

V. G. KIERNAN

## *Wordsworth Revisited*

Wordsworth stands out, with perhaps only Dante, Shakespeare and Milton beside him, among the greatest of political poets, interpreters that is of the hopes, fears, passions of political life. It is no small credit to England's history that three of these four names should belong to her, and in no way strange that they should be the three greatest names in the world's richest literature. Wordsworth stands much nearer to us than the others; he and his contemporaries are close enough for us to stretch our hands out and touch them. He deals also, much more than his forerunners, with the happenings of his own time and place. His street-tumults and senates are not translated away into Heaven or Hell or ancient Rome, they are London and Paris. He belongs to our age of the common man which he helped to bring into being; he does not write as a dramatist speaking through the mouths of fiery dukes and brawling kings, but finds words for the loud march of history as it is heard and felt by the commoner in the crowd: the moods of mass exaltation or panic, the bitterness of civil war, the nightmare shadow of unfettered power, of the modern State. He is the first modern poet to have known a Terror.

Our greatest poet of solitude and withdrawal, preaching the blessings of private life and renunciation of the world, is this same Wordsworth. If he was not like Coleridge 'myriad-minded', he was a compound of contradictory instincts; of melancholia and animal high spirits, visionariness and earthiness, insularity and cosmopolitanism. His long life was coeval with the intricate transformation of England by the Industrial Revolution, and he reflected in a multiplicity of ways, by attraction or repulsion, the new age taking shape. Probably more than any other writer of his time or since, he has meant very much to many very different people, and the further the history of this chaotic epoch unfolds the more we can expect to discover from him. In spite of the way he is bowdlerised and balderdashed for us at school he continues to find and fascinate readers. It is not surprising that new books on him should continue to be written.

Of recent books<sup>1</sup> the most comprehensive - though still incomplete; there is to be a further volume, on the period after 1803 - is

Mary Moorman, *William Wordsworth, a Biography* (O.U.P., 1957); F. M. Todd, *Politics and the Poet: a Study of Wordsworth* (Methuen, 1957); B. R. Schneider, *Wordsworth's Cambridge Education* (C.U.P., 1957).

V. G. Kiernan : Wordsworth Revisited

63

Mary Moorman's. This biography has been constructed with much hard labour and much good judgment from the now vast pile of materials supplied by Wordsworth's own published work along with the letters, diaries, miscellaneous records, and manuscript versions of the poems, that have been collected or sifted by scholars in this century. The pile is so high that it is almost a relief to find that it is unlikely to grow much higher. Mrs. Moorman has not come upon very much that is new herself. This biography will be the standard one for a long time to come, and lovers of Wordsworth find themselves at a convenient point to stop and look about them. But if they have been brought up on Marx as well as Wordsworth, they will not find the problems they are used to thinking of as the most significant and most baffling solved, or even fully recognized, in any of the new books.

Mrs. Moorman's work, apart from being a fine piece of scholarship and inspired by a sensitive appreciation of Wordsworth's qualities as a poet that makes it delightful to read, has the great merit of taking an all-round view of its subject; it is not dictated by any novel hypothesis about Wordsworth's private life or some other writer's influence on him. It is, however, less aware of the moulding forces of politics and economics than of those of Nature, or personal relationships, or mental processes. Its author is more at home in Grasmere than in the Place de la Bastille. She considers that Annette Vallon meant little to Wordsworth's development as a poet - 'less even (!) than the sight of France in revolutionary turmoil' (183). Even her Lakeland belongs to the cultured visitor rather than to the horny-handed native (though see 464-5)

This leaves a gap which Todd's book to some extent fills. He too does not profess to draw on much untapped material. He has made some further use of Record Office documents, which show, for instance, that Wordsworth when in Paris did not associate actively enough with French politics to come under the notice of the British government's spies. For the most part Todd is content to trace Wordsworth's opinions through the medium of his poetry, and of what has become known of his life: two obvious but, he feels, neglected sources (12). This is sensible, except that in certain directions fuller notice might have been taken of social backgrounds. Less acceptable is the axiom laid down at the outset (12-13) that there is no reason to associate change of political opinion in Wordsworth after his radical days with decline in poetical power. A Tory, Todd says, might be a good poet. 'Pigs may fly', Professor Sumner once said to Lord John Roxton. 'Yes, sir, pigs may fly, but they don't.'

