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Wordsworth's Sonnet Corpus

By

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is the work of Peter Spratley, and that it has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

Abstract

Wordsworth's Sonnet Corpus

The thesis is a study of Wordsworth and the sonnet. It is structured around detailed assessments of each 'type' of sonnet that Wordsworth wrote, but my overarching goal is to demarcate a sonnet corpus and place it in a position of eminence, and in so doing, gesture towards a re-evaluation of the poet's career, by positing an alternative to the traditional *Prelude*-centric view of his oeuvre. It has been customary, from influential critics such as Geoffrey Hartman onwards, to locate the familiar Wordsworthian ethos in the long poems and canonical Romantic lyrics, such as 'Tintern Abbey'. I argue that the large body of sonnets represents an alternate corpus, to be read both alongside, and counter to, the traditional interpretation of the career. The attempt is to encourage scholarship to rethink the poet's own metaphorical view of a 'gothic church' for his career, which has *The Recluse* as its primary body, and to reposition the sonnet form in that view, so that it may occupy a more prominent place. Wordsworth's sonnet groups are often overlooked by scholarship, or instead read out of context through unrepresentative anthologising. My thesis argues that the sonnets should not be read as subordinate to, or parasitic on, the longer work. I contend that the sonnets constitute a vital body of work in their own right.

By reading the poet's career through his sonnets, a sense of continuity between the early and late Wordsworth is established, while at the same time, the familiar Wordsworthian ethos is present throughout. I also develop the standard interpretation of Miltonic inheritance, by suggesting that while Wordsworth was certainly influenced by Milton, he was also profoundly influenced in his sonnet writing by his contemporaries, including Charlotte Smith, William Lisle Bowles and Thomas Warton. I build on recent scholarship in this area, and offer a more extensive view, that sees Wordsworth appropriating and subverting the conventional sonnets of the late eighteenth century for his 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' and *The River Duddon*.

My aim is to posit Wordsworth's sonnets as a corpus, and I argue that they occupy a prominent position in critical interpretations of the poet's career.

Abbreviations and Note On Citation

The following abbreviations and short forms of citation are used throughout the thesis:

<i>Century</i>	<i>A Century of Sonnets</i> eds. Paula Feldman and Daniel Robinson
<i>EPF</i>	<i>Early Poems and Fragments</i> eds. Carol Landon and Jared Curtis
<i>EW</i>	<i>An Evening Walk</i> ed. James Averill
<i>Fenwick</i>	<i>The Fenwick Notes</i> ed. Jared Curtis
<i>LB</i>	<i>Lyrical Ballads</i> eds. James Butler and Karen Green
<i>P2V</i>	<i>Poems, in Two Volumes</i> ed. Jared Curtis
<i>PW</i>	<i>Poetical Works</i> Vol. III eds. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire
<i>P</i>	<i>The Prelude</i> – all references are to the 1805 version unless otherwise stated
<i>TRC</i>	<i>The Ruined Cottage</i> ed. James Butler
<i>SSIP</i>	<i>Sonnet Series and Itinerary Poems</i> ed. Geoffrey Jackson

Quotations and references from critical work are followed by the name of the author and page number in brackets. Where there is more than one work by a given writer, the year of publication is given before the page number.

Quotations from poems are followed by the name of the book/edition the poem is from, followed by the page numbers that the whole poem occupies in the book, and finally line numbers. Quotations from *The Prelude* do not have page numbers, but instead Book and line references.

Introduction

*Scorn not the Sonnet; Critic, you have frowned,
Mindless of its just honours...*

This study provides a critical reading of Wordsworth and the sonnet, and seeks to give the form central importance in an interpretation of the poet's career. It is well known that Wordsworth was a prolific sonneteer (he wrote over five hundred in his life), and critics are in agreement that he had considerable success with the form, particularly towards the beginning of his career. It seems curious, therefore, that all too frequently, the sonnets are treated as peripheral in the standard notion of Wordsworth's career.

Often, sonnets are interpreted individually and so taken out of their original context.¹ The process of anthologising inevitably contributes to this kind of skewed reading, where sonnets are not always located alongside fellow sonnets of the same thematic or generic grouping meaning much of their rhetorical resonance is lost. The individual sonnet, in Wordsworth criticism, has come to be seen as an independent entity that can be called upon when required to support a larger argument that does not necessarily acknowledge that the poem in question is a sonnet.² This last point is important, for when Wordsworth writes a sonnet he is engaging in a particular generic mode which will influence the way we read the poem.

There are some exceptions to this kind of criticism. Some work from the last decade or so³ has addressed Wordsworth's sonnets as constituents of the various larger sonnet groupings and sequences that the poet devised. This has gone some way to reversing the trend of reading sonnets out of context, and so debates

concerning narrative patterns in the sonnets, or Wordsworth's organisational principles, are now conducted more frequently.

Despite this development however, the sonnet in Wordsworth studies remains on the fringes. Jonathan Hess has described the general scholarly status of the sonnet in unequivocal terms: 'In our time Wordsworth's sonnets have for the most part been unable to arouse much critical interest of any sort'. He goes on, saying, 'Wordsworth's sonnets are clearly marginal; they do not contribute in any fundamental way to what we have come to construct as Wordsworth's oeuvre' (4).⁴ The fact that this is expressed in an article that actually discusses the 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty' is telling: Hess confesses that the material he is working with is slight, and that 'any attempt to rehabilitate "Nuns Fret Not", to restore it to its "proper" place within the Wordsworthian canon, would *of course* be blatantly anachronistic' (4, my emphasis). I believe the sonnets are ripe for reappraisal.

My aim is to build on those studies that locate Wordsworth's sonnets in their respective sequences and groups. Part of the thesis, therefore, will treat the groups individually: the chapters are divided according to each sonnet series, meaning I can discuss each of them on their own terms. In this way, I assess the various 'types' of Wordsworthian sonnet voice, and consider how he uses the form differently, and for what purposes, at each stage of his life.

The main thrust of my argument expands upon this kind of compartmentalised approach to the sonnets. It is important to understand the internal dynamics of each group independently of each other, but a richer appreciation comes from investigating how the groups interact with one another, and what happens when they function together as a sonnet corpus. A wholesale approach to the sonnets of this nature has been carried out before, in 1973 by Lee Johnson. While I am in places

indebted to some of Johnson's thinking, I explore the sonnets in fresh ways. One of the key advantages my work has over his is the wealth of critical, biographical and editorial scholarship in Wordsworth studies that has accumulated over the last thirty years – in particular, two major biographies (Gill and Barker) and the peerless Cornell editions of the poems⁵ – which has led to a greatly improved understanding of the poet and his sonnet writing practices. Furthermore, Johnson's work is governed by an agenda that centralises form. As such, his readings of poems often prioritise matters of syntax, metre, and rhyme, and work to dismantle the sonnets into octave, sestet and quatrain in an attempt to scrutinise their inner metrical dynamic. As I explain later in this Introduction, my thesis is not primarily a formal study. Although I do not ignore form altogether, I see more at stake when it comes to the sonnets.

The idea of Wordsworth's career and the standard shape that it has assumed owes much to the influential scholars of the 1960s and 1970s, and especially Geoffrey Hartman. *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814* outlines a representative Wordsworthian corpus, and places *The Prelude* and the major lyrics – 'Michael', 'Resolution and Independence' and the Intimations Ode – at its centre. Alongside the earlier 'Tintern Abbey', this body of poetry has come to represent the familiar Wordsworthian ethos. It is in these poems that we find the poet whose vocation is to explore the transcendent mind of man, and 'the reciprocal generosity of nature and imagination' (Hartman 219). This *Prelude* / lyric-centric alignment of the career has become a commonplace in Romantic scholarship, but it is one that inevitably pushes the many sonnets to the fringes. As Hartman says of his own study, 'the sonnets are slighted' (xi). The sonnets have been accorded a parasitic relationship to the rest of

the poetry, and the current thesis asks what happens if we realign the traditional interpretation of the career such that the sonnets occupy a more prominent position. To employ Wordsworth's own metaphor of his career, what if the sonnets were to emerge from 'the little cells, oratories, and sepulchral recesses' of his poetic 'gothic church' (*Prose* III; 6), and were seen to occupy a more central position in this career edifice?⁶

This is the revisionary scenario that underpins my reading of the sonnets. I do not seek to overturn the *Prelude*-centric interpretation of the career, rather, I offer an alternative that can be read both alongside, and counter to, the traditional model. By this I mean that a coherent sonnet corpus can support the familiar view of Wordsworth's career, and in some ways follow a similar development. For example, the well-discussed emerging conservatism in Wordsworth's writing that the traditional career follows from the early work, through *Lyrical Ballads*, *The Prelude* and into *The Excursion*, finds an analogue in the sonnet corpus, although here, it is seen with a new perspective. And this new perspective is the whole point: the most important implication of reading the career through the sonnet corpus is that in places, the sonnet career diverges from the traditional one, and so offers up new insights and approaches.

To read Wordsworth's career through the sonnet is possible for two main reasons: firstly, because there are so many of them, more than any other formal or generic category in his poetic output, and secondly because Wordsworth wrote sonnets throughout his whole life. It was not a form he experimented with before leaving it behind, nor was it a form that he took up in later life after writing major poetry. The sonnet occupied him for the entirety of his writing period: from the age of sixteen when his first poem, a sonnet, was published, to his final years in his late

seventies. Even though he once thought the form to be ‘egregiously absurd’ (*Letters: Later Years I*; 125), his poetry, correspondence and numerous notes and prose pieces demonstrate a serious and thorough engagement with the sonnet, and it is for this reason that the sonnet should not continue to be devalued by scholarship, but should instead occupy a central position in an understanding of Wordsworth and his art.

While I suggest that we can read the sonnets as a coherent corpus of poetry, they are still various and diverse. They were written at different stages of Wordsworth’s life, under varying conditions, and were composed for a range of distinct purposes. Wordsworth’s numerous sonnets are doing different things, but I argue that there is a continuity that runs through them, and this is something we can gain in a critical understanding of Wordsworth aligned in this manner. To seize the sonnet and place it in a position of eminence so as to interpret a career allows us to trace Wordsworth’s development along a generic constant. This in turn presents the career as a kind of continuum, and so aspects of the traditional career which appear disjointed – such as the poet’s abandonment of radical politics for a conservative agenda – are able to be accounted for more effectively. One of the things we gain from a reading that privileges the sonnet, therefore, is the emergence of linearity in Wordsworth’s writing. The discussion of the 1822 *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* in chapter 7 draws connections with the political sonnets from 1802, and so suggests that the idea of a divide between the mid and late periods of Wordsworth’s career is a more complex adjustment than it is often seen to be.

Another critical interpretation gained from centralising the sonnets is drawn in chapter 5, where I argue that restriction and self-imposed enclosure – conditions that the sonnet form represents – are vital components of Wordsworth’s understanding of liberty and how it can be achieved. Indeed, the poet’s shifting idea,

throughout his life, of what constitutes liberty, occupies a major part of the discussion. The interaction of the ‘Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty’ and the ‘Miscellaneous Sonnets’ is particularly significant in developing this understanding of liberty. I also pursue a reading, which builds on recent work by Sarah Zimmerman among others, that there is a social, outward-looking incentive that underpins a number of Wordsworth’s sonnets, even those deemed to be especially introspective. Sonnets from all stages of his career reach out to their readership and engage with them, often with an agenda of moral guidance, and so I follow Zimmerman in arguing against prevailing accounts of Wordsworth’s ‘lyric transcendence’ (Zimmerman 74) and social disengagement in his poetry.

As briefly alluded to earlier, this study does not prioritise detailed formal analysis in its approach to the poems. Lee Johnson’s book covers this ground well. Having said that, I do offer close-readings of sonnets on occasions when I feel it to be necessary in order to fully understand how a particular sonnet is operating. My treatment of the formal shape of the sonnet more generally focuses on other matters. I consider the larger ideas, concepts, and biographical and historical contexts that underpin sonnets, and I am interested in how lexical and tonal choices establish the range of Wordsworth’s sonneteering voices that develop through his career. I consider the ways in which Wordsworth’s sonnets engage with each other: as a couple of thematically linked sonnets, a small unified group, or, as in the case of *The River Duddon*, an entire sequence with a narrative thread. The most important analytical treatment of the sonnet form occurs in chapter 5 where I assess Wordsworth’s use of the enclosed, restrictive sonnet space. While my insights here have particular relevance to the ‘Miscellaneous Sonnets’, the theoretical principles I argue Wordsworth explores have substantive bearing on his entire sonnet corpus.

I offer now a brief overview of the chapters. The first two chapters consider the ‘Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty’ in their original 1802 context, and as they appeared in 1807’s *Poems, in Two Volumes*. Chapter one discusses the influence of classical republicanism on these political poems, and chapter two addresses Wordsworth’s shifting political outlook as he moves from France to England in his attempt to discover a sense of genuine liberty. In these two chapters I focus on the influence of Milton – in terms of his prose, his character and his sonnets – and how Wordsworth used these to construct his sonnet voice. Throughout the study I discuss only the ‘Liberty’ sonnets from *Poems, in Two Volumes*, and not those from the extended ‘Poems Dedicated to National Independence and Liberty’. This is because the earliest ‘Liberty’ sonnets, written throughout 1802 and 1803, have a profound intensity, with the Miltonic spirit still fresh and visceral in Wordsworth’s lines, that is no longer so readily apparent in the more disparate and occasional later ‘Liberty’ sonnets, composed at various stages between 1808 and 1826. In these chapters, my argument seizes upon the Wordsworth of 1802, when he was on the cusp of a momentous change. To ensure that the focus remains on this vital period, I restrict my reading to the first, 26-sonnet series of ‘Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty’.

Chapter three acts as a bridge between the ‘Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty’ and the ‘Miscellaneous Sonnets’, in that it considers the overlapping of public and private concerns for Wordsworth in 1802. It centres on the summer visit to Calais and offers some interpretations of the sonnets he wrote there, and what they tell us about his complicated relationships with Annette Vallon and their daughter Caroline.

Chapter four offers a challenge to standard, entrenched readings of Miltonic influence by reconsidering the influence of Wordsworth’s contemporary sonneteers, including Charlotte Smith and Helen Maria Williams. This revisionary reading of

influence distinguishes this study from other work on Wordsworth and the sonnet where the primacy and exclusivity of the Miltonic inheritance predominates. I argue that we can, and should, look beyond Milton in order to get a complete sense of how Wordsworth's sonnet voice emerged and matured. I focus on the early, often overlooked 'Evening Sonnets', and the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' from *Poems, in Two Volumes*. The chapter provides a compelling counterpart to the arguments made in the opening two chapters. Chapter 5 extends this reading into the larger, three part 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' as they appeared from 1845 onward⁷, and I interrogate Wordsworth's use of what I call the sonnet 'space'.

The final two chapters look at two late sonnet groups, *The River Duddon* and the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*. The first considers Wordsworth's use of the sonnet sequence. I also develop my reading of influence by exploring how the *Duddon* sonnets are informed by, and move away from, the eighteenth-century sensibility river sonnet tradition. The final chapter discusses how the rhetoric of the historical, national and religious *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* mirrors that of the early 'Liberty' sonnets.

Since this study focuses on an immensely extensive corpus, omissions are, unfortunately, necessary. While some unfamiliar sonnets are considered in detail, some better known pieces may receive only a brief mention, or may not feature at all. I do not include any of the travel sonnets, for various reasons. Firstly, for reasons of coherence and consistency, I focus on those groupings that consist solely of sonnets.⁸ In the various late travel collections – *Memorials of a Tour on the Continent* (1820), *Yarrow Revisited* (1835) and *Memorials of a Tour in Italy* (1842) – the sonnets are supplemented by, and interspersed with, poems of other forms and kinds, and so Wordsworth is not, I argue, writing these sonnets *as sonnets*, as he

does earlier in his career. By this I mean that the key features of the sonnet, as it was used by Wordsworth – its sequential nature, political agenda, or epiphanic potential – are in these cases, not of primary importance. The sonnets are used as itinerary poems amongst itinerary poems in other forms, and so they lose much of their ‘sonnetness’. My overarching argument about centralising the sonnets and bringing them out of the gothic church’s ‘recesses’ is based upon an understanding of the form comprising more than just objectively determined formal characteristics.

Wordsworth may be writing a sonnet to be part of a coherent sequence or narrative pattern, as he does with *The River Duddon* or the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*. It may be to exploit the restriction and sense of enclosure the sonnet space offers, as he does in the ‘Miscellaneous Sonnets’, and, for that matter, in the other groups in this study. The writing of a sonnet may also be a conscious decision to emulate an influence, as Wordsworth does in the ‘Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty’. I argue that these factors have only minimal bearing on the travel sonnets. They are, more accurately, travel *poems* that just happen to be written in the sonnet form. There is no theoretical engagement with the sonnet *as* a sonnet.⁹ Furthermore, the tight space of the sonnet engenders a condition of focused intensity. In the sonnets I deal with in this study, deeply felt moments of urgency or heightened experience are the occasions that give rise to the poems.¹⁰ Composing ‘I griev’d for Buonaparte’, the first mature political sonnet, ‘immediately’ after seizing the inspiration of Milton demonstrates the intensity of Wordsworth’s sonnet writing practices. The travel sonnets do not have this same energy or emotional immediacy. They were often written months, even years, after the experiences which occasioned them.¹¹ Therefore, this study does not aim to be a comprehensive, enumerative account of every sonnet Wordsworth wrote, nor is it a strictly exclusive account that only acknowledges a select number of

sonnets. It instead explores a certain kind of sonnet writing: a mode of sonneteering that self-consciously exploits the form for political, personal, national and religious reasons, and because of its rich and varied literary heritage.

My focus, therefore, is with the four principal sonnet groups. By concentrating on these, a sharply defined, coherent sense of how, and for what purposes, Wordsworth used the sonnet emerges. With these sonnets, I posit an alternative reading of Wordsworth's career.

¹ By this I mean the sonnet's place in a particular thematic or rhetorical category – 'Miscellaneous', 'Liberty', *Ecclesiastical*, or *Duddon*. Original context may also indicate other periodicals or publications, the *Morning Post* for example.

² Readings of this nature are so numerous that a full list would be unnecessary. However, two representative examples, both cited in this study, are worth mentioning here. Philip Cox's discussion of Wordsworth and gender uses the 'Miscellaneous' sonnet 'Beloved Vale!' to support a reading of the poet's 'subtle critique of the "revisit" tradition that he had inherited' (47), but it is attached to, and feeds off, the more extensive concern with 'Tintern Abbey', the poetic focus of his argument. Similarly, James Chandler's study of Wordsworth's politics calls upon a selection of sonnets from *The River Duddon* to support a reading of the poet's 'Traditionalism' (168-72). While he does acknowledge their place in the original Duddon sequence, the particular 'sonnetness' of the poems is not a concern. My point is not that these discussions are inadequate in any way – both are compelling arguments – rather, they represent a particularly common approach to Wordsworth's sonnets: the sonnets are used to *support* readings that are primarily concerned with longer works, or the better known lyric poetry, and are not themselves the focus of the readings.

³ For example: Daniel Robinson on *The River Duddon*, John Delli Carpini on the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, and Stephen Behrendt on the 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty'.

⁴ This is from 1994, but despite some important work since then, much of what he says still seems to be the case in Wordsworth sonnet studies.

⁵ These invaluable texts play a central role in the current study. Life and poetry frequently intersect in Wordsworth's sonnets, and new biographical interpretations of the poet underpin much of my argument, especially in chapter 3. Also, since this study bases much of its argument on Wordsworth's own categorisation of his sonnets, and on the different versions that various poems went through, the comprehensive editorial matter of the Cornell editions, particularly *Early Poems and Fragments*, has been immensely helpful.

⁶ Of course, this concept of the gothic church, from the 'Prospectus' to *The Excursion*, actually centralises *The Recluse* as the 'body' of the church, while the preparatory *Prelude* is the ante-chapel. Since *The Recluse* as a complete poem never materialised, criticism has had to renegotiate Wordsworth's plan, by situating *The Prelude* as the primary major poem. The sonnets were seen by Wordsworth as part of his 'minor Pieces', 'to be likened to the little cells...' and so on. With the lack of a completed *Recluse*, Wordsworth's plan for the gothic church (Johnston 2003, 71 offers a useful visual sketch of this vision), is therefore an unstable construct. Twentieth-century criticism's reorganisation, which has centralised *The Prelude*, testifies to this. I argue that an alternative reorganisation is possible: bringing the sonnets to a prominent position.

⁷ The sonnets in this expanded group were written at various stages between the period of *Poems, in Two Volumes*, and 1845.

⁸ Of course, *The River Duddon* volume contains other poems and prose pieces besides just sonnets, but the central series of 33 poems are all sonnets, and so the sequence is not interrupted by other forms. In the chapter on *The River Duddon*, I briefly discuss the interaction between the sonnets and these other forms. *Sonnets Composed or Suggested during a Tour in Scotland* is the exception to this

rule, in that in its original publication, the volume was just sonnets. However, it has been omitted for the other reasons given above.

⁹ It is for this reason that I also leave out the late 'Sonnets upon the Punishment of Death' (1841) and 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty and Order' (1845).

¹⁰ The *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* are no exception: they were written as an impassioned response to what Wordsworth saw as a very real national threat, Catholic emancipation, and so while the quality of the poetry may not be strong, they are informed by a significant emotional response.

¹¹ The sonnets on the 1837 Italian tour, for example, were written at various stages between 1838 and 1842.

Chapter 1
The 1802 Political Sonnets, Milton,
and Wordsworth's Classical Republicanism

The account of Wordsworth's sudden moment of awakening upon hearing his sister Dorothy's recital of Milton's sonnets is well known, and remains one of the most significant episodes in his development as a poet. His comments to Isabella Fenwick regarding this event, made towards the end of his life – which is in itself, testament to the enduring quality of Milton's hold over Wordsworth – show a quiet, respectful acknowledgement of the epiphanic nature of that afternoon. Although he says that he 'had long been well acquainted' with Milton's sonnets, he goes on to explain that he was

particularly struck on that occasion with the dignified simplicity and majestic harmony that runs through most of them...I took fire, if I may be allowed to say so, and produced three sonnets the same afternoon (*Fenwick* 19).¹

The one sonnet that Wordsworth 'distinctly remember[s]' (*Fenwick* 19) writing that afternoon is 'I griev'd for Buonaparte': the first in a triumphant series of political sonnets composed throughout the remainder of 1802 and 1803, which are imbued with the 'majestic harmony' that he so admired in Milton. Wordsworth was not the first sonneteer of his era to return to the public mode of his predecessor. Coleridge's 'Sonnets on Eminent Characters' of 1794-5 certainly borrowed heavily from the Miltonic model with their stately pronouncements on public figures, but it was not until Wordsworth's poems seven years later that the Miltonic sonnet was truly reborn.

Wordsworth made various observations on why Milton's sonnet versification appealed to him, and I want to begin by briefly considering two poems as a way of demonstrating in what ways the voice of the 1802 liberty sonnets is indebted to Milton. One Milton sonnet will have to stand for many: 'To the Lord General Cromwell' was one of Wordsworth's favourites (*Letters: Early Years* 379):

Cromwell, our chief of men, who through a cloud
 Not of war only, but detractions rude,
 Guided by faith and matchless fortitude,
 To peace and truth thy glorious way hast ploughed,
 And on the neck of crowned Fortune proud
 Hast reared God's trophies, and his work pursued,
 While Darwen stream, with blood of Scots imbrued,
 And Dunbar field resounds thy praises loud,
 And Worcester's laureate wreath; yet much remains
 To conquer still; Peace hath her victories
 No less renowned than War: new foes arise,
 Threatening to bind our souls with secular chains:
 Help us to save free conscience from the paw
 Of hireling wolves, whose Gospel is their maw.

(*Complete English Poems*; 103-4)

Wordsworth's first political sonnet of 1802 bears many of the hallmarks of his precursor:

I griev'd for Buonaparte, with a vain
 And an unthinking grief! the vital blood
 Of that Man's mind what can it be? What food
 Fed his first hopes? What knowledge could *He* gain?
 'Tis not in battles that from youth we train
 The Governor who must be wise and good,
 And temper with the sternness of the brain
 Thoughts motherly, and meek as womanhood.
 Wisdom doth live with children round her knees:
 Books, leisure, perfect freedom, and the talk
 Man holds with week-day man in the hourly walk
 Of the mind's business: these are the degrees
 By which true Sway doth mount; this is the stalk
 True Power doth grow on; and her rights are these.

(P2V; 157-8)

The defining characteristic of both sonnets is their declamatory voice: these are triumphant, stately poems that invoke their subject in the opening line with a directness and a clear sense of purpose, which establish right away the 'unity of object and aim' (*Letters: Early Years* 379) that Wordsworth admires in Milton. The characteristic Miltonic inverted word order ('detractions rude') is picked up by Wordsworth ('Thoughts motherly') lending his lines a rugged feel. Neither of these sonnets could be called smooth or polished, but this was the whole point for Wordsworth: he follows Milton in the 'Liberty' sonnets because the subject matter of the poems calls for a raw, powerful movement of words.

This is most prominent in the conspicuous use of enjambment by both poets: six of Milton's lines run over into the next, while nine of Wordsworth's do the same. It is as if there is so much to say, that it cannot be contained within the tight space. The sonnets are packed tightly and give the illusion of bursting outwards, with statements overflowing into one another, making it seem as though the poems are larger than they really are. In a letter of 1802, Wordsworth remarked that Milton's sonnets have 'an energetic and varied flow of sound crowding into narrow room more of the combined effect of rhyme and blank verse than can be done by any other kind of verse I know of' (*Letters: Early Years* 379).² This, for Wordsworth, is Milton's unique power: the ability to maintain the integrity of the sonnet's rhyming convention, while simultaneously work against it by allowing the sense of the lines to overflow their bounds. This is complemented by a number of strong pauses in the middle of lines, further developing the music and 'varied flow of sound'. Wordsworth sees Milton's prosody as developing a poetics that merges the short

poem and the epic. The lines have much in common with *Paradise Lost*, and it is this grandeur and sublimity of Milton's sonnets that Wordsworth attempts to harness.³

I do not intend to spend any more time considering Wordsworth's appropriation of Miltonic versification, for while it was perhaps the sonorous music of Milton's lines that initially drew Wordsworth to the Miltonic sonnet, it was arguably his vital interest in his predecessor's choice of subject matter that led him to emulate what the great poet of revolutionary England had achieved. Stuart Curran is quite right when he asserts that Wordsworth's early sonnets attempt 'to recapture the *tone* and *ethos* of the Miltonic sonnet' (41, my emphasis). Indeed, it is the Miltonic spirit of political struggle during a period of unrest and upheaval that must ultimately be seen as the most fundamental influence on the 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty', from 1807's *Poems, in Two Volumes*, more so than the prosodic echoes in the verse.⁴ Wordsworth admired Milton's concern with public duty, alongside his need for personal contemplation. This duality, combining to establish an unfaltering dedication to goodness and moral rectitude, and more overtly, a study of what constitutes 'liberty' provides the framework for both poets' sonnets. In his sonnet to Cyriack Skinner, Milton is able to 'bear up and steer / Right onward' through his blindness, because he is supported by the knowledge that he has lost his sight 'In liberty's defence, my noble task, / Of which all Europe talks from side to side' (*Complete English Poems* 108; 8-9, 11-12). Walter Savage Landor's lines from 'To The President of the French Republic' give the clearest appraisal of Milton's developments in subject matter. He says that Milton:

caught the
Sonnet from the dainty hand
Of love, who cries to lose it, and he gave
The notes to glory.

