inherited an awareness of the relationship between the state,¹ liberty and morality. He believed that whereas monarchies debase men, republics enoble them by encouraging their best qualities.

While Wordsworth's political philosophy, at this stage, was indebted to Milton, Harrington and Sydney, it also embraced the revolutionary, democratic, ideologies of the more contemporary political thinkers Rousseau and Paine. Wordsworth's ideological position approached the latter in his insistence that virtue could thrive only in the truly rational and egalitarian society guaranteed by popular sovereignty, accountable representation, and the free reign of reason and conscience. Drawing on Rousseau and Paine, Wordsworth transformed the moral republican principles of his seventeenth century precursors into a theory of revolutionary democracy.

With sovereignty restored to the people, Wordsworth believed that the interests of the governed, and of the governors, would be reconciled. Harmony would ensue rather from the precarious balance of conflicting interest inherent in the mixed constitution. The people would create government, rather than having it imposed upon them. However, the new order which Wordsworth proposed could not come into being while the corrupt old order held tenaciously to its power. With the Pitt Government becoming increasingly hostile to republican agitators, there was no possibility of compromise, or of moderate reform. Like Paine²

1 Sydney did not support popular sovereignty, but advocated delegation or representation. Society's function and end was to guarantee liberty. See Fink, op.cit., p.45-6 and Gooch op.cit., pp.282-6.

2 Later in 1802, while Wordsworth was in the process of recasting his earlier thought, and experience of the 1790's, in *The Prelude*, he wrote a series of political sonnets. "London 1802", and "Great Men Have Been Among Us", recall the earlier republicans, patriots, and prophets "Marvell, Harrington, Young, Vane, and others who called Milton friend ... moralists who could act and comprehend." Wordsworth cited them as examples to a country sinking in moral lassitude and facing imminent invasion by the French "tyrant" Napoleon. At this stage, it is the English, rather than the French republicans, that Wordsworth sees as the "Great men" who "taught us how rightfully a nation shone in splendour".

Wordsworth proceeds to make clear in the Letter,¹ that the new order could only emerge from the annihilation of the old, in revolution.

Llandaff had condemned the French Revolution for both its violent means and its republican end. He pointed to the bloodshed and the chaotic struggle for power by competing factions as the only product of the new democratic order. The ideals of liberty and equality on which the revolutionaries had hoped to found their republic, had, instead, given birth to a society in which these ideals had been transformed into their opposites. What Watson had imagined to be the reality of republican democracy and its ideals in France convinced him of its danger to England: "Who would hazard the introduction of such scenes of rapine, barbarity, and bloodshed, as have disgraced France, and outraged humanity, for the sake of obtaining - what? - liberty and Equality."² Llandaff had then proceeded to contrast, unfavourably, republican ideals with the stability and moderation guaranteed by the English Constitution.

Wordsworth responded to Watson's charge by defending revolution on the grounds that it was a transitory³ phase between the death of the old society and the birth of the new. It was a period when the bankrupt values of tyranny were overthrown and replaced with a new morality. Confusion was inevitable, as the new order struggled to assert its existence against the recalcitrance of the old order:

"What, have you so little knowledge of the Nature of man as to be ignorant, that a time of revolution is not the season of true liberty. Alas! the

1 Wordsworth did not advocate revolution in England, but saw it as an inevitability if reform was not implemented. Wordsworth advocated balanced reform, unlike Paine, who advocated an immediate and sudden transfer of power from the monarch to the people. Though these were Wordsworth's objectives, too, he sought a gradual transfer of power, and the education of the populace so that they could make good use of it. Wordsworth was well aware of the consequences of the attempt by the French to achieve an instantaneous transfer of power. He pursues this theme later in the Letter, op.cit., pp.38, 35-6.

2 Watson, op.cit., p.25.

3 In Paine's scheme of social transformation, revolution is an intermediate and transitory stage, preceded by general enlightenment of the masses to their political rights, and followed by the creation of a new democratic society. The central act in the second step of political regeneration, was the formation of a convention to enact a constitution. If the old society rejected it, violent social upheaval would follow. c.f. Rights of Man, ed. M.E. Conway, (New York, 1892), Vol.11, Part 1, 309-10 where Paine defines the function of the constitution, and Part II, Ch.IV. "Of Constitutions".

obstinacy and perversion of men is such that she is too often obliged to borrow the very arms of despotism to overthrow him, and in order to reign in peace must establish herself by violence."¹

As Wordsworth had perceived, in the struggle between radical and reactionary forces, moral values and political ideals became inverted. The French Revolution exemplified this process. The cause of liberty had come to resemble the tyranny which it was uprooting: "She (Liberty) deplores such stern necessity, but the safety of the people, her supreme law, is her consolation."²

Wordsworth states his awareness of the apparent contradiction between the principles of liberty and the march of revolutions. The end, "of a fairer order to things,"³ justifies the convulsive means. Moreover, Wordsworth acknowledges that a political faith in republican ideals is to be the sole guide for action. Traditional codes of morality are seen as inhibiting:

"political virtues are developed at the expense of moral ones."⁴ For Wordsworth, "political virtue" amounts to a dispassionate reason whose only end is the achievement of revolutionary, democratic, objectives in the transformation of society.

1 Wordsworth parallels Mackintosh, Vindica Gallicae, a reply to Burke's Reflections: "Whatever excellence, whatever freedom is discoverable in Governments, has been infused into them by the shock of a revolution recalling Governments to their first principles." To the advocates of moderate reform he replied "these institutions would have destroyed Liberty, before Liberty had corrected their Spirit." He goes on to praise the National Assembly in France, which had "seized the moment of eradicating the corruptions and abuses, which afflicted their country. Their reform was total". Cobban, op.cit., pp.92-5. Vindica Gallicae is listed in the Rydal Mount Catalogue (lot 52). By June 1794 Wordsworth had arrived at a diametrically opposite view:

"I recoil from the bare idea of revolution ... I am a determined enemy to every species of violence ... I deplore the situation of the French". Wordsworth, Letters, Early Years, p.124.

2 Wordsworth, op.cit., p.33. c.f. Cicero, de legibus III, iii, 8, "Salus populi suprema est lex" and Selden (1624-1694), English jurist and legal antiquary: "Salus populi suprema lex est", Table Talk, ed. S.H. Reynolds, (London, 1892).

3 ibid., p.34. Note that Wordsworth expresses the end of revolution in terms of a millennium, or more exactly, a Utopia, as it is to be achieved by man, alone, through reason.

4 ibid., Wordsworth is referring to the French Revolution, and revolution on a universal level.

"Compassion" and "the benign exertions of the best affections of the human heart"¹ are dismissed as "erroneous notions which a habit of oppression" has created, and which may be excised through universal education and enlightenment.

It is only through the complete rejection of the old order, with its circumscribed world view and repressive morality, that the new order can come into existence.²

By taking the associationist psychological theories of Locke and Hartley to a revolutionary extreme, Wordsworth embraced the belief that society could be changed by altering the premises on which it had been founded. By transforming human consciousness, patterns of thought, and habits of morality, through education, society itself could be changed. A revolution in consciousness, and then of the framework and institutions of society, could be achieved through education.³ By educating the populace with a new rationalist political morality, Wordsworth held that he could realize his vision of a democratic, egalitarian, Utopia:

It belongs to education to create a race of men, who, truly free will look upon their fathers as only enfranchised.⁴

Wordsworth, deeply imbued with the tradition of English political and religious dissent, believed that man was an autonomous moral agent. Man was innately virtuous, but was hindered from acting virtuously by the oppressive

1 *ibid.* Wordsworth is not condemning charity, but its misapplication. He emphasizes the views held by Saint Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Milton, that the passions, and morality, should be directed by reason. Wordsworth condemns Church and State for their misdirection, through prejudice, of the passions, and for their corruption of their subjects' morals. In effect, Wordsworth is saying that revolution is a means of correcting the old order's abuse of morality, and of man's innate natural virtue. Revolution is a suspending of traditional, morally wrong, values. A new moral code will follow.

2 *c.f.* Paine, Rights of Man, Part II, p.234. "Ways and Means". "Revolutions have for their object, a change in the moral conditions of governments."

3 Wordsworth is probably referring to prophets of universal enlightenment. Like Paine, he held that there was no need to keep past decisions as restraints on the present. The pattern of contemporary education buttressed corrupt government. The educational forces such as social customs, institutions, had to be replaced for an effective social transformation. Like Paine, Wordsworth believed that a few enlightened individuals could spread and revive the people's belief in their political rights. Unless the people were set right, the overthrow of tyranny would be to no avail. They had to understand the principles and end for which they were acting. Rights of Man, II, pp.5-6 Paine continues: "education, and reason, were essential to post-revolutionary government". Government in a well constituted republic requires no belief from man beyond what reason can give." Rights of Man, I, p.153 and "He sees the rationale of the whole system, its origins and its operations ... it is best supported when it is best understood". p.46.

4 Wordsworth, *op.cit.*, p.34.

legal and ethical codes of Church and State. In this, Wordsworth's moral philosophy reveals its proximity to the Dissenters' concept of political morality.¹ In his Review of the Principal Question in Morals, Dr Price had stated that "it was God's plan for man to attain the perfect life on earth. The perfect life was the free life. Since God wanted man to be free, He bestowed upon him the capacity for enjoying liberty, and gave to him dignity and personality, individuality, a conscience, free will and intelligence.

Thus endowed, man is an autonomous moral agent able to choose the right cause and therefore to act virtuously. This moral freedom is the basis for all other freedoms, of which political and religious liberties are the most important."²

On the evidence of the Letter, Wordsworth had eschewed mystery, and adapted the Christian, spiritual, dimension of liberty. His ideal of liberty was a composite of current rationalist, materialist concepts, the Dissenters' belief in Christian liberty,³ and his own experience in France and of Nature. For Wordsworth the Jacobin, man was not a divine agent, nor was he accountable to God for his actions, but to his fellow man.⁴ Whether he achieved liberty through the processes of political revolution or social evolution, his happiness lay within the parameters of society and its political institutions. The freedom resulting from the replacement and transformation of the oppressive codes and systems of the old order would allow man to achieve uninhibited moral perfection. For Wordsworth, government, liberty and morality were interdependent.⁵

- 1 Ben R. Schneider in Wordsworth's Cambridge Education, (Cambridge, 1957) builds up a case for Wordsworth's acquaintance with Dissenting and radical philosophies, while at Cambridge 1787-91. In The Prelude, Bk. III, Wordsworth describes his misery at Cambridge and dissatisfaction with the stultifying traditions and scholarship there. c.f. ll.82-167 (1805).
- 2 Cited by Lincoln in some Political Ideas of Dissent in England, 1763-1800 (Cambridge, 1938) informative account of Price, Priestley and their bearing on the political turmoil of the late 1780s and early 1790s.
- 2 c.f. Milton's doctrine of "Christian Liberty" Paradise Lost, ed. Fowler, Book X. ll.79-101.
- 4 Rousseau's collectivism and accountability of the individual to the General will (Social Contract, Bk 1, Ch. VII, p.259) may have influenced Wordsworth.
- 5 As the Letter proceeds, Wordsworth increasingly reveals his belief that all government is inhibiting, and that man best exists in a state of total freedom, where his virtue, moral nature, flourishes. Wordsworth increasingly approaches the stance taken by Godwin in Political Justice. Salisbury Plain explores this theme further.

Watson had alleged that republicanism and the revolutionary means it employed, could only result in chaos and the destruction of liberty and equality - the very ideals which it sought to introduce into society. Watson held that these could only be guaranteed under a mixed system of government, with the monarchy as its keystone. Wordsworth attacks this biased and incomplete view of events in France, and of revolutionary man. He upholds his view of man as a free moral agent acting, ultimately, under the guidance and moderating influence of reason. He develops his previously stated contention that "revolution is not a season of true liberty".¹ With no previous experience of revolution, extremes of behaviour would be inevitable in the newly found liberty: "the co-ercive power is of necessity so strong in all the old governments that a people could not but at first make an abuse of that liberty which a legitimate republic supposes."²

Revolution produces an interregnum equivalent to the state of nature. The old morality is suspended as a new social contract and moral code are in the process of being forged. Experimentation and uncertainty prevail for a time. Moderation is restored as reason balances and defines the new liberty. In the meantime, Wordsworth describes the revolutionist as an "animal", as a being driven more by the blind desire for liberty than by reason: "The animal just released from its stall will exhaust the overflow of its spirits in a round of wanton vagaries, but it will soon return to itself and enjoy its freedom in moderate and regular delight."³

Wordsworth's concept of revolution approaches that of Blake. Just as Blake had represented the birth of Orc as an uncontained and cataclysmic unleashing of repressed psychic energy,⁴ Wordsworth similarly reveals his belief that revolution represents the cathartic and indiscriminate release of man's repressed desire to realise his innate potential for perfection and happiness. Moreover, through the image of man as an animal fettered

1 Wordsworth, op.cit., p.33.

2 ibid., p.38.

3 ibid., p.38.

4 Orc is revolution in the material World. c.f. Blake, *America*, 7, 11.3-7, "Orc ... Lover of wild rebellion, and transgressor of God's Law:" *Europe, A Prophecy*, 3:25, 28, and Milton, 29:34. For an account of the genesis of Orc, see Erdman, *Prophet Against Empire*, pp. 25-6, p.308. In *The Fearful Symmetry*, (Princeton, 1967) Frye describes Orc as "the power of human desire to achieve a better world which produces revolution and foreshadows the apocalypse", p. 206. Orc is the embodiment of generative and of regenerative power. In the Orc cycle, Orc becomes chained by reason, crucified, and is reborn. In many respects he bears resemblance to Shelley's Prometheus. Frye provides an examination of the Orc cycle and its analogues. pp. 207-35. On a general level, the Orc cycle traces the origins and course of Revolution as a universal.

by the tyranny of Church and State, Wordsworth shares with Blake the belief that man's unlimited potential is inhibited by the "mind-forged manacles" of habit and custom. The old order had distorted the common man's perception of himself to that of a subservient being of limited potential. Revolution would release him from that false image of himself. Liberated from without and within, man would be now left to regenerate his moral being with reason as his guide and the reconstruction of society as his goal.

For Kant,¹ revolution had been the means by which man was to go beyond his "animal" state and realize the unbounded potential of his reason. Wordsworth, independently, grasped the potential of revolution to raise man, via a quantum-leap, into conformity with the higher laws of Nature and history. Through revolution, man could progress toward an ideal moral world. Moreover, the moral enthusiasm which the French Revolution had engendered:

revealed a tendency and faculty in human nature for improvement such as no politician, affecting wisdom, might have conjured out of the course of things hitherto existing, and one which Nature and freedom alone, united in the human race in conformity with inner principles of right, could have promised.²

However, Wordsworth was also aware of the politico-economic strictures placed on man by the reality of his existence as a social and economic being.

Man's unlimited moral potential had to be realized within, and through, the structures of government and the economic system. Utopian conjecture had to be reconciled with politico-economic reality. Like Kant, Wordsworth saw the Republican constitution "as the only enduring political constitution in which the law is autonomous and is not annexed to any particular person ... It is the only condition under which each person receives his due peremptorily ..."³ Again, like Kant, he took the French Revolution to be a step in mankind's approach to the "kingdom of ends", to a situation in which there could be perfect dignity and self-determination for each individual.

In the Appendix to his sermon, Watson had attempted to redefine liberty and equality, and claim them as products of a mixed constitution. Watson

1 Manuel and Manuel, Utopian Thought in the Western World, (Harvard, 1979) Ch.21 "Kant: Beyond Animality" pp.519-31.

2 Kant on History, ed. L.W. Beck, pp.144-5. (Cover, 1976) c.f. Wordsworth's means of arriving at a "fairer order of things".

3 Kant, The Metaphysical Elements of Justice, trans. J. Ladd, p. 112-3.

asserts that "the liberty of man in a state of society consists of his being subject to no law but the law enacted by the general will of the society to which he belongs".¹ Attractive as this assertion may appear, Watson had neglected to mention that under the English Constitution the majority have little say in the legislation governing them. The legislative and executive power of government, in actuality, lay in the hands of the monarch and the aristocracy. The interests of the few were imposed on the majority. There was inevitably a division of interests between the governors and the governed. With power vested in one interest group, the other, the governed, were unable to redress their wrongs and exercise their rights. Wordsworth identified the division of interests within the state as the major source of oppression and corruption. Where this division persisted, there could be no liberty or equality. He recognized that the infrastructure of his democratic state would have to be directed at preventing this conflict:

'Philosophers, from a wish, as far as in their power to make the governors and governed one, will turn their thoughts to the system of universal representation, and will annex an equal importance to the suffrage of every individual.'²

Wordsworth believed that the virtues of democratic government lay in its dynamic, flexible and conciliatory nature. A republic would reconcile both the governors and the governed, unifying them, and so avoiding the potentially cataclysmic result of this division of interest. Following Harrington and Paine, Wordsworth found that the most convenient means by which the general and individual will could express themselves was through the institution of a representative assembly. By electing delegates, the interests of the Nation as a whole were to be represented. At the same time, the people were to exercise ultimate control over the government in both its legislative and executive aspects. With total accountability to the people, the government would not set itself apart from, and above, the people.

One of the central issues to arise from Wordsworth's comparison of monarchy and republican government is that of justice. In Wordsworth's republic,

1 Wordsworth, *op.cit.*, p.46. For a fuller discussion of the radical societies seeking manhood suffrage, annual elections, and reform in parliament, see P.A. Brown, The French Revolution in English History, pp.13-26.

2 Watson, *op.cit.*, p.25.

laws would be the "expression of the general will enacted only from an almost universal conviction of their utility".¹ Moreover, in a republic "less force is requisite to compel obedience to its laws". In contrast to this, the laws instituted under a monarchy have become "partial and oppressive".² Ossified and designed to protect the vested interests of monarchy and nobility, Wordsworth finds the existing penal code so "crowded with disproportioned penalties and indiscriminate severity that a conscientious man would sacrifice in many instances his respect for the laws to the common feelings of humanity".³

As he proceeds to evaluate forms of government and their impact on man's moral nature, Wordsworth increasingly reveals his belief in the antagonism between human virtue and political systems and ideologies. The Conservatives, Burke and Watson, had held that government was necessary to rectify man's inadequate and flawed Nature. Wordsworth responded by claiming that government and its laws impaired and frustrated man's potential for moral perfection. A democratic republic afforded the closest practicable approximation to the liberty necessary for an individual's and, a society's, moral growth.