On the political issues of the epoch Todd is judiciously liberal and well-balanced. His studies were being carried out just after the

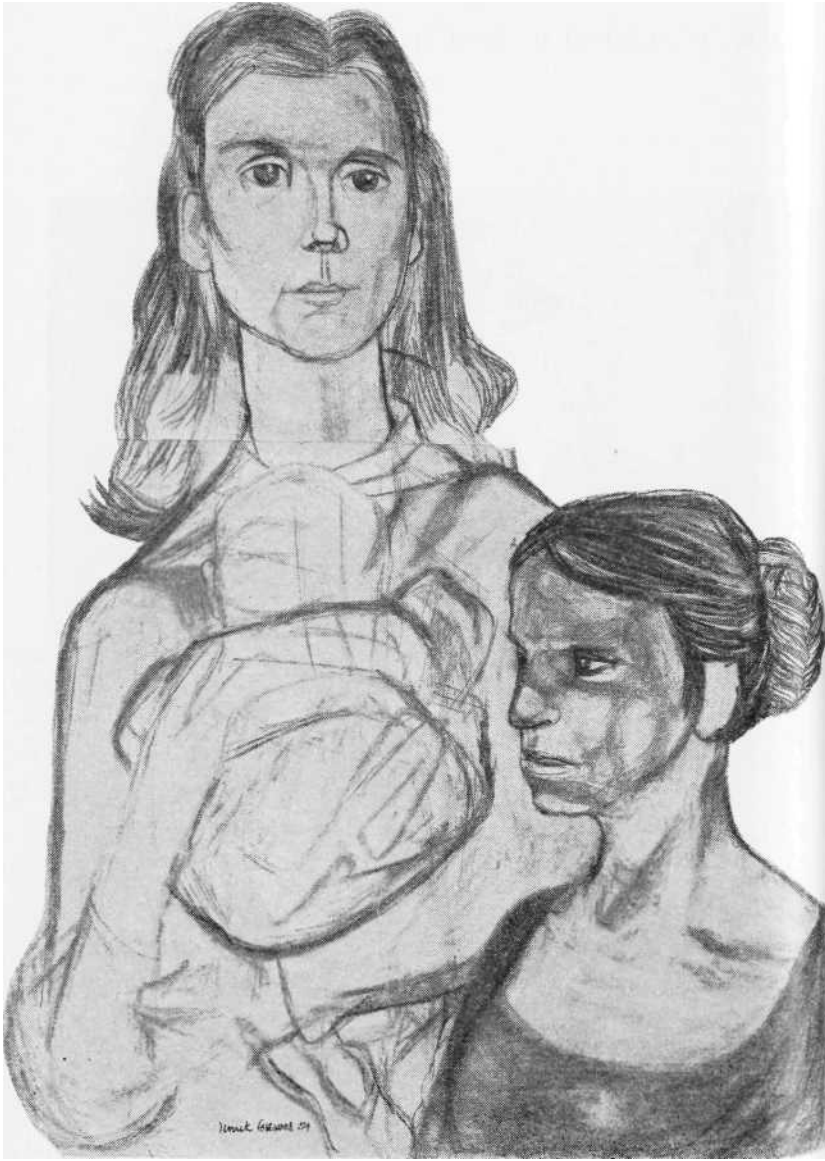
last war, and his references to this suggest that one of his points of contact with Wordsworth was the analogy (a misleading one in many ways) between England's struggles with Hitler and with Napoleon. During the Napoleonic wars (1803 to 1815) Wordsworth's genius touched its highest point and then quickly began its descent. Todd traces the decline and fall accurately and clearly, if he does not in all respects account for it; though he devotes surprisingly few pages to the *Excursion*, a splendid museum of Wordsworth's opinions as well as the burial-ground of his genius. Todd's purpose, as he tells us (12), is to describe, not defend, Wordsworth's change of party: in the latter chapters of his book, where he is addicted to use of the word 'mature', the distinction occasionally seems to get blurred. At any rate the poet's lapses into illiberalism are given the benefit of any possible doubts, as they were in the earlier book on this part of his life by Dr. Batho. No doubt it is useful for us to be reminded that a Tory may be a good man, whether or not he can be a good poet.