(qtd. in Nelson 25)

Gone are the familiar tropes and abstract musings of the Elizabethan love sonnet: in its place are addresses to historical figures, sublime elegies on the poet's advancing blindness, and most significantly, mini-treatises on liberty. To Wordsworth, this concern with upholding freedom in its many forms was the exemplary feature of Milton. When Wordsworth writes sonnets on a political theme in 1802, he does so as part of a specific agenda, a self-conscious manoeuvre to position himself alongside his great precursor. By associating his sonnets with Milton, the rhetorical potential of the poems is enlarged, for they carry with them the Miltonic heritage.⁵ It is not just Milton the sonneteer who inspires Wordsworth here. In fact, it is more Milton as republican activist and exemplary virtuous man who inspires Wordsworth in these sonnets. I argue in this chapter that the 1802 liberty sonnets demonstrate the influence of classical republicanism, which comes to Wordsworth through Milton and his fellow commonwealth men of the seventeenth century. While this influence begins a decade earlier, during Wordsworth's radical youth, the political sonnets of 1802 show the poet maintaining his essential republican ideals, but deriving new meaning from them. This is the most significant aspect of Milton's influence. The rousing, politically-engaged subject matter comes from Milton's example, and Wordsworth shapes it to accord with his troubled personal condition at the time and the wider demands of his historical moment.

In understanding the way in which Wordsworth appropriated the Miltonic inheritance, some attention to the methodology put forth by Harold Bloom in his seminal *The Anxiety of Influence* may be of some use here.⁶ Bloom's theory of influence – whereby the later poet engages in a creative duel with his precursor in an attempt to assert and define his own voice – may be applied to an appraisal of Milton

and Wordsworth. However, the full theoretical import of *The Anxiety of Influence* is not my main concern here: Bloom's theory stresses the antagonistic nature of the relationship between the struggling 'ephebe' and the precursor, and this opens up a Freudian debate that I do not wish to pursue. I instead focus on one of Bloom's 'revisionary ratios' – the mechanisms by which the later poet works to define his unique voice – and its implications for the present study of 'liberty'. This ratio is the *tessera*, or 'completing link' (Bloom 67). It is a concept based on the principle that a poet, in order to overcome the restrictive nature of influence, must 'persuade himself (and us) that the precursor's Word would be worn out if not redeemed as a newly fulfilled and enlarged Word of the ephebe' (67). Here, I take 'Word' in a literal sense, and apply it to 'liberty'. With a Bloomian reading of the Milton-Wordsworth relationship, the younger poet works to 'redeem' the concept of liberty from obscurity and inadequacy: enlarging its boundaries so that in the writings of the earlier poet, it appears unfinished, or 'truncated'. By 'completing' Milton's discourse on liberty, and in so doing, displaying a 'newly fulfilled Word', Wordsworth is able to overcome the stifling effects of influence. This may provide a compelling way in to Wordsworth's engagement with the Miltonic ethos.

Bloom's theory has one significant deficiency. In his introduction, he states that his 'concern is only with *the poet in a poet*, or the aboriginal poetic self'. He chooses to ignore 'influences not poetical', a decision which is clearly to the detriment of the theory's reach (11). As Frank Lentricchia observes, 'the unspoken assumption is that poetic identity is somehow a wholly intraliterary process in no contact with the larger extraliterary processes that shape human identity' (Lentricchia 326). This elision of political, historical and social contexts, means that Bloom would have us believe that in writing a collection of sonnets to 'Liberty',

Wordsworth was driven wholly by his attempt to outdo one man, while remaining somehow insensible to the fluxes of his own public and personal life. Wordsworth's sonnets are part of a larger political and social discourse: they are personal commentaries on the state of affairs in both France and England. Furthermore, while Bloom discounts historical context from his theory, he also seems to neglect the contribution played by a poet's *prose* works in influencing other poets, since as he says, his concern is only with 'the poet in a poet'. I challenge this too, for as this chapter will show, Wordsworth's sonnets are significantly influenced by Milton's political prose tracts. I therefore develop our understanding of the Miltonic spirit of Wordsworth's sonnets, and demonstrate that while Dorothy's reading was a vital moment, there are more factors at work, that stretch beyond matters of poetic form. Wordsworth resumes and enlarges a discourse on liberty that was once the central concern of his precursor. The balance between rootedness in contemporary events, and the invocation of a past literary heritage is played out throughout Wordsworth's 1802-3 liberty sonnets, and gives his discussion of liberty a dual temporality.

1802 was a time of political crisis for Wordsworth. He had invested so much emotionally in the French Revolution a decade earlier – he notes in *The Prelude* how his 'heart was all / Given to the people' (*P*; IX, 125-6) of France – but what he believed should have been the greatest fulfilment of the essential tenets of liberty, had become a spectacular failure. At this point, when 'many of his radical enthusiasms and theories were crumbling about him', he turned to the sonnet as an 'outlet' (Havens 530), in order to work through his problems. Formal reasons as to why Wordsworth saw the sonnet as a fit vehicle for considering liberty will be looked at in chapter 5, but perhaps the more straightforward reason for engaging with the sonnet at this time, is that, simply, it was the form used by Milton during *his*

period of struggle. As I suggested in the Introduction, when Wordsworth writes a sonnet, he does so for strategic reasons, in order to pursue a particular agenda. The sonnet, in each case, is the *only* form that will suit his purposes, and so it is here. In order to provide a committed response to the political issues of the time, Wordsworth writes Miltonic sonnets, and so invokes a literary heritage that lends credence and might to his entire project.

Havens observes that Wordsworth underwent a ‘sudden realization of the similarity of his situation to that described in some of [Milton’s sonnets]’ (530). He admired Milton’s contribution to the political cause of his time, and saw that his forebear could successfully employ the sonnet form to articulate a mature and powerful response to the unrest that existed. It was an acknowledgement of ‘the suitability of the sonnets of his favourite poet for expressing his own difficulties and fears’ (530). Yet there is a crucial difference. It is true that the activist in Wordsworth was inspired by Milton’s example, but the respective situations of each poet were radically different. For while Milton wrote his sonnets, and more importantly, his political prose tracts, in a pro-republican vein during the Civil War and the period of the English Republic, Wordsworth wrote his sonnets during the reactionary period against the revolutionary, and *after* his fervent zeal for the revolutionary cause had subsided. Yet this is not to say that Wordsworth had adopted a position of cautious inactivity and was therefore not campaigning for liberty with the same conviction and purpose as his predecessor. In fact, it gave him a further incentive to fight for liberty. For Wordsworth had seen the various stages of the cause of liberty – its attainment and accompanying hope and excitement, its subversion, with the collapse of the Revolution’s ideals and the onset of the Terror, and its eventual dissolution. Thus, the particular conditions of Wordsworth’s

historical moment at the turn of the century enabled him to comment more fully on the concept of liberty, since he had witnessed first hand *every* stage of its ultimate disintegration. He had seen and lived through its partial success and subsequent suppression, and this arguably put him in a better position than Milton both to question its very nature, and to fight for its eventual victory. Furthermore, Wordsworth found himself writing his sonnets at a time when liberty seemed at once extinguished, yet so full of potential. 1802 saw the Peace of Amiens⁷, a brief respite in conflict between England and France, and a period in which to reconsider the state of human and political affairs. Liberty may have failed during the Revolutionary period, but the palpable change in public mood felt throughout 1802 must have brought fresh hope – albeit fleetingly – for a more secure and peaceful future. If we are to say, then, that Wordsworth ‘completed’ Milton’s discussion of liberty, in accordance with Bloom’s *tessera* ratio, then the fortuitous nature of Wordsworth writing his ‘thesis’ at this crucial point in history, must take some of the credit, for it opened up to him a wider context – the chance to consider liberty’s evolution. After experiencing the bliss of the early days of the Revolution, Wordsworth now had to come to terms with the reality that ‘the death of liberty tainted the air’ (Moorman, *Early Years* 566). Wordsworth thus saw it as his duty to bring liberty back to life – to consider what it now meant in the days of Revolutionary fallout, and to reinstate it as a morally correct virtue. Having to witness Frenchmen – among whom he had considered himself a fellow ‘patriot’ – ‘losing sight of all / Which they had struggled for’ (*P*; IX, 125; X, 793-4) meant that he had lost all faith in the cause of liberty. The ensuing crisis, where he became immersed in Godwin’s *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*⁸, and the ‘clear / And solid evidence’ of ‘mathematics’ (*P*; X, 903-4) took him further into oblivion, but the rejuvenating spirit of both Coleridge and

Dorothy enabled the rebirth of his imaginative faculties, and by 1802, he was able to go about restoring his faith in liberty. He had had time to re-evaluate his beliefs, and the occasion of the summer trip to Calais⁹ acted as a catalyst for composition: the compact space of the sonnet form enabled him to focus and capture his thoughts. Of course, 'liberty' would come to mean something other than that which it signified a decade earlier, for while the sonnets initially set out to consider the concept in political terms, the dialectic progression of the series inevitably turns inwards. As I shall argue, Wordsworth ultimately sees true liberty as the responsibility of the individual: it is a state attained through the personal realm.

Wordsworth's return to England after spending the summer of 1802 in France is the subject of the tenth sonnet in the 1807 'Liberty' sequence, 'Composed in the Valley, near Dover, On the Day of landing'. Back on his native land, Wordsworth can happily exclaim 'tis joy enough and pride / For one hour's perfect bliss, to tread the grass / Of England once again' (*P2V* 162-3; 11-13). He is full of hope that he will now receive confirmation of liberty's existence. However, just four sonnets later in the sequence, this hope has been extinguished, as he instead finds his homeland to be 'a fen / Of stagnant waters' (*P2V* 165; 2-3). This realisation is a pivotal moment in the progression of the series, since it forces Wordsworth to enact a 'corrective' (Behrendt 656) manoeuvre, which will ultimately work to restore a sense of optimism to his embattled sensibility.¹⁰ This manoeuvre is fundamental to the meaning of the entire series, and comes in the form of Milton, or more specifically, Milton and his fellow seventeenth-century republican writers. The sonorous invocation and glorious sense of occasion of 'London, 1802' has oftentimes obscured the significance of the following sonnet in the series, 'Great Men have been among

us', which is all too readily seen as a straightforward denunciation of French culture and literature, in favour of the 'Books and Men' of England:

Great Men have been among us; hands that penn'd
 And tongues that utter'd wisdom, better none:
 The later Sydney, Marvel, Harrington,
 Young Vane, and others who call'd Milton Friend.
 These Moralists could act and comprehend:
 They knew how genuine glory was put on;
 Taught us how rightfully a nation shone
 In splendor: what strength was, that would not bend
 But in magnanimous meekness.

(P2V 166; 14, 1-9)

Certainly, there is a nationalistic element to the poem, but something more significant is being said, for in appealing to these 'Great Men' of the past, Wordsworth is suggesting a larger narrative is at work, one that presides over the general sentiment of the whole series. It is not just an English tradition that is being admired here, for the works of Milton, Harrington and others bring with them the cumulative influence of a wider heritage of political and social thinking on liberty: that of ancient Rome. This suggests, therefore, that the 1802-3 sonnets are under the influence – albeit predominantly second-hand – of what Quentin Skinner calls the 'neo-roman theory' of liberty (Skinner 1998).

Contemporary historians, with Skinner arguably chief among them, have long recognised the importance of classical models of government and law on the thinking of English republican writers in the seventeenth century. Apologists of the regicide and the establishment of the Commonwealth based their arguments on the principles set out in the Roman *Digest* of law, codified by the Emperor Justinian, Livy's histories of Rome, and Sallust's *Bellum Catilinae*, among other classical texts. The key notion that the English writers drew from these Roman texts, was that liberty's

antithesis was not merely restraint, but *slavery*. This was a concept at the heart of the *Digest* (or the *Institutes*, the ‘simplified textbook form...in which Milton studied it’) (Dzelzainis 301). Slavery was seen as a state in which a person was ‘subject to the jurisdiction of someone else’ and as such, was ‘within the power’ of another (Justinian 17, 18). Complete personal freedom, or *persona sui iuris*, means ‘to be capable of possessing rights of one’s own, and this is possible only if one is not subjected to someone else’s dominium, (or *patria potestas*)’ (Wirszubski 1). It was on these groundings that the execution of Charles I was justified by the republican writers of the seventeenth century. The people had been subjected to the rule of just one man, and were thus ‘made into the property of someone else’ (Justinian 15), thereby denying their inherent human liberties of living according to one’s own rule. In discussing Milton’s understanding of liberty, Skinner suggests that ‘the people of England had been living in a state of servitude under the rule of Charles I’, and thus ‘the abolition of the monarchy was ...interpreted as an act of self-liberation on the part of an enslaved people’ (Skinner 2002, 2).

Seventeenth-century discussions of slavery, and arguments in favour of republicanism, were based on the concept of monarchy as being a fertile breeding ground for tyranny. The classical origin of this notion is Livy’s *History of Rome*, which begins by professing that ‘no community living under a king has any title to be regarded as a free state’ (Skinner 1998, 55). Quentin Skinner tells us that ‘the opening books of Livy’s history are chiefly given over to describing how the people of Rome liberated themselves from their early kings and managed to found a free state’ (44). Using this classical precedent, Milton forcibly declared his distrust of submitting to the whims of one man in *Eikonoklastes*. He defined a Commonwealth

as a society in which all things are ‘conducible to well being and commodious life’ (Milton *Prose*; III, 458). However, if it cannot have these ‘requisit things’

without the *gift and favour* of a single person, or without leave of his privat reason, or his conscience, it cannot be thought sufficient of it self, and by consequence, no Common-wealth, nor free’.
(458, my emphasis)

Unless the people have control over their own laws, so that ‘every man’s business [is] done according to his own mind’ (Sidney 403), they are merely slaves, acting against their will under one all powerful master, the king. Therefore, when Charles I tried to arrest five members of the House of Commons in January 1642, it was interpreted by Milton as the king attempting to forcibly ‘substitute his own will for the will of the body politic’ (Skinner 1998, 48). The problem with monarchy was that it left open the opportunity for one man to seek an *excess* of power: to use his elevated position to suppress the liberty of the people, and in so doing, act tyrannically.

The argument was taken up by all of the Commonwealth men of the seventeenth century, but it was not always straightforward. The theories were initially adopted because of the transgression of Charles I: it was the corrupt rule of one particular man rather than the office of Kingship itself that was the issue. As Thomas Corns points out, the trial of the king was ‘always presented not as regicide, but as tyrannicide’ (Corns 29). Indeed, Charles is referred to as a ‘Tyrant’ throughout *Eikonoklastes*. However, the execution of the king led writers to consider the potential for tyranny in all one-leader rules, partly as a way of legitimising the ‘unprecedented events’ of the regicide (Skinner 2002, 1). In other words, they turned to Roman notions of slavery in order to justify the eradication of monarchy. The

single leader structure of monarchy was thus presented as a potentially tyrannical form of government, but it was still viable if it operated within a 'mixed government' – that comprising aristocracy, democracy and monarchy. The theory of mixed government was advanced by the Greek historian Polybius¹¹ and was endorsed by Machiavelli, the great republican of the Italian Renaissance, who was responsible for the transmission of classical theories throughout England through his *Discourses*. In discussing ancient Rome, Machiavelli says that 'the blending of these estates made a perfect commonwealth' (Machiavelli 216). The implication was that it was possible, 'at least in principle, for a monarch to be the ruler of a free state' (Skinner 1998, 54-5). Milton too, supported the theory of the blending of these three estates, indeed, his 'reiterated adherences to the idea of mixed government throughout the whole period from 1640 to 1660' demonstrates his predilection for its essential principles (Fink 1945, 109). However, this did not mean that he abandoned his fundamental aversion to one-person rule. Fink suggests that by *The First Defence of the English People* in 1651, 'Milton had arrived very definitely at the conclusion that a republic is superior to a monarchy as a means of realizing the ideal of a mixed state' (103). By 1660, and *The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*, the mixed state seemed to no longer hold any lustre for Milton, as he articulates his strongest ever 'constitutional model for good government without kings' (Corns 41). He is now openly hostile to monarchy, exclaiming:

all ingenuous and knowing men will easily agree with me, that a free Commonwealth without single person or house of lords, is by far the best government.

(Milton *Prose*; VII, 364-5)

The crucial concept is a 'free Commonwealth', the implication being that liberty is only available to a people in the absence of kings. Without kings, 'everyone remains equal in the making of the laws' (Skinner 1998, 76) and therefore 'the liberty not only of the commonwealth, but of every man' is assured (Harrington 20).

Milton, Harrington and others, based their theories on classical precedents, and so when Wordsworth invokes these men in his 'Great Men' sonnet, he exhibits an implicit show of admiration for the Roman models. It is during his stay in Paris in the early 1790s that Wordsworth is most likely to have first encountered the writings of the English republicans. Zera Fink has shown how important this group was to the Girondins, who themselves had an 'interest in classical models' and so felt, during these early days of the Revolution, 'a special kinship' with their 'classically-minded' English forebears (Fink 1948, 108). Under the tutelage of Michel Beaupuy, Wordsworth would have certainly mixed within Girondin circles at this time, and so was 'listening to, and probably participating in, discussions in which the ideas of the seventeenth century English republicans were of common occurrence' (Fink 1948, 110). Nicholas Roe writes that Wordsworth saw Beaupuy as a 'philosophic guide expounding his "creed / Of zeal" with enthusiasm and self-devotion' (1988, 62).¹² Wordsworth's involvement in radical politics and classical republicanism was fostered during this period of engagement with 'the experience of past ages', (*P*; IX, 343) but this is not to say that he had no previous interest in the history of Rome. He says in *The Prelude* how he and Beaupuy 'summoned up' – suggesting a prior knowledge – 'the honourable deeds / Of ancient story' (*P*; IX, 372-3). He had read the Twenty-first Book of Livy's *History of Rome* at Cambridge during 1789, which led him to admire 'the way in which honour, wisdom, and fair-dealing seemed so often to determine the course of Roman affairs' (Schneider Jr. 106). The history of

‘popular Rome’ was one of noble goodness; by contrast, the ‘modern narratives’ of his native land were ‘high-wrought’ and so ‘Stript of their harmonising soul’ (*P*; VIII, 771, 774, 775). Wordsworth’s nascent interest in the deeds of classical Rome were sharpened and given a keen focus by his reading in English republicanism.¹³ Upon encountering the seventeenth-century writers amidst the clamour of Revolutionary France, his admiration for Roman models of government were shaped into a radical program for political change. It is certainly this engagement with classical republicanism that brought about Wordsworth’s early, potentially volatile prose tracts: his *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff* and his series of correspondence, in 1794, with his friend William Mathews, with whom he had intended to establish a monthly miscellany entitled *The Philanthropist*. It was to ‘instruct and amuse mankind’ (*Letters: Early Years* 125) in a variety of political and cultural matters, but was to never come to fruition.

In the *Letter*, Wordsworth sets out his political stance explicitly, declaring:

The office of king is a trial to which human virtue is not equal. Pure and universal representation, by which alone liberty can be secured, cannot, I think, exist together with monarchy.

(*Prose* I, 41)

The inflammatory *Letter*, the clearest statement of Wordsworth’s politics at their most radical and his most impassioned pro-republican writing, remained unpublished until after his death, and with good reason: it could have seen him imprisoned for treason. The extreme nature of the *Letter*, which saw Wordsworth defending Louis XVI’s execution and the violence of the Revolution,¹⁴ had subsided somewhat by the time of the letters to Mathews in 1794. He maintains his position on ideal government – ‘I disapprove of monarchical and aristocratical governments, however

modified' (*Letters: Early Years* 123) – but the general thrust of his argument takes a new direction. He sees tyranny as resident in 'the infatuation, profligacy, and extravagance of men in power', but does not now advocate violent means to bring about change. 'I am a determined enemy to every species of violence' and 'recoil from the bare idea of a revolution', he stresses, showing his development from the previous year's *Letter*. The onus is now on 'every enlightened friend of mankind' to 'diffuse by every method a knowledge of those rules of political justice, from which the farther any government deviates the more effectually must it defeat the object for which government was ordained' (124). Hermann Wüscher (34-44, 48-54) has shown how the spirit of brotherhood informs these letters to Mathews, and indeed, a sense of moderation and calm in comparison with the seditious *Letter* is evident in Wordsworth's political thinking here. He now seeks the strength of representative men of thoughts, ideas and morals to do away with tyranny, rather than the rapid destruction of corrupt institutions through aggressive, violent means. He sees *The Philanthropist* as a means to instruct people – and in so doing, enlighten the mind of the common man – in the 'characters and opinions of eminent men, particularly those distinguished for their exertions in the cause of liberty, as Turgot, as Milton, Sydney, Machiavel, Beccaria, &c. &c. &c' (*Letters: Early Years* 125-6). The list here reads like an early version of the role-call of republican figures in the 'Great Men' sonnet.

Thus, the support for republican rule, evident in these letters to Mathews, and the *Letter*, has its germ in Wordsworth's reading of English seventeenth-century writers and their classical precedents. As early as 1794, however, it is possible to witness Wordsworth tempering his radicalism with a more moderate position, and this development prefigures his stance in 1802, where he presents himself as the weary (yet still vitally involved) activist, scarred by the collapse of the early

revolutionary ideals. This development, from 1793 to 1802, within the context of his republican influences is of profound importance. Fink (1948) has demonstrated the influence of Milton, Harrington etc. on the Wordsworth of 1793: the radical, republican author of the *Letter*. This is mainly done through drawing parallels between Harrington's ideas for the structure and functions of an ideal form of republican government, set out in his *Oceana*, with those of Wordsworth in his *Letter*. However, the *lasting* influence of Wordsworth's reading in classical republicanism has not received due attention.¹⁵ It has an important role in the makeup of the 1802 sonnets. Although the period of Wordsworth's return to nature and to Dorothy may appear like the dawning of the poetic self and a severing of the revolutionary past, Wordsworth was always involved in politics, and key features of his early republican thinking persisted in him beyond the Revolution's failure.

However, although the 1802 sonnets display many of the familiar tropes of Roman law and classical ideals, the general sentiment of the series is quite removed from that of the *Letter*. As the softening of his political position in the letters to Mathews foreshadowed, Wordsworth is no longer, by 1802, the ardent republican with a fervent belief that cutting off the head of the king was the first step to real progress. The influence of the seventeenth-century republicans and their accompanying classical precedents is no longer manifested in a specific program on how best to construct and maintain a strong, working government, as was the case in the *Letter*. In 1802, Wordsworth's republicanism has changed so as to meet changed circumstances. He demonstrates his scepticism of one-person rule in more abstract terms, and relates it to the conditions of his historical moment in 1802, which were crucially different from a decade earlier, when there was still hope for a successful and peaceful republican government in France. Furthermore, he conducts a study of

'liberty' by foregrounding its binary opposite, slavery, which he sees as existing throughout contemporary society. Of course, this dichotomy is inherited from Roman law. What remains the most curious aspect of using core notions of classical republicanism in 1802 is that which was earlier alluded to: that essential republican ideals should still hold true to Wordsworth, in some form at least, after he has seen the failure of the Revolution. We might argue that by appealing to the spirit of specifically *English* republicans, Wordsworth is trying to reinstate the glorious, legitimate Commonwealth of his homeland, as a way of countering, through poetry, the advancing aggression of the French. In effect, Wordsworth has moved from 1793's position of a hopeful *future* in France, to an (arguably weaker) retroactive position in 1802, of seeking hope in England's *past*. This will be considered more in chapter 2, but as for Wordsworth's classical precedents, they are still relevant in post-Revolution 1802 because he seeks, by this stage, to draw new significance from them. The scepticism of the single ruler remains, but ultimately, it is republican virtues and morals which Wordsworth values most in 1802.

We have seen, then, albeit briefly, how Wordsworth adopted the general theoretical stances of English republicanism for his *Letter*, and applied them to a justification of Louis XVI's execution. His repudiation of monarchy is strongest at this point, when historical circumstances were enabling the dissemination of pro-republican sentiment. He documents this period in *The Prelude*, when he tells of his 'Hatred of absolute rule, where will of One / Is law for all' (*P*; IX, 504-5). As the letters to Mathews suggested, however, Wordsworth develops his position to a point where corrupt, tyrannical leaders are attacked rather than monarchs per se. This seems to be the tenor of the 1802 sonnets, where there is an element of Milton's 'conservative' republicanism (Corns 31). This is what Corns sees in Milton's early

political tract, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*. At this stage, in 1650, the subject of Milton's polemic is still the sole figure of Charles I; he attacks tyranny and so is able to praise *good* kings:

A Tyrant whether by wrong or by right coming to the Crown, is he who regarding neither Law nor the common good, reigns onely for himself and his faction...look how great a good and happiness a just King is, so great a mischiefe is a Tyrant.

(Milton *Prose*; III, 212)

In 1802, Wordsworth too can celebrate the greatness of a 'just King' and this is demonstrated in what became the seventh sonnet dedicated to liberty, 'The King of Sweden'.¹⁶ The sonnet, along with those that would precede and follow it – 'On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic' and 'To Toussaint L'Ouverture' respectively – stand out from the series because their subject matter looks beyond the presiding narrative thread of liberty's fate in England and France. Stuart Curran suggests that these three sonnets 'implicitly affirm that civilized, humane values [which I interpret as freedom], are superior to the vicissitudes of time [and indeed place]' (47). In the Sweden sonnet, Wordsworth praises the king's moral qualities. He shows that if these are healthy, a monarch's reign can be glorious and noble. Kingship itself need not be censured if the king can take 'counsel of unbending Truth' and show 'How they with dignity may stand' (*P2V* 159-60; 3, 5). The sonnet also provides an interesting parallel with Milton, who in 1654's *Second Defence of the English People* praises another Swedish monarch, Christina. Milton must have thought that his 'republican ideology may seem a slur' (Corns 35) on the Queen and so he takes the opportunity, in his adulatory address, to endorse his belief in the glorious nature of *good* monarchs. To him, this 'most serene ruler of the Swedes' (Milton *Prose*; IV

Part1, 603) ‘personified his idea of the dichotomy between kings and tyrants’

(603n.):

How magnanimous you are, Augusta, how secure and
well-fortified on all sides by a well-nigh divine virtue
and wisdom. (604)

Although Wordsworth is not as explicit about King Gustavus IV’s *divine* nature, the similarities between the two pieces are clear. ‘Fortitude’, ‘glory’ and ‘dignity’ are values brought out in both accounts, values that exhibit the strong *moral* character of the two monarchs. This moral dimension is thus paramount to Wordsworth’s conception of liberty.