For Wordsworth's new order, the criterion according to which a man was to be valued was changed from the assessment of his property and income to a consideration of his moral worth. Men shared equally the potential to be virtuous, and consequently each man had an equal right to participate in government. In electing a representative, the people would choose according to a candidate's virtue: "virtues, talents, and acquirements are all that it will look for."⁴ By removing the emphasis from wealth to moral worth, Wordsworth believed that an egalitarian society without false and arbitrary distinction between its members could be brought about. Countering Watson's dismissal of "peasants and mechanics"⁵ as unfit and uneducated to govern, Wordsworth asserts that the peasant's innate moral qualities entitled him to office; he was "qualified by his industry and integrity to be instructed

1 Wordsworth, op.cit.,p.39.

2 *ibid.*

3 This is an attitude indicating perhaps Wordsworth's acquaintance with Godwin's notion of benevolence, and of his reading of Political Justice.

4 Wordsworth, op.cit., p.39.

5 *ibid.*, pp.44. c.f. Paine, Common Sense, (Pelican, 1978) 1.79. "hereditary nobility is an insult and imposition on posterity".

with the care of the interests of himself and his fellow citizens."¹

Wordsworth proceeds to denounce the inequalities in wealth and privilege which the English monarchy and constitution had perpetuated. He saw the nobility as parasites, living idly on the life-force of the labourer, whose political status and rights they denied. The grounds on which an hereditary elite claims superiority are seen as specious. Favouritism and primogeniture had created "separation among mankind that were absurd, impolite and immoral". Hereditary offices and sinecures were "badges of fictitious superiority"². Wordsworth states that he is "so strongly impressed with the baleful influence of the aristocracy and nobility upon human happiness and virtue" that he finds it sufficient reason for the preference he has given to the republican system.³

The extremities of monarchy in both France and England had made Wordsworth wary of constitutionalism. It could only lead to a divided state where the governors corrupted⁴ and oppressed the populace. Constitutionalism, in effect, gave the monarchy the legal sanction and precedent to destroy man's moral nature in the pursuit of power. Echoing Paine's outcry against the English Constitution, he sees it as a fiction used by those in power to deny the people their rights and to ensure the position of the ruling class.

Wordsworth, like Paine, maintained that the English Constitution denied the dynamic nature of society. It restricted man to a state of imperfection and perpetual bondage. Condemning Burke, Pitt, Watson, and the conservative

- 1 Wordsworth, op.cit., p.44. Wordsworth echoes Paine, *Rights of Man*, I.p.102. "Titles are but nick-names, and every nick-name is a title ... Titles are like circles drawn by the magician's wand, to contract the sphere of man's felicity." "The French Constitution says, 'There shall be no titles' ... all that class of equivocal generation ... called 'aristocracy' and 'nobility' is done away with, and the peer is exalted into Man. They are a chimerical nondescript ..."
- 2 *ibid.*, p.45. The monarchy secures its power by retaining its power to create titles, and raise men to a fictitious elevation above others.
- 3 *ibid.*, p.46.
- 4 Paine develops this point, *Rights of Man*, I.p.162. Democracy rules through reason and liberty, tyranny through ignorance and oppression: "Reason and Ignorance, the opposites of each other, influence the great bulk of mankind. If either of these can be rendered sufficiently extensive in a country, the machinery of Government goes easily on. Reason obeys itself; and Ignorance submits to whatever is dictated to it." "Wordsworth cites the recent example of the "king and Country" mob's attack on Priestley's house, as an example of government's manipulation of a people's ignorance. *Letter*, p.38.

cause, Wordsworth states that:

by a refinement in cruelty superior to that which in the East yokes the living to the dead, he (Burke), strove to persuade us that we and our posterity to the end of time were riveted to a construction by the indissoluble compact of a dead parchment, and were bound to cherish a corpse at the bosom, when reason might call aloud that it should be entombed.¹

Wordsworth continues, attacking Watson's² and Burke's claim that the Constitution had brought England and its populace to a state of Utopian perfection. For Wordsworth, the static nature of constitutional monarchy must inevitably consign society to "barrenness and by its putrefaction infect it with death".³ Only democracy could ensure vitality and progress⁴ through liberty and equality.

For man as a moral being "Government is, at best, but a necessary evil".⁵ In Wordsworth's view, the state is to assist man in achieving moral perfection. It must arise from the wish of the people and remain faithful to their needs and rights. Republican government comes closest to Wordsworth's ideal, though there is the suggestion that Wordsworth is beginning to favour the purest form of moral self-determination - anarchy.

Wordsworth concludes the Letter with a scenario of the political crises which had precipitated the need for remedial social change. The conservatives had remained implacable in their insistence on maintaining the integrity of the Constitution. However, the Constitution and the political and legal practices which it had sanctioned had brought only suffering to the people.⁶

1 c.f. Paine's contempt for the "musty records and mouldy parchments", Rights of Man, II, 282, 284. This passage refers to Burke's support for the Act of Settlement, Reflections, II, 297. The terms of this act bind "us and heirs, and our posterity, to them, their heirs and their posterity (i.e. William III's). c.f. also Reflections, II, 368. Man as part of the universal contract.

2 See Watson, op.cit., p.29 and Wordsworth, op.cit., p.48.

3 ibid., Wordsworth, p.58.

4 c.f. Wordsworth, op.cit., p.42 "Equality without which liberty can not exist, is to be met with imperfection in that state in which no distinctions are admitted but such as have for their object the general good".

5 ibid., p.42 echoes Paine, Common Sense, i.60. "Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil." Though Wordsworth echoes Paine, it would seem that Wordsworth is increasingly favouring no government at all. In Salisbury Plain, he is to place man's virtuous nature above, and against, the state and law, similarly in The Borderers.

6 Wordsworth portrays the suffering of the poor, p.43, as evidence of the consequences of a divided society, with rich and poor. In Wordsworth's new society there would be a more equitable distribution of Wealth. c.f. Paine, Rights of Man, II, Ch.5, "Ways and Means", where he proposes a welfare state.

Without reform, without popular sovereignty, the plight of the poor would continue unabated. Addressing Llandaff, Wordsworth accuses the Bishop of betraying the Christian principles with which he had sought to denounce the movement for reform in England: "You have no wish to dispel an infatuation which is now giving up to the sword so large a portion of the poor and consigning the rest to a more slow and more painful consumption of want."¹ By the latter part of 1793, the consequences of England's war against revolutionary France and the cause of liberty were coming to the fore, combining with the already intolerable oppression of constitutionalism, to compound the misery of the poor. Change was imperative.

The Letter remained unpublished and did not reach its intended public. It seems reasonable to conclude that Wordsworth saw himself as a spokesman of the republican cause in the mould of Milton. Through the Letter, Wordsworth was attempting to educate the public, and propose political reform rather than revolution. The Letter's orotund style, its balance, its coherent structure, differentiate it from the incendiary works of Paine and Mackintosh. In a time of conservative reaction and of censorship and the persecution of radicals, Wordsworth had necessarily to advocate political reform in moderate terms. However, despite the Letter's restraint and orderliness, Wordsworth's disaffection with his society and his recognition of the urgent need for the complete transformation of the state along democratic lines dominate his plea for the liberty of the individual, and of the nation.

Placed in its temporal perspective, between Descriptive Sketches and Salisbury Plain, the Letter reveals its importance, both in its own right, and as a document testifying to one stage in the development of Wordsworth's political thought. Descriptive Sketches had revealed the awakening of Wordsworth's awareness of social injustice, political oppression, and the need to liberate man from a bondage which was destroying his moral nature. The Letter is the culmination, and exposition, of that awareness. Taken together with Descriptive Sketches, the Letter reveals a distinct phase in Wordsworth's philosophy of man's social existence. It has affinities with contemporary radical political thought, and particularly with the paradigm of Jacobin radicalism established by Paine. Both Descriptive Sketches and the Letter may, consequently, be seen as products of Wordsworth's "Jacobin" period.

1 Wordsworth, op.cit., p.49.

While the Letter is the fullest record of Wordsworth's Jacobinism, it has also in it the seeds of Godwinism.¹ In the Letter, Wordsworth had interwoven separate traditions of republican and democratic thought in an attempt to formulate his own Utopian vision of man in society. Wordsworth was seeking to create in man's collective social existence the unconstrained liberty of the individual in his natural state. The Letter conveys Wordsworth's hesitations about any form of restriction imposed on the individual's free-will and reason. It portrays Wordsworth looking beyond revolutionary democracy, with its subjecting of the individual in Nature. Wordsworth's doubts about democracy are Godwinian in their implication. By breaking free of his inheritance, history, and the physical environment, by throwing off the forces previously conditioning his existence, man would live purely in the "light of circumstances/ flashed upon an independent intellect." (The Borderers, Act III, ll.1495-6.).

Wordsworth's preoccupation with the relationship between liberty, the state, and man's moral nature, led him naturally to embrace Jacobinism. Godwinian anarchy and rationalism were an evolutionary step beyond democracy to a state of pure liberty. The Letter reveals the beginnings of his transition from Jacobinism to Godwinism, from democratic liberty to the unrestricted individual released from his existence as a social being, acting according to his reason. As Elie Halevy has noted, "it is but a short step from the political philosophy which is set forth in the second part of the Rights of Man to that which William Godwin developed a year later in his Political Justice".²

Garrod classifies the period covering the composition of the Letter and Salisbury Plain as "semi-Godwinian".³ Wordsworth's political philosophy was developing beyond the Jacobin paradigm, and was, independently, approaching the anarchist and rationalist philosophy of Godwin. In Salisbury Plain, Wordsworth was to adopt a new system of ethics, with which to structure, and give coherence to, his libertarian views on man and the state. Godwin was to provide him with it in a new paradigm of political and moral thought.

1 Contrary to the views of Brinton and Roberts, there is no tangible evidence of Godwinian thought in the Letter; no allusions or borrowings.

2 Elie Halevy, Philosophical Radicalism, p.191.

3 H.W. Garrod, Wordsworth, Lectures and Essays. (Oxford, 1958), p.73.

CHAPTER TWOFROM POLITICAL APOLOGIST TO HUMANITARIAN POET -WORDSWORTH AND JACOBIN AESTHETICS

The poetry of Wordsworth's semi-Godwinian period reveals a lessening preoccupation with political theory and overt, moral didacticism. In Salisbury Plain, Wordsworth begins to turn from the solutions which abstract political theory and revolution seemed to offer toward the potential the individual has within himself to overcome his suffering at the hands of a destructive and oppressive government. Salisbury Plain sees the transformation of Wordsworth the political theorist into Wordsworth the humanitarian poet. No longer seeking the solution for man's suffering purely from without, in abstract political theory and in institutions, Wordsworth increasingly looks within man seeing there the reality of suffering brought about by social injustice as well as the source of man's salvation. For a time, Godwinism¹ was to furnish Wordsworth with a guide according to which he could find a solution, from within man's own being, for the evils of man's existence. It offered Wordsworth new, systematically defined concepts of man, society, and their relationship.

In the Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff, Wordsworth had condemned "laws partial and oppressive"² which made up a "penal code so crowded with disproportionate penalties and indiscriminate severity that a conscientious man would sacrifice his respect for the laws to the common feelings of humanity". Wordsworth's recognition that the law represented all that was unjust, oppressive, and divisive in government was to dominate Salisbury Plain. The law was to symbolize the means by which the governing classes retained their power and protected their property.

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- 1 See William Godwin, Political Justice, ed. Isaac Kramnick (Pelican Classics, 1976) Book V, Ch.XXIV, p.554. "Of the Dissolution of Government". Godwin anticipates the moral perfection which will result from a dual process of enlightenment and the abolition of political, religious, and legal systems: "with what delight must every well-informed friend of mankind look forward, to the auspicious period, the dissolution of political government, of that brute engine, which has been the only perennial cause of the vices of mankind, and which, as has abundantly appeared in the progress of the present work, has mischiefs of various sorts incorporated with its substance, and no otherwise removable than by its utter annihilation!"
- 2 Wordsworth, Prose Works, ed. Owen and Smyser, Vol.1,p.39.

It was manipulated in the cause of self-interest, and was instrumental in obstructing natural justice, progress, and, perpetuating inequality. Godwin had claimed that the wealthy were "in all countries directly or indirectly the legislators of the state".¹ The law invariably favoured their interests at the expense of the poor "reducing oppression into a system".²

Like Godwin, Wordsworth recognized that the political result of this exercise of power and superiority by the rich was that it produced crime, which in turn could be used to justify punishment, and as a rationale for government. Denied the justice that is rightfully theirs, the poor seek retribution outside the law. For the poor, "the state of society is a state of war".³ In Caleb Williams, Godwin had his persecuted hero, reduced to penury and crime, exclaim: "Oh poverty, thou art indeed omnipotent! Thou grindest us into desperation; thou confoundest all our boasted and most deep rooted principles; thou fillest us to the very brim with malice and revenge, and render us capable of acts of unknown horror".⁴ In Salisbury Plain, Wordsworth was to explore the causal relationship between oppression, poverty, crime, and injustice. He was to show the human cost of political and economic inequality and its consequences, injustice and oppression. Through the figure of a female vagrant, and an ageing traveller, Wordsworth, like Godwin in Caleb Williams, was to reveal the random yet inexorable chain of events which betrayed innocence into guilt, suffering and ultimately, death.

In both Wordsworth's, and Godwin's, vision of human existence, man had been enslaved from within, and from without. A victim, he was powerless to redress his suffering at the hands of impersonal, and merciless institutions, the power of which was sanctioned by custom. By changing man's external,

1 Godwin, op.cit.,p.92.

2 *ibid.*

3 Godwin, Caleb Williams, ed. David McCracken (O.U.P.,1970) p.216.

"We, who are thieves without liscence are at open war with another set of men who are thieves according to law."

4 *ibid.*, p.116. Caleb Williams was published in its first edition in May 1794. At this time, Wordsworth was completing Salisbury Plain, and was soon to revise it, extensively reworking the plot along lines similar to Caleb Williams. In Adventures on Salisbury Plain, Wordsworth was to emphasize the link between victimization by an oppressive society and crime. In Salisbury Plain, Wordsworth anticipates Caleb Williams. The female vagrant recounts how social injustice lead her to live off the spoils of war.

social and political environment, Wordsworth had believed that a corresponding amelioration would occur within him. Salisbury Plain reveals Wordsworth's developing awareness of the duality of man's existence, and of his two-fold bondage from within and without. By 1794, Wordsworth had recognized that reform of the institutions which surround and oppress all facets of his existence would not necessarily lead to an amelioration and emancipation within man's inner life. As Godwin had stated in Political Justice¹, it was only with an intellectual enlightenment accompanying the transformation of social institutions that freedom could be restored to man in his reasoning and acts.

In The English Jacobins, Cone has described Jacobinism as a "state of mind, a cluster of indignant sensibilities, a faith in reason, a vision of the future"². Even though Paine had tabulated the ideology of the Jacobins in Rights of Man, the movement lacked unity and was characterized by the diversity of individual views of man's existence in society. Nevertheless, as Gary Kelly has noted,³ they shared several central tenets:

They opposed tyranny and oppression, be it domestic, national or international, spiritual or temporal; they were against all distinctions between men which were not based on moral qualities, or virtue; and they were utterly opposed to persecution of individuals, communities or nations for their beliefs on any subject. They saw history both past and present, as an account of the efforts of some men to establish the rule of reason against its enemies, which were not imagination and feeling, but error and prejudice. They insisted that reason should decide the issue in human affairs, and human government, not power based on money, age, rank, sex, or physical strength.⁴

Godwin, however, differed from the Jacobins in several respects: "The author of Political Justice ... is the last man in the world to recommend

- 1 Godwin, *op.cit.*, p.273 (Book IV, Ch.2 - "Of Revolutions"). Godwin states "the only method according to which social improvement can be carried on, with sufficient prospect of an auspicious event, is when the improvement of our institutions advances in a just proportion to the illumination of the public understanding."
- 2 Carl Cone, The English Jacobins, (New York, 1968), p.v.
- 3 Gary Kelly, The English Jacobin Novel, (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1976), p.7.
- 4 Kelly, *loc.cit.*, p.7.

a pitiful attempt, by scattered examples to renovate the face of society, instead of endeavouring by discussion and reasoning, to effect a grand and comprehensive improvement in the sentiments of its members."¹ Social change was to be achieved from within the individual, through the gradual and universal liberation of the human mind from error and prejudice. In Godwin's eyes, education and enlightenment would eliminate the need for the corrective function of government.

In Salisbury Plain, Wordsworth like Godwin, was anticipating, and urging, the reign of Reason, the reign of the liberated intellect.² However, unlike Godwin and more resembling the Jacobins, Wordsworth was to emphasize the role of the feelings in man's life, and the urgent need for their liberation.

Though the female vagrant's tale is designed as a polemic against the Pitt Government, its function is also to reveal the role played by the emotions in rehabilitating a victim of political and legal institutions.³

In the first version of Salisbury Plain, Wordsworth transforms the conventional figure of a female vagrant into the symbol both of social injustice and of regeneration and liberation. Her victimization by implacable and tyrannical institutions, and her powerlessness in the face of an inexorable sequence of events, lead to a suffering of tragic intensity. Grief at the loss of her family, and physical hardship, do not harden the female vagrant, but ultimately lead to compassion for others. Suffering deepens and liberates her latent humanity. She becomes capable of selfless love. In loving she liberates others from suffering, and is herself renewed. The female vagrant, becomes a symbol of loss, suffering, and of a liberating, selfless love⁴ which transcends an evil the source of which lies in the authoritarian institutions and conventions of society. Wordsworth identifies her with a force not only

1 William Godwin, Fleetwood, (London, 1805) vol.i.p.xii.

2 See concluding stanza of Salisbury Plain, ll.540-50.

3 It should be noted that the female vagrant's regeneration occurs outside society, amidst nature. This is a theme which Wordsworth was to explore in subsequent poetry, and in the light of his own experience. The female vagrant anticipates the later books of The Prelude.

4 Mary Wollstonecraft, in her two Novels, Mary, 1787, and the Wrongs of Woman, 1796, presents heroines with similar qualities and of the same significance. Like Wordsworth in Salisbury Plain, she sees fiction as a means of putting forward social criticism, and utopian ideology. While Wollstonecraft was shaping the Jacobin novel, Wordsworth was defining "a Jacobin poetic".

for social regeneration but for a new order of social existence. She represents the tragic reality of a corrupt and oppressive society, a symbol at once of human tragedy and transcendence.

In the Evening Walk, Wordsworth first introduces the motif of the forsaken widow and mother into his poetry. Subsequently, she reappears in Salisbury Plain, The Borderers, The Ruined Cottage, and the Lyrical Ballads. In each poem, Wordsworth explores a new facet of the "misery which the constitution of society seems to have entailed on all her kind"¹. Moreover, each work reveals the transition in Wordsworth's outlook from that of political ideologist to humanitarian poet. Eventually, in The Ruined Cottage, Wordsworth integrates the image of suffering woman with his evolving philosophy of the interpenetration of Nature and the mind of man. In The Ruined Cottage, Wordsworth was to reconcile social criticism and political thought with his philosophy of "the one life"², in Margaret.