In the 'great' period - the few years just before and after the turn of the century - things are more difficult; it is, after all, harder to account for artistic success, which is rare, than for failure, which is common. Todd thinks that Wordsworth served his genius well by turning his back on London and on political agitation. Everyone has said this, and in some sense or other it can hardly be denied. But it is too often forgotten that Wordsworth went into the wilderness in order to hang on to his political principles and what was left of his political hopes, not in order to forget them; and few critics have managed to avoid a touch of patronising smugness when they get their hero out of the wicked metropolis into the innocent countryside with its gambolling lambs and rustics - they beam like a headmaster when he comes to write 'Promising progress' on a boy's report. Of the lambs and rustics Todd's picture is not as complete as it might be. He sees Wordsworth at Racedown (1795-97) finding consolation and healing among peaceful honest poor folk. There was an agricultural as well as industrial revolution in progress, and Dorset in the 1790's was anything but a rural Arcadia. Even Lakeland was no garden of Eden for those who had to find a living in it, and in the end Wordsworth only succeeded in making his countryside *peaceful* by eliminating human beings from it altogether. Those he put into the *Lyrical Ballads* were mad-women, aged paupers, idiot boys. Todd is not free from some old preconceptions when he finds in these poems 'humble man against his natural background', the poet's 'new found faith in man' (97ff; cp. Mrs. Moorman 280). He does not observe that in literary quality the grotesque figures on Wordsworth's rustic stage at this point are much below those of the preceding 'propagan-

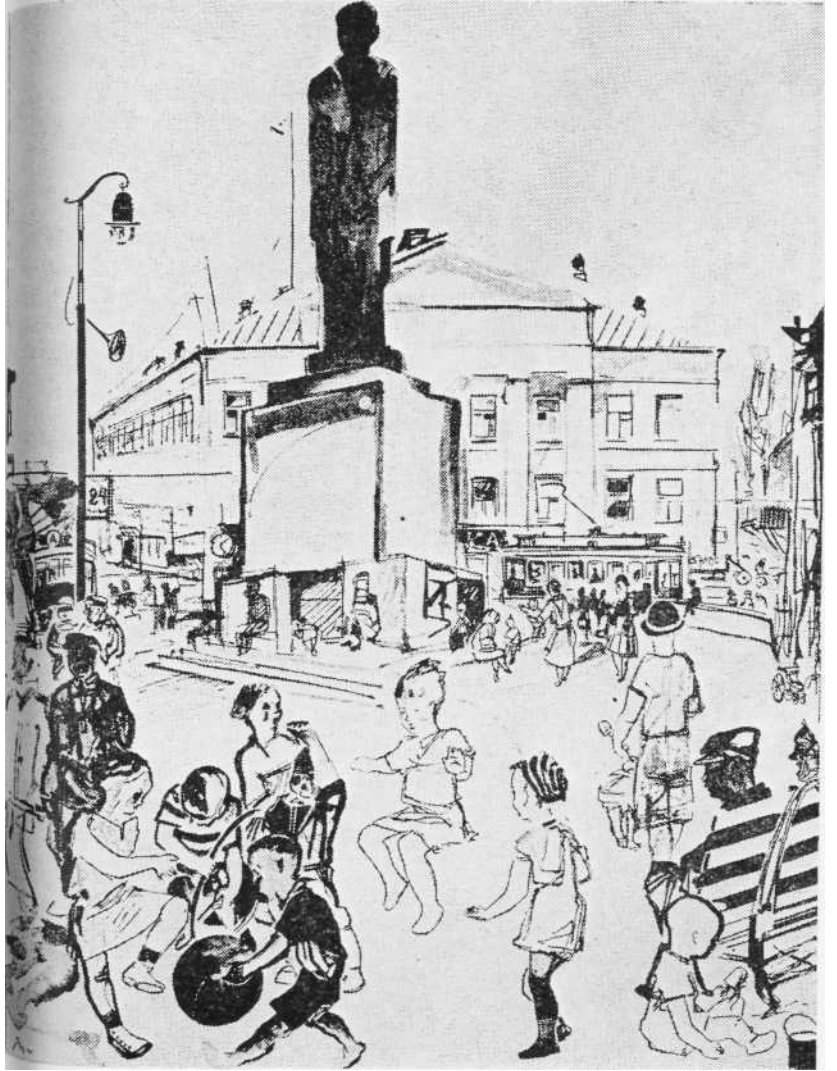
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Robert Hunt: Jazz concert monotype 1958



**Derrick Greaves: Italian family charcoal drawing 1954**



**Alexander Deineka: Moscow street brush drawing 1927**



Paul Hogarth: Amsterdam canal chalk drawing 1958

dist' poems like *Guilt and Sorrow*; or that the really inspired *gallads* he refers to (98) are quite out of harmony with the intention he quotes from the 'Advertisement' of depicting 'human passions, human characters'. They depict chiefly the poet himself. Except for a few close relatives and a very few others, Wordsworth never got to know his fellow-beings except politically; political idealism was his window on humanity. His sister Dorothy, who has been praised so highly and so deservedly for opening other windows to him, helped to close this one; she did his genius as much harm on one side as good on another. 'A woman always conspires against the higher soul of the man she loves.'