What the sonnet to the King of Sweden demonstrates is that Wordsworth is able to entertain the concept of good monarchs providing liberty for their people. This is what constitutes his ‘conservative’ republicanism. However, in 1802-3, we also see the influence of the more extreme vein of seventeenth-century republican thinking on monarchy: that which advocates the complete rejection of it. This, then, is what Wordsworth would have found in Milton’s *Readie and Easie Way*, and the *Discourses Concerning Government*, where Sidney expounded the following classically imbued argument:

As liberty consists in being subject to no man’s will, and
nothing denotes a slave but a dependence upon the will
of another; if there be no other law in a kingdom than the
will of a prince, there is no such thing as liberty.
(Sidney 402)

The two varying approaches to monarchy, or the governance of a single absolute ruler, influenced Wordsworth’s thinking in different ways and were held in a fine

balance. In 1793, he wholeheartedly accepted the radical repudiation of monarchy, most likely because of youthful vigour, and his active involvement in the French republican cause. In 1802, however, the two approaches are in evidence together and seem to feed into one another. For while Wordsworth's support of the King of Sweden displays a willingness to accept monarchy, elsewhere in the liberty sonnets, he is sceptical of, and even hostile to, the figure of the single ruler, and he uses the classical opposition of liberty and slavery to bring this out. Yet, in the same way that Milton's early republican stance in *The Tenure* was 'conservative' since it focused on the defects of *just* Charles I as opposed to kingship in general, Wordsworth too structures his critique of single-person rule around a denunciation of one man in particular: Bonaparte. As with Louis XVI a decade earlier, Wordsworth's historical moment had furnished him with a strong political figure on whom he could focus his republican-based thinking. The moderate Wordsworth of 1802 does not want to see Bonaparte executed – he had, after all, seen him as the great hope, a 'proper republican leader' (Erdman 4), only a few years earlier – but instead despairs at how he has squandered his credentials, and has been corrupted by his growing power. The sonnets on Bonaparte act as rallying-cries for the cause of liberty through the very process of lamenting its loss. It is in this way that Wordsworth's narrative on liberty is wider in scope than Milton's: he is championing liberty *after* it has failed, something Milton did not have to do. According to the *tessera* ratio, therefore, Wordsworth enlarges and develops Milton's now 'truncated' discourse on liberty.

'Calais, August 15th, 1802' sees Wordsworth in a dazed, almost disbelieving, state documenting 'young Buonaparte's' acquisition of the title 'Consul for life' which had taken place two weeks earlier (*P2V* 158-9; 2, 4). 'Young' acts as an implicit suggestion of Bonaparte's unpreparedness for his position, a critical

observation which is intensified by the permanence of his new status: he is ‘Consul *for life*’ and ‘his is henceforth an *established sway*’ (3, my emphasis). David Erdman explains how ‘Napoleon’s elevating himself to Kingship, then Emperor, crowned by a Pope, collapsed any remaining hope in the hearts of republicans like...Wordsworth’ (5).¹⁷ Witnessing this ignoble and hasty rise, whereby Bonaparte had ‘strewn Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, upon the winds’ (Erdman 4), inevitably leads Wordsworth to remember his early hopes for France, ‘when I was here long years ago: / The senselessness of joy was then sublime!’ (10-11). The juxtaposition of the two points in time is striking, and lends the sonnet a sense of pathos, as the poet is forced to consider both his early naiveté, along with his current profound struggle for hope in a France ruled by a tyrant. Yet from this position, Wordsworth can move to an insightful sentiment in the final three lines:

Happy is he, who, caring not for Pope,
 Consul, or King, can sound himself to know
 The destiny of Man, and live in hope.
 (12-14)

Here, Wordsworth is articulating a familiar, classically influenced rejection of autocratic rule: ‘Pope / Consul, or King’ are all, significantly, single person leaders. It seems to suggest that ‘hope’ and ‘happiness’ cannot be attained under the rule of one. Yet this is a rather bleak outlook and is arguably more in line with Wordsworth’s more extreme position in 1793, when he agreed with ‘twenty-five millions of Frenchmen’ that ‘they could have no security for their liberties under any modification of monarchical power’ (*Prose* I, 35). Stephen Behrendt suggests that Wordsworth may instead be rejecting, in these lines, ‘worldliness and temporal political power’ (651). For while the role-call of ‘Pope, Consul, King’ strongly

implies that Wordsworth remains sceptical of single person rulers – and in the context of the rest of the sonnet, this necessarily stems from Bonaparte’s abuse of his status as autarch – there is also a sense of Wordsworth endorsing a retreat to the self in these lines. Simon Bainbridge argues that Wordsworth is ‘faced with overwhelming evidence of the difference between what France once “promised” and what she “now is”’, and so is ‘forced back into himself for a solution’ (81). This is the major psychological shift that Wordsworth undergoes in the liberty sonnets. The experience of the Revolution’s failure has taught Wordsworth that the fate of liberty is not wholly dependent upon the world of politics. He knows that simply overthrowing a powerful single leader will not necessarily usher in a new age of freedom for the people. Indeed, the language of these lines is significant.

Wordsworth does not advocate ‘rejecting’ single rulers, but instead ‘*caring* not for Pope / Consul, or King’. The focus is on individuals, ordinary ‘week-day’ men, to be the guardians of their own personal liberties. Bonaparte has shown Wordsworth that single rulers have the capacity for licence, but if every man ‘can sound *himself* to know / The *destiny* of Man’, then there need be no concern with the potential for tyranny in those who hold political power. Wordsworth’s approach may be more passive than it was in 1793, but certainly more optimistic, since it suggests that anyone can ‘live in hope’ if they secure their own liberty, without caring for the dealings of public figures. Wordsworth exhibits here his classically influenced distrust of single rulers, but indicates that personal liberty is the most valuable concept to him.

Wordsworth had a kind of ‘direct contact’ with his public by virtue of the fact that seven of the liberty sonnets, including this one, were published in *The Morning Post* throughout 1802 and 1803, before they appeared in 1807’s *Poems, in Two*

Volumes as 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty'.¹⁸ This enabled Wordsworth to speak to his fellow countrymen as an English patriot once again, the voice 'of a poet now himself aggressively *of* the central public rather than of the Republican or Revolutionary People' (Liu 431). Within the physical context of a newspaper, the sonnets became part of a wider public discourse, where their 'purely aesthetic qualities were undoubtedly overshadowed by their rhetorical and political impact' (Behrendt 645). And this is where the importance of the sonnet form becomes particularly acute. The *Morning Post* sonnets have an immediacy by virtue of their location, but also because of their brevity: they come across as short bursts of condensed energy, making their political rhetoric have even more of an impact. Read alongside the news of the day, they contributed in shaping public feeling, thereby establishing themselves within the nation's consciousness. Generally, this simply entailed 'play(ing) to popular opinion' (Behrendt 645) by professing anti-Gallic sentiments, but Wordsworth wanted these sonnets, with their sense of immediacy, to say something more significant to the people of England. When they were later published as part of the complete series of 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty' in 1807, they had an even greater contemporary relevance. Bonaparte was now Napoleon I, and had been Emperor of the French for three years, meaning the sense of pathos that underpins 'Calais, August 15th, 1802' because Bonaparte had been named consul for life, takes on an added resonance. Richard Cronin notes that the sonnets, as they appear in the 1807 *Poems*, speak 'to a nation at war. Wordsworth presented his poems to their readers as a response to an urgent national crisis' (110).

As we have seen, 'Calais, August 15th, 1802', published in the *Morning Post* on 26 February 1803, seeks to instruct the public on how to be mindful of their personal freedoms amidst a world of political confusion. This came just under a

month after the second sonnet to be printed in *The Morning Post*, ‘Calais, August, 1802’, which in the context of Wordsworth *speaking directly* to his public, was arguably the most important of the seven sonnets. It is a bitter attack on the English people for violating their claims to liberty by flocking to France in order to see Bonaparte, and so anticipates the corrective enacted by Wordsworth in the final three lines of ‘Calais, August 15th, 1802’.

The rush to France in ‘Calais, August, 1802’ came about because people wanted to see ‘what a post-revolutionary state would be like, others to look at the art treasures Napoleon had looted, others to get a glimpse of the First Consul himself’ (Gill 1989, 207). The Peace of Amiens enabled this sudden burst of political tourism, with people anxious to see the glorious ‘new-born Majesty’ (*P2V* 156; 7) Bonaparte, who at this stage was not yet seen by the general English populace as a threat to the nation. Wordsworth, however, saw his self-appointment as Chief Consul as conclusive proof that he was no longer a force for good, but rather, a power-hungry tyrant. As Bainbridge remarks, Bonaparte did not merely represent a loss ‘which could have been fitted into Wordsworth’s characteristic pattern of loss and gain’, but instead, more seriously, ‘embodied the French Revolution transformed’ (83). ‘Calais, August, 1802’ thus works simultaneously as a savage upbraiding of the ignorant masses of English ‘tourists’, and a subtle critique of Bonaparte’s single person rule. The imagery used is significant, and recalls the Roman law model of master and slave:

Lords, Lawyers, Statesmen, Squires of low degree,
Men known, and men unknown, Sick, Lame and Blind,
Post forward all, like Creatures of one kind,
With first-fruit offerings crowd to bend the knee
In France, before the new-born Majesty.

(3-7)

By listing groups of people from all social standing, and therefore incriminating 'Everyman', Wordsworth's admonitory remarks have their fullest effect. The Christian imagery of the 'Sick, Lame, and Blind', coming as if to be cured, bestows an ironic divine quality upon Bonaparte. Yet the most telling image is that of the people 'bend(ing) the knee' before Bonaparte, worshipping him with 'offerings'. Wordsworth is sickened by this display, since to him it signifies the undignified and unnatural reverence slaves must show before their master. Yet what is even more troubling is that these 'Creatures of one kind' are English, and thus do not *need* to come before Bonaparte in humble adoration. He is presented as the figure of master, but significantly, the English people have not been forced under his dominion through tyrannical means; their subjugation has come about through their own actions. They are therefore behaving in a manner contrary to that advocated in the final lines of 'Calais, August 15th, 1802'. Wordsworth's classically rooted scepticism of single rulers is here manifested as a sorrowful recognition that they should be held in such unnaturally high regard. Short-sighted adulation of this kind is seen by Wordsworth as indicative of a nation's moral bankruptcy. Even worse is the fact that the cult of the 'Majesty' Bonaparte has tempted a 'free' people to cross the Channel in ignoble reverence, thereby making them 'neglect their own legacy of freedom' (Page 1988, 191). The slavery theme continues with Wordsworth further scolding his countrymen, branding them 'Men of prostrate mind' (8). 'Prostrate' suggests an act of obeisance paid before Napoleon; the physicality of the word also seems to imply full submission to his self-appointed glory. Significantly, however, this state of submission proceeds from the *mind*. The idea of slavery being self-inflicted is continued in the final line of the sonnet, where Wordsworth's attack on the foolish

Englishmen is at its most explicit: 'Shame on you, feeble Heads, to slavery prone!' (14). They are seen as being 'prone' to slavery, liable to fall victim to it through their own moral shortcomings. In the same way that their minds are 'prostrate', so their heads are 'feeble', implying they are too weak to withstand the temptation of submitting to tyranny. The sonnet therefore uses the Roman law dichotomy of master and slave, but develops the idea by showing the 'slaves' themselves as being partly responsible for their slide into servitude. It shows just how different Wordsworth's position is from that of a decade earlier. He still sees his reading in classical republicanism as pertinent to his purpose, but he is drawing new meaning from it. Liberty's foe is still the condition of slavery, but in this barren world where England is a 'fen / Of stagnant waters', and her people will violate their values by bowing before a despot, slavery, as induced by governmental structure, is no longer the pressing issue that it was at the time of the *Letter*. The mind and the soul of Man can be just as responsible for enslavement as tyrannical governments. When the 1802 sonnets were brought together as the 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty' in 1807, their purpose was to show how the mind and soul of man can also liberate. As the final two lines of 'September, 1802' make clear, 'by the Soul / Only the Nations shall be great and free' (*P2V* 163; 13-14). I return to this in the next chapter, but for the time being, I will remain with the sonnets on Bonaparte.

'October, 1803' features towards the end of the series, and written a year after the majority of the other sonnets, reflects a new mood in the political climate. In the autumn of 1803, invasion seemed imminent and the people of England were living in constant fear of Bonaparte's unchecked ambition. The sonnet is therefore one of the bleakest in the series, and the critique of Bonaparte, which before took the form of despair, is now an outright attack on his tyranny:

When, looking on the present face of things,
 I see one Man, of Men the meanest too!
 Rais'd up to sway the World, to do, undo,
 With mighty Nations for his Underlings...
 (P2V 170-1; 1-4)

Wordsworth considers the whole scope of political affairs throughout Europe and all he sees is *'one Man'*: the emphasis is clearly on Bonaparte's independent status as single, all-powerful leader, recalling the deep-rooted republican aversion to such a form of government. In contrast to *'Calais, August, 1802'*, the people no longer seem culpable in their decline into servitude, since Bonaparte is presented as an unconquerable despot, no longer reliant upon the people's show of reverence to furnish him with power. (Having said that, Wordsworth would seem to be implying that it is because of the earlier naiveté of the masses, that Bonaparte has acquired this position of supreme omnipotence). The language of slavery is once more evident, as Bonaparte is shown to have a single might that can *'sway the world'*: he can *'do, undo'*. It is as if he is a political puppeteer, able to use the people for whatever purpose suits his needs. He has denied them their basic liberties, for they exist *'under his dominium'* merely to serve him. The portrayal of Bonaparte is clearly indebted to Roman models of slavery, and as such, the similarities with the numerous assaults on Charles I's rule a century and a half earlier, are strongly evident. Yet Bonaparte is, purely by the breadth of his *'sway'*, a tyrant on a different scale to Charles. While it was the English people who were in thrall to Charles, here, Bonaparte has whole *'Nations for his Underlings'*. His is a rule not of poor governance, but of conquest. Although their concerns were with the English government only, the seventeenth-century Commonwealth men realised the threat to liberty that military conquest

presented. Quentin Skinner points out that they were insistent on the fact that ‘a state or nation will be deprived of its liberty if it is merely subject or liable to having its actions determined by the will of anyone other than the representatives of the body politic as a whole’, or indeed, by ‘another state as a result of colonisation or conquest’ (Skinner 1998, 49). The scale of Bonaparte’s tyranny opened up to Wordsworth a wider discourse on liberty than that which was available to his republican forebears. He was fighting for liberty, which was under threat throughout *all* of Europe, not only England. There was more at stake in Wordsworth’s campaign than there was in Milton’s: his historical moment presented him with the opportunity to enlarge upon his precursor’s precedent. Liberty was a more complex concept, since its binary opposite, slavery, was further-reaching and more manifest than it had been in the seventeenth century.

When the 1802 ‘Liberty’ sonnets were brought together as a coherent series in 1807, Wordsworth ordered them in such a way that he established a sonnet triptych designed to momentarily move the focus outward, away from England and France and onto geographical locales subjected to Bonaparte’s dominion. These three sonnets, already briefly alluded to – ‘On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic’, ‘The King of Sweden’ and ‘To Toussaint L’Ouverture’ – are cleverly situated in the 1807 volume. They immediately follow the sharply critical poems on Bonaparte, and come before the return to England. To read the sonnets chronologically¹⁹ is to be led from a critique of Bonaparte the man and his tyrannical sway over the French and English, to a study of his even more threatening international conquests. Of the three, the sonnet on Venice is of most interest.

The Republic of Venice was ‘terminated’ (Behrendt 652) by Bonaparte in 1797. It was a conquest that brought an end to what Wordsworth’s seventeenth-

century republican precedents had seen as the 'supreme illustration' (Fink 1945, 28) of a mixed polity, the ideal form of government. The 'exquisite balance' (Dzelzainis 298) that Venice achieved of the Doge, the Senate and the Consiglio Grande was seen as the core of its greatness, and helped to spread its reputation to England throughout the seventeenth century.²⁰ Venice was the archetypal free state, often seen as being superior to Rome, perhaps in part because it was a contemporaneous one: it was the 'model republic of the post-classical world' (Bate 1994, 8-9). It was therefore a system of government to be admired, cherished, and in the republican writings advocating mixed government, such as Milton's *First Defence*, emulated. This, then, was Wordsworth's starting point when he came to memorialise the Venetian Republic's 'Extinction'.

As Wordsworth grandly invokes 'Venice, the eldest Child of Liberty' (*P2V* 159; 4), the reader is presented with a very real, historically immediate ideal of genuine political liberty that had remained unchanged for centuries. Yet it is inevitably the poem's past tense that dominates. Its status as epitaph as well as panegyric is established in the opening lines:

Once did She hold the gorgeous East in fee;
 And *was* the safeguard of the West...
 (1-2, my emphasis)

This creates a sense of deep pathos that runs throughout the sonnet, reaching its zenith in the final two lines:

Men are we, and must grieve when even the Shade
 Of that which once was great is pass'd away.
 (13-14)

This closing lament begins by invoking a community, of which Wordsworth himself is a member, and more importantly, its prime spokesman. The lofty 'Men are we' alludes to the 'Great Men' who have 'been among us', but also corresponds with Wordsworth's self-appointed role as a man speaking to men. Venice, the 'Maiden City' (5), is feminised, and idealised to the point of becoming the passive, romantic object of Wordsworth's song. The poem reads almost as a love sonnet, with Wordsworth grieving the loss of his beloved.

The sonnet is an example of Wordsworth's 'dew-drop' (*Letters: Late Years* II; 605) image of the form. There is no dramatic shift in focus at the transition from octave to sestet, rather, an intensification of the sorrowful mood. The point is that the 'loss' of Venice occurs before the poem begins, meaning that the lament occupies the entire sonnet. This gives the poem a unity of purpose, as its central concern is enlarged in the sestet, rather than questioned or overturned. This is where the pathos comes from, for when Wordsworth turns to Venice to stand as his ideal representative of national liberty, just at the point in the series when he needs this confirmation of 'civilized, humane values' the most (Curran 47), the cause has already been lost. While 'The King of Sweden' and 'To Toussaint L'Ouverture' offer some sense of hope in their final lines, this dirge to Venice provides little in the way of an optimistic outlook. It serves to remind the reader of the tyranny of Bonaparte's ambitions – even though it never explicitly refers to him – and so accords with Wordsworth's earlier republican principles, while it simultaneously confirms his turn away from radical support for France. As Jonathan Bate observes, 'to a far greater extent than Robespierre's Terror, it was Napoleonic expansionism that turned English Jacobins against France' (1994, 9).

Wordsworth was drawn to Venice's historic claim to liberty, but perhaps more important than this is what Zera Fink labels the 'aristocracy of virtue' that dominated Venetian affairs (1945, 38). Venice's reputation as a peaceful republic, grounded in innate goodness, finds expression in Wordsworth's lines:

She was a Maiden City, bright and free;
 No guile seduced, no force could violate
 (5-6)

Rome was a republic sustained through violence and war, whereas 'Venice had ordained her institutions for the true end of civil government, the happiness and prosperity of men. But happiness rests on virtue, and in virtue only the few excel' (Fink 1945, 39). This notion runs through the sonnet; Venice had been unsusceptible to violation or seduction, and was a serene, divine body preserved by simple human virtue. It is worth being mindful of Fink's observation that Wordsworth was writing against the prevailing perception of Venice in his own day, when 'its decadence was only too clearly perceived'. He was perpetuating 'what may be called the Venetian "myth" of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that the republic had continued unchanged for more than twelve centuries' (Fink 1948, 118). Certainly, Venice had been a successful republic, but its fame outstripped the reality, and to see it as the ultimate ideal of civil freedom was anachronistic by the time Wordsworth came to write the sonnet.²¹ By buying into the myth, Wordsworth was keen to stress the *virtuous* nature of the republic. By holding virtue in such high regard, Wordsworth was moving to the more conservative aspects of his republican thinking. His focus was no longer on the necessity of a republican form of government, but was now on

how goodness and moral worth should guide human affairs, with the ultimate goal of acting for the common good of the people.

The overarching point that this chapter has been working towards is that by 1802, Wordsworth saw that a truly free civil society depended upon individuals being responsible for their own personal liberty, through the cultivation of virtue. He articulates this through the sonnet because it was the form used by Milton, and it is Milton who best embodies the state of moral goodness and ‘magnanimous meekness’ that Wordsworth values. As I go on to argue throughout this study, the sonnet form itself is shown to exhibit these same virtues: it is outwardly humble in scale, but like Milton, can achieve greatness and soar to epic heights.

The idea of preserving one’s own freedom and virtue is voiced in the closing lines of ‘Calais, August 15th, 1802’ and ‘September, 1802’. Wordsworth believes that simply overthrowing, or indeed executing, the single leader would not bring about any real progress in the cause of liberty. He had seen Louis XVI executed, and it had become the first step to ‘too much liberty’ and bloodshed. It had been an attempt to tackle tyranny with tyranny of another kind, that of violence in the name of revolution. By the time of writing the liberty sonnets in 1802, Wordsworth believed that to restore liberty, it was the *cause* of tyranny that needed to be suppressed. In the 1793 letter to Mathews, he had suggested that the British constitution was denying the people true freedom because of the ‘infatuation, profligacy, and extravagance of men in power’. Eight years later, his political thinking was shifting, and he now saw liberty as an inherent natural right of his country, but he remained firm on what he saw as the cause of tyranny. Now, however, that profligacy and extravagance was embodied in the figure of Bonaparte. In 1809’s *Convention of Cintra*, Wordsworth expounds the same formulation in defending those (presumably including himself)

who at first were opposed to war with France, before later lending their support to it. 'Their conduct was herein consistent...they kept their eyes steadily fixed upon principles', he declares, 'for though there was a shifting or transfer of hostility in their minds as far as regarded persons', the same enemy was combated, 'and that enemy was the spirit of selfish tyranny and lawless ambition' (*Prose I*; 226).

One of the most profound legacies of classical republicanism was the belief that the chief benefit of living in free states was that 'such communities are especially well adapted to attaining glory and greatness' (Skinner 1998, 61). In his *Bellum Catilinae*, Sallust argues the point by claiming that under the rule of kings, 'good citizens are objects of greater suspicion than the evil, and the *virtus* of others always appears alarming' (12). To a tyrannical autarch, goodness in the people is a threat, whereas 'under free systems of government everyone strives for glory without the least fear of seeming a threat' (Skinner 1998, 62). This essential benefit of living in a republic was often expressed through reference to its opposing condition, that is, the manner in which monarchies *deprive* the people of potential glory and liberty. In *Eikonoklastes*, Milton voices his disgust at the situation in England, where his countrymen 'chose rather to be the Slaves and Vassals of his will, then to stand against him, as men by nature free' (Milton *Prose*; III, 543). The people have become so accustomed to living in servitude, that any desire within them to strive for greatness has been extinguished. In the 1793 *Letter*, the staunchly republican Wordsworth followed this line of reasoning. The nobility has a 'necessary tendency to dishonour labour' and 'binds down whole ranks of men to idleness'. He is:

so strongly impressed with the baleful influence of aristocracy and nobility upon human happiness and virtue that if, as I am persuaded, monarchy cannot exist without such supporters, I think that reason sufficient for the preference I have given to the republican system.

(Prose I; 45, 46)

The stance adopted here, borrowed from Milton and his other republican precedents, is that republican forms of government must be advocated, since they alone work to encourage the cultivation of virtue and guarantee liberty. By the time of the 1802 liberty sonnets, however, a reversal of this formulation had occurred in Wordsworth's thinking. The focus was 'less on republics as producers of virtue than on virtue as the antecedent condition of successful government' (Fink 1948, 118). This was a major shift for Wordsworth, and defined the direction of the 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty'. A 'morally strong national soul', argues Johnson, 'is the precondition for good government' (47). The potential for Milton's 'well being and commodious life', and most significantly, the maintenance of *liberty*, depended upon individuals cultivating their own freedoms, rather than government structure. This meant Wordsworth had to turn away from political activism, and return to England. His search for genuine liberty begins in the 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty', but it would take him into the private life at Grasmere, and ultimately, into the sonnet form.

¹ Since Wordsworth already knew the sonnets well, it leaves us to consider why this particular afternoon in May 1802 became such a profound experience. The idea of inspiration and insight arising as much from the conditions of domesticity surrounding the poetic experience as from the poetry itself is something that will be considered in chapter 5.

² See chapter 5 for a discussion of the resonance of this term 'narrow room'.

³ A letter of 1833, written after most of Wordsworth's sonnets were composed, explains that 'in the better half of [Milton's] sonnets, the sense does not close with the rhyme at the eighth line, but overflows into the second portion of the metre' (*Letters: Late Years II*; 604). Wordsworth's own sonnets occasionally did this, but not always. He says it is done to 'aid in giving that pervading sense of intense Unity in which the excellence of the Sonnet has always seemed to me mainly to consist'. He goes on to say that his habit is to see the sonnet as 'the image of an orbicular body – a sphere or a dew-drop' (605). Johnson discusses this in greater detail (42-6).

⁴ The sonnets were written in 1802/3, and some were published individually in the *Morning Post* at that time. It was in 1807 that they were first published together as a coherent group. The 'Liberty'

sonnets therefore exist within two temporal contexts, and I address this later in this chapter and in the next.

⁵ In chapter 4, I address Wordsworth's contemporary influences on his sonnet writing. As I go on to argue in this chapter, while Milton's influence was partly poetic, it was primarily political and theoretical.

⁶ Robin Jarvis (1991) provides a more comprehensive account of Milton's influence on Wordsworth.

⁷ Christensen 6-7 discusses the significance of this truce initiated by the Treaty of Amiens.

⁸ Roe (2003) summarises why Wordsworth was drawn to Godwin at this point. 'The attraction of *Political Justice* was its argument for social progress...through the power of reason alone' (198).

⁹ The main purpose of the trip was to see Annette and Caroline. This personal aspect of Wordsworth's drive to reclaim liberty will be considered in chapter 3.

¹⁰ The theme of England's decay, which this sonnet invokes, will be taken up in chapter 2.

¹¹ See Fink 1945.

¹² The period of Wordsworth's radical involvement in France is covered comprehensively by Roe (1988) 38-83.

¹³ Wordsworth's reading and admiration of Milton's republicanism would go on to influence the way in which he recalled his upbringing in the Lake District. In his *Guide to the Lakes* he talks of his native land as a 'perfect Republic of Shepherds and Agriculturists', a 'pure Commonwealth; the members of which existed in the midst of a powerful empire like an ideal society or an organized community' (*Guide to the Lakes* 74).

¹⁴ He accounts for the violence with the following reasoning: 'A time of revolution is not the season of true Liberty...in order to reign in peace [Liberty] must establish herself by violence' (*Prose* I, 33).

¹⁵ Cronin (110-127), however, provides a valuable reading of the 1802 sonnets. He outlines Wordsworth's portrayal of England at war, and draws on the poet's republicanism.

¹⁶ It is interesting to note that while Milton moved, from 1649 to 1660, from a 'conservative' republicanism to a thorough rejection of all single person rule, Wordsworth, between 1793 and 1802, moves in the opposite direction: tempering his early militant republicanism with an increasingly moderate approach. Milton's extreme stance in 1660 may be interpreted as a last gasp attempt to defend republicanism as the Restoration approached, while Wordsworth's development may be seen as symptomatic of his gradual decline in radicalism, owing to at first, his political disillusionment, and later, his new domestic sphere in Grasmere.