In An Evening Walk³ Wordsworth had been more preoccupied with describing Nature in terms of the categories of the beautiful and sublime which Burke had defined in A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful. Man had assumed a stature of minimal importance against the grandeur of the landscape. At the same time, Wordsworth had described injustice, but the force of his criticism of society was soon dissipated in his derivative use of neo-classical idiom, and in his all but exclusive portrayal of his own, subjective, reactions, to his natural environment.

Prefiguring the female vagrant of Salisbury Plain, Wordsworth, in an Evening Walk, portrays the privation and death of a destitute woman and her child. He draws on two conventions, that of the war widow⁴ and that of the mother, who, with her child is denied life-saving charity by the discriminating poor laws. However, Wordsworth describes the woman's suffering not out of humanitarian concern, but in accordance with the prevailing taste for the sentimental:

1 Mary Wollstonecraft, The Wrongs of Woman, (Pelican, 1982), p.124.

2 c.f. Coleridge's "The Aeolian Harp", and "Religious Musings", ll.141-6. See also Wordsworth's restatement of Coleridge's philosophy in The Ruined Cottage, Ms. B., .15^v, in James Butler's Cornell edition of The Ruined Cottage, p.177.

3 Wordsworth had composed an Evening Walk in 1789.

4 c.f. Southey's "The Soldier's Wife" and "The War Widow".

Fair Swain! by all a mother's joys caress'd
 Happy some wretch has ey'd, and call'd thee bless'd;
 Who faint, and beat by summer's breathless ray,
 Hath dragg'd her babes along this weary way.¹

Rather than portraying suffering with intensity and directness, Wordsworth uses it in an attempt to exploit current poetic idiom.

The plight of the widow does not concern Wordsworth so much as the poetic conventions on which he draws in describing it. The juxtaposition of human suffering with the commonplaces of landscape poetry, and the excessive use of poetic devices, including a debased neo-classical diction, dissipate the pathos inherent in the situation:

The Widow, A few short steps to totter with the load,
 Shakes her numb arm that slumbers with its weight
 And eyes through tears the mountain's shadeless height.²

The unrestrained use of alliteration reveals the poet more preoccupied with the technicalities of poetic ornamentation than the gravity of the issues informing this episode. The fate of the woman's husband, and her consequent widowhood, are dismissed in two lines. The woman:

Bids her soldier come her woes to share,
 Asleep on Bunker's charnell hill afar;³

The motives that had driven the husband to voyage to the New World, to his death in service with the British forces and the subsequent injustices which the wife suffers, are briefly alluded to. The oppressive poor laws which are directly responsible for the woman's present state lose their significance in, and are muted by, the poem's overriding sentimentality:

I see her now, deny'd to lay her head
 On cold blue nights, in hut or straw built shed;
 Turn to a silent smile their sleepy cry.⁴

The woman resigns herself and her child to their imminent fate. A hostile Nature finishes what a pitiless society had initiated:

Oh! when the bitter showers her path assail,
 And roars between the hills the torrent gale,
 ... Death as she turns her neck the kiss to seek,
 Breaks off the dreadful kiss with angry shriek.⁵

1 Wordsworth, An Evening Walk, Poetic Works, Vol.1.ed.E.de Selincourt, (Oxford, 1940), 11.245-8.

2 *ibid.*, 11.250-2.

3 *ibid.*, 11.252-3. These lines are drawn from Langhorne's Country Justice, I. 11.161-7.

4 *ibid.*, 11.257-9.

5 *ibid.*, 11.279-288.

Wordsworth, in conformity with neoclassical conventions, sees death as an abstract personification. Overtly, he does not hold society culpable for the death of the widow and her children, but it is implied the widow dies exposed and isolated from the warmth of compassion. However, her last words are not directed at the pitiless institutions which have brought about her death and that of her children. Nature, represented at this stage as a hostile and amoral force, relentlessly takes her life:

Now ruthless Tempest launch thy deadliest dart!

Fall fires, but let us perish heart to heart.¹

The discordant imagery with which Wordsworth subsequently describes the death scene detracts from the tragic potential of the episode:

Soon shall the Light'ning hold before thy head

His torch, and shew them slumbering in their bed,

No tears can chill them, and no bosom warm,

Thy breast their death-bed, coffin'd in thine arms.²

The embrace of the mother, conventionally a symbol of life-giving love, is gratuitously changed into its antithesis. The gothic imagery does not engage the reader's sympathy, nor does it provide the reader with any insight into the real cause of the woman's death. The startling and morbid conclusion of this episode is excessively sentimental. Its significance is soon lost in the trite and incongruous pastoral that follows:

"Sweet are the sounds that mingle from afar."³

The episode of the widowed mother's death in An Evening Walk reveals Wordsworth's nebulous awareness of the emotional depth of maternal love and its vulnerability to the disruptive forces of Nature and historical reality. However, despite the extremities of gothic conventions, which undermine its tragic potential, the final image of mother and children in death, is one of transcendent love. However, its significance and the possibilities which it offers for social criticism are subsumed in the superficiality resulting from the poet's obsession with poetic convention.⁴

1 *ibid.*, ll.291-2.

2 *ibid.*, ll.298-301.

3 *loc.cit.*,

4 Langhorne's Country Justice had furnished Wordsworth with the episode of the widow's death. Unlike Wordsworth, Langhorne saw the death of the widow as symbolic of the lack of charity, compassion and justice prevailing in English Society in the latter half of the eighteenth century:
 "Worn with long Toil on many a painful Road,
 That Toil increas'd by Nature's growing Load,
 When Evening brought the friendly Hour of Rest,
 And all the mother throng'd about her Breast,
 The Ruffian Officer oppos'd her Stay,
 And, cruel, bore her in her Pangs away.
 ... Abandon'd there with Famine, Pain, and Cold,
 And Anguish, She expir'd ... (ll.221-230)

The bulk of Evening Walk had been composed in 1789. In the two years which elapsed between its writing and the composition of Descriptive Sketches, Wordsworth had become more aware of the political realities which surround, and intrude into, the common man's life.¹ His experiences in revolutionary France, and his association with the Brissotins,² had brought a new emphasis into his outlook and poetry. Among the "passing spectacles of Revolutionary life" which he later described in The Prelude, were:

Domestic severings, female fortitude
At dearest ~~separation~~ separation, patriot love
and self-devotion, and terrestrial hope
Encourag'd with a martyr's confidence.³

Wordsworth's growing opposition to war, law, and custom was, in Descriptive Sketches, to be expressed in a series of sketches portraying the dispossessed and alienated.

Though Descriptive Sketches is still dominated by Burkean aesthetics, Wordsworth is beginning to approach the Jacobin aesthetic of portraying "things are they are". Descriptive Sketches is a transitional poem. Wordsworth had not yet thrown off the restraints of neo-classical poetic convention, with its abstract and indirect manner of portraying experience. At the same time, Descriptive Sketches marks the beginning of Wordsworth's burgeoning political consciousness. The series of sketches which make up the poem share a common, identifiably Jacobin point of view. Each sketch, or episode, contributes cumulatively, to the denunciation of tyranny with which the poem concludes.

Several of the sketches describe solitary travellers. One, in particular, provides a link between the widowed mother of an Evening Walk, and the female vagrant of Salisbury Plain. A gypsy woman becomes the symbol of displacement, solitude, and suffering:

The Grison gypsy here her tent has plac'd,
Sole human tenant of the piny waste;⁴

Wordsworth introduces two concepts, guilt and sorrow, with which to explain the gypsy woman's aimless wandering:

The mind condemn'd, without reprieve, to go
O'er life's long deserts with its charge of woe.⁵

1 Wordsworth, Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years, ed. E. de Selincourt (3 vols., Oxford, 1939), Vol.II. p.829.

2 See G.M. Harper, William Wordsworth, His Life, Works and Influence, (John Murray, 1929) Ch.V. "In Revolutionary France". pp.89-126.

3 Wordsworth, The Prelude, 1805, IX, ll.276-9.

4 Wordsworth, Descriptive Sketches, ll.188-9. Wordsworth later uses this description for Margaret in The Ruined Cottage, ed. Butler (Cornell, 1979) Ms.B.1.5

5 Wordsworth, op.cit., ll.192-3.

Wordsworth attempts, as he had not in An Evening Walk, to probe the psychological state of his solitary. Moreover, Wordsworth draws a connection between the psychological state of the gypsy and the aridity of the terrain. Wordsworth does not describe the landscape in terms of the gypsy's state of mind, but rather, in a reversal of the pathetic fallacy, the landscape, her environment, acts on her psyche. Both contribute to the bleak image of life as a "desert" where:

Beasts and men together o'er the plain
Move on, - a mighty caravan of pain;¹

Despite the pessimism of Wordsworth's view of human existence, and of society, hope lies in man's spiritual strength:

Hope, strength and courage, social suffering brings,
Freshening the waste of sand with shades and spring.²

The individual does not inevitably succumb to social evil, but through "hope, strength, and courage" will prevail over suffering. This was to be the ethical position which Wordsworth assumed in his subsequent poetry. However, at this stage, inner strength was not the product of the interpenetration of the human mind and Nature. The gypsy is tormented by a hostile Nature³ and "seeks a shelter from the battering show'r."⁴

Descriptive Sketches conveys Wordsworth's uncertainty about the role that Nature plays in man's existence. Through subsequent poems, the interaction between man's mind and Nature would become more clearly defined. Eventually in The Ruined Cottage, Wordsworth would reconcile human suffering, social injustice, and Nature in the philosophy of the "One Life". In the meantime, his attitude to Nature would remain uncertain. Nature seems indifferent to man at best, and at worst it tyrannizes over him. This is borne out in Descriptive Sketches, where after undergoing the ordeal of the storm, the gypsy sits despondently:

By the deep quiet gloom appall'd, she sighs,
Stoops her sick head, and shuts her weary eyes.⁵

1 ibid., ll.195-6

2 ibid., ll.197-8

3 See Wordsworth, The Prelude, 1805, Bk.VI.ll.549-72.

4 ibid., ll.210.

5 Wordsworth, op.cit.,ll.221-2.

The capacity for destruction which Wordsworth would later attribute wholly to political and legal institutions is shared with Nature, in Descriptive Sketches. Describing the precariousness of man's existence in the Alps, Wordsworth expresses his concern for the fragility of the family, and domestic life:

Here Penury oft from misery's mount will guide
Ev'n to the summer door his icy tide,
And here the avalanche of Death destroy
The little cottage of domestic Joy.¹

Continuing his description of Alpine life, Wordsworth portrays the fragmentation of a family caused by the constraints of the natural environment:

... the tyrant Genius still at strife
With all the tender Charities of life,
... The father forc'd by Powers that only deign
That solitary man disturb their reign,
From his bare nest amid the storms of heaven
Drives, eagle-like, his sons as he was driven,
His last dread pleasure ...²

As Descriptive Sketches progresses, Wordsworth's preoccupation with the vulnerability of the family becomes more pronounced. The extraneous force which tyrannizes over, and disrupts it, changes from Nature to corrupt political institutions:

As despot counts their blaze of gems display,
Ev'n by the secret cottage far away
The lily of domestic joy decay.³

The luxuriance of Nature, and the opulence of the court contrast with:

Poor babes that, hurrying from the door,
With pale-blue hands, and eyes that fix'd implore,
Dead muttering lips, and hair of hungry white
Besiege the traveller whom they half affright.⁴

While both Nature and monarchy become associated with privation and death, Wordsworth offers hope in freedom. Liberty brings with it a regenerative power and an affirmation of the ground of man's being:

Yet, hast thou found that Freedom spreads her pow'r;
Beyond the cottage hearth, the cottage door:
All Nature smiles.⁵

1 *ibid.*, 11.597-600.

2 *ibid.*, 11.607-620.

3 *ibid.*, 11.720-2.

4 *ibid.*, 11.709-12.

5 *ibid.*, 11.756-8.

Descriptive Sketches enunciates a central theme which Wordsworth will pursue in his subsequent poetry. The family is the foundation of society. It is also the most fragile of society's institutions. The individual's existence is defined through his role within the family. At the same time, Wordsworth's solitaries are defined by the absence and loss of family, and their consequent rootlessness. The family with its nexus of sustaining relationships provides fulfilment only as long as it remains intact. Both Nature and the institutions of society and the state threaten and destroy the foundation of man's social existence.

Implicit in Wordsworth's preoccupation with the family is his concern for the domestic virtues, charity, compassion, altruism and love. The cottage and the family represent a way of life, and of a selfless love that is at once central to man's existence, yet susceptible to the inroads of historical and social change, as well as to a hostile environment.¹

After portraying the plight of the rural poor, individually and collectively, and imputing its cause to oppression by tyrannical government and the rapacious rich, Wordsworth concludes Descriptive Sketches with a prophecy of millennial revolution:

... Liberty shall soon, indignant raise
 Red on his hills his beacon's comet blaze,
 ... Yet ..., tho' Pride's perverted ire
 Rouze Hell's own aid, and wrap ~~the~~ hills in fire.
 Lo! from th' innocuous flames, a lovely birth.²

Employing apocalyptic imagery reminiscent of that found in Blake's depiction of the revolutionary spirit Orc's birth,³ and Coleridge's "Religious Musings", and "Ode to the Departing Year"⁴, Wordsworth ardently expresses his belief in the inevitability of global revolution.

1 c.f. Goldsmith, The Deserted Village, Langhorne, The Country Justice, Pt.I. ll.147-152, Pt.II. ll.53-7, and Cowper, The Task, Bk.V.ll.435-442.

2 William Wordsworth, Descriptive Sketches, ed. Eric Birdsall, The Cornell Wordsworth (Ithaca, 1984), pp.1116, ll.774-782.

3 c.f. Blake, The French Revolution, Song of Los.

4 Imagery drawn from Revelations, of the destruction and recreation of the Earth, align Biblical teleology with the political upheaval of revolutionary France. The fiery purging of Earth and the creation of a New Heaven and Earth are common in radical poetry of 1790's.

Wordsworth concludes his sketches of the oppressed poor of Europe with an allegorized depiction of tyranny and its overthrow. In imagery soon to be echoed in the similarly incendiary conclusion to Salisbury Plain,¹ Wordsworth gives poeticized expression to the impulse of incendiary Jacobinism also informing the Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff:

And dark Oppression builds her thick-ribb'd towns
 Where machination her fell soul resigns,
 ... Where Persecution decks with ghostly ^{rites} ~~unites~~
 Her bed, his mountains.²

The personified abstractions, prevalent in much neo-classical poetry of the eighteenth century are now tempered with the incendiary rhetoric of Wordsworth's radicalism. The barely contained outrage and prophetic awareness of the imminence of violent social upheaval noticeable in The Letter emerge in a powerfully concentrated outburst against the arrogance of monarchy in the last lines of the poem:

... 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.³

However, the "havoc, Fire and Sword" with which Wordsworth, the self-appointed spokesman for the poor, desires to redress the wrongs of the oppressed are not the sole, destructive end of revolution. Wordsworth offers a vista of the Millennium following the annihilation of the old order:

With its own Virtues springs another earth:
 Nature, as in her prime, her virgin reign
 Begins, and Love and Truth compose her train;
 With pulseless hand, and fix'd unweaned gaze,
 Unbreathing Justice her still beam surveys.⁴

1 Wordsworth, Salisbury Plain, ed. S. Gill (Ithaca 1974).

2 Wordsworth, Descriptive Sketches, ll. 795-99.

3 *ibid.*, ll.806-9.

4 *ibid.*, l.803.

However, though Wordsworth's Jacobin enthusiasm is excessively apparent, the abstract scheme of a political Utopia outlined in The Letter has now become transformed, poeticized, into a "pisgah vision"¹ of a purged and renewed Eden. Wordsworth has brought together the Biblical vision of the Apocalypse and political ideology and imposed it on the chaos of a Europe in violent social upheaval. Like The Letter, Descriptive Sketches reveals optimism in the inevitability and ultimate good of revolution.

Increasingly, the destruction of the family and man's deracination from the roots of his existence, become a central theme in the literature of social protest. Trial, imprisonment, outlawry, ostracism, persecution, transportation, and death dominate English novels and poetry of the period surrounding the French Revolution. Most noticeably, the figure of woman as mother, widow, vagrant and deserted wife, becomes the central symbol of social victimization, and the disruption of a life that is man's and woman's by nature and right. In Joan of Arc,² and the Triumph of Woman,³ Southey was to portray woman's victory over oppression. In "The Soldier's Wife", "The Widow", and "Elinor",⁴ Southey depicted women as the victims of forces beyond their control. In Salisbury Plain and The Ruined Cottage, Wordsworth was to unite both aspects of woman, as victim and as victor.

One of the consequences of Wordsworth's political commitment and ideological polemic is his couching of suffering and the events within the narrative in a more direct and less conventionally ornate and decorous style. Anticipating The Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth interweaves sympathy with imagination. Through a direct and unstylized portrayal of emotional states and experience, Wordsworth attempts to evoke the sympathy and the identification of his audience with the plight of the two protagonists. Johnson had earlier admitted that "all joy or sorrow for the happiness or calamities of others is produced by an act of the imagination, that realizes the event ... by placing up, for a time, in the condition of him whose fortune we contemplate; so that we feel ... whatever emotions would be excited by the same good or evil happening to ourselves".⁵

1 c.f. Adam's vision of the future in Paradise Lost, Bks.X,XI,XII.

2 Robert Southey, Joan of Arc, 1796.

3 Robert Southey, Triumph of Woman, 1793.

4 Robert Southey, The Soldier's Wife, The Widow, 1794. "Elinor" one of the Botany Bay Eclogues, was composed in 1794.

5 W.J. Bate, From Classic to Romantic, (Harper, 1961), p.134.

Salisbury Plain is a rhetorical and imaginative construct. In the introduction Wordsworth states his argument, and through the subsequent incidents portrayed in the narrative, is able to draw his conclusions in the revolutionary rhetoric with which the poem closes. The force of Wordsworth's imaginative rendering of social conditions evokes sympathy by converting an idea into an impression.

By appealing to both reason and feelings, Wordsworth attempts to precipitate moral action on the part of the reader.

In the preface to the first edition of Caleb Williams,¹ Godwin had stated his intention "to comprehend, as far as the progressive nature of a single story would allow, a general review of the modes of domestic and unrecorded despotism, by which man becomes the destroyer of man"². As a "study and delineation of things passing in the moral world"³, "things as they are"⁴, Caleb Williams defined the Jacobin aesthetic and its underlying political stance. Mary Wollstonecraft was to modify Godwin's tenets by focusing specifically on the plight of women. In the preface to the "Wrongs of Woman"⁵, she reinterpreted the Jacobin aesthetic for her own purposes, "the desire of exhibiting the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society"⁶. As the following comment shows, her novel was both a study of specific individuals and incidents, and a revelation of universal significance: "the history ought rather to be considered as of women, than of an individual"⁷. Similarly, in Salisbury Plain, Wordsworth intended that the female vagrant's narrative should have a more universal political significance.