The 'Margaret' story at which he worked on and off for years does concern a real human being: Todd, in another of his few references to poetic quality, cites it as proof that Wordsworth was advancing as an artist by describing suffering among the poor without making political capital out of it (92) - without incriminating the rich. Margaret, sinking uncomplainingly under her load of misery, *is* good poetry, but poetry prophetic of its own decline. Her ultimate haven was to be in the *Excursion*, that vast graveyard where her sad tale is multiplied *ad nauseam* without getting any further.

Of Wordsworth's early years Todd's account is on the whole borne out by a fuller treatment of it in a third book, Schneider's. The title - *Wordsworth's Cambridge Education* - is not quite exact, as the period covered stretches back to schooldays and forward for several years after college, but Schneider finds some good reasons for seeing this whole division of Wordsworth's life as dominated by Cambridge. Two things emerge most notably. First, 18th century Cambridge was ruled to a surprising extent by Newton and Locke, mathematics and rationalism (instead of, like Oxford, by dead languages and deader ideas); and though most of the senior collegemen were time-servers or obstructionists, among the younger men there was a powerful current of reforming radicalism. This had been active well before 1789: it was then stimulated by French events, and a whole battalion of young intellectuals threw itself into Progressive activities of one kind or another. The popular movement of the early 1790's for universal suffrage and annual parliaments 'was in great measure', Schneider writes, 'a Cambridge creation' (133). Secondly, the Wordsworth who was taking his humble Pass degree in the midst of this hubbub was strongly predisposed towards a mood of rebellion by factors in his personal experience. Among these Schneider recognises, as Todd does also, friction with unsympathetic relatives, and resentment at the conduct of that Lakeland tyrant and swindler Sir James Lowther. He brings out more forcibly than anyone else has done another personal factor, the clash that can fairly be assumed, if not proved, between Cam-

bridge snobbery and Wordsworth's rusticity of manners. His status, then still a somewhat inferior one, was that of a sizar. His refusal to accept the conventions of official Cambridge by working for an honours degree and a college fellowship may be seen as his first declaration of independence. France and Beaupuy in 1792 did not convert him to republicanism, they only crystallized what was already lurking inside him.

In the 1790's as in the 1930's, the chances for these young men from Cambridge of being able to do anything solid and useful depended on their being able to make contact with progressive mass forces. On the whole the story, of which Wordsworth's political history is a single small strand, is one of failure. There were plenty of radical intellectuals in England, and there was plenty of mass discontent, but throughout the period of the French wars the two were in the main cut off from one another, to the detriment of both. One might say that they have been trying to find one another ever since. In the 1790's England was in an exceptionally complicated situation, partly working-class and 'economic', and the cated situation. Progressive forces were partly middle-class and latter, the army of poverty, was itself a medley of old artisan and new factory-hand, cotton-spinner and farm-labourer. French events, while they stimulated excitement, also added very greatly to English complications. In 1789 the Revolution broke out, the torch from which all the watch-fires of the 19th century were to be kindled. Within three years it was attacked by the divine-right monarchies of old Europe, soon joined by England. Involved in the whirlpool of a continent convulsed by revolution and counter-revolution, Wordsworth can only be understood as a citizen of Europe, not of England alone. No artist in Europe, except Beethoven, was to leave so imperishable a monument to the French Revolution.

Under stress of war France quickly fell under government arbitrary and sometimes bloodthirsty, while in England civil liberties were drastically reduced. Economically and socially England was - even more than France - in a state of 'revolution'; politically she was not, for capitalism had long since pushed its way into power as it was now doing in France, and socialism was not yet in sight in any country. Swept by the new broom of the Constituent Assembly, France was in various ways putting herself overnight in advance of England. In some other ways the nation which had chopped off a king's head a century and a half before the French thought of it remained the more advanced of the two. Long practice and familiarity with constitutional life had engrained in it certain lessons that cannot be learned overnight. Irrationally, perhaps, but not unnaturally, liberals all round Europe were soon measur-

ing the progress of the French Revolution by the quantity of violence, the number of executions, it was costing. Government in England was reactionary enough, and the Constitution worm-eaten, yet in 1794, while the guillotine creaked more and more deafly in Paris, men tried for treason in London could still be acquitted by juries.