¹⁷ While the sentiment of Erdman's remark certainly stands, Simon Bainbridge (223-4) notes that 'his interpretation is littered with historical errors'.

¹⁸ These are 'Calais, August, 1802', 'I griev'd for Buonaparte', 'Calais, August 15th, 1802', 'To Toussaint L'Ouverture', 'We had a fellow-Passenger', 'It is not to be thought of...' and 'When I have borne in memory'. See Liu 430-6.

¹⁹ This is something Wordsworth would have desired from his readers. His reputation as an inveterate organiser of his poems' published ordering and layout is well established. See Liu 431 (and n. 84) and his chapter 9.

²⁰ See Fink (1945) 28-51 for an extensive study of Venice's political structure.

²¹ Hill (1979) offers an important discussion of the sonnet and formulates a persuasive case for the date of composition being January 1807, and not 1802: the poem seems to have been a late addition to the 'Liberty' series.

Chapter 2 The 1807 ‘Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty’ and the turn inwards

When Wordsworth’s political sonnets of 1802 and 1803 were brought together to create the ‘Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty’ in *Poems, in Two Volumes*, they began functioning as a unified group. They were no longer individual reflections, but instead, they collectively assumed a clear shape and structure, determined by Wordsworth’s editorial principles. They were now governed by a narrative: one that documents the physical and mental journey Wordsworth undertook in 1802. The historical context of the ‘Liberty’ sonnets in 1807 is different from that of the sonnets’ date of composition. Napoleon is now Emperor of the French, has won a host of decisive battles on the continent, and as such, poses a genuine threat to the English people. In these poems, ‘Wordsworth offers the war against Napoleon as a public event that will force his nation to discover once again the private virtues on which its greatness was founded’ (Cronin 126). I argue in this chapter that we should read the series as a collection of political poems that sees Wordsworth moving away from political activism. The threat of Napoleon in 1807 makes this manoeuvre even more necessary.

The narrative progression of the sonnets indicates that morals and virtuous living – the agents Wordsworth sees as necessary for engendering and preserving liberty – can only be achieved and sustained by turning away from France, where the very notion of liberty has been corrupted by a combination of the Revolution’s failure and Napoleonic conquest. While Wordsworth stresses that individuals are responsible for the cultivation of their own moral welfare, he also suggests that France is no longer able to provide a rich soil for this growth. It is only by returning

to, and embracing England, that Wordsworth can reclaim liberty. Yet this is only the first stage, for he ultimately turns to the private life of domestic virtue as the site where liberty may genuinely be able to flourish. As Richard Cronin argues, the shape of *Poems, in Two Volumes* curves outward ‘to embrace the public and political only to turn back in the second volume towards the individual life’, largely, I argue, because of the shift precipitated by the two series of sonnets at the end of volume I. This is done, Cronin continues, because of ‘Wordsworth’s sense that the language of politics is only ever a symbolic language, whose meaning is sustained by its reference to the language of private reflection’ (119).

Nicholas Roe has argued that although Wordsworth had been an ardent supporter of the Revolution, and had ‘welcomed events in France’, he also ‘retained a belief that England was still the true home of liberty’ (1988, 23). He suggests that Wordsworth was always committed to English accounts of native liberty, but I would add that it is only in 1802, when these sonnets are written, that this commitment is properly articulated and separated out from his French sympathies. This is clear from the sixteenth ‘Liberty’ sonnet, where Wordsworth proudly proclaims:

We must be free or die, who speak the tongue
That Shakespeare spake; the faith and morals hold
Which Milton held. In every thing we are sprung
Of Earth’s first blood, have titles manifold.
(*P2V* 166-7; 11-14)

Since the sonnets are largely chronological, the 1802 trip to France and the return to England that they document serve as an analogue to his mental shift between the two countries.¹ The series captures its writer as he is on the cusp of a great political

change. Sonnet 3, where Wordsworth remembers his 1790 journey through France with Robert Jones, marks the symbolic moment of temporal overlapping. The inevitable reimagining of himself as an idealistic twenty year old reaffirms the reality that his present-day self is very different: ‘behind the poet’s description of the radically altered external scene is the fact of the poet’s own internal alteration’ (Behrendt 650). Wordsworth’s disillusionment with the Revolution certainly emerged before this, at some point during the 1790s, but it was arguably seeing France again for the first time in a decade that properly opened his eyes to the changed man that he had become. The ‘Liberty’ sonnets *are* politically engaged poems in that they have political matters and the fates of nations as their subject, but that initial engagement becomes Wordsworth’s opportunity to *disengage*. His relationship with France is invoked and then he portrays its ultimate disintegration.² Joseph Phelan goes as far as arguing that ‘the sonnets are the crucible in which the “Victorian” Wordsworth is formed’. It is in these sonnets, so he argues, that the origin of Wordsworth’s ‘gradual but inexorable transition from youthful radicalism to moralistic conservatism’ (17) is located. I agree to an extent, in that it is certainly in these sonnets that a crucial moment of political change – a move away from radical involvement and towards domestic virtue – is crystallised, but the pejorative ‘moralistic conservatism’ is too disparaging. I propose instead to view this shift as a positive manoeuvre: a refinement of his conservative republicanism, so as to embrace a life of productive and liberating domestic retreat.

In thinking of the ‘Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty’ sonnets as a coherent, chronological group with a discernible structure, it is worth remembering that Wordsworth himself saw them in this way. In the well-known letter to Lady Beaumont, written soon after the publication of *Poems, in Two Volumes*, he responds

to the recent critical reviews by reflecting on the integrity and harmony of the sonnets:

...those to Liberty, at least, have a connection with, or a bearing upon, each other, and therefore, if individually they want weight, perhaps, as a Body, they may not be so deficient...I would boldly say at once, that these Sonnets, while they fix the attention upon some important sentiment separately considered, do at the same time collectively make a Poem on the subject of civil Liberty and national independence, which, either for simplicity of style or grandeur of moral sentiment, is, alas! likely to have few parallels in the Poetry of the present day.

(*Letters: Middle Years I*; 147)

It is interesting to note that Wordsworth sees this group of sonnets much like he saw the scope of his entire oeuvre. Short, individual works can stand independently, but they also function together as the various 'little cells, oratories, and sepulchral recesses' of the 'gothic church' (*Prose III*; 6): that is, the entire poetic oeuvre, or in this case, the 'Poem on the subject of civil Liberty'. Wordsworth's observations here may be read in another way, for he also means that these 26 sonnets collectively create *one* poem with a distinct rhetorical objective. Taking the idea further, we could argue that Wordsworth's achievement with this series was not simply the creation of a single, 26 stanza poem, but in fact, a single 'sonnet' with a clearly-defined three part structure. The turn from France, the embracement of England, and the critique of England's decaying society work together as the beginning, middle and end of the series, or 'the three propositions of a syllogism' that Wordsworth sees as the inherent structure of the legitimate sonnet (*Letters: Late Years II*; 604). Yet, as his comments in the letter to Alexander Dyce go on to say, he does not look at the sonnet as a 'piece of architecture making a whole out of three parts', but instead as

‘an orbicular body – a sphere or a dew-drop’ (605). His inclination is to see the sonnet as a unified structure that flows seamlessly and builds towards a fuller final third, where the main thrust of the argument resides. This is what happens in the ‘Liberty’ series, for while the sonnets are unified by their commitment to expounding upon the changing site of true liberty, it is the sonnets of the final third – those critical of England’s advancing debasement – that occupy the most space, and resonate the fullest. Where, though, do the final four sonnets of the series, which begin with the rousing ‘To the Men of Kent’, fit in to this shape? Here, Wordsworth takes on a whole new register: the poems are militaristic and overtly nationalistic and seem at odds with what has come before, where the poet bemoans the growing degeneracy of his country, and enacts a corrective measure by turning to the private life. I would argue, however, that the sonnets are not really out of place and instead close the series by developing Wordsworth’s understanding of exactly what is at stake when he turns from the public world of politics. On one hand, we might suggest that the jingoistic tone – ‘Shout, for a mighty Victory is won! / On British ground the Invaders are laid low’ (*P2V* 173; 1-2) – is there to counter the moral malaise of the nation: militaristic might as an attempt to reassert national identity. I would argue, however, that something more interesting is happening in the final sonnets. It is as if Wordsworth decides to close the series with these sonnets to remind both himself and his readers that the move from his earlier radical republicanism to his now conservative republicanism is not straightforward and nor is it able to avoid the threat of violence. The opportunity to cultivate the private life of domestic virtue is only possible if it is defended by warfare. The poet who had once justified violence in the Revolution realises that he can never fully move away from it.

While there may be a nationalistic strain to this series of sonnets, with Wordsworth declaring that England is the true, historic site of liberty³, it is at all times a troubled patriotism, tainted by the reality of what his country was becoming. As Bate pointedly remarks, there is 'no knee-jerk jingoism' (1994, 10) in this triumphant return to England from France. Indeed, other than the 'one hour's perfect bliss' in treading 'the grass / Of England once again' at Dover, there is no genuine jubilation in these poems (*P2V* 162-3; 12-13). His patriotic sentiments are fraught because he could not help but see contemporary England as analogous to post-Revolutionary France. Through revolutionary struggle, the French had earned for themselves a genuine opportunity to pursue and sustain a free society, but violence and later Napoleonic tyranny meant that the ideals of 'liberty, equality and fraternity' were squandered. England, for Wordsworth, had a deep-rooted claim to liberty, one that shaped its national identity⁴, but this too was gradually being eroded by an increasingly greedy and money-driven society. For Judith Page, the conflict that these poems address is close to home: 'not only does France pose a threat to England, but England poses a threat to itself' (1988, 195). England has become 'a fen / Of stagnant waters' because its people and its noble institutions have 'forfeited their ancient English dower / Of inward happiness' (*P2V* 165; 2-3. 5-6). In this land of 'getting and spending', where humane spiritual values and 'powers' that preserve moral welfare are laid waste, then 'little we see in nature that is ours' (*P2V* 150; 2, 3). The organic and domestic bonds that once brought people together and tied individuals to their natural surroundings have been exchanged for the 'idolatry' (*P2V* 164-5; 10) of financial and commercial bonds: an economy of love and community has been supplanted by a degrading economy of consumerism and materialism. The issue is taken up most fully in sonnet 13, 'Written in London, September, 1802:

The wealthiest man among us is the best:
 No grandeur now in nature or in book
 Delights us...
 Plain living and high thinking are no more:
 The homely beauty of the good old cause
 Is gone; our peace, our fearful innocence,
 And pure religion breathing household laws.
 (P2V 164-5; 7-9, 11-14)

We hear in these lines Wordsworth preparing the way for his invocation of the 'Great Men' of puritan republicanism which features two sonnets later in the series. They were the men who exemplified the 'good old cause' and defined the Wordsworthian ideal of 'plain living and high thinking' that was now, in 1802, and to an even greater degree in 1807, lacking in English society. As Mary Moorman points out, 'the English Puritans were more than political theorists. The Puritan ideal of life, austere and simple, had a natural attraction for Wordsworth' (Moorman *Early Years* 570). This is what Wordsworth now saw as the exemplary characteristic of his republican forebears: not their support of regicide (or tyrannicide) which had influenced him a decade earlier. The 'Liberty' sonnets begin the cultivation of that austere and simple life.

There is the suggestion that the materialism of society has become a new religion. 'Life is only drest / For shew', and those who are not seen flaunting themselves are 'unblest' (P2V 164-5; 3-4, 6). It has replaced the 'pure religion' that is nurtured within the domestic realm, and as such, England is shown to be undergoing a spiritual loss. Yet there is something even more serious at stake here: the loss of freedom. With sonnet 19, Wordsworth returns to the lexicon of slavery

and imprisonment. The vanity and selfishness which Wordsworth sees as endemic in contemporary England have deprived the nation of its historic claim to liberty:

There is a bondage which is worse to bear
 Than his who breathes, by roof, and floor, and wall,
 Pent in, a Tyrant's solitary Thrall:
 'Tis his who walks about in the open air,
 One of a Nation who, henceforth, must wear
 Their fetters in their Souls.

(P2V 168-9; 1-6)

Wordsworth's claim that this group of sonnets constitutes one single poem is supported through an acknowledgement of the various verbal and imagistic echoes, found throughout the series, that make semantic links between the sonnets.⁵ Here, the pent-in solitary refers us back to Toussaint L'Ouverture in sonnet 8, the Haitian slave who has fallen under the thrall of the 'tyrant' Napoleon. While he may be 'the most unhappy Man of Men' (P2V 160-1; 1), his imprisonment is shown to be subordinate to the bondage which can befall a nation. Also, the 'souls' of line 6 despondently recalls Wordsworth's claim, eight sonnets earlier in 'September, 1802', that 'by the Soul / Only the Nations shall be great and free' (P2V 163; 13-14). Freedom is governed by the spiritual domain within every individual, and yet if the people of England have forfeited their spirituality, and wear 'their fetters in the Souls', then hope for the future is lost.

As the series progresses, the focus moves from tyrannical governance to greed and vanity as the factors that lead to a loss of liberty. The 'infatuation, profligacy and extravagance' is now with *ordinary* men, not necessarily those in power. The note of despair in these sonnets is necessary to ensure that the rectifying measures Wordsworth introduces are effective. These are sonnets *dedicated* to

liberty because their aim is to show how best to nurture strong, morally upright values through sobriety, humility and honest goodness. These values are brought into focus through studies of two representative men, Napoleon and Milton.⁶ By being published in 1807, the 1802 sonnet 'I griev'd for Buonaparte' takes on a new resonance, and Wordsworth is intending for it to be read in the context of Napoleon I's (not merely Bonaparte's) claim to imperial sovereignty. The sonnet strikes a tone of pity, and so is removed from the savage attack on his tyrannical sway which characterises other sonnets on him. It is fourth chronologically, and so precedes those that critique France's ignoble imperialism. As such, it offers a justification of sorts for Napoleon's tyranny, but despite its note of pity, it is no less vehement in its aim to instruct and upbraid its addressee. The reason for Napoleon's autocratic severity, so Wordsworth's argument goes, is his deficient training as a leader, and significantly, as a man. Educated solely for militaristic ends, he was denied the grounding influence of sober, domestic virtues represented by books, the freedom to engage in the life of a community through leisurely discourse, and the image of the mother surrounded by children. As such, he was 'incapable of being anything other than what he "now is"' (Bainbridge 73). To use the principal political dichotomy of the 1790s, Napoleon was bred not in a Burkean manner, but in the Paineite mould, in that upheaval and wholesale political change are the chief goals. The virtues that Wordsworth extols in this sonnet, and that Napoleon lacks, provide 'the stalk / True Power doth grow on' (*P2V* 157-8; 14). The organic metaphor here is important, for although the goodness inherent in natural tropes informs much of Wordsworth's mature poetry, the steadfast, living, constant stalk here, gives an insight into Wordsworth's political thinking. As Phelan suggests, this kind of evolving organicism as a means of undermining revolutionary rhetoric was 'one of Burke's

most successful strategies in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (25-6), and indeed, this stalk of life, the source of 'True Power', may be equated with Burke's 'contract' between 'those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born' (*Reflections* 96).⁷ This is the natural, unbreakable bond that unites people and forms a society, which, Wordsworth argues, Napoleon is unable to enter into. Napoleon instead inspires a reverence that is 'sown in haste' and springs up with a 'transient shower' (*P2V* 157-8; 2, 10-11). The suddenness of Napoleon's rise and conquests have been his major moral failing, for there has not been time for his principles to take root and find a nurturing soil.

John Rieder sees these sonnets as a return to 'the kind of public utterance [Wordsworth] had projected for the *Letter to Llandaff* and *The Philanthropist*' except that his 'republicanism in 1802 has lost its earlier Paineite ring', and instead 'falls back on the older and safer rhetoric of civic humanism' (52). I agree with this insofar as the shift from radical politics to a concern with the inherent worth of ordinary individuals is key, but the implication in Rieder's terminology is that this movement is a retroactive one. The furious energy of the *Letter* may be gone, and perhaps Wordsworth's rhetoric is 'safer', but can we not see this shift as a *progression*, as a step forward, rather than a fall back, towards a more hopeful and positive future where inner virtue and humble service can overcome the violence and disillusionment in France? This is, I argue, how Wordsworth interpreted his 'counterrevolutionary turn'.⁸ For he uses Milton, the other representative man of the series, to stand for everything that Napoleon is not. He embodies Rieder's 'civic humanism' and is invoked – symbolically at the very centre of the series chronologically – as 'the presiding genius of English republican *virtue* and *freedom*' (Bate 1994, 13, my emphasis). The significance of Milton, as Bate alludes to, is his

importance to Wordsworth on *both* sides of his (Wordsworth's) political shift. At the time of the *Letter*, it was Milton the political pamphleteer, and supporter of the regicide that inspired Wordsworth; now in 1802, it is Milton the virtuous *man* who is praised in the sonnets, a change Behrendt sees as a deliberate 'suppressing or transforming of Milton's overtly political self that reflects Wordsworth's response to his own personal and public trauma in 1802' (644).⁹ To return to Bate, where it was once political freedom that engendered personal virtues, it is now personal virtues that engender personal freedoms, and Milton is the man to inspire this.

Milton is celebrated as a great republican among other 'Great Men' in the fifteenth sonnet, but it is in the preceding sonnet, 'London, 1802', that his personal virtues are addressed. Wordsworth's innovative move in these sonnets is to make republican virtue personal, and it is this that brings about a stable and just polity:

Thy soul was like a Star and dwelt apart:
 Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea;
 Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
 So didst thou travel on life's common way,
 In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
 The lowliest duties on itself did lay.
 (P2V 165; 9-14)

Milton is presented as the ideal exemplar for those lost English souls, who in their unthinking, publicly-conducted lives of 'getting and spending' are squandering their birthright to freedom. Wordsworth appeals to him to 'save' this England of 'selfish men' (6), and implores him to 'raise us up' and 'give us manners, virtue, freedom, power' (7, 8). Yet this rejuvenating spirit is at all times carried through with an attendant humility, for while Milton may inspire greatness and reach sublime heights, he does this while travelling 'on life's *common way*', dedicated to the

'lowliest duties'.¹⁰ Behrendt points out that Milton's 'cheerful godliness' was a 'commonplace from eighteenth-century biographies' (658). Wordsworth seizes this popular myth of Milton's character, stressing that his and his fellow Puritans' 'magnanimous meekness' (*P2V* 166; 9) is not only the most admirable characteristic, but also, 'the essential strength of a nation' (Johnson 51). By emphasising Milton's humbleness, Wordsworth is able to portray his precursor as an ordinary, everyday citizen whose entire life is committed to fostering the domestic, communal bonds that unite and ennoble society. He represents the ideal plain-living English character (as distinct from the debased French) who has been lost from English society, but who can, so Wordsworth believes, be rediscovered. If Wordsworth's intent in this series is to 'reclaim' liberty from the French (Bate 1994, 6) then Milton is the man to do it.

It is fitting that the sonnet addressed to Milton is one of Wordsworth's most quintessentially Miltonic sonnets in terms of its theme and overall mood. It is self-consciously conceived in the same spirit as Milton's poems, and reads like a tribute to him, not only as a great moral figure, but as an influence. The rousing opening line of Wordsworth's sonnet – 'Milton! thou should'st be living at this hour' (*P2V* 165; 1) – recalls a number of Milton's own and the purpose and whole mood of the poem has much in common with Milton's address to Lord General Fairfax:

Fairfax, whose name in arms through Europe rings,
 Filling each mouth with envy or with praise,
 And all her jealous monarchs with amaze,
 And rumours loud that daunt remotest kings,
 Thy firm unshaken virtue ever brings
 Victory home...

(*Complete English Poems* 102; 1-6)

This is the sonnet being used as 'a trumpet', with which to blow 'Soul-animating strains', as Wordsworth later said of Milton's legacy in 'Scorn not the Sonnet' from 1827 (*PW* 20-21; 13, 14). The opening invocation focuses the reader immediately: this is a direct, serious poem with an explicit point to make, rather than an idea to explore, as the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' do. While Milton's prosody is adopted by Wordsworth in the 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty', it is Milton's urgency, grandeur, and sense of public duty that most informs this series. Wordsworth follows Milton in his celebration of a public figure, but a vital aspect of this Miltonic inheritance is that it is the strong *character* and fortitude of the figure that is centralised. Fairfax's 'firm unshaken virtue' is echoed by Wordsworth who calls upon Milton to restore the lost virtue of the English people. Neither sonnet is a straightforward poetic gesture of respect, nor a conventional panegyric sealed within a highly crafted formal frame: both poems reach *outside* of poetry, and this is why Wordsworth felt he needed to turn to the Miltonic sonnet for his articulation of liberty in this series. Both sonnets come into existence because something serious on the public stage is at stake. The figures of Milton and Fairfax in the two sonnets are there not only to be celebrated, but because the poet in each case relies upon them. This is what makes Wordsworth's Miltonic sonnets in the 'Liberty' series active, publicly-engaged poems, which are far removed from Coleridge's idea of the form as a 'small poem, in which some lonely feeling is developed' (qtd. in Curran 36). The 'Liberty' sonnets, like Milton's, are written so as to be part of the public scene that they document. At the same time, they exhibit a move away from that public scene, as the appeal to Milton's *personal* character makes clear.

Wordsworth depends upon Milton in 'London, 1802', just as Milton depends upon Fairfax, but is this a weakening manoeuvre for Wordsworth? Milton's sonnets

of public address call upon Cromwell and Skinner alongside Fairfax: the poet's contemporaries. Yet by appealing to Milton, Wordsworth invokes the past to animate and revitalise the present. Unlike Milton, he sees no glory in his own day and needs steadier, more resolute men of a previous age. However, I suggest reading this appeal to the past as Wordsworth demarcating the character of the 'representative man' so that he can draw attention to his present-day equivalent, namely, Wordsworth himself.

When Wordsworth implores Milton to 'return to us again' (7), the fanciful notion of a resurrected Milton is given credence by the realisation that such a rebirth will be enacted symbolically through Wordsworth. The whole project of resurrecting the Miltonic sonnet, and turning it towards public, political matters, is part of Wordsworth's move to be seen as a surrogate Milton figure. The next stage is to appropriate Milton's *character*, for the 'Liberty' series goes beyond simply writing a particular mode of sonnet. It is about writing with the spirit of Milton's personality running through him: his moral sternness and cheerful goodness. Wordsworth's concept of the sonnet-space – and this relates to his whole career as sonneteer – is based on majesty and sublimity proceeding from lowliness and humility, and much of this is derived from his idea of Milton's character.¹¹

Wordsworth's desire to be the 'representative man' for a new age goes back to his days as a radical in the 1790s when he perceived 'the guidance of the "single person", the "sage", as the best hope for mankind' (Roe 1988, 79-80).¹² I argue it has a significant bearing, albeit in a reconfigured state, on the Wordsworth of the 'Liberty' sonnets. He had 'an almost Miltonic sense that he was born for great things' (Fink 1948, 121), and it is made clear throughout the French books of *The Prelude* that he wanted to take an active role in the Revolution. The 'virtue of one

paramount mind' (*P*; X, 179) was needed, to 'lead men from tyranny to liberty' (Fink 1948, 121). This single institutor was different from the figure of the tyrannical autarch such as the monarch, or later Napoleon, and has its origins in the classical republican thinking that first inspired Wordsworth as a radical. Quentin Skinner, drawing on the writings of seventeenth-century Commonwealth men, outlines the character of this independent sage. He is 'plain and plain-hearted; he is upright and full of integrity; above all he is a man of true manliness, of dependable valour and fortitude' (1998, 95). This is precisely what Wordsworth saw in Milton, and by extension, himself. His hopes for an active role in France may have been unfulfilled, but he could still play the great institutor in the England of 1802 and 1807: not as a radical agitator, but as a moral *teacher*. His role now, as he saw it, was to guide and instruct his countrymen, and to serve as an example to the people.

Wordsworth's move from seeing liberty as dependent upon governmental structure to seeing it as nurtured within the individual is still a political manoeuvre, in that he is still articulating a program for social improvement. In order to be free, you had to lead a moral life, and this would only be achieved by rejecting the debasing effects of the increasingly consumerist society. This in turn was only possible through humility and sobriety: the 'plain living and high thinking' of 'Written in London, September, 1802'.¹³ The final stage of this agenda was the need for a withdrawal into the nurturing spirit of the private life – rural and domestic retreat. It is significant that in 'London, 1802', one of the admirable attributes that Wordsworth applies to Milton is that he lived and worked away from the madding crowd. He does not celebrate the pamphleteer of bustling London, but the 'domestic bard' (Behrendt 659) who retired from public life. 'Thy soul was like a Star and dwelt apart' (*P2V* 165; 9) he says, a powerful image of might and illumination, but

also immense distance. This point of retreat is the platform from which to launch a vision of social reform. Thirteen years later, Shelley praised Wordsworth for being 'as a lone star...Above the blind and battling multitude' ('To Wordsworth' *Major Works* 90-1; 7, 10); a moment of celebration before the censure for having 'deserting these' and leaving 'me to grieve' (13). Ironically, Shelley castigates Wordsworth for his rejection of his radical ideals and the desertion of his position as a 'lone star', when it is actually this lone star and its dwelling apart that enables Wordsworth to 'seize [Milton] for the conservative cause' (Behrendt 659). Sarah Zimmerman has rightly argued that the 'impulse to withdraw from social arenas...is manifested throughout his career' (80), since the sonnet form itself is a kind of retreat. Yet this withdrawal did not prevent, but rather *fostered* literary and cultural engagement.¹⁴

Wordsworth is able to 'teach' his readership and play an active role from his place of domestic retirement, because he 'distinguishes the "Public" from his ideal readership, the "People"' (Zimmerman 77). He believed that public life, and the people who inhabit it, were far removed from the subjects and purpose of his poetry. In an 1807 letter to Lady Beaumont, he speaks of the:

pure absolute honest ignorance, in which all worldlings of every rank situation must be enveloped, with respect to the thoughts, feelings, and images, on which the life of my Poems depends. The things which I have taken, whether from within or without, - what have they to do with routs, dinners, morning calls, hurry from door to door, from street to street, on foot or in Carriage; with Mr. Pitt or Mr. Fox...
(*Letter Middle Years I*; 145)

Wordsworth writes for the People, not the Public. He imagines the 'distant prospect of an ideal audience' (Zimmerman 77) for his poems, and believes his ability to teach people to 'see, to think and feel' will be 'their destiny' (*Letters* 145).¹⁵

When these sonnets were first being published in the *Morning Post*, soon after their composition, Wordsworth could genuinely feel that he was speaking to, and ennobling an audience. They were of their historical and political moment, and provided a particular view on the days' events *as they were being lived*. By 1807, and the letter to Lady Beaumont where he responds to the poor reviews of *Poems, in Two Volumes*, he had to settle for his 'fit audience ...though few'. In the letter he laments that 'there neither is, nor can be, any genuine enjoyment of Poetry among nineteen out of twenty of those persons who live, or wish to live, in the broad light of the world' (146), although of course, speaking even just to this audience of the few was the whole point.¹⁶

The intent of the 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty' was to reclaim liberty for a newly virtuous English People of the near future, from a tyrannical France of the past. Wordsworth snatched the term from the corrupted triumvirate of the Revolution's rallying-cry, and in so doing, 'freed' it from strictly political matters. In Book 13 of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth describes what he means by this liberty which is articulated in the 'Liberty' sonnets:

Hence chearfulness in every act of life;
 Hence truth in moral judgements and delight
 That fails not, in the external universe.
 Oh! who is he that hath his whole life long
 Preserved, enlarged this freedom in himself?
 For this alone is genuine Liberty.