In an essay contrasting romance and history, Godwin had stated his utilitarian view of literature, outlining a Jacobin aesthetic: "Laying aside the generalities of historical abstraction, we must remark the operation of human passions; must observe the empire of motives whether grovelling or elevated; and must note the influence that one human being exercises over another ..."⁸. Having stated the novelist's position, Godwin proceeds to evaluate the relative claims of romance and history. Godwin concludes, favouring romance. While the historian is confined to specific incidents and individuals, "the writer of romance collects his material from all sources, experience, report and

1 Godwin's Caleb Williams was first published in May 1794.

2 William Godwin, Caleb Williams, or things as they are, ed. David McCracken, O.U.P. p.1. (Preface, May 1794, to the first edition).

3 *ibid.*

4 The subtitle of Godwin's Caleb Williams.

5 Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary and the Wrongs of Women, ed. Gary Kelly, O.U.P., 1976 p.73. (Originally published 1796)

6 *ibid.*, p.73.

7 *ibid.*, p.73.

8 From an unpublished essay quoted in Gary Kelly, The English Jacobin Novelists (Oxford, 1976), p.199.

the records of human affairs, then generalizes them; and finally selects, from their elements and the various combinations they afford, those instances which he is best qualified to portray, and which he judges most calculated to impress the heart and improve the faculties of his reader ... The writer of romance then is to be considered as the writer of real history"¹.

Situation and psychology take precedence over narrative: "True history consists in a delineation of consistent, human character, in the display of the manner in which such a character acts under successive circumstances, in showing how character increases and assimilates new substances to its own, and how it decays, together with the catastrophe into which by its own gravity it naturally declines"².

The process of moral discovery forms the basis of the Jacobin aesthetic. Godwin sees the probing and exposing of character and of conventions as the novelist's, and poet's, essential function: "the analysis of the private and internal operations of the mind, employing the metaphysical dissecting knife in tracing and laying bare the involutions of motive, and recording the gradually accumulating impulses, which led the personages described ... to adopt the particular way of proceeding in which they afterwards embarked"³. This view of the function of the poet, or novelist, lies behind the novels of Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, and informs the poetry of Wordsworth from Salisbury Plain to the Lyrical Ballads.

The period intervening between the composition of Evening Walk, Descriptive Sketches and Salisbury Plain had seen an evolution in both Wordsworth's political thought and the aesthetics of his poetry. In Descriptive Sketches Wordsworth was attempting to reconcile the poetic conventions of the eighteenth century with the revolutionary politics and rhetoric so dominant in the Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff. However, Wordsworth, increasingly under the influence of Godwin, was to continue developing a Jacobin aesthetic, though more along the psychological and sociological lines then being established by Godwin.

The Salisbury Plain poems, or rather the ongoing revision of the drafts, reveal in great clarity Wordsworth turning from incendiary apologist for the French Revolution and reform in England following Paine the rationalist, to a more individualistic, compassionate and imaginative exploration of oppression's

1 Godwin, op.cit., p.199.

2 ibid., p.200.

3 William Godwin, Fleetwood: or, The New Man of Feeling, (London, 1805), p.XI.

victims. Salisbury Plain, and the preceding poetry, then show a maturing political consciousness, and consciousness of poetry as both a medium for the imagination and social reform. However, as the poetry of the next three years culminating in The Borderers reveals, Wordsworth was to increasingly reject Godwinian and Jacobin politics and aesthetics as models in favour of a latent, individualistic, humanitarian poetry.

CHAPTER THREE

WORDSWORTH'S POETRY OF SOCIAL PROTEST -A NIGHT ON SALISBURY PLAIN

In Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814, Geoffrey Hartman sees Salisbury Plain as "more than a document revealing Wordsworth's passage from consciousness of nature to self-consciousness. It is also a poem participating in that movement"¹. However, Hartman neglects an intermediate stage in the development of Wordsworth's poetry and philosophy of man. Consciousness of man, and of man in society, precede the poetry of self-consciousness which culminates in The Borderers and The Prelude. In Descriptive Sketches, Wordsworth's consciousness of nature had evolved into a consciousness of man in society. In Salisbury Plain, there is an interplay between consciousness of nature, of man in society, and of human psychology. In Salisbury Plain, Wordsworth increasingly incorporated his understanding of social affairs and nature into the analysis of the human mind. At the same time, there is a shift in focus from direct reference to the French Revolution to the need for reform of the institutions causing suffering to the oppressed poor.

Stephen Gill sees Salisbury Plain² as "Wordsworth's contribution to a public debate, not as a 'poem' in a restricted sense, but as a statement on public affairs"³. As an anti-government polemic, the poem was ostensibly concerned with specific recent events. Its function as propaganda was to direct the reader's attention to the moral evil occasioned by England's declaration of war on revolutionary France. It continued the commentary on current events that dominated the Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff, and to a lesser extent, Descriptive Sketches. Gill continues, asserting that

- 1 Geoffrey Hartman, Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814, (Yale University Press, 1964), p.214.
- 2 Salisbury Plain was composed between August 1793 and May 1794. In a letter to Matthews dated 23rd May, 1793, Wordsworth refers to its completion, his intention to publish it, and to a change in its title to A Night on Salisbury Plain. Gill's reproduction of the manuscripts shows Wordsworth's insertion, and modification of, the title. Wordsworth subsequently revised and extensively changed the poem between 1795-6, working on it until as late as 1799. This second version is called Adventures on Salisbury Plain. Wordsworth revised and published the second version in 1842, entitling it Guilt and Sorrow or Incidents upon Salisbury Plain. Reed in his Wordsworth: a Chronology, gives a detailed account of the dates for each manuscript and its variants, pp.333-7. Appendix xii. Gill draws on Reed, in the introduction to "The Salisbury Plain Poems".
- 3 Stephen Gill, "Wordsworth's Breeches Pocket", Essays in Criticism, 19, 1969, p.391.

"its quality as a poem is directly linked with how far Wordsworth observes the elementary rules of such a debate"¹. Though Salisbury Plain may be seen as Wordsworth's² intended contribution to the debate on the war with France, and to the cause for political and legal reform in England, its poetic value lies beyond its function as propaganda. While the poem's topicality contributes to the concrete, realistic portrayal of experience, its relevance and dramatic intensity carry it on to a more universal plane.

In keeping with the "elementary rules of such a debate", Wordsworth in the introduction to the poem states the criteria according to which the reader is to interpret the central experiences of the poem. Wordsworth states his beliefs about the nature of society. He arranges the themes of his argument. The body of the poem is designed to prove the veracity of these propositions, while the conclusion is an affirmation of Wordsworth's introductory propositions about "man as he is not"³, and a call for social change. Formally, the poem is a rhetorical construct. The form shapes the content according to Wordsworth's didactic purpose. Superficially, the narrative of the two vagrants is framed by the poet's opening and closing declamations, and is an illustration of its main points. However, a tension arises between the poem's rhetorical structure and the imaginative intensity and scope of its content. The content bursts through the formal constraints, conveying more forcefully Wordsworth's insights into man's social existence and his humanitarian concern for the plight of the oppressed.

Salisbury Plain opens with one of the pairs of contrasting concepts which dominate the poem's structure. Wordsworth contrasts man living in his natural state with civilized man. As the poem proceeds, Wordsworth's

1 *ibid.*, p.391.

2 Salisbury Plain remained unpublished. A later version appeared in 1842, as "Guilt and Sorrow".

3 The subtitle of Robert Bage's novel Hermesprong, published in 1796. Older than contemporary Jacobin novelists, and writing more in the tradition of Voltaire and Diderot, Bage's Hermesprong concentrated on "the conflict between coercion and free-will, social requirements and the necessities of individual choice and independence, (Kelly, The Jacobin Novel (Oxford 1976, p.62.) Like Voltaire's naive Indian hero in L'Ingénué, Bage's Hermesprong has a simple common sense and lack of "civilized" preconceptions which enable him to expose the vanities and illusions of society. He has affinities with the female vagrant in that he too is a victim and a symbol of betrayed innocence.

portrait of modern society suggests the identity of man's savage state with his civilized state. In effect, as the poem's opening stanzas suggest, modern society, with its established institutions, has only given rise to greater barbarity and to disregard for the dignity of human life. Savage man leads a life dominated by hardship, brutality and fear:

Hard is the life when naked and unhoused
 And wasted by the long day's fruitless pains,
 The hungry savage, 'mid deep forests, roused
 By storms, lies down at night on unknown plains
 And lifts his head in fear.¹

Wordsworth does not share Rousseau's naive concept of the noble savage living in harmony with nature. Rather, underlying Wordsworth's concept of savage man is the Christian belief in man's alienation from Nature as a consequence of original sin². Isolated, divorced from a fertile Nature and its nurturing grace, man struggles against a hostile environment. Again, rather than the idyllic notion of man in his natural state on which the political theorists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had based their concepts of the state, and of man's political nature, Wordsworth depicts the wretchedness of man living under the tyranny of Nature. Superficially, Wordsworth's view of the relationship between man and Nature had changed little from that expressed two years earlier in Descriptive Sketches.

Despite the hostility of Nature, the savage has an inner strength with which he can endure suffering:

Yet his is strong to suffer, and his mind
 Encounters all his evils unsubdued.³

Uncivilized man's solitary existence is one of continued hardship as he struggles to prevail against both the hostile forces of his natural environment, and against other men: "... the war-songs' peal the valley shake"⁴. His misery is heightened by changes in fortune and the consequent unhappiness

- 1 Wordsworth, Salisbury Plain, ed. Stephen Gill, ll.1-5. Gill's edition of the poem appears in Wordsworth - Bicentary Studies, pp.153-167, and in The Salisbury Plain Poems, The Cornell Wordsworth, Cornell University Press, 1975, pp.19-119. Subsequent references are to the latter text.
- 2 c.f. Wordsworth, The Excursion in Poetical Works, III, ed Legouis. (Oxford) 1940), where Wordsworth explores the solitary's similar state of alienation.
- 3 Wordsworth, op.cit., ll.10-11.
- 4 *ibid.*, l.15.

which comes from the contrast between past happiness and present suffering:

The thoughts which bow the kindly spirits down,
And break the springs of joy, their deadly weight
Derive from memory of pleasures flown
Which haunts us in some sad reverse of fate.¹

Wordsworth introduces the themes of memory and uncertainty which are subsequently to recur in the female vagrant's narrative. In conjunction with the emerging theme of the barbarity of civilized man, they will assume a central role in the narrative.

In the Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff, and in Descriptive Sketches, one of Wordsworth's principal criticisms of existing political institutions had been that they tended to divide society into two classes, the privileged and powerful and the impoverished and enslaved. He had condemned a nation where the governors held power at the expense of the governed. Wordsworth continues his attack on privilege in Salisbury Plain, combining it with the two themes of memory and loss. The "reverses of fate" which, through memory, torment man are directly attributable to political institutions. Ironically, the very institutions which separate civilized man from savage man, are, themselves, the source of increased misery. Moreover, reflection on the unequal distribution of wealth in a divided society creates resentment:

... from reflections on the state
Of those who on the couch of Affluence rest
By laughing fortune's sparkling cup elate,
... We of comfort reft, by pain depressed,
No other pillow know than Penury's iron breast.²

In contrast to this, man's natural, uncivilized state precludes him from experiencing the misery attendant upon progress, and a society divided between the privileged and the poor. Instead, savage man finds a natural freedom and equality, but at the cost of unremitting suffering:

What in those wild assemblies has he viewed,
But men who all of his hard lot partake,
Repose in the same fear, to the same toil awake.³

1 *ibid.*, ll.19-22.

2 *ibid.*, ll.23-27, c.f. Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff, where Wordsworth condemns arbitrary social and political distinctions, "these separations among mankind are absurd, impolitic, and immoral.", Wordsworth Prose Works, Vol.1. ed. Owen and Smyser, pp.44-5.

3 *ibid.*, ll.16-19.

In the first three stanzas, Wordsworth establishes the principal themes of Salisbury Plain, and suggests a relationship between them that will become apparent in the central narrative. While the themes of savagery, of a civilized yet unjust society, and of memory, reveal a pessimistic outlook on the common man's lot in modern society, the fourth stanza offers hope:

... where Refinement's genial influence calls
 The soft affections from their wintry sleep
 And the sweet tear of Love and Friendship falls
 The willing heart in tender joy to steep.¹

In contrast to the "couch of Affluence" of the rich, Wordsworth offers the common man the consolation and hope which "Refinement" will bring. Wordsworth's use of "Refinement" is deliberately ambiguous. Refinement denotes the process of perfecting, of improving, and of realizing innate potential. It is a veiled reference to social change, whether of a revolutionary or evolutionary nature. Refinement also has a rarer use. It can mean "a piece of subtle reasoning"². This may refer to the liberation and enlightenment that will come through education and discussion, the Godwinian "mace of Reason"³. In this stanza, Wordsworth has equated "Refinement", and its complex of meaning, with the spiritual renewal of the poor and oppressed. As the plot and conclusion of the narrative will reveal, regeneration at an individual and a social level will be the result of two principal agents, reason and charitable love or compassion: "Love and friendship". Wordsworth employs imagery evoking the revitalizing influence of spring to express the social renewal and liberation that will come through reason and selfless love. By implication, "the wintry sleep" of "soft affections", is the product of a barren, repressive, social order.

In the concluding lines of the introductory section,⁴ Wordsworth foreshadows the female vagrant's account of her dispossession and subsequent wanderings. Wordsworth refers to "men in various vessels who roam the deep of social life"⁵.

1 *ibid.*, ll.28-31.

2 *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol.8.p.340. Milton also used "refine" in the sense of "freeing from coarseness and rudeness", to imbue with culture, delicate feelings or instinct; c.f. *Paradise Lost*, VIII,589. This sense is also implicit in Wordsworth's use of "Refinement". Johnson defines refinement as "the act of purifying, by clearing away dross and recrementious matter", and as "the state of being pure". Wordsworth reads a political, utopian, significance into the term.

3 Wordsworth, *op.cit.*, l.594.

4 Lines 1-36 or Stanzas 1-4 comprise the introduction.

5 Wordsworth, *op.cit.*, ll.32-33.

The central action of the female vagrant's tale, the voyage of estrangement, exile and reconciliation, becomes a metaphor for the rootless existence of the poor in a hostile and uncharitable society. The traditional metaphor for life, the pilgrimage, takes on a new, political, significance. It denotes the uncertainty, solitude, vulnerability, and alienation that dominates the common man's existence. The final couplet of this stanza reinforces Wordsworth's view of the plight of the common man in civilized society:

... how many thousands weep
 Beset with foes more fierce than can assail
 The savage without home in winter's keenest gale.¹

For Wordsworth, society is more destructive than a hostile Nature.

The narrative commences with the description of a solitary traveller journeying over Salisbury Plain. At this stage in the poem's evolution,² the traveller is anonymous. Wordsworth furnishes neither a physical description of him, nor a biographical sketch. His role is primarily functional. Through him, Wordsworth can express his own sense of alienation from man and nature. Later, in The Prelude, Wordsworth refers to the "crise de conscience" brought about by the Pitt Government's declaration of war on France in February 1793. As a consequence, Wordsworth, a sympathizer with the French Revolution and its republican ideals felt betrayed by, and estranged from, his own nation, traditionally a bastion of liberty:

... I felt
 The ravage of this most unnatural strife
 In my own heart, there lay it like a weight,
 An enmity with all the tenderest springs
 Of my enjoyment ... It was a grief -
 Grief call it not, 'twas anything but that -
 A conflict of sensations without name ...³

Wordsworth subsequently employs an image drawn from Nature to describe his anguish:

Now from my pleasant station was I cut off
 And tossed about in whirlwinds.⁴

1 *ibid.*, ll.33-6.

2 In Adventures on Salisbury Plain, 1795-6, Wordsworth will present him as a sailor, victimized by society, driven to murder, and persecuted by the law, and his own guilt and remorse.

3 Wordsworth, The Prelude, (1805), ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, et.al., Norton, Book X.1.250-6.

4 Wordsworth, The Prelude, (1805), Bk. X.11.257-9.

For Wordsworth, the image of the tempest denotes both inner turmoil, and the vulnerability of a solitary man to his environment - to nature and society. In the opening lines of the narrative of Salisbury Plain, Wordsworth adds further layers of meaning to this image: "The troubled west was red with stormy fire"¹. It furnishes a description of the landscape against which the ensuing action will take place. It alludes to the outbreak of war between England and France, placing the contents of the poem in their political context. In addition, it draws the reader's attention to the stream of apocalyptic imagery that will accompany subsequent descriptions of war, and ultimately, Wordsworth's concluding call for the overthrow of the old order.

While the solitary traveller functions as a counter allowing Wordsworth to explore the themes stated in the introduction, he has also an independent inner life. He provides the only human presence in a bleak, desolate landscape. Rather than the detached descriptive mode of Descriptive Sketches, the traveller allows Wordsworth to portray a man reacting to his environment. The emphasis of the poem does not lie in its description of landscape so much as its depiction of man's reaction to it. Though Wordsworth retains a detached, authorial omniscience, he is still able to convey insights into the inner life of the characters through the external description of symbolic acts. The solitary traveller turns his back on the spire of Salisbury Cathedral:

... the distant spire
That fixed at every turn his backward eye
Was lost, tho' still he turned, in the blank sky.²

In the subsequent versions of Salisbury Plain, this act will signify guilt, and the traveller's attempt to escape the consequences of his act of murder. However, in Salisbury Plain, it marks the traveller's abandoning of the conventional means of salvation. In Salisbury Plain, the traveller is symbolically turning his back on a society, the institutions of which are rooted in, and dominated by, the Church - "Superstition's reign"³. Rejecting the consolation and hope that the spire offers, and turning away from the symbol of an immoral society's secular values, the traveller finds himself on Salisbury Plain, isolated and exposed.

1 Wordsworth, Salisbury Plain, l.37. c.f. Descriptive Sketches, ll.774-81.

2 *ibid.*, ll.39-41.

3 *ibid.*, ll.548.