Europe's reaction to the Jacobin Reign of Terror of 1793-94 has a special significance for us in our day. Just as in our day with the Russian Revolution, both early enthusiasm for the French Revolution and later disillusionment with it affected intellectuals more than working masses. No one was more affected than Wordsworth himself. Strong imagination intensifies fear, as it does all other emotions, and Wordsworth was always sensitive to fear. Nature, from childhood, frightened as well as enchanted him; in later years he tried to come to terms with fear by regarding it as an educative influence. This is not to say that fear determined his conduct of life. In his early years he was a daring cragsman, for instance. But the same intense imagination that whispered unspeakable thoughts into his childish brain as he hung in the dry wind from the perilous cliff, or filled it with dreams of a mountain hunting him down like a giant because he had stolen a boat, gave him obsessive dreams after 1793 in which he stood on trial for his life before the Revolutionary Tribunal. His violent revulsion from the smell of death that had come to hang over the Revolution was to be his profoundest political sensation throughout life. He shared it with nearly all the European writers of his generation, and Europe down to our own time has agreed with him in remembering the French Revolution as, above all, the Terror. Its collective memory of that age, not conjured up by conservative propaganda only, has been the memory of the guillotine. Russia in 1917 stepped into a ready-made, sinister picture-frame.

Wordsworth's generation never freed itself from the traumatic experiences of 1793 and 1794, the guilt of England in allying with foreign despots against liberty, the guilt or fatality of France in sacrificing liberty to self-preservation and then ambition. Schneider illustrates vividly the mood of frustration and defeatism by the example of John Tweddell, a Cambridge radical who seems to have had what we should call a nervous breakdown. 'Let the monsters of the earth tear out each other's bowels', he wrote to a Wend, gloomily watching the war go on. 'When the world is a desert there will be peace in it.' He left England, wandered about for years, and by 1799 could say with pallid relief: 'I grow day by day more indifferent' (220, etc.). Wordsworth was of too tough a fibre to collapse under the strain, and he would not take refuge in indifference. In 1794 he turned away from ideas of immediate

change to abstract Godwinian 'Political Justice'. Here again he was one of a shoal of radicals, and Schneider shows how neatly Godwinianism fitted on to the genuine if somewhat arid rationalism of 18th century Cambridge thinking. It is interesting to compare his treatment (231-5) and Todd's (86-9) of Wordsworth's philosophising drama, *The Borderers*, of 1796. Schneider sees it as his self-emancipation from Godwinianism; Todd, rather, from the Revolution. Mrs. Moorman, who studies the play with much insight (302 - 308), sees it as both. In any case, he could not be content with Godwin for long.

Todd sees him passing through a brief spiritual crisis, quickly recovering his balance, and retiring into rural seclusion in 1795 already healed, whole, and happy (74ff). This is an unconvincing approach to the years of the *Prelude*. Dr Johnson, no doubt, maintained that nobody ever really cares about the badness of the times, and it is true that nobody frets all day and every day about them. But Johnson lived before 1789: since then public affairs, with war as the most insistent of them, have vitally concerned the lives of everyone in Europe. Wordsworth's development was to a great extent governed by the changing pattern of the Continental war. Between 1795 and 1801 a rough balance of brute strength established itself. When war was renewed after a brief pause France, now under an emperor, was threatening Europe with universal conquest; the balance of power had vanished. Wordsworth never ceased to believe that England and her allies had acted criminally by going to war in the first place. In the decade or so after he ceased to be a French partisan he might be described as a democrat (and freethinker), practising passive resistance in the wilderness, and condemning his own and the French Government about equally. Even after he came (from 1803) to regard French imperialism as the worst menace, and therefore to support war against it, he wanted the war to be one of liberation. For several years more he had very little belief in his government's ability or wish to wage the war as it should be waged; and (as Todd shows), he continued for a good deal longer than is sometimes supposed to favour parliamentary and other reforms at home.