(*P*; XIII, 117-122)

This is a freedom to be enlarged *in the self*. The 'cheerfulness' recalls Milton's 'cheerful godliness', a characteristic carried throughout every act of life's common way.

Functioning concurrently with this reclamation of liberty in the sonnets is a growing patriotism and conservatism. Wordsworth has to acknowledge and work through his nation's moral failings in order to rediscover a place for himself in his homeland after mentally and politically 'leaving' France. The 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty' are therefore an ideal site in which to locate Wordsworth's 'counterrevolutionary turn'. This move should be seen as a realignment of his Miltonic inheritance. The sonnets crystallise a clear moment of moving between two countries and two quite different ideologies, and this is continued throughout the sonnet corpus. The sharply marked contours of the geographical locales gives this series a resonance the like of which cannot be found anywhere else in his career. The Channel, introduced implicitly in the first sonnet of the series, acts as the fulcrum upon which the rest of the sonnets balance. If we read this sequence of poems in this way, it is possible to interpret Wordsworth's growing conservatism not as an outright rejection of his youthful radical views, but as a refinement of them. He is still drawing from the classical republican thinking which fed his revolutionary fervour, but deriving new meaning from it, turning it towards a new agenda. The Puritan ideal of humble living and rural retirement is not fulfilled in the 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty': the threat of invasion preoccupies the closing reflections. 'Plain living and high thinking' were realised in the extended 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' – the sonnet project that would occupy Wordsworth's later life.

¹ Sonnet I establishes the idea that Wordsworth is caught between two countries, II to IX are the French sonnets that critique Bonaparte's imperial ambitions and the nation's moral bankruptcy, X and XI mark the happy return to England, XII to XXII focus on England and see Wordsworth despair for his country, leading to the appeal to Milton and his fellow 'Great Men', and XXIII to XXVI, written in 1803 and 1806, close the series and are more militaristic, anticipating French invasion.

² There is an irony at the heart of this shift in national allegiance, for it is only by being in France in 1802 that 'the healing of Wordsworth's bond with England' is precipitated' (Bate 1994, 5). The 'patriot' of Revolutionary France who gave his heart to the people becomes a patriot of his homeland once again, and the 'noisier world' of radical politics is replaced by the 'smoke that curls, that sound /

Of Bells' and the 'white-sleev'd shirts...playing by the score' of England (*P*; IX, 125, 126; *P2V* 162-3; 2-3, 4). Paineite upheaval gives way to Burkean organicism.

³ 'Thought of a Briton on the Subjugation of Switzerland' is similar to sonnet 16, quoted earlier. 'Two Voices are there; one is of the Sea, / One of the Mountains', the 'chosen Music' of liberty. Napoleon's campaigns have silenced the Swiss voice of the mountain, and so it is the job of liberty to 'cleave to that which still is left': the voice of England, defined by her naval supremacy (*P2V* 164; 1-2, 4, 10).

⁴ In 1809's *Convention of Cintra*, Wordsworth says that England, 'by the help of the surrounding ocean and its own virtues, had preserved to itself through ages its liberty, pure and inviolated by a foreign invader' (*Prose* I; 228). Of course, this view was not exclusive to Wordsworth. The myth of an inviolable England was a pertinent and timeless one. It was, however, much complicated by the Norman Invasion of 1066. Wordsworth counters this in sonnet 23, 'To the Men of Kent', where he prepares the county's men for invasion in 1802 by reminding them that they remained unconquered by William, centuries earlier. See Bate (1994) 11-13 for a fuller discussion.

⁵ Liu draws attention to some of these links 631-2.

⁶ Behrendt has called them 'particular "types" against whom Wordsworth appears to measure himself (651).

⁷ In *The Convention of Cintra*, Wordsworth echoes these words: 'There is a spiritual community binding together the living and the dead; the good, the brave, and the wise, of all ages' (*Prose* I; 339). Wordsworth's political shift in these sonnets – a move from radical republicanism to puritan or conservative republicanism, and a growing concern for civic humanism – may also be drawn along the Paine-Burke spectrum, and this is what James Chandler's important study does. We may argue that Wordsworth's early radicalism was an allegiance to Paineite models, and by the time of these sonnets, he becomes more concerned with the gradual, evolving processes of Burkean organicism. This opens up an entirely new political theoretical discourse. Wordsworth's respect for history, and the value he places on domesticity, show that the Burkean model perhaps overlaps here, but Burke's theory was rooted in a desire to preserve class hierarchies, something these sonnets do not engage with. James Chandler writes at length on Burke's lasting influence on Wordsworth's political thinking, and although it has some relevance here, I argue it is subordinate to the puritan republic model I set out in this chapter and the previous one.

⁸ I take the term, a common expression for Wordsworth's political shift, from the title of Rieder's book.

⁹ The 'personal trauma' is perhaps a reference to the poet's reunion with Annette, which I address in the next chapter.

¹⁰ The concept of greatness deriving from humble origins has a substantial bearing on the way in which Wordsworth sees the sonnet form itself. This will be explored in chapter 5.

¹¹ Jennifer Wagner sees Wordsworth's 'taking 'fire' as both 'the passing on of [Milton's] poetic power and the usurpation of it' (35). This view accords with my reading of Milton in the previous chapter.

¹² Bainbridge suggests that in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth contrasts 'what might have been' had he pursued the role of the single person, 'and the debasing of this role by Robespierre and Napoleon' (85).

¹³ Wordsworth's 'sobriety' was literal too. In the 1815 Preface to *Poems*, he makes a point of noting that he is a 'water-drinker' (*Prose* III; 38).

¹⁴ See chapter 5 for a discussion of Wordsworth's retreat into domestic life, and his articulation of work and liberty proceeding from spatial restriction.

¹⁵ See chapter 4 for more on this passage from the letter.

¹⁶ Newlyn (91-99) discusses Wordsworth's uneasy relationship with his readership at the time of *Poems*, in *Two Volumes*, and his 'abiding concern...with finding a worthy audience' (95).

Chapter 3

Annette, Caroline and Wordsworth's Personal Liberty

Wordsworth's critics and biographers have long felt a keen sense of frustration that the poet and his sister left little written record of their summer 1802 visit to Calais. This trip saw Wordsworth's first meeting with Annette Vallon in a decade, and his first *ever* meeting with his daughter Caroline, yet his poetry and Dorothy's journal entries from the time seem to be curiously unaware of the momentous nature of this reunion. Dorothy does talk of walks along the beach and Caroline's 'delighted' response to the 'glowworm light' (*Journals* 125) of the boats on the water, but there is no discussion of Annette's appearance, how the reunited couple interacted, or how any of the party was feeling about events. Wordsworth's poetic output from this August consisted solely of sonnets: almost all of them were on public and political matters.¹ For Stephen Gill, 'a series of sonnets on political themes is no substitute for more intimate revelation' (Gill 1989, 208). With only the barest of details about the trip available, and a small body of poetry – seemingly removed from immediate personal events – with which to memorialise the visit, questions arise regarding Wordsworth's feelings and the importance to him of seeing Annette again. Did he feel nothing for her? Was the trip an inconvenience and only fulfilled for the sake of propriety? Or was the meeting too painful for Wordsworth, so much so that he consciously turned away from the realities before him, evading any emotional anguish by busying himself with political reflection? It is highly unlikely that Wordsworth no longer had feelings of some description towards Annette and his daughter, and Gill argues that the 'It is a beauteous Evening...' sonnet (to be considered later) and 'future relations with Annette', together suggest that 'generally the visit was a success' (1989, 208). However, the other two views

outlined above have been put forward by separate biographers. Juliet Barker points to a sense of coldness or even indifference about the whole visit when she writes that Wordsworth and Caroline 'met as strangers and they parted a month later, apparently without any burning desire to meet again...Having done his duty, William returned to England with evident relief' (Barker 213). Mary Moorman, on the other hand, focuses more on the poet's wilful disengagement, a skill well used throughout his life: 'he wrote not about Annette but about the public events which so deeply moved him. He was, as a poet, capable of a remarkable detachment from his immediate circumstances' (Moorman *Early Years* 565). Both views may contain an element of truth, but neither offers a sensitive interpretation of Wordsworth's motives or aims for the Calais visit.

I argue that there was no explicit poetic tribute to Annette, Caroline, or to the visit in general, because Wordsworth experienced a surfeit of feeling; the whole matter was so emotionally resonant that it became impossible to address directly. Furthermore, the turn to politics in his sonnets is not necessarily a turn away from Annette. With their overtly publicly-voiced narrative, the Calais sonnets may at first seem to be enacting a 'remarkable detachment' from personal feeling, but as I shall argue in this chapter, they instead do the very opposite. This is because Annette, and all that she represented to Wordsworth, became politicised in his mind. Throughout 1802, Wordsworth's sonnet writing was allowing him to face up to the consequences of what 'too much liberty' engendered. At first, this was played out in the political, national realm, but by August, Wordsworth would come to see that his relationship with Annette could be understood in the same way. I argue that Wordsworth was able to manage and articulate his larger concerns of liberty and national identity by seeing Annette and Caroline as inextricably bound up with them, and vice versa.

Furthermore, in an implicit, allusive way, the sonnets also exhibit Wordsworth's deep concern for the wellbeing of these two marginalised members of the poet's extended family.

Stephen Gill writes that 'one longs for more evidence on which to speculate about Wordsworth's feelings about Annette and their daughter, if only to counterbalance the records Wordsworth did leave' (1989, 208). Since more evidence, which could perhaps offer a richer, more complete understanding of events, will apparently always elude us, I will work with the evidence that does exist to see how much they can tell us about this notoriously mysterious episode. After all, whatever happened between Wordsworth, Annette and Caroline in Calais was a major moment in the poet's personal and creative life, and it deserves critical attention even if important details remain unknown. As Gill continues, a man 'as possessed as Wordsworth was by the past and by memory, who valued as he did the primary affections of our nature, and who was so moved by images of the permanent surviving against time's erosion, must have been deeply stirred. But we do not know' (1989, 208). We may not know, but this need not preclude further discussion of the Calais trip. A more fruitful avenue to pursue is that hinted at by Gill: Wordsworth *must* have been deeply stirred. By using this as a starting point, building on what we do know of Wordsworth's character, and supporting it with the poetic material that did appear during the visit, some interesting insights may be reached. Being mindful of both the undeniable importance of such a significant reunion, and Wordsworth's habitual depth of feeling, might it not be worthwhile to actually look for Annette and Caroline's presence in the very place that commentators have seen as the site of Wordsworth's evasion of these women: namely, the Calais tour sonnets? I therefore offer what follows in this chapter as a hypothesis: an interpretation of events based

upon limited poetic material, but also building on various critical work that has bearing on this episode.² It is also posited as a development of the discussion of the 'Liberty' sonnets from the first two chapters, and (with 'It is a beauteous Evening') a way into analysis of the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets'. Clearly, such an approach is necessarily speculative, but one that finds, I hope, some very plausible insights. We may never genuinely know how Wordsworth felt about seeing Annette and Caroline again, but I conjecture that the Calais sonnets of 1802 tell us more about the relationship than they at first seem to.

Firstly a few words about the events immediately preceding this trip may be useful. The early months of 1802 were a time of numerous crises in Wordsworth's life.³ Among other problems, he experienced exhaustion, headaches and many sleepless nights as a result of his inability to make any significant headway with *The Recluse* and Lord Lonsdale's debt remained unpaid, which provided a constant cause for concern for both Wordsworth and Dorothy. Yet meeting again with Annette – the woman he had loved and left in the space of seven months almost a decade earlier – was certainly the poet's greatest personal trial of 1802. The Peace of Amiens brought a cessation of hostilities between France and England from late March 1802 onwards, but preliminary negotiations between the two countries meant that communications were reopened as early as December 1801, and on the 21st of that month, a letter arrived from Annette, almost certainly Wordsworth's first contact from her in nine years.⁴ From this date until 5 July 1802, thirteen letters are recorded passing between the former lovers (Barker 208). This sudden burst of correspondence at essentially the first available opportunity since the couple last saw each other suggests that both parties were keen to re-establish contact with one another. It is important to be mindful of the extent of their feelings towards one

another in 1792. Whilst in France, there had been talk of marriage, although as Émile Legouis contends, it seems that Annette was the primary force behind these discussions: Wordsworth's 'inborn cautiousness' and 'native wariness' more than likely prevented an early union (Legouis 27). Yet this should not imply that Wordsworth wanted to forgo marriage altogether. After all, procrastination and lack of instinctive action were part of his disposition. The true nature of their relationship at this time is difficult to gauge, since virtually no documents or correspondence survive.⁵ It is known, however, that Wordsworth deviated from his initial plans in February of 1792 by following Annette to her family home in Blois: two months later she would be pregnant (Gill 1989, 57). There was no 'inborn cautiousness' here; this spontaneous decision must surely illustrate the extent of his feelings. Legouis is in no doubt as to the depth of Wordsworth's initial attraction to Annette. He says, 'his love for her was an exalted, blinding passion, in the presence of which all else vanished. The sight of Annette at her window, or even of Annette's window alone, was each day's supreme instant' (Legouis 14). What can be safely assumed is that parting from Annette and their unborn child was an intensely troubling experience for Wordsworth, who, it is to be remembered, only left France in 1792 because of financial necessity: 'it was against his will that he went back to his country' (Legouis 25). 'Reluctantly to England I returned / Compelled by nothing less than absolute want / Of funds for my support' he recalls in *The Prelude* of 1805 (P; X, 189-91).⁶ He was also, of course, leaving behind his days of active Revolutionary involvement, but the loaded 'reluctantly' arguably hides a profound grief at parting from his love. He knew that as the political situation worsened, it became less and less likely that he could return to France to be with Annette and their newborn daughter. He experienced loss, but perhaps more acutely, guilt at the separation and ensuing lack

of contact.⁷ As such, having to face up to Annette in 1802 did not mean hesitantly dealing with a youthful indiscretion better left forgotten; it meant actively revisiting painful memories, and tackling his guilt and confused feelings head on.

Matters were complicated by the fact that Wordsworth had recently become engaged to his long-time friend Mary Hutchinson, and they hoped to marry soon. This must have placed Wordsworth in a difficult situation, but it appears that on 22 March 1802, after much discussion with Dorothy, some semblance of a plan emerged, succinctly expressed in his sister's journal:

Mr Luff came in after dinner and brought us 2 letters from Sara H. and one from poor Annette...we resolved to see Annette, and that William should go to Mary (*Journals* 82).

Wordsworth visited Mary on his birthday, 7 April, to organise their wedding date and to tell her of the France trip. The convergence of these two items of discussion was unfortunate, but also, as we shall see, greatly significant. Mary's feelings about his decision to travel to France and spend time with an old lover and the mother of his illegitimate child are uncertain, but one can assume that she was not entirely pleased with the arrangement.⁸ Mary must have responded with considerable understanding though, for the trip went ahead, but Wordsworth would have been greatly unsettled at having to put this news to his future wife. With his concerns about *The Recluse* along with having to postpone marriage preparations, his firm decision to visit Annette is all the more striking. It demonstrates his strong sense of duty towards both her and Caroline, as well as his desire to reach some kind of agreement with her, whatever that may be. Seizing this opportunity, afforded him by the Peace, to face up to the sexual liberties of the past, Wordsworth would come to associate Annette with the liberty he was seeking on a national scale.

William and Dorothy arrived in Calais on 1 August and met Annette and Caroline that evening. They stayed until the 29th, which, as Stephen Gill has noted, is a 'long time to spend in lodgings in a drab seaside town', the implication being that there was a 'real commitment to re-establishing contact with Annette and to getting to know Caroline' (Gill 1989, 207). While the purpose of the visit may have been to settle affairs, the length of the stay would suggest that simply spending precious time with Annette and Caroline was just as important to Wordsworth as the more sober concerns of explaining his impending marriage, reaching financial agreements, and so on. As for the location, Calais may have seemed to be an odd choice. Kenneth Johnston wittily remarks that 'nobody stays in Calais in August, not even Calaisians if they can help it' (Johnston 1998, 783). As Gill suggests, Paris was not an option for this great reunion on account of Annette's Royalist leanings, but also Wordsworth's disgust at the crowds of Englishmen 'of prostrate mind' who were flocking to the capital in order to see Napoleon (Gill 1989, 207). Yet from another perspective, Calais was an entirely fitting site for the meeting, symbolically situated between the beating centre of Revolutionary France, and the coast of England: a kind of 'neutral ground' (Page 1988, 190) which would be significant in determining the direction taken by Wordsworth's poetry at this time. He was in France, but England was within sight, meaning he could hold them both in perfect balance. Positioned as he was, at the fulcrum of these two great powers, he was able to sway imaginatively between the two, and this is precisely what happens in the sonnets he wrote at the time. On one side was a nation he had once felt passionately for, whose cause had occupied his entire being, but now felt strangely alien to him. On the other was his homeland which he loved dearly, but he was concerned for its continued well-being in an age of political uncertainty. Located in Calais – in France 'but only just' (Gill

1989, 207) – his feelings for France and England could be ruminated upon simultaneously.

This decision, to project a public voice speaking for a nation, when a more personal, intimate tone would seem more appropriate for the private and localised nature of events, is of course curious. Alan Liu demarcates a sub-group of Calais sonnets in the ‘Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty’, and it is some of these poems that I consider in this chapter.⁹ These sonnets, written at a time when Annette was clearly at the forefront of Wordsworth’s thoughts, may not contain any *explicit* reference to her, but their relationship is there, channelled into a more public register. A similar instance of ‘concealing’ Annette would occur two years later in Book IX of *The Prelude*, which details Wordsworth’s residence in France. Their love story is sublimated into the decidedly un-Wordsworthian romance *Vaudracour and Julia*, which was published separately in 1820. This 380-line tale of young lovers torn apart by outside forces is now read as an obvious parallel of the Wordsworth / Annette affair.¹⁰ However, it was not originally interpreted as such, since Annette’s role in the poet’s life actually managed to stay hushed up until revealed in 1916 by George McLean Harper.¹¹ It leads us to question why Wordsworth should want to keep quiet about Annette by not addressing her directly in his poetry, while his initial love for her was, as we have seen, genuine. Certainly, he was all too aware of the scandalous nature of the relationship, and so would want to keep his former lover and illegitimate child hidden from critical circles in England. We might also add that he avoided writing poetry explicitly concerning Annette in 1802 out of consideration for his fiancée Mary, who of course was aware of the Frenchwoman, but would have been justifiably uncomfortable with verse dedicated to her.

Yet this fails to explain why Annette *does* still occupy a shadowy place in Wordsworth's poetry. She takes the principal female role in *Vaudracour and Julia*, and her allusive, metaphorical presence is felt in the 1802 sonnets: crucially, her existence is not eliminated altogether. By creating a half-state of existence for Annette, Wordsworth could maintain the integrity of accurately documenting his life, since she is still present, but at the same time she would remain a mystery to his reading public. Perhaps a more precise interpretation is that Wordsworth's relationship with Annette had problematised the life story he wanted to create for himself, since it represented youthful liberty passing over into libertinism. Although he certainly loved Annette, their romance had 'produced troublesome consequences for the poet desiring his personal freedom in 1802' (Page 1988, 193). As a way of dealing with it, therefore, he realised that rather than ignore Annette entirely, it would be more effective if his poetry acknowledged her, albeit in a reconfigured form. Wordsworth recasts Annette as France itself, and thus their story is placed within a wider political scheme. His guilt and sadness of the 1790s were replaced, after ten years of introspection, by a sober recognition of what 'too much liberty' had led to. The hopes for liberty, equality and fraternity that had been fostered in those early heady, idealistic days of the Revolution had failed because the principal proponents of the move to establish liberty through eliminating the existing system of government had overreached themselves. In abolishing an enslaving hierarchical rule, the revolutionaries took their new-found liberties too far, leading to disorder and licence. Similarly, Wordsworth's youthful love affair with Annette had indeed been 'very heaven', but with the conception and then birth of Caroline, those blissful freedoms ceased. This was of course accentuated by political forces beyond his control, but nevertheless, by allowing his liberties to exceed the limits of propriety,

the habitually staid Wordsworth could see that his amorous freedoms had become illegitimate. It may have been the war that kept him from visiting Annette, but it was his own excessive liberties that had led to not only a deserted mistress, but also, a deserted daughter in the first place. I believe that Wordsworth acknowledged this merging of the political and private realms, and realised that in order to preserve himself emotionally, he needed to distance himself from these painful Revolutionary and romantic French liberties. To do this, he had to embrace England and all things English, and this becomes the principal objective of the 1802 sonnets. While they outwardly document the end of his support for French liberty which had now given way to tyranny, and his return to the legitimate liberty of his native England, the sonnets are as much about his private manoeuvre from Annette to Mary.

‘Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty’ opens with ‘Composed by the Sea-side, near Calais, August, 1802’. Wordsworth stands on the Calais coast, looking out to England and the western star that hangs lovingly above the land. Lee Johnson has argued that the union of evening star and nation is described in ‘nuptial terms’, and he emphasises the star’s role as a metaphor for the soul of Wordsworth’s exemplar, Milton (49). In ‘London, 1802’, written shortly after his return to England, Wordsworth’s address to his spiritual mentor centralises the star: ‘Thy soul was like a Star and dwelt apart’ (*P2V*; 165, 9). Read in this way, the star imagery invites a purely Milton-centred interpretation of the opening sonnet, where the poet is presented as a majestic shining beacon, the ‘Splendor of the West’, preparing to ‘sink / On England’s bosom’ to save her from her growing degenerate state (*P2V*; 155, 1, 3-4). This then sets the public tone for the rest of the series. Yet something else is happening in this sonnet: the underlying presence of Wordsworth’s romantic relationships. Judith Page picks up on Johnson’s idea of the nuptial theme, but argues

that instead of describing the union of Milton and England, based on moral improvement, the poem is actually cast as a conventional love sonnet, with the star representing the 'bright poetic star' of Wordsworth himself. She suggests that 'England as motherland becomes a passive female body...awaiting the illumination of the male star' (Page 1988, 195, 196). The marital bond that unites Milton's spirit and the spirit of the nation is a symbolic one; Wordsworth, however, has a very real wedding impending. The epithalamic benedictions toward the end of the poem – 'Blessings be on you both! one hope, one lot, / One life, one glory!' (11-12) – seem far more suited to a real wedding than to a metaphorical one. The meaning of this poem, and indeed, that of the series as a whole, is dependent upon the realisation that England – with her comforting 'bosom', and dressed in the 'fresh beauty' of the star (4, 9) – is representative of not just a generic construct of the female, but more precisely, Mary. Wordsworth's wife-to-be lies patiently across the waters while he is able to offer only distant blessings and 'heartfelt sighs' (13) to their imagined union, situated as he is amongst those 'who do not love her' (14): a loaded phrase that accommodates both French hostility to England, and Annette's private grief at losing her beloved to another woman. The 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty' operate on two levels: as publicly-voiced political poetry, and as a disguised and highly personal set of parables about Wordsworth's private life.

The most compelling sublimated version of Annette is found in the last sonnet of the Calais trip (or the ninth of the 'Liberty' series) written as Wordsworth and Dorothy were travelling home, 'September 1st, 1802'. On their journey back to England, Wordsworth and Dorothy were joined by an exiled black woman banished from France by a Government decree that Wordsworth attacks in an 1827 head-note to the poem, calling it a 'capricious act of Tyranny' (*P2V*; 161-2). Yet it is the way

that the woman is described which is of note. She is 'Dejected, meek, yea pitiably tame', and 'silent, motionless in eyes and face' (5, 9). It is interesting that this is the first poem Wordsworth wrote after leaving Annette. It is as if his final, sorrowful vision of her is seen in the lifeless expression of the passenger. The poem is in many ways a reworking of a popular 1790s poetic trope, that of the pitiable French emigrant, as found in Charlotte Smith's *The Emigrants*, for example. Jonathan Bate has argued that the woman is in fact 'Wordsworth driven from France' (Bate 1994, 9), but it is far more likely that the downcast face of the passenger, 'silent as a woman fearing blame' (4) represents the transposed image of the recently 'abandoned' Annette.¹² Later revisions of the poem would place emphasis on the woman's vitality and resolve, with her eyes of 'tropic fire' and 'the lustre of her rich attire' (162n.), but the original, written with Annette's face still clear in his mind, depicts her as a 'poor Out-cast' (13), deprived of her spirit and independence. It is significant that Wordsworth's first sonnet upon leaving Calais is not concerned with his desire to reclaim liberty for England, but instead, portrays a rejected Annette-double. Wordsworth's turn from France to England was a necessary movement, but it did not mean that it was not an emotionally challenging one for him.

This is evident also in the one overtly personal sonnet written in Calais, 'It is a beauteous Evening, calm and free'.¹³ We find in this sonnet the Wordsworth who, in Gill's words, was 'deeply stirred'. It deals not with Annette, but with Caroline, and is a tender parting gesture to a daughter he barely knew:

It is a beauteous Evening, calm and free;
 The holy time is quiet as a Nun
 Breathless with adoration; the broad sun
 Is sinking down in its tranquillity;
 The gentleness of heaven is on the Sea:
 Listen! the mighty Being is awake

And doth with his eternal motion make
 A sound like thunder – everlastingly.
 Dear Child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here,
 If thou appear'st untouch'd by solemn thought,
 Thy nature is not therefore less divine:
 Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year;
 And worshipp'st at the Temple's inner shrine,
 God being with thee when we know it not.
 (P2V 150-1)

Wordsworth fulfilled his duties to Caroline (and carried out perhaps the main purpose of the trip) by organising a financial settlement for her, but the emotional weight of seeing his daughter for the first time is dealt with in a curious way in this poem. The figure of Caroline in this sonnet is not the mysterious 'shadow-figure' that Annette is in other sonnets, but I read her presence in a different way from other critics. Judith Page finds the final three lines of the poem problematic, and suggests that Wordsworth is vague and 'distancing' in his description because he 'evades his particular responsibilities to ... Caroline' by 'conveniently placing her in the hands of God – the reliable father figure he cannot be himself' (Page 1988, 198). The lines refer to a passage in Luke's Gospel, where the beggar Lazarus is 'carried by angels to Abraham's bosom' (Luke, 16.22), while the rich man is sent to hell.¹⁴ Abraham tells the tormented rich man, who in the context of the poem becomes Wordsworth himself, that 'between us and you there is a great gulf fixed' (Luke, 16.26) that cannot be crossed. The implication of this Biblical metaphor is that Caroline is indeed placed in the comforting and protective bosom of God, but not because Wordsworth coldly declines his responsibilities as a father: it is because of the very real 'great gulf' that is fixed between them, namely the English Channel. The poem's conclusion does not highlight Wordsworth's shortcomings as a guardian and provider. It in fact draws attention to his turmoil at having to live so far away from his daughter, in a condition to be identified with hell. This is no evasion of paternal

care, for Wordsworth ensures Caroline's protection, even if it is only conducted within the sonnet.