Journeying beyond the confines of society, the traveller regains the freedom from political restraints that is man's in his natural state. However, the liberation from the institutions of society brings only solitude and exposure to the extremes of Nature. The traveller may have escaped oppression by the state, but he is now subjected to the tyranny of his natural environment:

No shade was there, no meads of pleasant green,
No brook to wet his lips or sooth his ear.¹

The traveller's history enacts a desperate quest for visible objects of hope. However, each negative statement denotes an image which the traveller seeks, but denies its objective existence. Imagery imitates desire, and syntax the force with which objective reality denies that desire. The visible landscape is described by implication, and in negative terms. Wordsworth renders the traveller's hardship and disappointment as he encounters the desolation of Salisbury Plain through a direct use of language. He records the traveller's reaction in terms of subject and object, in terms of anticipation and the often unexpected reality. At the same time, Wordsworth strips language of devices that mediate between the external object and the mind of the reader - personification, analogy, or periphrasis. He arranges literal images, endowing them with an intense but implied significance. In doing this, Wordsworth enables the reader to visualize the landscape, as the traveller sees it and reacts to it.

In a further development away from the conventions of eighteenth century landscape and pastoral poetry, Wordsworth portrays a desolate landscape hostile to man. It lacks the beauty or sublimity of Burkean aesthetics. Wordsworth's political protest against the unjust and oppressive institutions of his society extends to its poetic conventions. Seeking to portray the truth of man's existence, "things as they are", he had necessarily to overturn out-moded genres and the false assumptions lying behind them concerning man's relationship with Nature, and with society. Liberated from society, the solitary does not discover a Rousseauesque haven² in Nature, nor does he find the idyllic happiness of the shepherd of the pastoral. Instead his existence and consciousness revert to the level of the savage described in the introduction:

He stood the only creature in the wild
On whom the elements their rage could wreak.³

1 *ibid.*, ll.46-7. ll.46-7.

2 See J.J. Rousseau, *Les Reveries du Promeneur Solitaire*, 1778, which deals with alienation, persecution, and refuge in the luxuriance of Nature, which opens the mind to a new moral order.

3 Wordsworth, *op.cit.*, ll.66-7.

Wordsworth presents the reader with a dilemma. Man can live in society with its injustice and oppression, or he can confront the existential reality of liberty found in a Nature hostile to man.

Solitude and exposure to the extremities of the terrain bring on delirium and hallucinations. Appropriately, Wordsworth employs gothic conventions to describe the solitary's vision of the supernatural at Stonehenge.¹ He uses the device of the "genius loci" as a means of bringing a revelation to the traveller and consequently to the reader. The genius warns the traveller of spectres haunting the ruins:

Fly ere the fiends their prey unawares devour
Or grinning, on thy endless tortures scowl
Till very madness seems a mercy to thy soul.²

The spirit proceeds to describe the apparition of Druidic spectres³ and the ritual of human sacrifice which they perform:

Oft at dead of night, when dreadful fire
Reveals that powerful circle's reddening stones,
'mid priests and spectres grim and idol's dire,
Far heard the great flame utters human moans.⁴

Wordsworth employs the machinery of the gothic novel to convey his apprehensions about the moral evil of a society where the interests of Church and State are served by sacrificing human life. Wordsworth implies a link

- 1 In an unpublished letter to John Kenyon dating from 1838, Wordsworth describes his own experience on Salisbury Plain. "Overcome with heat and fatigue I took my siesta among the pillars of Stonehenge; but was not visited by the muse in my Slumbers." *M.L.R.* L111 (1958), p.547. Wordsworth did not, as he claims in *The Prelude*, (1805) XII, 312-353, undergo a visionary experience at the time, August 1794. However, as Gill in his introduction states, "the encounter with the Plain provided Wordsworth's imagination with a focusing image through which he could express much of what he had been feeling so impotently about the nature of man in society", p.5. In the "Advertisement to Guilt and Sorrow", (*Wordsworth, Poetic Works*, Vol.1, ed. E. de Selincourt, Oxford, 1940 p.95) Wordsworth describes the significance of Stonehenge in the poem, "The monuments and traces of antiquity ... led me unavoidably to compare what we know of those remote times with certain aspects of modern society, and with calamities principally those consequent upon war, to which, more than any other class of men, the poor are subject."
- 2 Wordsworth, *Salisbury Plain*, ll.88-90.
- 3 See Stuart Piggott, *Ruins in a Landscape*, (Edinburgh, 1976) and *The Druids* (London, 1968) for eighteenth century responses to Druidism, particularly as a form of Christianity.
- 4 Wordsworth, *op.cit.* ll.91-4.

between the established Church, symbolized earlier by the spire of Salisbury Cathedral, and the ruined monuments of a culture given to human sacrifice. The clergy of the contemporary Church¹ defer to the state, and, condoning the war with France, consign a nation to death. The significance of the traveller's revelation lies in more than the simple contrast of the barbaric past with the civilized present. Wordsworth implies that, despite the interval in time between the druidic past and revolutionary present, the nature of society has not changed. Priest and King offer up human life to the modern idol of power.²

Later, in The Prelude, Wordsworth again describes Stonehenge and his vision of Druidic rituals. Rather than presenting this episode as fiction, and through the experience of another, Wordsworth portrays it autobiographically, as the culmination of his own visionary wanderings over Salisbury Plain in August 1793:

While through those vestiges of ancient times
I ranged, and by the solitude o'ercome,
I had a reverie and saw the past,
 ... and lo, again
The desert visible by dismal flames!
It is the sacrificial altar fed
With living men - how deep the groans ...³

For Wordsworth in 1793, the ruins of Stonehenge had symbolized both a supernatural and a social evil that had been prevalent in the past and was still manifesting itself in the present. Wordsworth, in 1805, still saw Stonehenge as an enduring testament to the ever-present moral evil of a tyrannical society.

However, the ruins, and his visionary experience amongst them, take on a new, added, significance in Wordsworth's autobiographical recasting of experience. No longer merely symbols of oppression and death, they testify to the power of the imagination. In 1805, Wordsworth describes his journey to Stonehenge, and subsequent vision there, in terms of a pilgrimage and the fulfilment of his own poetic destiny:

- 1 In the Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff, Wordsworth had accused the Bishop, and the conservative cause which he was upholding, of having "no wish to dispel an infatuation which is now giving up to the sword so large a proportion of the poor and consigning the rest to the more slow and more painful consumption of want.", Wordsworth, Prose Works, Vol.1. ed.Owen and Smyster, p.49.
- 2 This theme is brought out in the concluding stanzas, particular stanzas 50-57, ll.442-514.
- 3 Wordsworth, The Prelude (1805), Bk. XII. ll.318-332.

... To such mood,
 Once above all - a traveller at that time
 Upon the plain of Sarum - was I raised:
 There on the pastoral Downs without a track
 To guide me, or along the bare white roads
 Lengthening in solitude their dreary line, ...¹

In contrast to Wordsworth's later interpretation of an earlier experience, Salisbury Plain depicts a journey of loss, sorrow, estrangement, and physical hardship. Moreover, the gothic sensationalism of the earlier poem afforded a tangible approximation to Wordsworth's horror at the plight of the common man, and of the poor, in an oppressive society waging war on innocence and freedom.

Before composing Salisbury Plain, Wordsworth had written "At the Isle of Wight, 1793".² In it, he had recorded his response to the sight of the English fleet preparing for war. The concluding lines look forward to the image of human sacrifice now becoming prominent in Salisbury Plain:

But hark from yon proud fleet in peal profound
 Thunders the sunset common; at the sound
 The star of life appears to set in blood,
 And ocean shudders in offended mood,
 Deepening with moral gloom his angry flood.³

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- 1 Wordsworth, The Prelude, Bk.XII, ll.313-320. In the Advertisement to Guilt and Sorrow, Wordsworth refers to "two days wandering on foot" over the plain.
 - 2 Composed late June, or early July 1793, it records Wordsworth's journey from London to the Isle of Wight with William Calvert in late June, 1793. It is published in Wordsworth's Poetic Works, Vol.1.ed. E. de Selincourt, pp.307-8. In the 1842 Advertisement to Guilt and Sorrow, Wordsworth recalls "spending a month in the Isle of Wight in the latter part of the summer of 1793, in view of the fleet which was then preparing for sea off Portsmouth at the commencement of the war; I left the place with melancholy forebodings." c.f. The Prelude, (1805), X. 291-307.
 - 3 Wordsworth, "At the Isle of Wight, 1793", Poetical Works, Vol.1, ed E. de Selincourt, Oxford, 1940, pp.30-8, ll.1518. In the "Advertisement to Guilt and Sorrow", op.cit., p.92, Wordsworth describes the genesis of Salisbury Plain in terms of this premonition of suffering: "The struggle which was beginning ... I was assured in my own mind would be ... productive of distress and misery beyond all possible calculation. This conviction was pressed upon me by having been a witness during a long residence in revolutionary France, of the spirit which prevailed in that country." C.f. The Prelude, (1805), X.ll.275-83, for Wordsworth's anger at the Pitt Government's declaration of war, and Salisbury Plain, stanzas 50-58, ll.442-522 for a similar condemnation.

It was the premonition of approaching war, with the inevitable destruction of life, that gave rise to the "moral gloom" preoccupying Wordsworth on his subsequent journey over Salisbury Plain.

Wordsworth conveys his despair and pessimism at the consequences of the approaching war. This is reflected in the gothic topoi, and by evoking an atmosphere of unalleviated gloom:

At length, deep hid in clouds, the moon arose
And spread a sickly glare.¹

Again, through the reaction of the traveller to the inhospitable terrain, Wordsworth indirectly expresses his own approaching moral crisis initiated by the political crises of 1793, and not fully resolved until 1797, when, in The Ruined Cottage, he expressed his redemptive vision of the "One Life".

Worn out and wasted, wishing the repose
Of death ...²

Historical reality defeats Wordsworth's quest for hope in a barren, oppressive society. Despair at the turn of political events, the recognition that his millennial hopes for change in England were unfounded, drive Wordsworth into increasing introspection.

The old traveller's journey across Salisbury Plain enacts on a symbolic level Wordsworth's search for a meaning and redemption in an unjust society. Just as the traveller is continually disappointed in his desperate search for shelter from a hostile Nature, so Wordsworth was defeated of hope for social change by the force of historical events. The old traveller's despair, terror, and confusion mirror Wordsworth's own inquietude and impotent horror at an unalterable course of events which will lead to death and suffering for a whole Nation.

Significantly, the only haven which the traveller finds is a charnel house, once a shelter dedicated to the Virgin. It is haunted by a presence inimical to life:

Till then as if his terror dogged his road
He fled, and often backward cast his face.⁴

1 Wordsworth, Salisbury Plain, ll.116-17.

2 *ibid.*, ll.120-1. *The despair and confusion of this period drove him to search* *for a new faith.*

3 c.f. Wordsworth, The Prelude (1805), X. ll.275-306.

4 Wordsworth, Salisbury Plain, ll.125-6.

The Charnel-house becomes the third in a sequence of symbols which straddles the poem. It brings more clearly Wordsworth's association of religious institutions with death. The previously stated connection between the spire of Salisbury Cathedral and the war with France, and between Stonehenge and human sacrifice, lead to the association of the Charnel-house with the traveller's, and Wordsworth's, anxiety at approaching death. All three symbols reveal a tendency in man's existence in society that bridges the past and present, the sacrifice of human life to perpetuate political power.¹

Moreover, the Charnel-house represents the search for a haven from oppression, whether of political or natural origins, resulting in a confrontation with the reality of man's innate limitations - his mortality.

Having escaped death, and the evil presence in the Charnel-house, the traveller approaches another ruin, a spital:

And when the ambiguous gloom that ruin shewed,
How glad he was at length to find a place
That bore of human hands the chearing trace;²

In an ironic reversal of the motif of expectation and disappointment that has so far dominated the action of the narrative, the solitary traveller enters the Spital anticipating a demonic presence, but finds a woman:

Ah me! that last hope is fled apace;
For, entering in, his hair in horror rose
To hear a voice that seemed to mourn in sorrow's throes.³

The ruin is not haunted by a supernatural presence, but by a female vagrant:

It was the voice of one that sleeping moaned,
A human! and soon his terrors fled.⁴

The plot has so far developed on two levels, the literal and symbolic. On the symbolic level, the solitary has passed through suffering, undergone a spiritual death, and is now to be reborn through the compassion of a female bearer of grace - the female vagrant. Appropriately, as redemptress, she has taken refuge in a shrine dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

The ironic reversal extends beyond the level of plot to a transformation in the poem's imagery and to the significance of its patterned sequences of symbols and themes. This central turn in the poem's movement towards irredeemable pessimism will reverse and balance what has preceded. Rather

1 c.f. Wordsworth, op.cit., stanza 58, ll.514-22.

2 *ibid.*, ll.137-8.

3 *ibid.*, ll.133-5.

4 *ibid.*, ll.136-7.

than death, inhumanity, and the injustice and immorality of impersonal political and religious institutions, the ruin will come to symbolize hope, life, and regeneration through compassionate, selfless love. The previously contrasted themes of past and present, savagery and civilization, suffering and memory, will retain their former significance, but, in the context of what follows, will assume a further, contrasting, meaning. At the same time, the pattern of expectation and disappointment to which Wordsworth has accustomed the reader is suddenly reversed, making the reader aware that there is hope for change in what seems an irremediably pessimistic view of human life.

Despite the excesses of gothic sensationalism, Wordsworth retains psychological verisimilitude in his portrayal of the meeting of the solitary traveller with the female vagrant. The discovery of the female vagrant dispells the fear and despair that the traveller's ordeal on the plain has engendered. Likewise, the human presence of the traveller releases the female vagrant from the anxiety inspired by her own experiences on the plain:

Cold stony horror all her senses bound.

But he to her low words of chearing sound

Addressed, with joy she heard such greetings kind.¹

Their interchange establishes a mutual sense of security. Increasingly, their dread of the desolation of the surrounding plain gives way, under the influence of compassion, to a mood of introspection and reminiscence.

The female vagrant's account of her journey over Salisbury Plain parallels the traveller's own wanderings. Though she has not suffered to the extent that the anonymous traveller has, and though she has not been subjected to the visionary experiences of the traveller, she had been made aware of the apparitions at Stonehenge. She had encountered an old mendicant on the plain who had recounted the tale of a swain's vision amid the ruins. Through the female vagrant's account of the Druidic rituals at Stonehenge, Wordsworth repeats the theme of human sacrifice:

... dismal red

Clothes the black bodies of encircling crowds.

It is the sacrificial altar fed

With living men. How deep it groans.²

1 *ibid.*, ll. 155-9.

2 *ibid.*, ll. 182-5.

Wordsworth incorporates verbatim, these lines in his own account of Druidic rituals in *The Prelude*, XII.ll.330-3.

However, in the female vagrant's account, human sacrifice extends explicitly to war. Through the description of bronze-age warriors, Wordsworth alludes to the present state of war between England and France, and to the inevitable bloodshed:

The sword that slept beneath the warrior's head
 Thunders in fiery air: red arms appear
 Uplifted thro' the gloom and shake the rattling spear.¹

The apparition of warriors of the past age soon gives way in the female vagrant's narrative to the reality of war in the present.

Wordsworth prefaces the female vagrant's retrospective of her life with a physical description of her. Her bedraggled appearance reveals her suffering at the hands of fate, Nature, and an oppressive society. She embodies the themes which Wordsworth has made central to the poem. Moreover, the contrast between past and present lies at the heart of Wordsworth's description of the female vagrant. Intruding into the narrative, Wordsworth says of the female vagrant's past happiness and beauty:

Moved she not once the prime of Keswick's plain.
 While Hope and Love and Joy composed here smiling train?²

The female vagrant's care-worn appearance reestablishes two of the poem's principal themes stated in the introduction: the transience of human happiness and the permanence of loss:

And are ye spread ye glittering dews of youth
 For this, - that Frost may gall the tend flower
 In Joy's fair breast with more untimely tooth?³

The imagery of frost evokes the deadening impact of suffering brought about by social injustice. Wordsworth consistently draws on life-denying aspects of Nature, finding there a source of imagery for his description of man's barren, corrosive, and suffocating social existence.

Ostensibly, the female vagrant's account of her life is an "artless tale"⁴, its dramatic directness and lack of poetic pretension, reflect her ingenuous personality. Moreover, the political import and vein of social criticism submerged in the narrative only become apparent in the context of the whole poem. Wordsworth does not intrude into, and disrupt, the course of the tale in order to emphasize an issue, but has already alerted the reader

1 ibid., ll.187-90
 2 ibid., ll.205-6.
 3 ibid., ll.217-9.
 4 ibid., l.228.

to its importance in the preceding narrative. Wordsworth employs a variation of dramatic irony. He has the female vagrant narrate her tale, unaware of the full significance of her account of her suffering, and the political end it serves. Her tale, then, is an uninhibited outpouring of anguish, grief and despair. The absence of neo-classical poetic ornamentation, and the consequent prosaic directness of language create the impression of sincerity and "artlessness".

The theme of memory in conjunction with past happiness and present misery is implicit in the opening lines of the female vagrant's tale. The vagrant returns to her youth, which, as Wordsworth has stated in a homily¹ bridging the description of the female vagrant and her tale, is transient. She portrays her childhood as an idyllic existence:

By Derwent's side my father's cottage stood,
... A little flock and what the finny flood
Supplied to him were more than mines of gold.²

The pastoral, with its connotations of vitality, innocence and the fertile harmony of man with Nature, contrasts with the preceding gothic landscape, with its associations of death, evil, and the estrangement of man from Nature. At the same time, Wordsworth portrays the female vagrant's family, with its nexus of sustaining relationships, as the natural outgrowth and embodiment of this idyllic existence. Both the fertility of her natural environment and domestic contentment unite to provide the source of her joy:

Light was my sleep, my days in transport rolled;
With thoughtless joy I stretched along the shore
My parent's net ...³

At the same time, village life provided the female vagrant with a sense of communal identity. The community offered solidarity and the peaceful

1 Wordsworth, op.cit., ll.220-225, "Unhappy Man! ... it is thy miserable dower
Only to taste of joy that thou may'st pine.
A loss, which rolling suns shall ne'er restore.
... No second spring, but pain, til Death release thee, thine."

2 *ibid.*, ll.226-9.

3 *ibid.*, ll.230-3. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth had claimed that his revolutionary ardour was the natural product of childhood joy and freedom.

"a child of nature, as at first,
Diffusing only those affections wider
That from the cradle had grown up with me."

X.753-5. The female vagrant displays a similar regard for childhood, providing Wordsworth's first extensive treatment of a theme that was to culminate in *The Prelude*.

co-existence of individuals. The "dance that loudly beat the merry floor"¹ and "the ballad chaunted around the brightening flame."² celebrated this vital harmony between men, and between man and Nature.