In all this Wordsworth's attitude was realistic and rational. *One* may compare it with that of Hazlitt, for instance, who went on damning the Tories longer and more doggedly, but went on with the same doggedness admiring the more and more tyrannical Napoleon, so that his ideas cancelled one another out. Wordsworth, withdrawing into solitude, was cutting himself off from leaders and slogans, but not from principles. He was trying to find his own solutions in a tangled situation: a personal solution, by giving up all pursuit of ease or popularity and embracing a life of obscure

poverty; a social solution, by holding up the humble village against the bloated town, and the virtues of the poor against the vices of the rich. As a writer he put his feelings into a democratic theory of diction, according to which the plain language of the plain man is superior to any style that learning or refinement can invent. Clad in such armour Wordsworth was able for a few vital years to survive morally and to hold on - 'with more than Roman confidence', as he boasted - to his faith in man's future. It was only when faith in man, in man as a political animal, failed him that he lost his belief in progress and sank into Toryism and mediocrity.

He had been a mediocre writer, it must be admitted, in his early period too. Partisanship had not unlocked his genius, and in the couple of years when his mind was most inflamed with politics he wrote practically no verse at all. It should be remembered that early interest in Nature, or love, had not made a successful poet of him either. This early lack of success must be explained partly by his being still a prentice-hand at his trade. The Revolution had caught him, younger than Blake and Burns, at an age when he was readiest to react emotionally to it, but least able to translate emotion into poetry, which is a difficult and highly technical art. So is music, but the poet unlike the musician has to master an outer as well as an inner world at the same time. First-rate music has often been written by very young men, or even boys; first-rate poetry, very seldom, and on 'collective' or political themes perhaps never. It was an added element in the bewilderment of Wordsworth's life in his 'active' years that he could not yet find expression for what he felt.

Allowing for this need for time to grow up as a writer, one great fact stands out. Wordsworth, who lived for more than seventy years, wrote his great poetry in hardly more than seven of them: and these brief years of inspiration belong neither to the time of enthusiasm for New France nor to that of enthusiasm for Old England, but to the period of self-exile in between. Many of his contemporaries went through the same early and late phases as he did; very few had the same experience in between, of a stage of independence, integrity of individual judgment clung to with Stoic firmness, a viewpoint from which could be seen good and evil in each of the two camps dividing the world, and the cause of humanity as something beyond both. It seems that the conditions most favourable to him as a poet were those which imposed on him isolation, while not yet depriving him of hope. It was an isolation analogous with that in which Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*.

In 1789 Wordsworth, like many others, had hailed the Revolution not as an outbreak of conflict, but as the coming of conciliation and harmony inside France and the turning away of war-

weary Europe to perpetual peace. All this made him rejoice; it did not 'inspire' him. The mood destined to make him the successor of Milton was born in the France of 1792, on the edge of civil war, while he listened to the talk of revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries and watched the volunteers pouring towards the frontier. Harmony, it became clear, would not come spontaneously, it would be the reward of struggle and victory. But conflict went on, and it seemed to be reducing all parties in France, all governments in Europe, to the same moral level. The gap between expectation and outcome, or illusion and reality, broadened.

The Revolution had awakened in Wordsworth the sense of human greatness, of the grandeur of human destinies. He never escaped from it, even when he was living with flowers and hills and rustic virtues; all his life it *strode after him* like the mountain of his vision, both exalting and terrifying, in boyhood. It engendered the *Prelude*, the masterpiece at which he worked intermittently all through his great period. Not that the *Prelude* is all, or even mainly, about politics; it is about the human mind, especially the poet's, as *Paradise Lost* is about the human soul; but only an age of transcendent events makes humanity and its destinies seem of transcendent importance. 'In the beginning was the deed.' However, while Wordsworth was still in Paris or London among the jarring factions and their watchwords it was impossible for him to contemplate the Revolution imaginatively. Imagination required distance, detachment, the consciousness of how far historic events dwarf individual strivings. 'Recollection in tranquility' is a formula that he must, whether aware of it or not, have derived at least as much from political as from private memories. He began the *Prelude* (Mrs. Moorman's Chap. XIII is interesting on this) during his 1798-99 winter, huddled over a stove in a remote provincial town in Germany when he was more cut off from the world, by weather and poverty, than at any other time of his life. Looking at Europe from his secluded outposts with emotion still fresh but judgment suspended, Wordsworth had the impulse and the energy to try and bridge by effort of imagination the gulf between illusion and reality that history had failed to bridge. In the *Prelude* he sees, as he had seen in Paris in 1791,

' the Revolutionary power

' Toss like a ship at anchor, rocked by storms ' -

it is one of the most characteristic of his great phrases; he is seeing the upheaval not as good or evil but as something enormous and beyond the good and evil of ordinary measurement. Poetry does not arise from demonstrable truth, or from harmony of insight and action, the visible goal steadily approached; but from doubt, loss, division, uncertainty - at moments when the energy generated by

historic struggles makes all doubt and division seem still possible to overcome. It is the spark leaping the gap, the bridge spanning the gulf.