Page argues that Wordsworth is vague and distancing in his relations with Caroline in this sonnet because the girl, like Lucy, is turned into an abstraction.¹⁵ Caroline is given no voice of her own, since Wordsworth appropriates 'the authority of voice to himself' (199). She also argues that the invocation of 'Abraham's bosom' not only places Caroline in the hands of God, but also, symbolically kills her, since the Biblical metaphor actually relates to 'the place where the good go at the moment of death' (200). The implication of Page's argument is that Wordsworth essentially uses Caroline to legitimise his own experience, while she is symbolically sacrificed: 'no longer existing for her own delight, she becomes enshrined in the poem that addresses her' (200). Page sees Caroline as a 'difficult presence' for Wordsworth, and 'It is a beautiful Evening' 'releases him from responsibility' (201). I argue responsibility *is* passed from Wordsworth to God, but not simply because Wordsworth seeks to liberate himself from Caroline, turning her into a 'disembodied spirit' (201), as Page asserts. He passes her over to God because his domestic condition – living hundreds of miles from her – demands it. She is placed in 'Abraham's bosom' (which can still function metaphorically as a site of protection, without the implication of death) because Wordsworth *has* to transfer responsibility, not because he *wants* to. The Wordsworth of the Calais sonnets is distressed by the necessity of leaving Annette and Caroline – so that he can leave France and illegitimate liberty behind before embracing England – and the emotional anguish of such a manoeuvre. This is something Page's reading does not adequately acknowledge. She posits Caroline as a victim in this sonnet, an abstracted, sacrificed

girl with no voice who is used as part of Wordsworth's need to 'sanction his actions' (198).

I suggest approaching the poem in a different way, which may offer a more sympathetic understanding of Wordsworth's motives and feelings. Page is uncomfortable with Caroline's portrayal, because she sees the sonnet as an address to the girl, which then fails to grant her a voice. As with the dramatic monologue, she argues, 'the reader wonders what the addressed person must be thinking' (199). I argue that this poem is not a direct address to Caroline, but is actually an intensely personal poem primarily, that only later reaches out to the girl. We should not read this as a sonnet dedicated to Caroline that fails to acknowledge her as a real person, but instead as a private reflection on peace and tranquillity that reaches an epiphany, and so opens outward to *include* Caroline to share in the experience. Page notes the 'uncharacteristic' strong break at the end of the octave, which for her conspicuously separates Wordsworth's experience in the first eight lines from Caroline's response (198). She remains 'untouched by solemn thought' because she is not invited by her father to share in it.

Yet this overlooks the fact that this is a sonnet from a summer where Wordsworth's immediate circumstances are not dealt with directly. The other Calais sonnets are primarily political, but have the underlying presence of Annette, who can be teased out by a reading that merges the political with the personal. I suggest reading 'It is a beauteous Evening' in a similar way: as a poem which foregrounds an individual, sensibility-derived experience, and has Caroline as a quiet presence in the background, who is incorporated into the intense moment. The firm divide between octave and sestet is important, but does not, as Page suggests, keep Caroline separate from Wordsworth's experience. The first eight lines articulate an archetypal

Wordsworthian moment, particularly suited to the sonnet (which is the focus for the argument in the next chapter). This is an evening sonnet, which uses its twilight setting to establish a valuable mood of tranquillity. The visual sense is dulled, meaning the aural, and subsequently, imaginative faculties, are awoken. The octave closes with a moment of epiphany as the ‘mighty Being’ makes ‘a sound like thunder – everlastingly’. This is the epiphanic apogee of the sonnet: with experience at its most powerful, the octave ends, validating and confirming the intensity of the moment.

Wordsworth’s earliest ‘Evening Sonnets’ (which, as I shall argue in the next chapter, are the origin of the ‘Miscellaneous Sonnets’) keep the experience confined to the speaker only. In this sonnet, however, Caroline is brought into it. The break after the eighth line firmly establishes the intense mood of the octave, since it ends with a sense of charged energy. Once the experience is set up, the sestet then signals a shift in outlook, reaching beyond the narrator. It begins immediately with the appeal to Caroline – ‘Dear Child! dear Girl!’ – which situates her within the experience. The poem’s first personal pronoun is brought in on the same line – ‘walkest with *me*’ – which draws together the two personas and brings them into a sympathetic exchange. We do not hear from Caroline because the whole point of this sonnet is that it sets out, as do the other ‘Evening Sonnets’, to be a purely personal moment of insight. The fact that Caroline is brought into the poem at all is significant, for she is accommodated within one of Wordsworth’s most private sonneteering modes.¹⁶ ‘It is a beauteous Evening’ displays Wordsworth’s desire to embrace his daughter and share his epiphany with her, even though he knows he will soon have to leave her. The sonnet is a vital document of his emotional torment in the summer of 1802, and an important transitional work in terms of his development as a sonneteer, since it

shows his sensibility inheritance being shaped into something more socially-attuned. The other 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' exhibit a continuation of this manoeuvre.

The purpose of the Calais trip was primarily to 'clear the way for his [Wordsworth's] marriage to his lifelong friend Mary Hutchinson by "divorcing" Annette Vallon' (Page 1988, 190). Not only does Wordsworth enact this manoeuvre for real, it is also played out in the sonnets. There is no 'remarkable detachment', as Moorman suggests, since Annette's allusive presence is felt throughout the sonnets. The personal is relocated to the public, in order for it to be articulated more effectively. Since the Annette affair was both too painful and too scandalous to discuss explicitly in his poetry, she becomes imaginatively transposed by Wordsworth into the political realm, and is thus addressed in a public register. By merging Annette and France in the poetry, the act of sonnet writing becomes a cathartic exercise for Wordsworth, whereby he can deal with both problematic realities simultaneously. The 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty' see Wordsworth make his peace with, and turn away from France / Annette, as he prepares himself for the joyful return to England / Mary.¹⁷ The change in his relationship with France (and by extension, Annette) from how it was a decade earlier is stark and discomfiting. In 'To a Friend, Composed near Calais', the third of the 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty', the poet remembers his 1790 tour of France with his close companion, Robert Jones. 'Festivals of new-born Liberty' (*P2V*; 156-7, 4) filled the air during those early, triumphant days of the Revolution, but in the Calais of 1802, a solitary greeting of '*Good morrow Citizen!*' becomes 'a hollow word, / As if a dead Man spake it!' (11-12) The 'Banners, and happy faces' (8) that once adorned a glorious, optimistic France are now to be found across the channel: the 'Bright Star! with laughter on her banners' (*P2V*; 155, 8) hangs above England, anticipating the eventual union of

Wordsworth and Mary. Similarly, in ‘Calais, August 15th 1802’, the occasion of Napoleon assuming the title Consul for life signals the end of Wordsworth’s sympathetic relationship with France. As Gill argues, ‘Wordsworth was forced to register afresh that ‘France’ and ‘Liberty’ had long since stopped being synonymous’ (1989, 209). Yet facing Annette again – for the first time since their joyful, impassioned affair – meant that Wordsworth also had to register that ‘Annette’ and ‘Liberty’ were no longer synonymous. Their romantic freedoms of 1792 had been overturned, as both parties had become imprisoned on opposite sides of the Channel, cut off from one another. Since Wordsworth was all too aware that neither France nor Annette could be restored to their former greatness, his only option was to turn (albeit painfully) away from both.

This merging of nation and woman becomes possible in 1802, because the Wordsworth of 1792 associated the glorious political liberties of the early Revolution with his romantic liberties with Annette: politics and romance were inevitably entwined, since they had occupied the poet’s entire being simultaneously. In his reading of the French Revolution and its literary representations, Ronald Paulson has argued that the experience of Annette – the affair, the child, and the father’s desertion – is ‘the hidden center of Wordsworth’s revolutionary experience’. For him, in common with other revolutionary writers of the 1790s, ‘love itself is the symbol of revolution – even if the loved one happens to be a royalist’ (Paulson 265, 268). He goes on to say that ‘the act of loving with this slightly alien woman *is* the act of revolution’ (269). I would add that the fact that Annette was a royalist actually intensified the degree of Wordsworth’s revolutionary investment. Since her political views were at odds with Wordsworth’s in 1792, by loving her so passionately, he was enacting his own private rebellion, while concurrently revolting on the political

stage. Their clash of political ideology becomes the basis for Vaudracour and Julia's class conflict. For it is this allegory that offers us the clearest indication that Wordsworth imaginatively merged the political with the private. The 1805 version of *The Prelude* gives us the tale of Vaudracour (a French rendering of 'Heartsworth') and Julia as a substitute for political reflection. Such a manoeuvre effectively implies that this romance could tell us as much about the 'public acts, / And public persons' (*P*; IX, 546-7) of which Wordsworth and Michel Beaupuy speak as more clearly politically engaged writing. Wordsworth stops short of informing us of the 'record and report which day by day / Swept over us' to 'here instead / Draw from obscurity a tragic tale' (IX, 549-551). The tale's opening line – 'Oh happy time of youthful lovers' (IX, 556) – finds an echo in *The Prelude's* most rousing celebration of the Revolution's early excitement: 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very heaven!' (X, 692-3). By 1802, these youthful joys were replaced by a solemn reappraisal of the state of affairs in France. Yet he was not only revisiting France, but Annette also, and the vision of what must have been a heartbroken woman and an illegitimate child who knew nothing about her father, would make Wordsworth realise that the consequences of his romantic investment were as serious as his political one. As Judith Page remarks, he was faced with 'the birth of an illegitimate tyranny and the presence of an illegitimate daughter' (1988, 191). As such, the first poem written upon the return to England, 'Composed in the Valley, near Dover, on the Day of landing', is markedly different in tone to those written in France, with Wordsworth delighting in the sights and sounds around him. The ensuing sonnets, as discussed in the previous chapter, see him reappraise the moral value of his country, but at this first moment of leaving France and reuniting with England, he is filled with a rejuvenating joy. He is free from the political bonds that

restrain Frenchmen, and furthermore, situated now in England, he is also free from the emotional restraints imposed upon him by Annette. The movement from France to England, from Annette to Mary, is indicative of Wordsworth's turn away from the liberties of youth: emerging from an exciting, itinerant, but ultimately unstable time and towards a more settled, domestic existence. The return to England sees Wordsworth advocate more humble ideals and homely virtues. Thus, as he stands at Dover shortly after returning home in 'September, 1802', the eleventh sonnet of the series, he looks out to the coast of France in a gesture that parallels the first of the 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty' where his gaze is directed the other way, from France to England. At the close of the poem, he observes 'that by the Soul / Only the Nations shall be great and free' (*P2V*; 163, 13-14). The chaos and excitement of the Revolution is replaced by a life of restraint, quiet and domestic retirement, just as the unthinking passion of his relationship with Annette is replaced by the hope of a humble, idyllic life with his legitimate wife, Mary.¹⁸

In late 1802, Wordsworth wrote one of his most famous sonnets, 'Nuns fret not' – a sonnet on the art of sonnet writing, where he expounds his theory on the restrictive space of the form, its 'scanty plot of ground' (*P2V*; 133, 11), as being conducive to successful creativity. This poem is discussed in greater detail in chapter 5. It is in this sonnet that the merging of the public and the personal, with regards to Annette, is crystallized. The sonnet form acts as solace to those who have felt, in the poem's best-known line, 'the weight of too much liberty' (13). The poem's concern is primarily with poetic form, and alludes to Wordsworth's inability to write his epic *The Recluse*. The prospect of a vast philosophical blank-verse poem offered him 'too much liberty', for there was so much to write, and no clear place to start. The 'narrow room' (1) of the sonnet on the other hand, provided a sharply defined focus,

and became a site of 'short solace' and creative 'pastime' (14, 10). However, the formal limits of the sonnet, as explored in this poem, also become an analogue of the kind of restraint Wordsworth was advocating for his public and private life.

Throughout the early part of 1802, before the Calais trip, the poet and his sister had been reading a great deal of Shakespeare¹⁹, and it is unlikely to be mere coincidence that 'too much liberty' is a precise echo of Claudio in *Measure for Measure*. While there is no definite record that Wordsworth or Dorothy had read *Measure for Measure* at this time, there is every chance that either, or both of them, could have done without it being documented in Dorothy's *Journals*, since so many other plays were being read by them during these months. In Act1 Scene 2, as Claudio is being led away by the Provost to prison, Lucio asks him 'whence comes this restraint?' 'From too much liberty' is Claudio's reply, referring to his crime of pre-marital relations, resulting in an illegitimate pregnancy: a situation uncomfortably close to Wordsworth's own. I realise it is speculative to claim that this line influenced Wordsworth's thinking, and later fed into 'Nuns fret not', but the echo is startling and worth consideration. If Wordsworth had indeed read the play in early 1802, or was perhaps reminded of it, the fact that his line in 'Nuns fret not' was written many months after the period when the play is likely to have been read suggests that Claudio's response was with him throughout the summer, and thus its implications would have undoubtedly coloured his thoughts during his time with Annette. Even if Wordsworth had not been aware of the line, our understanding of the word 'liberty' must here be amended, in the light of both Shakespeare's and Wordsworth's use of it. 'Liberty' had been a concept entirely in the political realm for Wordsworth, bound up with the Revolution and the civil freedoms of the people. But as Jonathan Hess argues, because of France's growing imperialist ambitions

throughout the 1790s, the term 'came to take on decidedly negative connotations, connotations of political restlessness, regicide and *subversion*' (10, my emphasis). Jonathan Bate continues in this line and indicates that 'France could no longer be associated with freedom; liberty had to be reclaimed by England' (Bate 1994, 6). This becomes the project of the 1802 sonnets, but Wordsworth did not seek to 'reclaim' liberty only through politics. His realisation that his sexual relationship mirrored that of the publicly shamed Claudio, meant that the term 'liberty' had become sexualised in his mind, and aligned not with true moral freedom, but with licentiousness and libertinism.²⁰ The initial emotional investment in Annette, which Wordsworth probably knew could not be maintained because of the dangerous political situation, combined with the birth of Caroline, represented an *excess* of sexual liberty for Wordsworth. As with the Revolution, 'too much liberty' ultimately led to its nullification and its passing over into a state of illegitimacy and disorder. In order to restore morality and legitimacy to 'liberty' it had to be reclaimed by a more permanent, immutable force. Wordsworth no longer trusted political means for safeguarding the liberties of the populace, and instead saw it as individuals' responsibility to cultivate their own freedom: 'by the Soul / Only the Nations shall be great and free'. Therefore, he safeguarded his own freedoms and legitimised his own condition by enacting a political turn on a private level. France was Wordsworth's passionate, tumultuous and licentious mistress, with Annette as its human, sexual embodiment. In 1802, he left his mistress permanently to settle with his wife for a life of moral restraint and stability, qualities that in poetry he found in the sonnet form. England, Mary and the sonnet offered him the values through which, he believed, true personal and virtuous freedom was able to flourish.

¹ For biographical accounts of this trip, which as I have suggested seem frustrated by the lack of specific detail, see Moorman (*The Early Years*) 563-5; Gill (1989) 207-9; Johnston (1998) 783-6 and Barker 211-3.

² I am indebted to Page (1988) in particular. While I agree with her on various points, we diverge in other places. See the reading of 'It is a beauteous Evening'.

³ See Curtis (1971) 3-26; and Tayler 119-141.

⁴ Dorothy's journal is reticent, remarking simply that in the day's bundle of four letters, one is 'from France' (*Journals*, 50).

⁵ Of all the letters sent between Wordsworth, Annette and Dorothy, only three survive: one from Annette to Wordsworth and two from Annette to Dorothy. See Barker 68-9.

⁶ In the 1850 version, this became 'Dragged by a chain of harsh necessity' (1850 text); X, 222.

⁷ This potential guilt over his apparent desertion of Annette may feasibly be the secret influence on a number of poems on abandoned or impoverished women and mothers, including 'The Ruined Cottage', 'The Mad Mother', and 'The Complaint of the Forsaken Indian Woman'.

⁸ See Tayler, 130.

⁹ Liu (472-81). He argues that these sonnets can be read as a separate body of work, distinct from the 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty' and 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' groupings in *Poems, in Two Volumes*.

¹⁰ See especially Jacobus 1984.

¹¹ Roe (2003), 197.

¹² Liu (476) sees the woman as a 'shadow-version' of Annette.

¹³ Perhaps because of its personal theme, the poem appeared as part of the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' rather than the 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty'.

¹⁴ Erdman (6) draws attention to the Biblical allusion, but he does not stress the anguish which I believe this poem displays.

¹⁵ See Page (1988) 197-201 for her discussion of the poem.

¹⁶ I suggest this 'opening-out' of the private twilit sonnet here continues into other later sonnets. See the discussion of 'Hail, Twilight' in chapter five. Chapter 4 sets out the convention of the 'Evening' sonnet dynamic.

¹⁷ See Page (1988) 193.

¹⁸ See chapter 5 for more on this retreat to the domestic virtue of Grasmere.

¹⁹ See *Journals*, 3-7, 96, 100, 113-14, 117, 118.

²⁰ I think that even if he had not read, and was not mindful of *Measure for Measure*, this would still apply. It is also worth noting, that during this period of reading Shakespeare, Dorothy read *A Lover's Complaint* to her brother, the tale of a young woman who is seduced and subsequently abandoned by her male lover. Although again speculative, it is quite plausible that this reminded Wordsworth of his relationship with Annette, and reinforced his sense of guilt. When Dorothy read it to him, just six weeks after they agreed to visit Annette, Wordsworth was in bed, and was left 'composed' (*Journals* 96).

Chapter 4 Wordsworth's Sensibility Inheritance: The 'Evening Sonnets' and the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets'

The first three chapters of this study base much of their argument on one of the critical commonplaces regarding Wordsworth and the sonnet: namely, that the poet's entry into sonnet writing occurred on 21 May 1802, when his sister Dorothy read to him the sonnets of Milton. This chapter provides a refinement and development of that interpretation. It does not seek to negate the story of 'Miltonic conversion', but offers a new reading that encourages a reconsideration of this standard view. Part of Wordsworth's agenda in citing Milton as the chief influence on his sonnets was to declare his allegiance to the particular brand of 'masculine' sonnet that he saw as perfectly exemplified in his precursor's small collection. He praised Milton's 'manly and dignified' compositions (*Letters: Early Years* 379) and expressed his admiration for their 'gravity and republican austerity' (*Letters: Later Years* I; 126). Moreover, Milton was the *only* poet that Wordsworth ever publicly acknowledged as being an inspiration for his career as sonneteer: in the Advertisement to the 1838 edition of his collected sonnets he claimed 'my admiration of some of the Sonnets of Milton, *first* tempted me to write in that form'. He goes on to say that he mentions the fact 'as a public acknowledgement of one of the innumerable obligations, which, as a Poet and a Man, I am under to our great fellow countryman' (qtd. in McNulty 745). Dorothy's reading of Milton was certainly a seminal event, since it acted as the catalyst for a rapid and thorough involvement in the sonnet form that lasted for the entirety of his writing career. Yet Wordsworth's comments here, and in his Fenwick Note on the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' – where he says that the three sonnets he wrote upon hearing Dorothy's reading were 'the first I ever wrote except an irregular one at school' (*Fenwick* 19) –

are misleading, and perhaps deliberately so. Wordsworth's romanticised narrative of poetic epiphany, with the Bloomian relationship of precursor and ephebe that it sets up, diverts attention away from an alternate story of influence, which has just as much credence as the common Miltonic one. Milton's important role should remain crucial, but its pre-eminence must be questioned.

The irregular sonnet Wordsworth mentions in the Fenwick Note is almost certainly 'On Seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress', noteworthy for being his first published poem, which featured in *The European Magazine* in 1787. There were, however, other sonnets written prior to 1802 – and thus *before* the influence of Milton took hold – which Wordsworth either forgot about entirely (which is unlikely), or instead purposely chose to ignore.¹ By elevating the importance of Milton, a manoeuvre with the (perhaps intended) side effect of neglecting all other sonneteers, Wordsworth's point seems to be that being part of a venerable poetic tradition was essential to ensure the integrity of his literary vocation. This all must be understood within the context of the late eighteenth century, and in particular, that period's sonnet writing milieu. Daniel Robinson suggests that 'Wordsworth appears to be taking the baton directly from Milton because he deliberately avoided a place for himself in the more immediate sonnet tradition' (Robinson 2002, 449). This '*immediate* sonnet tradition' is the crucial factor here, and is the reason for Wordsworth's apparently conscious decision to overlook his earliest, pre Milton-inspired sonnets.

Stuart Curran's *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* provided the first serious study of the eighteenth-century sonnet revival, in which he situated the form's rebirth within the burgeoning sensibility movement. Sensibility, in its poetic manifestation, and the sonnet, grew in popularity simultaneously, yet this was no

coincidence. The sonnet found a new voice for itself away from the Renaissance ‘ecstasies of love and religion’ and instead in ‘unavailing sorrow’ thanks to the established paradigms of sensibility. Concurrently, sensibility was able to flourish due to the phenomenal number of sonnets dedicated to excessive emotional states that were published. ‘Sonnets of sensibility flooded forth like tears’, Curran remarks, with a particularly apposite image (30). Although William Lisle Bowles was a major figure in the sonnet’s rejuvenation throughout the 1780s and 90s, it was overwhelmingly *female* poets who were claiming the sonnet of sensibility as their own. Charlotte Smith, Helen Maria Williams, Anna Seward and Mary Robinson were at the head of those who, as Curran has outlined, carved out a ‘definable woman’s literary movement’ through their cultivation of an emotional, elegiac mode of sonnet (30). Clearly, a fully formed, well-established school of sonnet writing existed before the age of high Romanticism when the sonnet flourished further, and it is *this* school that I argue had the dominant influence in the earliest Wordsworth sonnets, not Milton. Furthermore, I argue that the influence of the sensibility tradition was long-lasting; it did not cease with the reading of Milton in 1802. One of the major legacies of Curran’s critical intervention, therefore, has been the opportunity for subsequent critics to reconsider the Miltonic story in the light of these female poets. The first seven sonnets that Wordsworth wrote display none of the Miltonic grandeur of his 1802 and post-1802 compositions, but are instead substantially indebted to the aesthetic of sensibility, and they went on to exert a profound influence on the later ‘Miscellaneous Sonnets’. The language, occasion and overall mood of these early sonnets stem predominantly from the work of Wordsworth’s contemporaries in the 1780s and 90s, and therefore must be treated as important documents in his evolving relationship with the form.² This chapter does

not seek to efface or deny the significance of Milton, but instead focuses its attention on this other, equally important site of literary influence: the debate can, and must be able to accommodate *both* readings.

While he may never have acknowledged their influence on him, Wordsworth did still make clear his interest in, and admiration for, his immediate contemporaries. Like Coleridge, he eagerly read Bowles's sonnets in 1789, a 'thin, 4to pamphlet, entitled *Fourteen Sonnets*, bought in a walk through London with my dear brother, who was afterwards drowned at sea' (Wordsworth, qtd. in Dyce 258n.). He also owned the fifth edition of Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* which he read as an undergraduate at Cambridge, and he visited her in Brighton on his way to France in 1791. In 1833, he wrote that Smith was 'a lady to whom English verse is under greater obligations, than are likely to be either acknowledged or remembered' (Note to 'Stanzas suggested in a Steam-Boat off St. Bees' Heads', *SSIP* 621). Also, he read Helen Maria Williams's work in her *Poems* of 1786 and in her 1790 novel *Julia* which contained some of her sonnets. He obviously revered them, for he was able to repeat one, 'To Hope' from memory, and in 1830 he advised Alexander Dyce to include Williams's sonnets in an anthology of women poets (Wu, *Wordsworth's Poets* 138-9). With the evidence of such earnest respect, one might question why Wordsworth was not more forthcoming in associating his own sonnets with those of his contemporaries. He may have seen the sensibility sonnet as 'hackneyed' or a form of 'mawkish effusion', as Robinson has suggested (2002, 449), or he may have been wary of what he perceived as a female movement that he could not comfortably feel part of. There is certainly the possibility that Wordsworth experienced anxiety or embarrassment at having any kind of association with the popular, contemporary mode of sonnet, hence the fervent desire to attach himself to what he perceived to be

a more enduring, and implicitly male-gendered literary heritage (Milton) that could ensure he would be placed among the pre-eminent figures of English poetry. A case can certainly be made for Wordsworth endeavouring to outwardly adopt a stance – through his expositional writings – set apart from his sensibility contemporaries, since they were, for the most part, self-consciously forging a female poetics that ran counter to the apparently ‘loftier’ male-dominated tradition that he strived to be a part of.³

As a result of this uncertain relationship that Wordsworth had with the sonneteers of his day, scholarship has necessarily pursued a similarly ambiguous path in trying to understand it. The poet’s position as inheritor of the sensibility tradition has been ably argued by a number of critics⁴, yet running concomitantly to this criticism is a trend in sonnet studies that emphasises Wordsworth’s uneasy association with his contemporaries. Jennifer Wagner, for example, has claimed that Wordsworth ‘expressly admired’ the popular women poets of the day, but ‘his own engagement with the sonnet form rejected that sentimental, “feminine” mode for the “manly” (his word) Miltonic mode’ (27). Daniel Robinson sees the adoption of the Miltonic voice in 1802 as a ‘deliberate erasure of the sonnet of Sensibility’ (2002, 449). Robinson’s use of the word ‘erasure’ is equivocal, and draws attention to the indeterminacy of the topic he is addressing: did Wordsworth ‘erase’ the Sensibility sonnet by avoiding it altogether, or did he guiltily write in that mode and try to ‘erase’ it by, in effect, ‘covering his tracks’ through his assured declarations of Miltonic inheritance? There is a similar ambiguity in Joseph Phelan’s observation that ‘in turning to Milton’ Wordsworth was ‘retrospectively feminising and rejecting’ the elegiac sonneteers of the late eighteenth century ‘in one sweeping movement’ (12). Do the ‘turn to Milton’ and the subsequent ‘rejection’ of sensibility seem more

persuasive because of the Fenwick Note and the letters? After all, Phelan adds that when Wordsworth rejects his contemporaries, the poet includes an ‘earlier version of himself’ in that rejection, implying that he saw his own poetry as part of that sensibility milieu.