The female vagrant had passed her earlier life in innocence, in a rural community isolated from the injustices and corruption of the state's political institutions. In scenes reminiscent of Goldsmith's Deserted Village³ and Langhorne's Country Justice,⁴ Wordsworth has the female vagrant describe the destructive consequences of the confrontation of pastoral innocence and freedom with social and political corruption and oppression. In the first version of Salisbury Plain, the female vagrant attributes the disruption of her idyllic existence to the intrusion of unnamed external forces:

At last by cruel chance and wilful wrong
My father's substance fell into decay.⁵

In Salisbury Plain, the female vagrant does not identify the specific cause of her father's and her own, dispossession. The "cruel chance" and "wilful wrong", to which she refers, point to a combination of unspecified circumstances. "Cruel chance" implies an irresistible, impersonal, fatality, while "wilful wrong" denotes deliberate victimization. The unidentified forces become personified in their combined effect as "Oppression.", "Oppression trampled on his tresses grey."⁶ Later, in Adventures on Salisbury Plain,⁷ and subsequently in "The Female Vagrant", she identifies the forces disturbing the harmony of the rural community:

Then rose a mansion proud our woods among
And cottage after cottage owned its sway.⁸

1 *ibid.*, l.250.

2 *ibid.*, l.251.

3 Goldsmith, The Deserted Village, ed. Roger Lonsdale (Longmans) ll.325-336 and ll.363-384. Goldsmith's Deserted Village served as a model, one of several, for Salisbury Plain.

4 Langhorne, The Country Justice, ed. Donald Davie, (Heinemann) Part II, ll.51-60, p.81. The Country Justice provided a source and model for Wordsworth's description of the plight of the poor in an oppressive society.

5 Wordsworth, *op.cit.*, ll.254-5

6 *ibid.*, l.57.

7 Adventures on Salisbury Plain remained incomplete in its manuscript form. The Female Vagrant's tale was omitted while Wordsworth worked on a new tale with which he could balance the enlarged narrative of the old sailor. However, he did not compose a substitute, and Gill in his edition of the poem has placed the version of the female vagrant's tale which appears in the Lyrical Ballads, 1798, in its place. See Read, Chronology, Appendix XII, pp.333-7 and Gill's introduction, pp.7-9.

8 Wordsworth, Adventures on Salisbury Plain, ed. Gill.ll.311-12.

Wordsworth situates the events of the female vagrant's tale in the new age of commerce, with its denial of, and disregard for, the traditional values of village and family life. The mansion and its owner embody the life-destroying attitudes of the new mercantile morality:

No joy to see a neighbouring house, or stray
Through pastures not his own, the master took;¹

The Enclosure Acts, and the rise of a new monied and propertied middle-class, brought with them the denial of traditional rustic freedom and equality. The new landowners derived their property and wealth from the oppression and the exploitation of agrarian labour: "The poor man deprived of his rights of common and his share in the village lands obviously lost."² Moreover, the manner in which Wordsworth describes the new land-owner suggests not only his uncaring intrusion into, and disruption of, a traditional way of life, but his disregard for Nature. By implication, Wordsworth states that power and wealth place a barrier between man and Nature. It is only the poor agrarian labourer who can enter into an harmonious coexistence with Nature.

The female vagrant proceeds to describe her father's attempts to resist the powerful and intrusive forces of social change, represented by the new landlord:

My father dared his greedy wish gainsay;
He loved his old hereditary nook.³

The landlord, with the full support of the law, contrives his downfall:

But, when he had refused the proffered gold,
To cruel injuries he became a prey,
Sore traversed in whate'er he bought and sold:
His troubles grew upon him day by day.⁴

The new laws favouring the wealthy and designed to protect their property allow the landowner to victimize successfully the female vagrant's father: "Till all his substance fell into decay." (c.311)

1 *ibid.*, ll.302-3.

2 A.E. Rodway, *Godwin and the Age of Transition*, (Harrap, 1952) p.17.

3 Wordsworth, *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, ll.303-4.

4 *ibid.*, ll.307-310.

The force of Wordsworth's disenchantment with the injustices of a social system which permits the lawful oppression of a poor man by his neighbour, a rich land-owner, is conveyed in a later variant of "The Female Vagrant". Following the line describing the "decay of the old farmers substance", Wordsworth, in 1802, adds:

They dealt most hardly with him, and he tried
To move their hearts - but it was in vain - for they
Seized all he had, ...¹

The landowner is implacable in his retribution. Embodying the lack of charity and compassion characteristic of the new laws and landowning class, he provides a vehicle for Wordsworth's indictment of a society which victimizes the poor. As the female vagrant's narrative in Salisbury Plain reveals, there are no legal or moral restraints placed upon his pitiless treatment of the old man:

Even to the bed where his old body lay
His all was seized; ...²

The female vagrant's generalized references to "cruel chance" and "wilful wrong", then, refer to the insuperable forces of social and political change, and to man's vindictive nature.³ These come together unexpectedly, and intruding into an individual's existence, irredeemably alter it. The inexorable forces of historical change and unregenerate human nature destroy the innocent world of the female vagrant's paradisaical childhood. Isolated from them in her youth, she is now helplessly caught up in them.

In the Deserted Village, Goldsmith had attributed the desolation of the countryside and the destruction of the traditional agrarian way of life to the new mercantile morality of the powerful rich:

... times are altered; trad^e's unfelling train
Usurp the land and disposses the swain;⁴

Goldsmith and Langhorne had treated dispossession as a subordinate, though important, theme. They had described its impact in terms of the victory of a new, undesirable, morality over traditional rustic virtue. However, Wordsworth differs in his treatment of this theme. Rather than through abstract, didactic,

- 1 Wordsworth, "The Female Vagrant" in the Lyrical Ballads, ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones, Methuen, 1963, p.46.Fn. to line 51.
- 2 Wordsworth, Salisbury Plain, ll.258-9.
- 3 c.f. Caleb Williams, where Falkland's power is particularly god-like.
- 4 Goldsmith, The Deserted Village, ll.63-4.

moralizing, he portrays dispossession and deracination in concrete, physical, and vividly psychological terms. Moreover, Goldsmith and Langhorne had perceived the new morality's tendency to break the bond between man and Nature. Wordsworth, too, as Enid Welsford¹ has pointed out, couches the dispossession of the female vagrant and her father in terms of the metaphor of the fall. The female vagrant's eviction from the paradisaical terrain of her childhood echoes the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden. Appropriately, the earlier drama of exposure to the external landscape now gives way to an inner drama in which suffering is seen in terms of psychological imbalance as well as physical privation:

... weeping side by side

Turned out on the cold winds, alone we wandered wide.²

Wordsworth's condemnation of the new economic morality, which asserts the relative value of wealth to the detriment of the intrinsic, sacred value of human life, is implicit yet powerful.

Wordsworth emphasizes the reality of human suffering by interweaving the themes of dispossession and memory. As she recounts her life to the old traveller, the female vagrant's sense of deracination, and her memory of the contentment of her youth, lead to an outburst of grief. Wordsworth employs the rhetorical device of repetition to underline the contrast of past happiness with present misery: "Can I forget ... can I forget".³ In the first two instances, the female vagrant refers to memories of her childhood. The third "Can I forget"⁴, referring to the memory of her father's ruin, "that miserable hour"⁵, accentuates her sense of irretrievable loss.

Each instance of loss, each trite detail of her earlier life, is given significance through the emotional force conveyed by the tone. Moreover, Wordsworth uses the interplay between past and present to create a subtle and ironic distancing between events and their description. Occasionally, these converge, heightening the female vagrant's grief as she relives a significant event from her past. In an ironic use of this device, Wordsworth has the female vagrant recall her departure from her home. Her father had just urged

1 Enid Welsford, Wordsworth's Salisbury Plain, (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1966). pp.19-20.

2 Wordsworth, Salisbury Plain, ll.259-60; c.f. Goldsmith, The Deserted Village, ll.275-286, and ll.363-384, for a similar linking of the effects of a new morality with eviction from a pastoral paradise and subsequent suffering. Goldsmith, in the latter passage, brings out the theme of exile, associating it with vagrancy, grief and death.

3 *ibid.*, ll.235-244.

4 *ibid.*, l.262.

5 *loc.cit.*

her to pray, but a complex of conflicting emotions prevents her from doing so:

I could not pray, by human grief oppressed,
Viewing our glimmering lot through tears that never ceased.¹

Wordsworth does not indulge in sentimentality but employs a realistic, confessional, mode of narrative to describe with poignancy the female vagrant's memory of a distressing incident from her past. At the same time, while each recalled incident accentuates the female vagrant's grief, it also, in conjunction with that grief, serves as an indictment of an unjust society. The tone, narrative mode, and the events themselves come together in a cumulative, and powerful, condemnation of a divided, oppressive, society. Lying behind this, and entering into the female vagrant's tale, is the force of Wordsworth's outrage, and his desire for social change. As Gill has stated:

"The revolutionary spirit brought old conditions into new perspectives, and the oppression of one female vagrant was suddenly seen to have intimate links with the reasons why, for instance the country was plunging into an unjust war. The poem makes these links, emphasizing the disaster that threatens a country that had divided into two nations ... This attack on the oppression of the poor is the centre from which all the poem's questioning radiates."²

Wordsworth reverts to the topoi of the pastoral genre as the female vagrant recalls her first love. Dispossessed, she seeks the protection of her beloved, now an artisan. Subsequently, she finds reassurance and contentment in marriage and child-bearing. However, the respite from suffering is brief, and with the foresight of experience, the female vagrant intuits further loss:

Three lovely infants lay within my breast,
And often viewing their sweet smiles I sighed
And knew not why ...³

Though Wordsworth has set the female vagrant's tale against the background of an earlier war, the American War of Independence,⁴ it nevertheless reflects Wordsworth's reaction to England's war with France in 1793. Moreover, Salisbury

1 *ibid.*, ll.268-9.

2 Gill, *op.cit.*, p.5. Introduction to the Cornell edition of The Salisbury Plain

3 Wordsworth, *op.cit.*, ll.291-93.

4 In the "Advertisement to Guilt and Sorrow", Wordsworth states that at the time he composed Salisbury Plain, "The American War was still fresh in memory", P.W.I. p.94.

Plain is a study of the impact of war in general upon the lives of the poor. The female vagrant describes its rapidly spreading consequences in terms of the decline of her family's well-being. She juxtaposes the effect, the threatened survival of her children, with its cause:

my happy father died
 Just as the children's meal began to fail,
 For war the nations to the field defied.¹

At this stage, Wordsworth focuses the narrative on the detrimental impact of war on the most susceptible and central of social institutions - the family. Increasingly, he widens the scope of his description of a society's dissolution in war. In a series of revealing images, Wordsworth portrays a nation coming to a standstill, its life-force and capacity to give meanings to life spent. Images of desolation and neglect dominate the landscape of an eighteenth century waste land:

The loom stood still, unwatched, the idle gale
 Wooed in deserted shrouds the unregarding sail.²

Wordsworth's use of metonymy and synecdoche conveys the fragmentation, loss of unity, and distorted perceptions of reality, which war produces. The abandoned loom symbolizes the sudden and devastating transformation of communal life:

How changed at once! For Labour's chearful hum
 Silence and Fear, and misery's weeping train.³

War strikes not only at the heart of society, but at the very roots of the individual's existence. The labourer is deprived of his livelihood, the fulfilment and dignity which it brings, and he and his family are reduced to penury.

The female vagrant's narrative now becomes a sociological study of the fragmentation of society during war. Wordsworth described how the already oppressive social conditions and political events concur in determining the actions not only of one individual but of a whole nation. Changes in the already divided structure of society had brought about the initial dispossession of the female vagrant and her father. The sudden outbreak of war deprives

1 Wordsworth, Salisbury Plain, ll.293-5, c.f. Deserted Village, ll.371-4.

2 ibid., ll.296-7, c.f. Ruined Cottage, l.174. where the "loom" signifies a way of life soon destroyed by famine and war, ll.185-196. c.f. Goldsmith, The Deserted Village, for similar symbols of desolation.

3 ibid., ll.298-9.

her husband of his livelihood.¹ Poverty and the need to provide for his family drive the female vagrant's husband to enlist in the army:

... soon with proud parade the noisy drum
 Beats round to sweep the streets of want and pain.
 ... He could not beg: my prayers and tears were in vain;
 To join those miserable men he flew.²

In an unpublished redraft of the previous stanza, Wordsworth has described the effects of war in terms of psychological realism, rather than in the currently prevailing sentimental mode:

When War's first threats reduced the children's meals
 Thrice happy that from him the grave did hide
 The empty loom (chill/cold) hearth, and silent wheel
 And tear (which/that) flowed for ill (that/which) Patience could not heal.³

The reality of privation and the need to find sustenance prevail over moral convictions. Patience, an abstract moral quality, cannot ensure life. Physical suffering can not be alleviated by moral or spiritual strength. The female vagrant proceeds to describe her husband's, and her own awareness of this grim necessity imposed upon them by circumstances:

My husband's arms now only served to strain
 Me and his children hungering in his view.⁴

The psychological constraints caused within the family by "the law severe of penury"⁵ are a recurrent theme in Wordsworth's subsequent poetry of social protest in the 1790's. As late as 1798, Wordsworth is still preoccupied with the disastrous effects of poverty upon the fragile relationships which constitute man's most elemental form of existence within society - the family.

- 1 Wordsworth's treatment of this theme extends into poetry he composed later in the 1790's. The Ruined Cottage is based on war's disruption of family life, and the domestic tragedy which follows.
- 2 Wordsworth, op.cit., ll.300-05.
- 3 *ibid.* Gill's reproduction of the manuscript of Salisbury Plain includes variants which Wordsworth suppressed. See Gill's edition of Salisbury Plain, p.81. This is a redraft of ll.295-7.
- 4 *ibid.*, l.302-3.
- 5 Wordsworth, The Excursion, Book VIII, l.283, Poetic Works, Vol.5, ed. E. de Selincourt, Oxford, 1940, ll.283-7 occur, originally, in manuscript, in Notebook 18A, dating from 1798.

A study of the burden placed on the husband and father of a family by poverty occurs in notebook 18A¹ dating from 1798. The passage, entitled "Fragment", describes the deadening impact of penury on love. The husband's duty to provide for his family, and his inability to fulfil this obligation, lead to self-recrimination, a feeling of helplessness, and a conviction of failure:

For let the impediment be what it may
 His hands must clothe and nourish them, and thence
 From hour to hour so constantly he feels
 An obligation pressing him with weight
 Inevitable, that all offices
 Which want this single tendency appear
 Or trivial or redundant:
 ... There is no freedom in his love.
 ... He is the worst of slaves, the slave
 Of his own home ...²

The "Fragment"³ parallels and elucidates the complex of psychological and emotional tensions implicit in the female vagrant's terse description of her husband's distress and his decision to enlist.

Rather than providing a refuge from the encroaching privation and social dislocation which result from war, the family itself becomes a source of anxiety. The bond of love sustaining its members becomes a fetter chaining each to the distress of the other. Moreover, the female vagrant's narrative reveals how the coinciding of social injustice and a nation's political ambitions have undermined the role and significance of established institutions and moral values. Ironically, the love and harmony of domestic life become transformed by war into an existence of anguish and fragmentation. The random concurrence of circumstances, and the unfolding course of history, drag the

- 1 Manuscript 18A¹ dating from 1798, contains sections of Adventures on Salisbury Plain, as well as sections of The Ruined Cottage. Several pieces entitled "Fragment" also appear. In her notes to The Excursion, Helen Darbishire, provides a description of the manuscript, P.W.V., pp. 369-70. In his Chronology, Appendix IX, p.344, Reed provides a comprehensive description of it.
- 2 Wordsworth, "Fragment", from notebook 18A, published in P.W.V., pp.344-5, IX, 11.1-11. It is included in Appendix B, as Darbishire and de Selincourt "Find it akin" to The Ruined Cottage.
- 3 c.f. The Ruined Cottage, m.s.B.11.230-243. See also The Deserted Village, 11.384-5: "her fond husband strove to lend relief
 In all the silent manliness of grief."

female vagrant and her family helplessly along in their wake. Enlistment and departure from England, and abandoning all that has previously given her life significance, seem the only means of preserving intact the family and life itself:

We reached the western world a poor devoted crew.
 Oh dreadful price of being! to resign
 All that is dear in being; ...¹

The process of deracination that had commenced with the eviction of the female vagrant continues as the very need to survive entails the denial of deeply held moral convictions. The female vagrant proceeds to condemn her parasitic subsistence of the spoils of war. In retrospect, she believes that an innocent death through starvation, retaining integrity and without the need to violate moral imperatives, would have been preferable to the immorality and shame of surviving on the life's blood of others ,

protracting a cursed existence with the brood
 That lap their very nourishment, their brother's blood.²

As the female vagrant proceeds to recount her suffering in America, Wordsworth subtly underlines nuances of change in her psychological state. The narrative comments on the subject matter. As the female vagrant speaks, the ironic distancing between past and present is widened. While this allows her to make detached observations on her past, it also reveals the effect that suffering in the past has wrought upon her present state of mind. Her declamatory remarks about plundering the dead reveal a remorse and blood-guilt that time has not laid to rest but rather accentuated. Conversely, she has repressed the memory of the tragic death of her family. The narrative describing their loss is restrained and brief to the point of perfunctoriness:

Husband and children one by one, by sword
 And scourge of fiery fever: ...³

- 1 Wordsworth, *Salisbury Plain*, ll.306-8. Wordsworth's use of "devoted" l.306 is ambiguous. O.E.D. gives a secondary meaning, "formally or surely consigned to evil, or destruction", c.f. Milton, P.L.IX.900-1: "doomed".
- 2 Wordsworth, *op.cit.*, ll.314-15. C.F. Langhorne, *The Country Justice*, Part III, ll.97-9 refers to the immorality of War in similar terms referring to those:
 "who calmly on a Brother's vitals prey:
 For them I plead not, who, in Blood embrued,
 Have every softer Sentiment subdued - "
 Both Wordsworth and Landhorne allude to Cain's act of fratricide, as well as employing imagery denoting the bestiality, and loss of human dignity, of those who participate in it.
- 3 *idid.*, l.321-3. Again Wordsworth echoes Langhorne, *The Country Justice*, Pt.1 l.161., who describes the illusive hopes that the new world encourages, and the tragic reality.

However, the following narrative becomes disjointed, revealing the anguish which freeing her repressed memories of the death of her family has caused. Despite the formal constraints of the Spenserian stanza, Wordsworth is able to convey his grief by dislocating the rhythmic regularity of the verse, and through enjambment:

... every tear
Dried up, despairing, desolate, on board
A British ship I waked as from a trance restored.¹

The female vagrant's tale comes to a standstill. The ensuing silence conveys her inability to retain any longer her distance from the events of her past. She is consumed by grief and the now released memories of her loss:

Here paused she of all present thought forlorn,
Living once more those hours that sealed her doom.²

One of the central ironies of the female vagrant's tale to this point has been that, enslaved by unjust social conditions and drawn into the current of history, her suffering has led ultimately to liberty. The process of deracination which had separated her from the idyllic existence of her youth, from her homeland, and eventually from her husband and her children has resulted simultaneously in complete restlessness and total liberty. Released from all commitment, the female vagrant is left to adapt to her newly found independence:

Some mighty gulf of separation passed
I seem transported to another world: ...
... For me, farthest from earthly port to roam
Was best; My only wish to shun where man might come.³

The freedom or, rather, isolation that the female vagrant's experience has brought her leads to a pessimistic scepticism about the good in man. She withdraws into herself, alienated and dispossessed of her essential humanity.