Ultimately the gulf opened too wide and swallowed up bridge and builder together. Now this widening of the gulf was in part a matter of historical fact; it meant, to speak less metaphorically, such things as the ever-growing ambition of Napoleon, which was also that of French capitalism, to monopolise Europe. But also in part it represented a failure of Wordsworth and many others like him to comprehend what was really happening in Europe, what the forces at work and the prizes at stake really were. Imagination may be fed by shadows and twilight, but not if these are self-invented or self-imposed. To this day, after a century of microscopic research, there is still enough mystery hanging over the French Revolution to satisfy any poetical appetite. At the same time we do now know enough about Wordsworth's France and his Europe (to say nothing of his England), to see that his mental image of the world about him was an impressionistic one, highly charged with emotions only imperfectly related to realities. Modern history was a subject then little developed, and at Cambridge it would seem ignored along with modern languages. The only historian Wordsworth knew much of when he went to France was Plutarch (Mrs. Moorman 191, 195). Nobody in England had more than the sketchiest notions of what countries like Spain and Russia, among England's allies, were really like. Economic history was a science still unborn, and there was very little comprehension, in or out of France, of the forces that had been transforming French society and preparing the way for 1789. And Wordsworth, after he settled at Grasmere at the end of 1799, read shockingly few even of the books that were available. One is obliged to add that most of his critics have followed his bad example, so far as study of the French Revolution is concerned. A course of reading in Mathiez, Lefebvre and Soboul ought to be compulsory with them. Mrs. Moorman has not quite got away for instance (204, 208) from an idea of the Jacobins as ravening beasts devouring a flock of simple idealistic Girondins; a conception of the French party struggle long since exploded.

Wordsworth and his friends were inclined to share it; they were apt to put the blame for what had gone wrong on the anarchical Paris 'mob', or its 'bloodthirsty' Jacobin leaders, especially Robespierre whose death momentarily revived their hopes. In reality the sansculottes were not mere wild animals, and the Jacobins were not mere ruffians, Robespierre and his group least of all. Wordsworth not only lacked information; still more seriously, he lacked a social theory, a science of politics, to guide him to an understand-

ing of what meagre facts he possessed. Eighteenth century Cambridge explored the universe, and the individual mind, in terms of rational laws; society, in between, got left out. The great master-key discovered by the 19th century was, above all, missing - the significance of society's division into *classes*, and of how inevitably and all-pervasively antagonism arises within any class society. Men still thought in terms of the 'People' at one end and of despots or designing demagogues at the other. Yet Wordsworth like many others before him did think, or feel, instinctively in terms of class and class. He half-saw in his *Lyrical Ballad* days that in order not to despair of mankind as a whole he must discriminate between different social types of men. One might say that he and his generation were fumbling all their lives for the key that Marx discovered. Perhaps, in fact, such a thing is never 'discovered' in theory until after it has grown perfectly obvious and familiar in practice, and the answer is staring everyone in the face. Even then it takes a man of genius to notice it.

That the Revolution had 'failed' was a notion incessantly repeated after 1793: it was the tragic failure of the age - until by dint of continual repetition its 'blighted hopes' became as stereotyped and meaningless as the 'blighted hearts' of the Byronic school. But what, after all, had failed? Only the Utopian, extravagant hopes kindled in 1789, the dreams of peaceful perfection that Wordsworth found France thrilling with on his first visit. Every new class succeeding to power claims, and for a moment with all the glow of sincerity, to speak for all the human race and to have found the talisman that will banish all the horsemen of the Apocalypse. This glow of deception and self-deception, of course, quickly wore off: of course, France and Europe were not ready yet to live happily ever after, and their way forward was to lie through much further conflict. Nevertheless, in its mundane mission the Revolution did not fail. It established a modern order of things in France within which capitalism could expand freely and produce all the goods and all the ideas it was capable of producing. It swept away the clogging remnants of an antique economy; it abolished feudal courts, dues, imposts, as well as tithes, and thus strengthened the home market; it abolished fiscal immunities, established civic equality, prepared the groundwork for a rational system of law: it brought religious toleration and stimulated scientific enquiry. All these advances were consolidated under Napoleon. 'Liberty', in the sense of representative government, was lost again almost as soon as won: but whether this is one of the necessities or only the accidents of a capitalist order is a question that history has not answered very clearly.