This uncertainty, then, centres on the possibility that Wordsworth outwardly disavows the sonnet of sensibility while simultaneously writing within its tradition. My argument is that critical writing on Wordsworth and the sensibility sonnet has a degree of ambiguity in its assertions because Wordsworth’s own ubiquitous tale of generic conversion in 1802 has been so convincing that it has become – understandably – entrenched. It has acquired the status of common currency at the expense – at least until Curran – of other potentialities. While other poems of Wordsworth’s early career have been comfortably positioned within the sensibility movement (see note 4), the poet’s powerful and effective piece of myth-making⁵ with the story of Dorothy’s reading, has complicated matters as regards the sonnet, since all discussions of ‘Wordsworth the sonneteer’ are conducted with reference to it, due to its residual influence. It has meant that while a post-Curran, revisionary reading of Wordsworth’s sonneting influences has certainly existed, and proved important, the *degree* of the poet’s sensibility investment has either been underplayed, or shrouded by conflicting impulses (as shown with Phelan, Robinson and Wagner). This is not always the case, since Hunt and Wu (1970, 1995) have both made strong and convincing arguments in favour of the influence of Smith and Bowles, respectively, without any suggestion that Wordsworth was troubled by his position as inheritor of sensibility. I am therefore situating my argument as a continuation of the critical line instigated by Curran and subsequent scholars, albeit with a new direction. I accord with them in that although I see 21 May 1802 as a

pivotal juncture in Wordsworth's career, I do not treat it as the *sole* defining moment in his development as sonneteer. However, while they adopt a relatively cautious stance with respect to the debt he paid his contemporaries, in that they stress Wordsworth's 'rejection' and 'erasure' (with the exception of Hunt and Wu), I make a more forceful argument for his assumption and appropriation of the voice of sensibility in his sonnets, particularly in his early 'Evening Sonnets' and the later 'Miscellaneous Sonnets'. Whatever Wordsworth said (or rather did not say) regarding his sonnet influences in his notes and correspondence, the *poetry* itself gives us a more accurate picture. Certainly, while many of the canonical Wordsworthian sonnets do exhibit the recognisable traits of Milton, there is equally a strong strain of sensibility throughout his sonnet corpus, particularly in the earlier ones, on which this chapter will be primarily focused.

During the period of his juvenilia, Wordsworth was thinking seriously about the sonnet form, for not only was he writing, but also revising and publishing sonnets. One of the four 'Evening Sonnets' of 1789-91, 'On the [] village Silence sets her seal', was revised by Wordsworth at some point before 1802. Among other alterations, its first line became 'Calm is all nature as a resting wheel', and it acquired a title, 'Written in very early Youth', for its subsequent inclusion in the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' of 1807's *Poems, in Two Volumes*. Yet the first published version of the poem in its revised state was in the *Morning Post* of 13 February 1802. Clearly, Wordsworth was investing time in his sonnet writing: recasting and rethinking old works, before sending them off for publication. More important however, is the date of the poem's appearance in the *Morning Post*: it is more than three months *before* Dorothy's seminal recital of Milton in May. What this means is that a sonnet voice, not under the influence of Milton, but instead of his

contemporaries, had emerged before 1802. Admittedly, that voice was still evolving, and largely imitative, but this is still something which challenges the traditional notion that Wordsworth had only a modicum of interest in the form before the ‘epiphany’ of Dorothy’s reading. Furthermore, the influence of Smith, Williams and others did not cease in 1802 – it proved to be a lasting relationship. With Dorothy’s recital, the Miltonic voice was ushered in, was instantly appropriated, and an engagement with the form which had already begun started to take a new shape. But the acquisition of Milton did not necessitate the loss of the original voice of sensibility. Milton’s sonnets may have offered to Wordsworth a clarity of vision, a fiery impetus, and presented him with a model to aspire to, but they did not entail supplanting the model Wordsworth was already working within. Dorothy’s journal entry from Christmas Eve, 1802, seven months *after* the reading of Milton, is illuminating in this regard:

I have been beside him ever since tea running the heel of a stocking, repeating some of his sonnets to him, listening to his own repeating, reading some of Milton’s, and the Allegro and Penseroso. ...My beloved William is turning over the leaves of Charlotte Smith’s sonnets (134-5).

Smith is still being read after Milton’s influence has taken hold – all three poets, including Wordsworth himself, are being read together. It is as if even now, having been a dedicated student of Milton’s for some time, Wordsworth still has the need to return to the quieter, elegiac mode of Smith. Dorothy’s prose draws the scene in an appealingly democratic and symbolic way that does not privilege any individual, but instead presents them all as equals. Clearly, merely reading Smith does not necessarily indicate influence at work, but the fact that he is nevertheless still drawn to her makes us question whether Wordsworth did reject, or move away from the

sensibility sonnet as Robinson or Phelan have suggested. What Wordsworth was able to do from 1802 onward was balance his influences successfully, for while the grand, sonorous voice of Milton fed into the sublime, public, 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty', the more restrained, reflective and private voice of sensibility was not rejected, but instead reshaped and used as the basis for the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets'. It is because of these two directions that Wordsworth's sonnets took in 1802 and beyond, that it is possible to have both Milton and the female sonneteers of sensibility as vital influences. *Both* had substantive importance on Wordsworth, and I shall focus on the latter.

While the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' were the inheritors of Wordsworth's early influence from sensibility, they exhibit a significantly more independent, mature voice than that used in the early, pre-1802 sonnets. His very first sonnet, 'On Seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress', shows the poet at his most sentimental, the closest he was ever to be to the style of his contemporaries. The poem is an almost entirely derivative piece. Both form and diction lack any real degree of originality, for Wordsworth is swamped by the inherited voices of others. The descriptive vocabulary, with its extravagant adjectival clauses, makes the sonnet very much a product of the 1780s where emotion was often pushed to extremes, so much so that it tended to verge on inauthenticity. The initial response to Williams's weeping is shown in an overblown description of the speaker's sudden rush of blood: 'Life's purple tide began to flow / In languid streams through every thrilling vein'. This elaborately drawn moment is complicated by the apparently anomalous juxtaposition of 'languid' and 'thrilling'. Later, Wordsworth depicts the dimming of his 'swimming eyes' and life leaving his 'loaded heart' (*EPF* 396; 1-2, 3, 5). In the same way that the central drama of Helen Maria Williams's sonnet 'To Hope' – the

one Wordsworth could repeat from memory – sees the poet bask in her aching sadness, so the ‘dear delicious pain’ (4) of Wordsworth’s sonnet points to a figure luxuriating in his insincere anguish. Also, the characteristic feature of sensibility sonneteering whereby the speaker assumes the woes of another is continued by Wordsworth here. In ‘To the Curlew’, Williams takes on the ‘melancholy wail’ (*Century* 43; 3) of her subject as her own, and here, Wordsworth takes the shed tear of his subject, Williams, as his own. This poem is all about Wordsworth’s response to Williams’s emotion, not Williams’s response to the original tale of distress. The emotion is transferred from Williams to Wordsworth, meaning the reader is further distanced from the initial emotional event, which happens to be but a fictional tale anyway. Furthermore, at the time of writing, Wordsworth had never even met Williams, making this an entirely fanciful evocation of a moment of heightened emotion, for the purpose of eliciting a similar emotional response from the reader. More cynical modern readers may balk at this fantasy scenario being dressed as reality, but it is precisely this contrived quality of the setting that confirms the sonnet’s place in the sensibility tradition where such moments of imagined sympathy are privileged.

The sonnet is an exercise in artifice, and this is what Wordsworth felt he had to move away from in order to become a serious sonneteer. Yet the contemporary sonnet had much to offer Wordsworth, for in many ways it accorded with his nascent ideas about what psychological, emotional, nature poetry should do. He gratefully inherited the reflective, pensive, elegiac mood and setting of the eighteenth-century lyric, which had been codified by the sensibility sonnet writers at the close of the century. Also, he was drawn to sensibility literature’s primary concern with the emotional response to an event, rather than the event itself (Averill 32). This

dynamic became fundamental to Wordsworth's poetics: it informs his theory of poetry in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, where he says his aim is to show how 'the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling' ('1800 Preface' *LB* 746).

However, the artifice was still a problem. Wordsworth would never have been able to advance as a poet of emotional experiences if he had remained appropriating the feelings of others in imagined settings – as in the Helen Maria Williams sonnet – as his own (or at least the narrator's own). James Averill has called these early 'experiments with voice and point of view' a form of 'ventriloquism': inventing speaking voices, sentimental events and mournful characters that are entirely fictional and have no (or marginal) basis in Wordsworth's own experience (45). His other sonnet from 1787, 'Sonnet written by Mr _____ immediately after the death of his Wife', exemplifies this mode perfectly since it was 'probably not occasioned by any particular bereavement' (*EPF* 392). Thus we have more imagined figures and further 'kindred doom' and 'raven gloom' (*EPF* 393; 2, 4), but what this sonnet and that to Helen Maria Williams demonstrate is that Wordsworth, still aged just sixteen at this point, was driven by an attempt to 'describe the inner truth of the emotions', one of the most fundamental concerns of his entire oeuvre (Wu, 'Poetry to 1798' 26). He is still – largely because of his youth – adhering to a formulaic and prescribed set of sentimental traits, but these become his way in to a mode of poetry that is invested in exploring intense emotional conditions. Wordsworth was moving towards an understanding of deep feeling, in these instances (and in much of the other early poetry) occasioned by grief and death.⁶ Yet while his subsequent sonnets retained the essential sensibility-derived concern with mood and feeling over event and incident, they became less about a

reaction to someone else's mournful state, and more about a powerful, personal experience in a natural setting. Averill sees this shift as a movement from 'sentimental to topographical verse' (49): in other words, Wordsworth came to evoke sympathy no longer through 'contemplation of human suffering', but instead through 'the feelings of the "accordant heart" beating in harmony with nature' (48).

Sonneteering artifice – in the shape of elaborate diction, excessive emotional states and contrived pity – had to be left behind; real experiences and real emotions were needed. As such, the strong subjective voice of Wordsworth the poet-wanderer soon supplanted the detached, artificial voice of the first two sonnets. The story of Wordsworth's early maturation as a sonneteer is the story of moving away from sentimental convention while remaining rooted in the pensive, reflective state so essential to the condition of sensibility. His eighteenth-century sonnets show a gradual progression or evolution – at all times working within the sensibility tradition – which found its apotheosis in the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' at the beginning of the next century. There was no wholesale denial of the tradition he was partaking in, since the next important series of sonnets he wrote self-consciously played into one of the dominant motifs of the contemporary sonnet: the gathering darkness of evening.⁷ It was with these poems that Wordsworth bridged the gap between sensibility artifice and the assured, independent voice of the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets'.

The evening lyric has a long history, one charted by Christopher Miller in his recent book, *The Invention of Evening*. With its origins in Virgil's *Eclogues*, progressing through Milton's *Il Penseroso*, and into the eighteenth-century and Romantic elegiac lyric, the poem that is not so much *about* the melancholic half-light of evening, but is instead situated in, and occasioned by it is fundamental to my

purpose. The motif was used by the sensibility sonneteers of the late eighteenth century, for it offered them an ideal external condition with which to explore the psychological processes of emotion. It made perfect sense for them to embrace ‘this isolating darkness’, for as Miller remarks, the set of ‘aesthetic preferences’ (39) cultivated by sensibility sonneteering, owing to its melancholic character – evening walks, shadows, gloomy churchyards and so on – fitted comfortably into the tradition initiated by Milton’s *Penseroso* and Gray’s elegist. The four sonnets Wordsworth wrote between 1789 and 1791 are situated within this evening setting, and this was to become his most fruitful borrowing from his immediate peers.⁸ The irony of this adoption was that Wordsworth used a well established convention of the contemporary sonnet – the evening setting – in such a way that it became his tool with which to define his own, distinctive voice. In the very act of exhibiting the influence of his contemporaries, he was modifying it, and shaping a new voice. Wordsworth used the central dynamic that the evening setting afforded him, but extended it beyond the bounds of a purely temporal condition. He was able to begin in moments of twilight, before opening them out to articulate a particular way of seeing the world.

The growing darkness of evening, turning slowly into night, appealed to the sensibility sonneteers, for the world of grey mists and shadows that crowded round the isolated spectator could function as a suitable analogue to the state of melancholy that was invariably explored in these poems. In Helen Maria Williams’s ‘To the Moon’, the speaker’s weariness is heightened by her acknowledgement that her mood corresponds with her surroundings. ‘To me congenial is the gloomy grove’, she seems to whisper. Again, there is the sense that she luxuriates in her suffering. She continues: ‘that gloom, those pensive rays alike I love / Whose sadness seems in

sympathy with mine!’ (*Century* 43; 5, 7-8). Yet this almost Keatsian delight in melancholy is qualified by the sonnet’s closing couplet, where the pensive half-light helps to *calm* her anguished soul, rather than intensify its woes. ‘Thy light can visionary thoughts impart, / And lead the Muse to soothe a suffering heart’ (13-14). Indeed, evening’s power to *soothe* was crucial to these sonneteers. In ‘To Night’ – a poem Wordsworth commended to Alexander Dyce in 1830 (*EPF* 677) – Charlotte Smith seeks out a darkened landscape so that she can ease her emotional burden. She says, ‘I still enjoy thee – cheerless as thou art; / For in thy quiet gloom the exhausted heart / Is calm, though wretched; hopeless, yet resigned’ (*Works* 40; sonnet XXXIX, 10-12). What sonneteers found in natural evening settings was repose. The atmospheric gloominess of the scene meant that they could explore intense emotional states, but the calm, pensive quality of the moment allowed them to pursue this without the attendant extravagant sentimentality that would often mar other works of sensibility. This combination of effects is perhaps what attracted Wordsworth to the evening sonnet.

Evening marks a moment of repose and tranquillity when diurnal labours are suspended. It is at this point, this pause in the daily cycle that, as Miller argues, ‘a new kind of work takes place – the act of listening and thinking’ (81). With external activity waning, owing to the failing light and the unpeopled landscape, ‘imaginative fancy or introspection’ (9) occupy the speaker. While Wordsworth’s evening poems are imbued with the familiar elegiac strain of sensibility, it is the contemplative, meditative potential of this temporal condition that was most conducive to his kind of poetics. The steady gaze of the poet speaker is in evidence in Smith’s sonnet ‘To the Moon’: ‘Alone and pensive, I delight to stray, / And watch thy shadow trembling in the stream, / Or mark the floating clouds that cross thy way’ (*Works* 18; sonnet IV, 2-

4). These lines are quite possibly the source of the closing lines in Wordsworth's Evening sonnet, 'Sweet was the Walk along the narrow Lane':

with cunning side-long Look,
 Sauntering to pluck the Strawberries wild, unseen.
Now, too on Melancholy's idle Dreams
 Musing, the lone Spot with my Soul agrees,
 Quiet and dark; for [thro'] the thick wove Trees
 Scarce peeps the curious Star till solemn gleams
 The clouded Moon, and calls me forth to stray
 Thro' tall, green, silent woods and Ruins gray.
 (EPF 680-1; 7-14)

The echo of this word 'stray' is important, for what Wordsworth inherits from Smith here is the desire to linger in this scene. His solitary tarrying, when all others have retired to domestic habitation, allows him to slowly survey the darkening scene. He can take in his surroundings, which are bereft of significant action or sensation, yet this means he can note the small, lulling movements and sounds. As his remark in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* would later claim, the feeling developed here, one of pensiveness and solemnity, takes precedence over the action and situation. Also, it is to be remembered that these 'Evening Sonnets' were written contemporaneously with *An Evening Walk*. The poem is commonly read in the light of the eighteenth-century picturesque and topographical traditions, but of course it also functions as a kind of extended evening lyric. Duncan Wu has suggested that the sonnets were written immediately prior to *An Evening Walk*, in summer 1789 (1995, 356), and so Wordsworth may well have seen the shorter poems as preparatory material for the longer work that would go on to be one of the poet's earliest published pieces. The sonnet form allows Wordsworth to do something rather different, since its enclosed space offers him a degree of focused intensity on *one* moment of emotional insight, whereas *An Evening Walk* is a composite of various experiences. Even so, the

familiar concerns of the contemporary twilight sonnet and the notes of mournful sensibility are in evidence:

A sympathetic twilight slowly steal,
 And ever, as we fondly muse, we find
 The soft gloom deep'ning on the tranquil mind.
 Stay! pensive, sadly-pleasing visions, stay!
 Ah no! as fades the vale, they fade away.
 Yet still the tender, vacant gloom remains,
 Still the cold cheek its shuddering tear retains.
 (EW 74; 382-8)⁹

The final 'shuddering tear' exhibits the residual influence of his contemporaries.

While the pensive mood would remain, this kind of conventional sensibility diction would soon be left behind.

The figure of the lone wanderer slowly surveying the tranquil scene features in the 'Miscellaneous' sonnet, composed in 1802, 'How sweet it is, when mother Fancy rocks', yet the evening setting has gone:

How sweet it is, when mother Fancy rocks
 The wayward brain, to saunter through a wood!
 An old place, full of many a lovely brood,
 Tall trees, green arbours, and ground flowers in flocks;
 And Wild rose tip-toe upon hawthorn stocks...
 Verily I think,
 Such place to me is sometimes like a dream
 Or map of the whole world: thoughts, link by link,
 Enter through ears and eyesight, with such gleam
 Of all things, that at last in fear I shrink,
 And leap at once from the delicious stream.
 (P2V 137; 1-5, 9-14)

There is a slight, but significant verbal echo from the early 'Sweet was the Walk' sonnet with the word 'saunter'. It is a loaded word, perfectly conveying the kind of pose Wordsworth strikes throughout these sonnets and *An Evening Walk*. While his

contemporaries would often experience the evening while motionless, Wordsworth's speakers invariably wander. Here, as in another of the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets', "Beloved Vale!", Wordsworth saunters and steadily looks and listens about him. The mood is reminiscent of 'Sweet was the Walk': in his solitude, he notes the 'tall' or 'thick wove' trees and the 'wild' vegetation, his earlier 'musing' finds an echo in 'mother Fancy' rocking his 'wayward brain', and in both poems, the very experience of walking in this introspective manner is 'sweet'. Yet the evening gloom from the first poem which gave rise to the 'solemn gleams', 'clouded Moon', and 'Ruins gray' that tied him to his sensibility contemporaries is absent. With the darkness lifted, the scope of Wordsworth's vision is extended, and so the enclosed, isolating wood of the earlier poem is opened up to become a 'dream / Or map of the whole world'. 'How sweet it is', written just over a decade after the 'Evening Sonnets', displays Wordsworth's progression: he has freed this type of poem from the convention that linked it to his contemporaries, but retained the reflective, introspective temperament. It is this pensive, ruminative way of seeing the world, where the receptive speaker allows the tranquil surroundings to work on him, so that they may lift him beyond the immediate temporal and spatial moment, that defines the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets'.

This is all dependent upon the *stillness* of the scene, and while all of the 'Evening Sonnets' are suffused with a gently lulling calm, it is the first of the four, 'When slow from pensive twilight's latest gleams', that is most imbued with stillness:

deep the measur'd strokes rebound
 Of unseen oar parting with hollow sound
 While the slow curfew shuts the eye of day –
 Sooth'd by the stilly scene with many a sigh

Heaves the full heart nor knows for whom, or why –
(*EPF* 679; 10-14)

The literary echoes are numerous here as Landon and Curtis show (*EPF* 679), from Thomson, Gray, Milton, and the almost verbatim borrowing from Helen Maria Williams's 'To Twilight' in line two. Yet the most significant echo, as Duncan Wu first pointed out, is from Bowles (1989, 167). His 1789 sonnet 'Written at Tinemouth, Northumberland, after a Tempestuous Voyage', set at evening, anticipates the mood and vocabulary of Wordsworth's poem:

Soothed by the scene, even thus on sorrow's breast
A kindred stillness steals, and bids her rest;
Whilst sad airs stilly sigh along the deep
(*Fourteen Sonnets* Sonnet I; 10-12)

This recalls Smith, who is also 'soothed' by the repose she finds in an evening landscape. The significance of this stillness, for Wu, lies in its ability to 'precipitate some psychological shift – in this case the soothing of sorrow' (1995, 356). In other words, the calm of the scene is not there simply to provide a setting; it has a role to play in shaping the emotional and psychological responses of the spectator. To return to the rationale of the *Preface*, the feeling gives importance to the action: perception of the external enacts an amelioration of the internal. Another feature of the closing two lines of Wordsworth's sonnet is the conspicuous excess of emotion, characteristic of sensibility. 'With many a sigh / Heaves the full heart' has a cloying quality which is intensified by the hyphen at the end of the line, leaving the overwrought sentiment suspended. Yet as has been argued, these poems were formative sonnets for Wordsworth, with sentimental convention still very much part

of his aesthetic. By the time of the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets', the motif of the ruminative spectator responding to the enriching calm of an external scene remained, but the artificial diction and elaborate emotion had been outgrown. 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge', the collection's most celebrated poem, testifies to this change. The spectator has relocated to the city, but the occasion of the sonnet is remarkably similar to that of the 'Evening Sonnets'. The day is poised at a liminal moment: evening has been replaced by dawn, and the peacefulness of the scene – 'Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!' – initiates an awakening in the viewing individual (*P2V* 147; 11). Yet the later poem is spoken by a more mature, assured voice, for whereas the earlier Wordsworth can only soothe his anguish, the poet of 1802 is able to perceive, in his vision of London, the potential for enormous power. He is uplifted by his anticipation of 'the mighty life that will spring into action when the city awakens' (Langbaum 353): 'Dear God! the very houses seem asleep; / And all that mighty heart is lying still!' (13-14). The calm of the scene, deriving from its position at the cusp of day, between the realm of nightly rest and that of diurnal activity, enables a kind of suspension. Wordsworth's imaginative recognition of it acts as the release, affording him a moment of joyful epiphany. In this way, the liminal state of dawn can act analogously to evening.

Yet is there something more significant about the calm of *evening's* gloom, particularly in the context of its ability to 'soothe sorrow'? In *The Ruined Cottage*, the unrelenting misery of Margaret's tragic demise is told during the summer, in the midst of an oppressive landscape when 'the sun was mounted high' (*TRC* 43; 1), and the narrator 'from very heat / Could find no rest' (45; 22-3).¹⁰ As the tale comes to a close, the grief and despondency we would expect to follow is absent, and in its place is a benign tranquillity that seems at odds with the suffering that has preceded it:

He ceased. By this the sun declining shot
 A slant and mellow radiance which began
 To fall upon us where beneath the trees
 We sate on that low bench, and now we felt,
 Admonished thus, the sweet hour coming on.
 (75; 526-30)

Averill has accounted for this dramatic shift from suffering to calm by turning to Wordsworth's (albeit uncertain) knowledge of Aristotelian *katharsis*. By listening to Margaret's tale of sorrow, the narrator gives himself up to it, is purged of his feelings, and is able to come away feeling 'admonished' and exalted, rather than downcast (Averill 60). I am in agreement with him in this, but believe more attention must be paid to the vital function played by the evening setting. This moment, between the declining of the sun and the onset of stars, is not described for the purposes of mere scene-setting; it plays an active role in precipitating the psychological amelioration that the narrator undergoes. It is not altogether incongruous that the narrator should feel calm and easeful at the end of the tale, after all, readers of sentimental literature – a mode that led to *The Ruined Cottage* as well as the early sonnets – read tales of misery and woe so that they might experience a virtuous sympathy with the protagonists, and feel nourished by their civilised emotional response to fictional suffering.¹¹ After speaking of Margaret's death, the Pedlar tells the narrator that when, in his grief, he looked upon the nearby spear-grass, the sight conveyed to his heart

So still an image of tranquillity,
 So calm and still, and looked so beautiful
 Amid the uneasy thoughts which filled my mind,
 That what we feel of sorrow and despair
 From ruin and from change, and all the grief
 The passing shews of being leave behind,

Appeared an idle dream that could not live
Where meditation was.

(TRC 75; 517-24)

I see the Pedlar's meditative response to the spear-grass as analogous to the response the narrator has to the newly-descended calm of evening. The restless and fatigued individual who comes through the blistering heat of day and listens to Margaret's story is, by the end of the poem, composed and strangely lifted as a result of feeling 'the cathartic value of pathos' (Averill 61). He is emptied out emotionally by hearing the sad tale, and then *compensated* by the tranquillity of evening, as the Pedlar is by the spear-grass. This is also how the speaker of the 'Evening Sonnets' functions, for he too is plagued by a grief for which he must find consolation.

Kurt Fosso talks of the 'sense (and the sensibility) of grief' that dominates Wordsworth's Cambridge-era poetry, namely the Evening Sonnets and *An Evening Walk* (48). Yet this poetics of grief and mourning, as his book sets out to show, remains important throughout his career, suggesting Wordsworth's elegiac strain is something more than just a conventional borrowing from eighteenth-century sensibility, or a schoolboy fascination with death and the macabre. Particularly pronounced in the early poetry – which includes the gothic, fragmentary *The Vale of Esthwaite* – this concern with grief is in fact a response to Wordsworth's own genuine grief at the death of his parents. The incomplete, fourth Evening Sonnet is a poem of stillness and calm, but like *The Ruined Cottage*, it is very much a poem of mourning:

How rich in front with twilight's tinge impressed
Between the dim-brown forms impending high
Of [s]hadowy forests slowly sweeping by
Glows the still wave, while facing the red west

The silent boat her magic path pursues
 Nor heeds how dark the backward wave the while
 Some dreaming loiterer with perfidious smile
 [Alluring onward such the fairy views
 In [] colouring clad that smile before
 The poet [thoughtless] of the following shad[es];
 Witness that son of grief who in these glades
 Mourned his dead friend, suspend the dashing oar
 That]

(EPF 685)

The allusion to Collins's *Ode on the Death of Mr. Thomson* in the final lines – made more explicit when the scene was relocated to the Thames in the revised *Lyrical Ballads* version of this sonnet – acts as the poem's public reflection on mourning. Yet as Fosso (and Wu before him) show, there is also a more private mode of grief at work here. Fosso claims that 'these looming shades' in the poem, an essential component of the evening setting, 'are not just shadows but ghosts of the (un)remembered dead, and herein lurks the source of the boat's and the poem's "magic"' (50). Wu first suggested this reading, based on a jotting in one of Wordsworth's notebooks: 'the dead friend is present in his *shade*' (1995, 359). He also proposes that this meaning of the word 'shade' is used in 1787's *The Vale of Esthwaite*. However, it would seem as though the preoccupation with death and ghosts in this earlier poem is founded upon an inability to adequately come to terms with death. In the famous passage that deals with his 'mighty debt of Grief' after the death of his father, he sighs 'I mourn because I mourn'd no more' (EPF 446; 287, 289). For Wu, 'Wordsworth's grief in the present (1787) is actuated partly by his failure fully to mourn his parents at the time of their deaths': his mother died nine years earlier, and his father four (Wu, 'Poetry to 1798', 24). Furthermore, *The Vale* is an exceptionally dark poem throughout, suffused with the imagery of terror and horror. As Averill notes, Wordsworth's 'yearning is not for "calmer pleasures", but

for the gothic and the sublime' (46). Yet the 'Evening Sonnets', while being thematically and stylistically linked, in some degree, to *The Vale*¹², do yearn for those calmer pleasures, particularly 'How rich in front'. What the 'Evening Sonnets' seem to enact is a delayed response to grief. Coming two years after *The Vale*, they enable Wordsworth to articulate a more refined, peaceful mode of mourning, owing in large part to the tranquillity he has found in the evening setting. Wu argues that in 'How rich in front', 'grief has been allayed by the preternaturally vivid apprehension of the red sky in the west, an essential component of which is the presence of the dead themselves' (1995, 359). The 'shades' are 'following' the boat, with the implication that they are the source of the magic that gently moves the boat along. There is a cyclical movement at work here, for while it is the calm of the idyllic twilight scene that soothes the grief that has occasioned the poem, it is the benign magic of the ghostly shade – the origin of the grief – that creates the tranquil calm. What the evening represents, then, is a profound moment of calm *after* a period of grief: the repose and peace that twilight offers provides a suitable consolatory state to be embraced as part of the process of mourning. Like the narrator of *The Ruined Cottage*, the speaker of this sonnet has a cathartic experience, and is emotionally ameliorated by being purged of his grief. Wordsworth actively embraces the evening in these sonnets, not just due to conventional adherence, but because the gloomy shade comforts him, and it does so since it represents the very thing he is mourning, yet now, unlike in *The Vale*, he can come to terms with his grief. The grief of his parents' death, which in 1787 had yet to be adequately faced and articulated, has now been alleviated because he sees the murkiness of evening less as a gothic, macabre category, and more as a benevolent, soothing power. Wordsworth's sonnets set at

evening take their inspiration from the sonnets of his contemporaries, but he makes the mode serve his own unique purposes.