Though the plight of the female vagrant is drawn from the stock situation of the war-widow⁴, Wordsworth goes beyond contemporary treatments of this theme. The female vagrant as war-widow becomes a vehicle for Wordsworth's exploration of liberty, not as the ideal put forward in the Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff, but as the existential reality. At the same time, on

1 *ibid.*, ll.322-4.

2 *ibid.*, ll.422-4.

3 *ibid.*, ll.325-7.

4 *ibid.*, ll.370-1, 377-8.

• See "The Soldier's Wife", and "The Widow", Southey's contribution in 1794, to the Jacobin protest against the war between England and France, The Poetical Works, Vol.II.pp.140-3.

a superficial level, the female vagrant's suffering serves another function. Inspiring pity for her suffering, and outrage at the society that has caused it, her tale becomes propaganda for Wordsworth's humanitarian stance.

In Religious Musings, Coleridge was to present a similar, though briefer, account of a war widow's loss and suffering:

O thou poor widow, who in dreams dost view
 Thy husband's mangled course, and from short doze
 Start'st with a shriek, or in they half-thatched cot
 Cour'st o'er thy screaming baby! Rest awhile
 Children of Wretchedness! More groans must rise,
 More blood must stream 'on ere your wrongs be full.
 Yet is the day of Retribution nigh: ...¹

Coleridge's excessive portrayal of suffering is designed to illustrate the need for apocalyptic social change. Coleridge's ardent idealism demands absolute liberty through the total dislocation of political and social institutions. Conversely, though Wordsworth was to conclude Salisbury Plain with a similar call for redress and freedom,² the female vagrant's tale itself reveals the limitations of revolutionary liberty. The dislocation and loss of family, the abandoning of sustaining moral conventions, the denial of love and man's essential humanity, lead only to a loss of identity and of purpose, to alienation and deracination. Wordsworth, in contrast with Coleridge,³ has portrayed as realistically as possible the dilemma which faces man, both in the seventeenth-nineties and in the twentieth century. An unjust society represses the individual, denying his fundamental rights and dignity, yet preserves institutions which give meaning and substance to life. Opposed to this is the anarchy of revolutionary war with its consequent privation and indiscriminate slaughter. The latter brings liberty, and with it, deracination, alienation and loss of personal and cultural identity.

1 Coleridge, Religious Musings, Poetical Works, ed. E.H. Coleridge (Oxford, 1974) 11.295-303. Composed between 1794-6, it was a call for apocalyptic revolution. See also Coleridge, Destiny of Nations (1796), 11.252-71.

2 See Salisbury Plain, 11.541-9.

3 c.f. S.T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, ed. George Watson (Everyman, 1982) p.47, where Coleridge describes his first meeting with Wordsworth in Bristol in September 1795, and Coleridge's admiration of Salisbury Plain.

Salisbury Plain may be seen in terms of a dialectic in which Wordsworth explores the reality of the two sets of alternatives facing man in society; oppression and stability, freedom and war. In effect, in the narrative of Salisbury Plain, Wordsworth is setting the two prevailing and opposed political philosophies of his times - Burkean conservatism and Painite radicalism - against each other. Wordsworth has taken the principles underlying both philosophies, and, grounding them in the social and political realities of the late eighteenth century, attempted to describe their consequences and validity. Implicit in this enactment of abstract political ideals is Wordsworth's growing awareness that neither ideology can fully accommodate the reality of man's social existence.

The freedom that her experiences have brought unbalances the female vagrant's mind.¹ In lines modelled on an earlier prose fragment dating from 1787 entitled "A Tale" and possibly a source of the female vagrant's tale, Wordsworth relates his meeting with a deranged beggar woman. His description of her is echoed in the later portrayal of the female vagrant's distraction: "Her eyes were large and blue; and from the wrinkles of her face (which from their fineness, seemed rather the wrinkles of Sorrow than of Years), it was easy to see they had been acquainted with weeping; yet had not perpetual tears been able to extinguish a certain wild brightness which, at the first view, might have been mistaken for the wildness of great joy. But it was far different - it too plainly indicated she was not in her true and perfect mind."² For the female vagrant, the demise of her family, the abandoning

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- 1 Wordsworth's preoccupation with the mental derangement that suffering brings to the poor is a theme that appears repeatedly in his earlier poetry. The Vale of Esthwaite, Salisbury Plain, Adventures on Salisbury Plain, The Borderers, The Ruined Cottage as well as several fragments including Incipient Madness are dominated by this theme. In most instances Wordsworth employs the gothic and macarbe to portray the unbalanced mind.
 - 2 Wordsworth, A Tale, Prose Works, Vol.1.ed. Owen and Smyser, pp.7-8. See Reed, Chronology, p.313, Appendix VI, for a description of the manuscript in which "A Tale" occurs. Another source which Wordsworth himself cites, appears in Poetic Works, Vol.1.ed. E de Selincourt, p.330. "All that relates to her sufferings as a sailor's wife in America, and her condition of mind during her voyage home, were faithfully taken from the report made to me of her own case by a friend who had been subjected to the same trials and affected in the same way." Both the source Wordsworth describes in the Fenwicke note, and "A Tale" come together in the description of the female vagrant's derangement.

of her homeland, and the denial of her own humanity have led to the loss of meaning of life. No longer having a society or culture with which to identify, her sanity loses its purchase on reality. She describes herself as "robbed of her perfect mind."¹

The female vagrant attempts to evade reality and preserve her freedom through a pilgrimage that has death as its end:

Roaming the illimitable waters round,
 ... of every friend but Death disowned,
 All day, my ready tomb the ocean flood.²

Eventually, the female vagrant's voyage from the new world returns her to England. Dispossessed and reduced to vagrancy, she encounters a society that is as unjust and uncaring as when she departed:

... homeless near a thousand homes I stood,
 And near a thousand tables pined and wanted food.³

The female vagrant closes her narrative, bringing the past into the present:

Three years a wanderer round my native coast
 ... And now across this waste my steps I bend:
 Oh! tell me whither, for no earthly friend
 Have I, no house in prospect but the tomb.⁴

The female vagrant's concluding outburst reveals her anguish at the desolation and purposelessness of her life. Unlike Wordsworth's later "solitaries" and vagrants in "The Old Cumberland Beggar", "Old Man Travelling", and "The Leech Gatherer", the female vagrant has not yet undergone the healing process which comes through the individual's atonement with Nature. Freedom has only brought further suffering and alienation. The female vagrant has not yet achieved the final liberation which comes through the acceptance of Nature. Imprisoned by selfhood, she imposes a barrier, separating herself from, rather than reconciling herself with, both her fellow man and Nature.

1 Wordsworth, Salisbury Plain, l.379.

2 *ibid.*, ll.382-5.

3 *ibid.*, ll.386-7.

4 *ibid.*, ll.388-393. C.F. Langhorne, The Country Justice, Part II ll.173-4:

"Those Veterans to their Native shores return'd
 Like Exiles wander'd, and like Exiles mourn'd ..."

Langhorne, like Wordsworth, deplored England's neglect of those who had fought in their country's service, sacrificing their families and livelihood.

Later, in The Ruined Cottage Margaret, who has undergone a similar experience of loss and despair, finds hope and release in the acceptance of Nature.¹ However, even as late as 1798, Wordsworth had intended the female vagrant's tale to stand as an illustration of how the preoccupation with personal affliction becomes an impediment to the healing and liberating influence of Nature. In the version of the female vagrant's tale which appears in The Lyrical Ballads of 1798, Wordsworth concludes the narrative by drawing attention to the female vagrant's consuming grief: "that perpetual weight which on her spirit lay"².

In Salisbury Plain, Wordsworth offers the possibility of redemption for the female vagrant. The act of confronting her past, through her narrative, has functioned as catharsis, purging and liberating her from grief and the bondage of selfhood. At the end of the female vagrant's tale, the narrator states simply "she ceased"³. The narrative then turns away from the psychological drama that has just taken place. Dawn dispels the gloom and fear of the previous night:

... The city's distant spires ascend
Like flames which far and wide the west illumine,
Scattering from out the sky the rear of night thin gloom.⁴

Wordsworth's portrayal of dawn breaking over the landscape functions also as a metaphoric description of the female vagrant's release from the anxiety and grief of her dark night of the soul. The rising sun, variously symbolizing in this poem the ascendancy of hope and of reason, signals a new direction in the movement of the narrative. It marks the beginnings of a process of regeneration and reintegration which will reunite the female vagrant with Nature, and her fellow man, and reconcile her with the springs of nature within herself. The spires which the solitary had turned his back on now become pertinent to a renewal of hope in the possibility of redemptive love.

Nature had nurtured the female vagrant in her childhood. Subsequently, her deracination and suffering had distanced her from the ground of her being. Eventually, on her voyage back to England, Nature had briefly asserted its soothing influence over her distracted mind. Even as the female vagrant

- 1 See The Ruined Cottage, ed. James Butler, Cornell Wordsworth (Ithaca, 1979), ll.485-492, 501-6, 512, 520.
- 2 Wordsworth, "The Female Vagrant", The Lyrical Ballads, ed. Brett and Jones, p.54, l.270.
- 3 Wordsworth, Salisbury Plain, l.394.
- 4 *ibid.*, ll.394-6.

approaches the end of her tale, a benign Nature again intrudes. The compassion of her companion, the old traveller, and the approaching dawn, combine to remove the impediment of grief which has so far obstructed the healing influence of Nature:

... forth she came and eastward look'd. The sight
O'er her moist eyes meek dawn of gladness drew
... The whilst her comrade to her pensive cheer
Tempered sweet words of hope and the lark warbled near.¹

In a reversal of the pathetic fallacy, Wordsworth has the female vagrant mirror nature. "The meek dawn of her gladness"² associates and identifies the regeneration that is occurring within Nature - dawn - with the reconciliation of the female vagrant with life and Nature.

In her analysis of Salisbury Plain, Mary Jacobus has noted that "the only refuge of the poor lies in mutual compassion"³. In the narrative following the female vagrant's tale, the old traveller exhibits not only sympathy for her suffering but empathy:

... human sufferings and that tale of woe
Had dimmed the traveller's eye with Pity's tear.⁴

A victim of society himself, he is not only able to enter into the female vagrant's account of her suffering, but identifies with it:

He too had withered young in sorrows deadly blight.⁵

No longer solely preoccupied with the abstract political rights of Jacobin ideology, Wordsworth was not looking for a practicable ethical system. In the Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff, Wordsworth had become aware of the shortcomings of radical political idealism. In Salisbury Plain he turned his attention to the reality of social injustice, seeking means to remedy it without recourse to the violence of revolution advocated by the Jacobin

1 *ibid.*, ll.336-342.

2 *ibid.*, l.337.

3 Mary Jacobus, Tradition and Experiment in the Lyrical Ballads, (Oxford, 1974), p.145.

4 Wordsworth, *op.cit.*, ll.399-400.

5 *ibid.*, l.405. In later versions of Salisbury Plain, Adventures on Salisbury Plain, and Guilt and Sorrow, Wordsworth was to balance the female vagrant's tale with a fuller account of the old traveller's identity and ordeal. As he appears in the first version of the poem, the old traveller enables Wordsworth to put forward his newly emerging beliefs on society, liberty, nature, and the relationship between individuals. He functions more as a suffering member of the masses than as a counter manipulated in the plot.

polemicists Paine and Mackintosh. Instead, Wordsworth was beginning to place his hopes for social change in inter-personal relationships founded on benevolence, altruism, and compassion. Wordsworth's stance is at variance with Godwin in emphasizing the role of Nature in man's existence, the centrality of the family in sustaining man's life, and consequently, the dominance of emotion, rather than reason, in human action. In any event, whether arrived at independently, or revealing the influence of Godwin, Wordsworth's belief that mutual compassion, and altruism, are to become the foundation of social life, is evident in his treatment of the regenerating relationship forged between the female vagrant and the old traveller:

And in the youthful mourner's doom severe
He half forgot the terrors of the night,
Striving with counsel sweet her soul to cheer.¹

In his Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, Godwin had devoted a chapter to defining his position with regard to current attitudes to benevolence.² Godwin contends that man is capable of disinterested altruism devoid of self-interest and the fear of painful consequences. In effect, Godwin asserts that selfless devotion to the good of others is a prerequisite virtue for the ideal political system. "Neither philosophy, nor morality, nor politics, will ever show like itself, till man shall be acknowledged for what he really is, a being capable of rectitude, virtue and benevolence, and who needs not always be led to actions of general utility, by foreign or frivolous considerations ... The system of disinterested benevolence proves to us, that it is possible to be virtuous, and not merely to talk of virtue, ..." ³. Godwin continues, linking disinterested benevolence with "abstract justice", the moral foundation of his new society:

An idea like this, reconciles us to our species: ...
and gives us reason to expect that, as men collectively
advance ... they will proceed more and more to consolidate
their private judgement, and their individual will, with
abstract justice, and the unmixed approbation of general
happiness.⁴

1 *ibid.*, ll.401-4.

2 Godwin, Political Justice, ed. Isaac Kramnick (Penguin, 1979), Book IV, pp.377-89

3 *ibid.*, pp.386-7.

4 *ibid.*, pp.387-8.

Whereas Godwin's rationalist, disinterested benevolence radiates outwards from the individual to the whole of society, Wordsworth's mutual compassion, an irrational force sustaining the physical and spiritual existence of two individuals, tends inward. In contrast to Godwin, who asserts the rational, detached, benevolence which was the ethical ideal of the Enlightenment, Wordsworth, anticipating his later humanitarian, romantic, poetry, advocates the emotional commitment of sympathy and empathy.

In her study of the Salisbury Plain¹ poems, Enid Welsford has commented on the affinities of Salisbury Plain with Milton's Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained. She has noted a parallel between Wordsworth's deracinated female vagrant and the old traveller, and Adam and Eve. The female vagrant's eviction from the pastoral paradise of her youth is analogous to the exile of Adam and Eve from Eden. Moreover, Welsford believes that the process of reintegration and reconciliation which closes the poem's narrative is, in effect, a return to paradise. Just as the female vagrant has been dispossessed of a pastoral paradise in her youth, so now, after much suffering, she is restored to a state of grace within Nature. Though Welsford's comparison only holds true on a superficial level, the pattern of loss and restoration, nevertheless, is a dominant feature of the poem's structure. Suffering has effectively brought with it a higher state of grace than mere innocence.²

The female vagrant's reconciliation with Nature, and with humanity, is reinforced through the sequences of imagery within the poem. The spire of Salisbury Cathedral, which had previously signified the tyranny of society's institutions, and the Church's complicity in a war consigning multitudes to their death, now becomes a symbol of hope and regeneration:

... The city's distant spires ascend
 Like flames which far and wide the west illumine
 Scattering from out the sky the rear of night's thin gloom.³

1 Enid Welsford, Wordsworth's Salisbury Plain, (Oxford, 1966) pp.19-20.

2 Blake also adopts the Framework of Innocence, fall from innocence to Experience, and achievement of a higher stage of perception and existence, particularly in his cycle of poems dealing with Urizen, Los and Orc. Wordsworth's indebtedness to the Milton's scheme of innocence, fall and ultimate grace may also be seen in the structure of The Prelude, particularly in the Books dealing with the French Revolution, which is seen as a fall from childhood and youthful innocence into the world of a seething society. Abrams deals extensively with this in Natural Supernaturalism (Norton, 1971) pp.21-8.

3 Wordsworth, op.cit.,ll.393-5.

Salisbury Plain itself, which had become a metaphor for despair, suffering, the supernatural, and the alienation of man from society and Nature, now gives way to a verdant, pastoral, landscape intimating fertility, hope and the atonement of man with Nature:

... now from a hill summit down they look
 Where through a narrow valley's pleasant scene
 A wreath of vapour tracked a winding brook
 Babbling through groves and lawns and meads of green.¹

Their newly regained paradise is a physical reality, a symbol of the harmony of man with Nature, and, in its Elysian luxuriance and calm, suggestive of the two vagrants' serenity and spiritual renewal. However, Wordsworth subsequently emphasizes the fragility of this new Eden. The existential reality of human suffering is, without social change, the inevitable lot of all. Drawing on an earlier passage in Descriptive Sketches,² Wordsworth expresses his pessimistic view of human existence and its attendant uncertainties:

... life is like this desert broad
 Where all the happiest find is but^a shed
 And a green spot 'mid wastes interminably spread.³

- 1 Wordsworth, op.cit., ll.406-9. The "prospect of Eden " may record Wordsworth's own experience in April or May 1794, when he and his sister, Dorothy journeyed on foot from Kendall to Grasmere, and from Grasmere to Windy Brow, which they had left in May 23, 1794. As Moorman notes Windy Brow dispelled some of the pessimism that recent political events had caused Wordsworth: "Here at Windy Brow, in the benign presence of his sister, and with the spring advancing to its perfection in fell and dale, a poet could not but be gay", p.248. Wordsworth's sojourn at Windy Brow, possibly recast in Salisbury Plain, anticipates what Moorman sees as the "story of Wordsworth at Racedown—the story of his reconciliation, 1795-7, with man, partly through a return to Nature, and partly through two human agencies. Mary Moorman, Wordsworth, The Early Years. (Oxford, 1957), p.280.
- 2 c.f. Wordsworth, Descriptive Sketches, P.W.1, p.76. ll.590-3.
 "-Alas! in every clime a flying ray
 Is all we have to cheer our wintry way,
 Condemn'd, in mists and tempests ever rife,
 To pant slow up the endless Alp of life."
- 3 Wordsworth, Salisbury Plain, ll.421-3. In The Prelude, 805, Book XII, ll.69-81, Wordsworth denounces the ignorance and ambition of modern "statists" and their materialist policies "the utter hallowness of what we name the Wealth of Nations", stating that without a true knowledge of the common man and his needs the harmful rifts within society will never be healed, and the common man consigned to a life of alienation, oppression, and suffering.

Noticeably, the narrative does not close with the female vagrant and her companion re-entering society. Injustice and inequality are still prevalent, and oppression rampant. The female vagrant and the old traveller, then, can only retain freedom and happiness outside society, living in a Rousseauesque paradise, where Nature and mutual compassion sustain their existence.