From this point onward the French urban masses had the same

problems and the same sort of ruling class to cope with as the English. Trade unions and strikes were equally illegal in both countries all through this period: a fact that both radicals and conservatives in England might have pondered more on. But besides establishing the rule of a new class the solid reforms started in 1789 immensely increased the sum of human happiness in France, and this was too seldom observed by romantics abroad who were disappointed because the wonderful vision of 1789 had faded into the light of common day. Wordsworth might not be likely to know much about trade union legislation; but considering how he identified himself with the English peasantry and pinned his faith and hopes on the essences of rural life, he seems to have been always strangely oblivious of the peasant revolution in France that ran alongside the main urban one. It was by organizing, protesting, rioting on their own account that the peasants compelled the abolition of feudal rights over them: Wordsworth should have taken note of this when he was despairing of man's ability to improve his lot by collective action. He never forgot the sight of the poor famished country-girl in the lane near Orleans, when his friend Beauy clinched his ardour for the cause by exclaiming

' 'Tis against *that*  
' Which we are fighting' -

yet he never seems to have reckoned with the fact that in France the peasantry was emerging from the ordeals of this age far stronger than in England, that the old rural life he cherished was surviving intact in France while in England it was being relegated to a few backwaters like the Dales. Another thing he always seems to have left out of account is that a nation of peasants cannot serve as foundation for parliamentary government and constitutional freedom. The peasants were Napoleon's staunchest supporters.

Writing the *Prelude*, Wordsworth was preparing himself for what he intended to be his life-work as poet and teacher, buoyed up by the hope that Europe might yet be regenerated by tragic experience. He failed unfortunately to see that mankind collectively could not regenerate itself by withdrawal and meditation, and that the lessons of the age could not be digested in a vacuum but only through fresh effort and fresh struggle. It is ironically appropriate that the *Prelude* should have come out at last, in 1850, just after another grand European upheaval. It struck the respectably liberal Macaulay as 'to the last degree Jacobinical, indeed Socialist' (Todd, 126). Englishmen had been less hysterical over the Continental events of 1848 than half a century before, and some of the credit for this may be given to Byron and Shelley - and to Wordsworth. But Wordsworth had not been able to go on for long making poetry out of what he had seen and felt, because he did not go

on learning, and when he was ready to embark on his life-work he had nothing left to teach except the vanity of human wishes.

Our own age has given us proof enough that a poet cannot profitably be guided on his way by a government or party official, however righteous or learned. He should, however, as Wordsworth would have fully acknowledged, submit himself to the guidance of all the knowledge of men and things that he can come by. Failing to understand the Revolution, Wordsworth was also failing to understand his own country. He went to Lakeland in quest of simplification and clearer artistic vision; but the peasantry he attached himself to there was a dying class, and of the working-class he knew nothing. He came to fancy that political virtue could be renewed in England while political activity was suspended; and he thought, wrongly, that an individual could sustain himself in isolation indefinitely by his own moral strength. All this brought on the defeatism which, without his ever consciously abandoning a single principle or a single sympathy, carried him inch by inch into the drawingroom of reaction. At the close of his years of inspiration he was left with a theory of poetry which he hardly ever practised, a great poem which he never published, and a heap of short poems which hardly anyone wanted to read.

The fact then to be taken account of in any theory of art and society is that Wordsworth did his great work during a brief period of critical detachment as an independent radical; but that this independence was precarious, and for want of political anchors he was very soon drifting on a backward current. His experience also partly concerns us as ordinary citizens. Between the European situation then and now there are analogies so close as to be almost hypnotic. There are immense differences as well. We *ought* to be able to keep our heads and see things more lucidly than Wordsworth's generation could. We have vastly more knowledge than they had of political and social movements of every kind: and we have a theory by which this knowledge can be roughly interpreted, so long as the telescope is kept focused on the actual world and not on artificial models of non-existent planets. Until the millennium, some admixture of the illusions of 1789 may be needed to inspire enterprise, but the ratio of illusion to understanding ought to be diminishing.

The best thing to do after speculating about Wordsworth is to reread the *Prelude*. Poetry like this raises whatever it touches, even when it points no road, and it is the best antidote against the inevitable discouragements and disillusionments that are always the strongest bulwarks of reaction.