With the spiritual renewal of the female vagrant, images within the narrative which had previously signified despair and alienation are now transformed into images of hope and regeneration. However, the polemical coda which concludes the poem looks back to the poem's bleak introduction, with an as yet unchanged outlook. The female vagrant's narrative had revealed the possibility of liberty and happiness outside society. However, the unjust and oppressive institutions of society, and the prevailing mercantile morality¹ are inimical to both the compassionate bond between individuals, and to the fragile nexus between man and Nature.

The conclusion of the poem universalizes, while commenting upon, events in the female vagrant's tale. It presents a portrait of an irredeemably degenerate and oppressive society. Wordsworth exhorts the reader to examine the consequences of a value system which places the security of property and uneven distribution of wealth above the inherent rights and dignity of human life. The female vagrant's tale becomes, in effect, a case study, a specific instance, of a wide-spread social and moral evil:

For proof, if man thou lovest, turn thy eye
On realms which least the cup of Misery taste.
For want how many men and children die?²

In lines which were later to be echoed in "Humanity", Wordsworth denounces the exploitation of the poor, and the denial of their essential humanity, by the wealthy:

1 c.f. Coleridge's Lectures of 1795 on the fragmenting effects of industrialization.

2 Wordsworth, op.cit., ll.433-5.

How many by Inhuman toil debased,
 Abject, obscure, and brute to earth incline
 Unrespited, forlorn of every spark divine.¹

Lying behind Wordsworth's condemnation of social injustice in Salisbury Plain is his belief in the immorality of social division according to wealth and "nobility". This belief has figured prominently in his attack on the moral evil which had resulted from the uneven distribution of property and power: "when redress is in our power and resistance is rational, we suffer ... from beings like ourselves because we are taught from infancy that we were born in a state of inferiority to our oppressors, that they were sent into the world to scourge, and we to be scourged. Accordingly, we see the bulk of mankind, activated by these fatal prejudices, even more ready to lay themselves under the feet of the great than the great are to trample upon them."² His contention that social injustice has its foundations in the unequal distribution of property and wealth, and that the social system itself fosters oppression³ by the privileged and delinquency in the poor, is repeated in Salisbury Plain, where Wordsworth asks rhetorically:

How many at Oppression's portal placed
 Receive the scanty dole she cannot waste,
 And bless, as she has taught, her hand benign?⁴

Moreover, Wordsworth sees the current conflict with France, as well as the previous war with the American colonies, as an extension of the mercantile

1 Wordsworth, op.cit., ll.439-441. C.F. "Humanity", composed 1829, published in "Poems of Sentiment and Reflection", pp.392-3 of Wordsworth's Poetical Works, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, O.U.P., 1978. "Humanity" reiterates themes and images from Salisbury Plain, including the attribution of a new significance to Stonehenge. Wordsworth condemns the servitude of the Working Class in terms soon to be repeated in Dickens' Hard Times: England's soil

"groans underneath a weight of slavish toil
 For the poor Many, measured out by rules
 ... that to an idol, falseley called 'the Wealth
 of Nations', sacrifice a People's health
 Body and Mind and Soul; ... the Power least prized is that which
 thinks and feels". ll.85-93.

2 Wordsworth, Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff, Prose Works, Vol.1, ed., Owen and Smyser, p.36. Wordsworth's condemnation of aristocratic government is repeated in the letter to Matthews, June 1794. Letters 1787-1805, 42, p.24.

3 This recrimination is also echoed in the letter to Matthews, June 1794, Letters 1787-1805, 42, p.124.

4 Wordsworth, Salisbury Plain, ll.436-8, c.f. Langhorne, Country Justice. Part II, ll.49-60.

spirit which had engulfed England. For Wordsworth, the imperialist desire to subjugate can only have one consequence - complete moral collapse:

... nations, though at home in bonds they drink
The dregs of wretchedness, for empire strain,
And crushed by their own fetters helpless sink,
More their galled limbs in fear and eye each silent link.¹

Wordsworth employs imagery of bondage and enslavement to describe England under the Pitt Government. With the outbreak of revolution in France, and the public expression of discontent by its radical supporters in England, the Pitt Government had necessarily to become reactionary and more repressive.² England had become a prison. For Pitt, fear of revolution from within and the disruption of the status quo necessitated surveillance and censorship, "the eyeing of each silent link"³. The conclusion, then, depicts an England where the governors, having denied the populace their rights, react with fear and anxiety at the prospect of a just and egalitarian society. Fear of losing power and property has led to an unjust war with France, and an undeclared war on the radical element of the English populace:

Injury and Strife,
Outrage and deadly Hate usurp the reign of Peace, Truth, and Justice.⁴

Rather than choosing to acknowledge truth, the Pitt Government had turned on the English people as well as the French, embarking on a course that can only lead to further fragmentation and revolution. Wordsworth expresses his own reaction of despair and helplessness at being caught up in events which contravene Reason and compassion and affront Nature:

Through storms we ride with Misery to her goal:
Nor star nor needle know the tempests of the soul.⁵

1 *ibid.*, ll.446-9.

2 See Wordsworth's letter to Matthews, May 1794, Letters 1787-1805, 40., p.119. Wordsworth refers to "doctrines which are now enforced by banishment, imprisonment, etc., ... pregnant with every species of misery". c.f. Stanza 58, ll.505-13 of *Salisbury Plain*, and Wordsworth's letter to Matthews, June, 1794, p.125, where Wordsworth, like Milton before him in *Areopagitica*, urges the liberty of the press, and freedom of inquiry, instead of its repression at the hands of the government.

3 Wordsworth, *Salisbury Plain*, l.450.

4. *ibid.*, l.445

5 *ibid.*, ll.466-7, c.f. *The Prelude*, 1805, X. ll.234-5, 238, 253-8.

The three¹ concluding stanzas of Salisbury Plain raise some problems in the poem's interpretation. Essentially the crux of the poem, the concluding stanzas are a d^efinite statement of Wordsworth's political views and of the influences that shaped them. There has been some critical debate on their actual meaning. One view of the poem put forward by George Meyer² and F.W. Bateson³ sees the poem disintegrating into pessimism, violence and incoherence. George W. Meyer has asserted that Wordsworth wrote the concluding stanzas with the "grim and violent" objective that England's hierarchical society be "utterly destroyed" by republican revolution. However, the last three stanzas themselves are at variance with such an interpretation. The third last stanza, 57, argues for a peaceful transformation of society along the lines of the gradual process of education and enlightenment proposed by Godwin:

Say, rulers of the nations, from the sword
 Can aught but murder, pain, and tears proceed?
 Oh,⁴ what can war but endless war still breed?
 Or whence but from the labours of the sage
 Can poor benighted mortals gain the meed
 Of happiness and virtue, how assuage
 But by his gentle words their self-consuming rage?⁵

Again Meyer has argued that since in stanza 57 Wordsworth charges rulers with opposing reason by waging wars, he must have believed that progress could come only after monarchies were violently overthrown. However, stanza 57 is actually an appeal for reformation addressed to the rulers themselves, and, while it denounces the war with France, it is also a general condemnation of all violence. In effect, as the body of the poem makes clear, Wordsworth

- 1 Stanzas 53-57, ll.473-504 are missing, as are ll.523-39 from the manuscript of Salisbury Plain. See the introduction of Gill's edition of the Salisbury Plain poems.
- 2 George W. Meyer, Wordsworth's Formative Years, (Ann Arbor, 1943) pp.112-8.
- 3 F.W. Bateson, The Two Wordsworths, (New York, 1967)
- 4 c.f. Milton's sonnet "On the Lord General Fairfax at the seige of Gloucester" l.10. "For what can war but endless war still breed." In his notes to Salisbury Plain, de Selincourt states that "Wordsworth's conclusion is far more inspired by Milton's great political utterances in prose and verse than by Godwin". P.W.1. p.341.
- 5 ibid., ll.466-7, c.f. The Prelude, 1805, X. ll.234-5, 238, 253-8.

sees revolution as self-defeating. Fully aware of the anarchy and indiscriminate slaughter that it had produced in France, Wordsworth seeks a "gradual and constant reform of those abuses" that will prevent the "self-consuming rage"¹ of civil war.

Subsequently, in June 1794, in a letter to William Matthews, Wordsworth states: "I recoil from the bare idea of revolution: ... I am a determined enemy to every species of violence ... I severly condemn all inflammatory addresses to the passions of men, even when it is intended to direct those passions to a good purpose"². Moreover, aware of the publishing restrictions and censorship imposed by the Pitt Government, Wordsworth had written to Matthews in May 1794, expressing his hope of publishing Salisbury Plain. Wordsworth, then, did not consider the poem as overtly inflammatory.³

The letter to Matthews of June 1794 throws further light on the interpretation of stanza 57. It reveals Wordsworth influenced by the ideals of both Milton and Godwin. In the letter, Wordsworth refers to "the freedom with tranquillity"⁴ that "political justice"⁵ and the wide-spread dissemination of its principles will produce. In stanza 57 Wordsworth looks to the "labours of the sage"⁶ that will bring enlightenment and freedom to those oppressed under "Superstition's reign". Again, the letter elaborates on this point. Wordsworth following Paine states that "we must look for protection entirely amongst the dispassionate advocates of liberty and discussion"⁷. In Areopagitica, Milton had similarly advocated "liberty and discussion by wise men" as a prelude to reform: "... when complaints are freely heard, deeply consider'd, and speedily reform'd, then is the utmost bound of civil liberty attain'd, that wise men looke for."⁸

1 Letter to Matthews, June 1794, Letters 1787-1805, p.124.

2 Wordsworth, Letter to Matthews, June 1794, p.124. Later in the letter, Wordsworth states his intention to "express his detastation of the execrable measures pursued in France 'yet' hold up to the approbation of the world such of their regulations and decrees as are dictated by the spirit of Philosophy.", p.128. Wordsworth has not yet renounced fully his support for the French. In a letter to Matthews, May 1794, Wordsworth had referred to himself as a "democrat", p.119.

3 Wordsworth, Letter to Matthews, May 1794, p.120.

4 Wordsworth, Letter to Matthews, June 1794, p.124.

5 Godwin's Political Justice had appeared in February 1793.

6 Wordsworth, Salisbury Plain, l.510.

7 Wordsworth, Letter to Matthews, June, 1794, p.126.

8 Milton, Areopagitica, Selected Prose, ed. C.A. Partrides, (Penguin) p.197.

Though the female vagrant's tale had revealed Wordsworth differing with Godwin on the concept of disinterested benevolence, the conclusion shows Wordsworth in agreement with Godwin's and Paine's belief that reason and education could enlighten the populace and so furnish the means for achieving liberty and social transformation. Similarly, like Godwin, Wordsworth believed that this process could only be set in motion by "the labours of the sage", by enlightened philanthropists,¹ educators guided by the light of reason and the principles of political justice.

In effect, both Wordsworth and Godwin look back to the tradition of religious and political dissent embodied in the writings of Milton. Milton's argument for the uninhibited dissemination of knowledge and truth as a means of releasing the public from enslaving ignorance reverberates through Political Justice and the conclusion of Salisbury Plain. In Areopagitica, Milton had looked to "lerner men as England's leaders to deliverance".² Moreover, Milton's linking of freedom of speech and thought with political liberty is an obvious, seminal influence on Wordsworth. Describing the consequence of the relationship between "free-writing and free-speaking", and "mild, and free, and human government", Milton states "this is that which hath rarify'd and enlightn'd our spirits like the influence of heav'n; this is that which hath enfranchis'd, enlarg'd and lifted up our apprehensions degrees above themselves."³

In the following stanzas, Wordsworth dissociates truth and justice from the power of authoritarian political and legal institutions:

Insensate they who think, at Wisdom's porch
 That Exile, Terror, Bonds, and Force may stand:
 That Truth with human blood can feed her torch,
 And justice balance with her gory hand
 Scales whose dire weights of human heads demand
 A Nero's arm.⁴

1 See Wordsworth, Letter to Matthews, June 1794, where fearing the possibility of revolutionary anarchy in England, Wordsworth states "I deplore the miserable situation of the French: and think we can only be guarded from the same scourge by the undaunted efforts of good men in propogating with unremitting activity those doctrines which long and severe medication has taught them are essential to the welfare of mankind", pp.124-5.

2 Milton, op.cit., p.228.

3 *ibid.*, p.240.

4 Wordsworth, Salisbury Plain, ll.514-19. c.f. Godwin, Political Justice, p.86. "Sound reasoning and truth, when adequately communicated, must always be victorious over error: Sound reasoning and truth are capable of being so communicated: Truth is omnipotent: The vices and moral weakness of man are not invincible: Man is perfectible, or in other words susceptible of perpetual improvement."

Wordsworth is again attacking the Burkean view of man as a fallible being incapable of exercising his reason, and judgement. In effect, Burke and Llandaff had attempted to defend a society in which political, religious, and legal institutions had assumed control over man's free-will and reason. In Wordsworth's eyes, Church and State had confined man spiritually and morally, the legal code had physically enslaved him. Again, the letter to Matthews throws some light on Wordsworth's essentially Godwinian notions of truth, justice and reason: "I see no connection, but what obstinacy of pride and ignorance renders necessary, between justice and the sword, between reason and bonds"¹. Rather than institutions embodying and interpreting truth, and distributing justice, Wordsworth, like Godwin, and Milton, believes that these are the province of the individual's reason. For Wordsworth, once moral autonomy and the uninhibited exercise of reason have been restored to the individual, oppressive institutions will become redundant.²

In stanza 58,³ Wordsworth inveighs bitterly against the reality of a legal system which had protected the wealth, and power, of the rich and aristocratic. Anticipating Godwin's Caleb Williams,⁴ Wordsworth deplores the injustices perpetrated by a legal system which not only punishes crime but drives the individual to it:

... must Law with iron scourge
 Still torture crimes that grew a monstrous band
 Formed by his care, and still his victim urge,
 With voice that breathes despair, to death's tremendous verge?⁵

The female vagrant's tale had partially illustrated this tendency of the law to discriminate against the poor, forcing them eventually into crime in order to survive. The vicious cycle of victimization, injustice, poverty,

1 Wordsworth, Letter to Matthews, June 1794, p.124.

2 See Godwin, Political Justice, Book V, Ch. XXIV, "Of the Dissolution of Government", p.554. For Godwin, Reason as reasoning is distinguished from, but not antithetical to, reason as intuitive perception equated with Imagination. In The Prelude, Wordsworth makes a similar definition and distinction.

3 c.f. Wordsworth, letter to Matthews, June 1794, p.123: "I disapprove of monarchical and aristocratical governments, however modified. Hereditary distinctions and priveleged orders of every species I think must necessarily counteract the progress of human improvement."

4 Caleb Williams was published in May 1794 by which time Wordsworth had completed Salisbury Plain. See letter to Matthews, May, 1793.

5 Wordsworth, Salisbury Plain, ll.519-522.

crime and punishment was, for Wordsworth, the product of an arbitrary legal code which was not derived from "those general principles of the social order"¹ nor from any concept of equity. It existed solely to benefit the powerful and wealthy.²

In the final stanza of Salisbury Plain, Wordsworth condemns the oppressive and corrupt system championed by Burke through ironic allusion to one of its earlier proponents, Edmund Spenser. T.J. Gillcrist has stated that "Wordsworth reworks some of the terms of the political allegory in Book V of The Faerie Queene so as to denounce modern versions of the traditional social theory through a ~~poet~~ protest against Spenser's expression of it".³ Certainly, the imagery draws on Spenser's personification and the heroic idiom employed in The Faerie Queene. Wordsworth portrays the march of reason with which the millennial transformation of society must occur almost as allegory. In the final stanza, Wordsworth calls upon the proponents of public enlightenment to act in a unified assault on the arrogance and tyranny of the old order. Such an attack, whether literal or metaphoric, must necessarily draw on traditionally established heroic virtues;

Heroes of Truth pursue your march, uptear
 Th' Oppressor's dungeon⁴ from its deepest base;
 High o'er the towers of Pride⁵ undaunted ~~near~~ ^{rear}
 Resistless in your might the Herculean Mace
 of Reason⁶

Implicit in Wordsworth's ironic Spenserian allusions is the rejection of the "yron Flaile"⁷ that protects a social order founded on political inequality. Instead, Wordsworth calls for a different weapon with which to attack injustice at its foundation in error and superstition: "the mace of Reason". As

- 1 Wordsworth, letter to Matthews, June 1794, p.124.
- 2 c.f. Milton, Areopagitica, Prose Works, C.A. Patrides, pp.240-1.
- 3 T.J.Gillcrist, "Spenser and Reason in the Conclusion of Salisbury Plain," English Language Notes, vol.7.1969, p.14.
- 4 c.f. Spenser, The Faerie Queene, V,II. stanza 28, ll.2-3.
- 5 c.f. Spenser, The Faerie Queene, V.III.stanza 10, l.4. See also, Wordsworth, Letter to the Bishop of Llandoff, Prose Works ed.,Owen & Smyser, vol.1.p.36. Wordsworth prefigures the dungeon and tower condemning "the fatal prejudices which cause mankind to lay themselves under the feet of the great, and the great to trample upon them". The "Towers of Pride" and "Oppression's dungeons" of Salisbury Plain.
- 6 Wordsworth, op.cit., stanza 61, ll.541-5.
- 7 Spenser, Faerie Queene, Bk,V.ii.stanza 53, ll.5-6.
 "But when at them he with his flaile gan lay,
 He like a swarme of flyes them overthrew".

R.B. Schneider has noted: "The last stanza is a prayer that truth may conquer human misery and ignorance by its own light ~~and~~ atone, without the aid of force."¹

No longer advocating violent social upheaval and abrupt political change, Wordsworth, very much under the influence of Godwin, recognizes that if man's lot is to improve it must be from within his own being. The liberating force of truth, of rational enlightenment, together with the binding tie of compassion between individuals, can bring about the only practical change in man's social existence.² For Wordsworth, the humanitarian poet, the struggle to realize justice and liberty must take place within the mind of individuals, and will only be achieved when:

... not a trace

Be left on earth of Superstition's reign,

Save that external pile which frowns on Sarum's plain.³

when Stonehenge comes to symbolize not the everpresent tyranny of Church and State, but its destruction. Finally, Salisbury Plain depicts, through its narrative and conclusion, the transcendence of the individual over suffering at the hands of the unjust and powerful, and the already stirring forces of social renewal in the reintegration, through love, within man's own fragmented being.

1 R.B. Schneider, Wordsworth's Cambridge Education, (Cambridge, 1957), p.215.

2 See Wordsworth's Letter to Matthews, June 1794 in Letters, ed. Legouis (Oxford 1947), 1, p.124: "I see no connection, but what obstinacy of pride and ignorance renders necessary, between justice and the sword, between reason and bonds".

3 Wordsworth, op.cit., ll.545-9.