The 'Evening Sonnets' must be read as a transitional series of poems: they mark Wordsworth adapting the voice of sensibility, turning it towards a poetics of epiphany. He does this by adhering to sensibility's essential concern with feeling over action and by using the device of the lone spectator, and more specifically, as I will now argue, by allowing the *loss* of vision to guide him. For while visual perception of moments of stillness and the insight it affords was important, the most fundamental dynamic inherited from the evening sonnet derives, ironically, from the poet's *inability* to look about him. The true, transitional period of evening, before the absolute darkness of night – where some sonnets, like Smith's 'To Night', are staged – is a period in flux. With the light slowly fading, evening is about passing from one state to the next. Despite its stillness and calm, it is constantly moving and changing, and this tension between stasis and mutability was part of its appeal to sensibility sonneteers. With the foreknowledge that this moment of mournful calm was, by its very nature, transient, the job of the poet was both to memorialise it in verse before it disappeared, and, in so doing, delight in its particularly charged power, a power deriving from its transitoriness. In Williams's 'To the Torrid Zone', the poet disparages the light of the tropics where 'instant darkness' shrouds 'genial bloom', before she goes on to privilege the evening light of, presumably, England. She exalts 'twilight's doubtful gloom, / Those mild gradations, mingling day with night'. The pleasure she takes in the scene is enhanced because it is fleeting, and the *gradual* recession of the light prolongs the period of her soul's communion with it. The twilight 'leaves my pensive soul that lingering light, / When musing memory would each trace resume / Of fading pleasures in successive flight' (*Century* 44; 11, 9-10,

12-14). Evening is necessarily a liminal state, on the threshold of something else beyond, and in the poetry situated within evening, this state is able to establish a corresponding feeling in the poet: evening can mirror the transition of the imagination, passing from one mental state to the next. This manoeuvre occurs at the point at which the slowly encroaching darkness is such that bodily senses are stretched to their absolute limit. The speaker can see, but only just.

'To Twilight', by Helen Maria Williams, articulates this moment in its closing lines:

Yet dearer to my soul the shadowy hour,
At which her blossoms close, her music dies –
For then, while languid nature droops her head,
She wakes the tear 'tis luxury to shed.
(*Century* 42; 11-14)

In these lines, argues Miller, 'the somnolence of the world awakens the poet's spirit' (40). A new plain of existence, suffused with luxurious sadness, is opened up to her as a compensatory manoeuvre. The light of day has died and nature is closing up on itself leaving the speaker alone, but it is at this moment that the epiphany occurs. For in the absence of external stimulation, the internal processes of the soul and the imagination are brought to life, manifesting themselves in the standard sentimental gesture of sensibility literature, the shed tear.

Wordsworth picked up on this manoeuvre, and it fed into the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets'. As discussed in the previous chapter, 'It is a beauteous Evening, calm and free' is staged at the moment when 'the broad sun / Is sinking down in its tranquillity'. As in the 'Evening Sonnets', the fading light establishes a calm from which the poet is made conscious of a great power before him, in this case, the benign and almighty presence of God. Yet this moment is most acutely felt in Wordsworth's transitional sonnet, 'On the [] village Silence sets her seal',

which was revised before 1802 and became part of the 'Miscellaneous' group as 'Calm is all nature as a resting wheel':

On the [] village Silence sets her seal
 And in the glimmering vale the last lights die
 The kine obscurely seen before me lie
 Round the dim horse that crops his later meal
 Scarce heard; a timely slumber seems to steal
 O'er vale and mountain; now while ear and eye
 Alike are vacant what strange harmony,
 Homefelt and homecreated seems to heal
 That grief for which my senses still supply
 Fresh food...

(EPF 682; 1-10)

Evening is passing into night, and Wordsworth's sight is compromised. The 'last lights die', the kine are 'obscurely seen', the horse is 'dim' and 'ear and eye / Alike are vacant'. With the failure of vision, sensory perception yields to imaginative insight. As he goes on to say, a 'strange harmony, / Homefelt and homecreated seems to heal / That grief for which my senses still supply / Fresh food'. The 'strange harmony' is as ambiguous, yet also as meaningful and perceptive as his 'sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused' at Tintern Abbey. A moment of epiphany has occurred, a psychological process of healing enabled by the 'enforced repose of the poet's senses'. Duncan Wu calls this state, when the bodily senses are subdued, a 'mystical suspension' (1995, 362), which is the necessary condition for a subsequent rush of insight, acting as recompense. While very little in the way of external action and movement happens in this poem, a significant process, seemingly occurring instantaneously, has been enacted and is made all the more striking by being played out in the restrictive space of the sonnet. The central drama of this sonnet, as with the other 'Evening Sonnets', and indeed the 'Miscellaneous' group, is internalised. Wordsworth's 'ability to celebrate a moment of heightened perception

and consciousness' (Wagner 40) is initiated by the loss of vision, the tyrannical sense, and this is why the evening setting of these early sonnets was so important. Wordsworth was able to tap into the extraordinary potential of this common sensibility motif, but once he had seized the dynamic of numbness and failure followed by imaginative recompense, he could free it from the restrictions of purely twilit settings – and indeed the conventional lexicon of sensibility – and thereby open it out to form a major component of his poetics. Such an epiphanic moment is at the centre of the crossing the Alps episode in *The Prelude*, and was also described, in lucid prose, to De Quincey:

At the very instant when the organs of attention were all at once relaxing from their tension, the bright star hanging in the air above those outlines of massy blackness, fell suddenly upon my eye, and penetrated my capacity of apprehension with a pathos and a sense of the Infinite, that would not have arrested me under other circumstances.¹³

(Wordsworth, qtd. in Jordan 442)

This is indeed an extraordinary imaginative power, for it has the potential to invest any external object with a profound sublimity. Calm and sensory repression leads to a state of mental suspension, which allows for 'pathos and a sense of the Infinite'. Instances of this abound in the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets'. It is significant that the revised poem, 'Calm is all nature as a resting wheel', is positioned almost in the middle of the series. This poem, which provides the strongest link to Wordsworth's early, formative years as a sonneteer holds a central place in this first collection of mature sonnets and offers a structure that is repeated in many of the other sonnets.

In the third 'Miscellaneous' sonnet, Wordsworth describes how he and his party go in search of a celebrated view, but 'ere we had reach'd the wish'd-for place, night fell...And nothing could we see of all that power / Of prospect, whereof many

thousands tell'. However, with the failure of vision, creative fancy takes control and the group are recompensed by 'Grecian Temple, Minaret, and Bower' (*P2V* 138; 1, 3-4, 6) – shapes in the clouds offered to them by their new imaginative insight.

Sometimes the epiphanies are even quieter, but no less profound. In sonnet 8, the musing poet-speaker watches ships from a distance with a pensive detachment before suddenly one catches his attention: 'A goodly Vessel did I then espy' (142; 5), he proclaims. He inexplicably finds himself drawn to the ship, preferring it to all others. His initial passivity as onlooker is shaped into a strong emotional investment; even though his reason tells him that 'this Ship was nought to me, nor I to her' (9), his imaginative faculties are nevertheless awoken and uplifted by the vision.

Wordsworth unashamedly celebrates this moment of epiphany, as he is momentarily suspended so as to become something other than his ordinary self – 'I pursued her with a Lover's look' (10) he says. The rationale behind this sonnet is addressed at length in an important letter that Wordsworth wrote to Lady Beaumont in 1807, soon after the publication of *Poems, in Two Volumes*. The letter as a whole is an impassioned yet often pained defence of Wordsworth's poetic vocation, in the wake of the disappointing reception of the recently published volumes. Lady Beaumont's sister apparently objected to the poem, and Wordsworth was subsequently compelled to justify its aims. He begins by outlining one of the 'general principle[s] or law[s] of thought' that govern his poetic agenda:

Who is there that has not felt that the mind can have no rest among a multitude of objects, of which it either cannot make one whole, or from which it cannot single out one individual, whereupon may be concentrated the attention divided among or distracted by a multitude?

(*Letters: Middle Years I*; 148)

This may be seen as the central guiding doctrine of the ‘Miscellaneous Sonnets’: the ability, or even *need*, to focus the perceiving mind onto *one* powerful external stimulus amidst a world of ephemeral distractions, so as to realise its (both the stimulus and the mind) inherent imaginative potency. This ‘concentration of the attention’ is at the heart of Wordsworth’s poetics of epiphany. The small space of the sonnet provides the perfect formal base for this imaginative shift because the single, intense vision occupies the whole of the sonnet’s ‘narrow room’. He goes on, and explains that in the sonnet, the multitude of ships he sees leads him into a ‘dreamy indifference’, ‘and a kind of comparative listlessness or apathy’. This state is analogous to that described in the comments to De Quincey, and in the ‘On the [] village’ sonnet. The gloom of evening, which suspends the perceiving senses by denying objective vision, finds a corollary in its apparent opposite – an overabundance of visual stimuli. Wordsworth’s mind cannot focus because there is *too much* to view, and so he ceases his attempt to engage emotionally with the scene. It is then from this imaginatively idle position that insight is possible: ‘All at once, while I am in this state, comes forth an object, an individual, and my mind, sleepy and unfixed, is awakened and fastened in a moment’ (148). He discovers in this instant, as he describes elsewhere, a ‘strange harmony’ and a ‘sense of the Infinite’. What defines this change is its suddenness, just like the intense response to Helen Maria Williams’s distress. In that sonnet, there was more of a focus on the *physiological* effects, with the ‘thrilling vein’ and ‘swelling heart, but in both cases, and throughout the ‘Miscellaneous Sonnets’, Wordsworth’s primary concern is with the intensity of ‘the mind being once fixed and rouzed’ (149). In the letter, he calls this manoeuvre from perceptual suspension to imaginative insight ‘a mission of the poetic Spirit’ (149): from twilight shadows to miscellaneous reflections, this mission

is a vital component of his early sonnet writing. Very little in the way of external activity happens in the 'Ships' sonnet, for the real action here occurs *within* the ruminative spectator's mind, just as it had done in the archetypal poetry of eighteenth-century sensibility.

I have been discussing some of the earliest Wordsworthian sonnets, exploring how the voice of sensibility and the evening setting become, in these poems, a way into coming to terms with personal grief, and a mode with which to celebrate moments of personal imaginative epiphany. Seen in this way, these sonnets seem to accord with Averill's contention that 'Wordsworth's, like all sentimentalism, is liable to turn into self-pity; the basically inward concerns, the focus upon one's own response, make the sentimentalist particularly vulnerable to a kind of solipsistic pathos' (51). Do these sonnets, by the great Romantic poet of self, ever look outward? Lore Metzger has argued that the project set out in the *Preface* to the *Lyrical Ballads*, with its emphasis on a poetics of *feeling* – like the sonnet of sensibility – turns away from society: 'it signals the displacement of art anchored in the social relations of a specific time and place by an autonomous art anchored in the individual situated in mental space, in an ideal spot of time' (188). However, more recent critics have sought to investigate the potential for self-reflexive and inward looking poetry – the Romantic lyric and the associated sonnet of sensibility – to look outward, and embrace social concerns.¹⁴ Sarah Zimmerman's re-reading of Romantic lyricism attempts this by overturning canonical interpretations of the mode which had been codified by critics such as Abrams and Frye. These influential studies, Zimmerman argues, 'too successfully' made their case for a mode of lyric where the poet 'turns his back on his audience', meaning 'we have come to associate the form exclusively with one particular political trajectory' (74, x). It has thus become easy to

read subjective lyric poetry, particularly mournful, elegiac works like the sensibility sonnet, as being profoundly egocentric and self-pitying. Yet the fact that a poem is focused on the self does not mean that it necessarily turns away from its audience; as Zimmerman posits, it is often the very opposite that occurs. For indeed, it is the poet's awareness of a reading *audience* that ensures that the Romantic lyric, including Wordsworth's sonnets of personal experience, do not remain wholly self-serving and inward looking. William Richey argues that sonnet writers would often try to offset charges of egotism by drawing from the 'humanitarian poetry' movement, which he suggests emerged roughly contemporaneously with the sonnet revival. Poets could use 'obviously pitiable figures to universalize and magnify [their] personal sorrow' (429), so while the essential concern always remained with the poet, the more immediate subject of the poem would be focused elsewhere, on oppressed individuals. This certainly occurs in Smith's sonnets, and *Lyrical Ballads*, and it recalls Averill's notion of Wordsworth's 'ventriloquism' in his early poems, but the 'Evening Sonnets' and the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' do not appeal to impoverished others, and instead remain focused on Wordsworth. Yet Richey also claims that the 'sonnet – no less than the humanitarian poem – seeks to elicit its reader's sympathy' (429). This then, is the sonnet's fundamental concern, regardless of whether it achieves it through focusing on a poor outcast, or on the poet. Although evading egotism and appealing to a reader's sympathy become *easier* if the poet attends to the misfortunes of others, as Richey implies, as long as the poet can still connect sympathetically with readers by other means, then the sonnet can still function successfully in an outward way. It is possible, in other words, for the intensely subjective voice of Wordsworth's sonnets to direct itself beyond the confines of the self.

As both Richey and Zimmerman make clear, it is a poem's audience that is vital. This notion is not new; after all, sensibility literature is defined by its ability to engage with, and work on, the emotions of the readers. Sensibility literature is most concerned with 'the response it evokes in observer and reader' (Averill 31), and so it cannot therefore be an entirely insular mode. As such, when Wordsworth writes a sonnet that actively borrows from the poetics of emotional exchange, the sonnet can only function correctly, can only have *meaning*, if there is an assumed audience to read it and respond to it. He need not address an audience directly, but by knowing they are there, their unspoken response gives life to the poem. As Zimmerman says of 'Tintern Abbey', 'Wordsworth wants an auditor to confirm the poetic self he presents to them' (100). She argues that Wordsworth, like Smith, 'articulates private thoughts, memories, and reflections, which are "overheard" and create the emotional bond needed for the reader to identify with the poet' (99). While a case may be made for this happening in the 'Evening Sonnets', I think Wordsworth, with the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets', is more transparent about speaking to an audience through seemingly internal reflection. Firstly, many of the sonnets have, like 'Tintern Abbey', a silent auditor in the form of Dorothy. While poems such as 'Composed after a Journey across the Hamilton Hills' and 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge' may seem to spring from subjective experience, they actually both celebrate and memorialise a heightened emotional experience that Wordsworth shared with his sister. In both cases, the scene described in the poem is also sympathetically drawn in Dorothy's journal: the experience is not Wordsworth's own, but instead functions as a *social epiphany*.¹⁵ Also, if we return to the 1807 letter to Lady Beaumont, we see that writing poetry for a public was very much Wordsworth's intention for *Poems, in Two Volumes*, even though the publication's 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' do not

explicitly address an audience. He imagines an ideal readership, located in later years, after the critical present-day, which will respond emotionally to the poems' enduring appeal. Wordsworth's sonnets are never meant to be insular and purely for himself, for they are to 'console the afflicted, to add sunshine to daylight by making the happy happier, to teach the young and the gracious of every age, to see, to think and feel, and therefore to become more actively and securely virtuous' (*Letters: Middle Years I*; 146). This can be read as an ironic appropriation of the humanitarian incentive that Richey discusses. After the volumes' bitter reception, the crestfallen Wordsworth turns 'the Public' into his poor and needy subjects, deprived of adequate emotional support, and then posits his poems as the way to reach out to them, in order to provide a 'destiny' for the otherwise derided collection. By 'teaching' people how to 'see, think and feel', Wordsworth aims to achieve the ultimate purpose of sensibility poetry – to elicit an emotional response from the auditor.

The 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' rarely tell a story, describe an external event, or even make some kind of political or philosophical statement. Instead, they each document a process, just like the fluid emotional states of sentimental literature, and like the growing gloom of evening. More often than not, this process is of an emotional, psychological nature, and it is for this reason that they are rightly the heirs of the sensibility tradition.¹⁶ The 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' come into being as they are experienced, since they are the record of Wordsworth *exploring* something, rather than *saying* something. Robert Langbaum has argued that Wordsworth 'wrote two kinds of sonnet – the Miltonic or discursive and the epiphanic sonnet' (353). I make a similar claim, and see this as the central difference between the two groups of sonnets that appeared in *Poems, in Two Volumes*. The public voice of Milton was used for the 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty', while the more introspective voice of

sensibility, which had evolved into a psychological mode for reaching toward epiphanic insight, was used for the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets'. The Miltonic 'Liberty' sonnets are fixed and declarative: they have a point to make, and do not stray from that purpose. However, they go about it by making a range of disparate observations and proclamations. 'I griev'd for Buonaparte' strives to denounce the uneven and militaristic education of Napoleon, and jumps between battles, children round the knees, books and leisure, and talk with the week-day man. 'London, 1802' works through a logical structure with many component parts. It begins with an invocation, then a statement of the problem, then the introduction of the corrective, and finally, a few lines of panegyric and public reflection. It is an ordered, tightly arranged poem. By contrast, each of the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets', in keeping with their sensibility origin, develops smoothly and grows out of a *single* subjective consideration springing from the pensive individual's mind, moving outwards and fluidly between changing mental states, towards insight. The 'Liberty' sonnets are the product of a public spokesman systematically working through his carefully constructed rhetoric, whereas the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' are the product of a private, emotional journey taken within a singular mind. It is vital to understand this distinction between the two groups.

It is problematic that very few of the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' are regularly anthologised in collections of Wordsworth's poetry. Generally, only 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge' and 'It is a beauteous Evening' are represented. These sonnets have become inadvertently absorbed into the 'Liberty' series, and are consequently read and appreciated in the light of the popular and familiar Miltonic conversion story. This amalgamation denies them their true ancestry. To recover the

lineage, it is vital to put the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' back in their original literary context and reclaim them as inheritors of the sensibility tradition.

¹ There were at least seven sonnets written in Wordsworth's youth, including that to Helen Maria Williams. They are 'Sonnet written by Mr. _____ immediately after the death of his Wife', composed 2 March 1787, 'If grief dismiss me not to them that rest', a translation from Petrarch, composed late 1795 / early 1796, and the four 'Cambridge' or 'Evening' sonnets, all written between 1789 and 1791: 'When slow from pensive twilight's latest gleams', 'Sweet was the Walk along the narrow Lane', 'On the [] village Silence sets her seal' and 'How rich in front with twilight's tinge impressed'. All are in *Early Poems and Fragments*.

² McNulty's essay is a short piece and does not have the advantage of recent editorial work, but is nonetheless an insightful study of this area, since it challenged the prevailing, Milton-centric critical standpoint of the time. For example, in 1922, Havens had argued that 'it is folly to pretend that Wordsworth's sonnets are an evolution from those of his immediate predecessors; he turned to other sources for his inspiration, his models, and his conception of the form...it was to Milton and Milton only that he was indebted' (528, 529).

³ See in particular Curran, and Robinson 1995. It is telling, that after Wordsworth's genuine compliment to Smith in the note to 'St. Bees', he goes on to say 'she wrote little, and that little unambitiously': neither observation is accurate.

⁴ See particularly Averill, Jacobus, Curran, Wu and Robinson. Wordsworth's poetry of the 1780s and 90s, including *Descriptive Sketches*, *An Evening Walk* and *Lyrical Ballads* show him to be very much a poet of sentimental, eighteenth-century modes.

⁵ Jonathan Bate (1994) has likened Wordsworth's story of Dorothy's reading – this 'typical' construction of his own past – to a 'spot of time' (2).

⁶ These themes are made all the more resonant if we treat the juvenilia as Wordsworth's record of coming to terms with the death of his parents. See Fosso, 27-45 and Wu, 'Wordsworth's Poetry to 1798', 24.

⁷ Wordsworth's 'Evening Sonnets' have received very little critical attention. Duncan Wu, 'Navigated by Magic' and Kurt Fosso have provided valuable readings. They are a notably assured group of early poems and mark a crucial stage of Wordsworth's development as sonneteer. *Early Poems and Fragments* published them together for the first time.

⁸ The adoption of the evening setting can obviously be seen as Wordsworth following Gray and Milton, as well as just his contemporaries, but as Duncan Wu in *Wordsworth's Reading 1770-1799* suggests, the *Elegy* and *Il Penseroso* may have been read, at least initially, any time between 1779 and 1787 (70, 99), whereas the contemporaneity of Smith, Williams and Bowles means it is likely their sonnets were read much more recently by Wordsworth.

⁹ The lines are quoted from the 1793 edition in *An Evening Walk*.

¹⁰ All quotations from *The Ruined Cottage* are taken from MS. D, the 1799 text in *The Ruined Cottage and The Pedlar*.

¹¹ In her overview of sensibility literature, Janet Todd explains how 'misery or adversity can, it was thought, be converted into pleasure by the sensitive poetical mind in two ways': it 'educates sympathy' and 'educates the aesthetic sense' (54).

¹² The following lines from *The Vale* anticipate both the passage from *An Evening Walk* previously quoted, and the closing line from 'When slow from pensive twilight's latest gleams': 'Now too while o'er the heart we feel / A Tender Twilight softly steal / Sweet Pity gives her forms array'd / In tenderer tints and softer shade / – The heart when pass'd the Vision by / Dissolves nor knows for whom or why.–' (*EPF* 432; 127-32).

¹³ Wu, (1995) first drew attention to this important quotation with reference to the 'Evening Sonnets'.

¹⁴ Fosso, Zimmerman, and Richey.

¹⁵ See entries for 4 October and 31 July 1802 (128, 123).

¹⁶ Northrop Frye's seminal essay talks of sensibility literature as a literature of 'process'.

Chapter 5 The Sonnet and the 'narrow room'

As a term of categorisation, 'miscellaneous' is indistinct, to say the least. Since clearly-drawn systems of classification were an obsession for Wordsworth, this is a significant consideration. Numbering 121¹, second only in size to the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* among Wordsworth's collection of sonnet series, the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' are a major constituent of his sonnet corpus, and as I will argue, are central to his theoretical concept of the sonnet-space. I begin by exploring more occasions where the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' articulate moments of epiphanic intensity, before the main argument moves on to consider how Wordsworth exploits the inherent 'narrowness' of the sonnet.

Acknowledging the apparent randomness and lack of narrative framework inherent in a poetic miscellany, a number of critics have attempted to find an underlying coherence to the group, arguing the case for a poet who carefully considered the ordering of his sonnets.² These arguments for an implicit structure can be convincing, particularly with reference to the short, 20-sonnet series from 1807's *Poems, in Two Volumes*. Yet when it comes to a group that has been extended to 121, it is difficult to argue that Wordsworth self-consciously strove for coherence. Of all Wordsworth's sonnet groups, the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' is clearly the least sequential. The *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, which I address in chapter 7, are a historical chronology, the 'Liberty' sonnets are a smaller, personal chronology charting the progression of a shifting political outlook, and *The River Duddon* (see chapter 6) follows a continuous historical / biographical line, marked by the unbroken flow of a river. There is no such conspicuous cohesion or linearity with the 'Miscellaneous

Sonnets', but in a sense, this should be seen as a strength: the group has variety and diversity in its subject matter. The breadth and scale of the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' was made possible by the very fact that Wordsworth was not limited by self-imposed demands on narrative cohesion. From the very beginning, he set himself no requirement to ensure that all of the group's sonnets adhered to a pre-established subject matter. While there is diversity, for instance, in the sonnets on the River Duddon, it was necessary, in order to fulfil the sequence's aims, for every sonnet to concern itself in some way with the overarching river theme. This added obligation, directed elsewhere towards Liberty and the Anglican Church, may provide a focus for the creative impulse, but can also act as a form of inhibition. It is perhaps because of this need to satisfy the demands of a single theme that Wordsworth would often tire himself out in writing sonnet sequences, pushing himself to compose a bulk of sonnets conforming to a set goal.³ The 'Miscellaneous Sonnets', by virtue of their piecemeal composition, have a freer feel. Each one of them comes into existence as the result of a specific experience or reflection that Wordsworth feels necessary to memorialise, meaning that each marks a significant moment in Wordsworth's personal life, most often centred on his domestic experience in Grasmere, as I shall argue. They are, therefore, free of the sometimes stilted artificiality and historical objectivity that characterise some of the other late sonnet series.⁴

This aspect of the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' derives from a combination of Wordsworth's two chief sonnet influences – Milton, and his more recent predecessors. Milton's sonnets were free-standing, occasional effusions, brought forth by particular events or people, and so marked a 'liberation of the individual sonnet from the Petrarchan sequence' (Phelan 18). Similarly, the sensibility sonnets of the eighteenth century sought to capture moments of heightened personal experience, and although

they often strayed towards conventional structures, a real, lived event (or at least the illusion of one) was always key. This demonstrates the arbitrary, or perhaps inconsistent way in which Wordsworth handled his influences. For while the 'Liberty' and the 'Miscellaneous' groups are very different, and as I argued in the previous chapter, it is the divergence of the inherited Miltonic voice and the sensibility voice that accounts for this difference, Wordsworth was still able to bring his disparate influences together when he sensed a convergence of their aims.

It is unlikely that Wordsworth purposely set out to establish a group of poems under the title 'Miscellaneous Sonnets'. The category was initiated in 1807 for *Poems, in Two Volumes*, and was used for those sonnets that Wordsworth felt did not concern themselves explicitly with liberty – his dominant thematic focus for his sonnets at that point. While the 1807 'Liberty' series read as a unified whole, there was never any attempt by Wordsworth to present the disparate 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' as an interconnected entity. The crucial thing as regards Wordsworth's development as a sonneteer is that while the organisational principles of the group originated by way of mere convenience, the utilitarian designation 'miscellaneous' ultimately served to enable the poet's creativity.

The group kept expanding because Wordsworth came to see it as a suitable repository for a whole range of fourteen-line proclamations or reflections. The indeterminate nature of 'miscellaneous' made for an inclusive and multifarious group, meaning Wordsworth could add to it again and again, engaging his imaginative faculties without the need for his editorial arbitration.⁵ His enumeration of the 'moulds' and 'forms' of poetry in the 'Preface' to his 1815 *Poems* – his most extensive attempt at categorisation – places the sonnet in the class of 'Idyllium', and

the brief overview of its characteristics is largely in line with the open, generalised nature of ‘miscellaneous’. The Idyllium is:

descriptive chiefly either of the processes and appearances of external nature, as the ‘Seasons’ of Thomson; or of characters, manners and sentiments...or of these in conjunction with the appearances of Nature... The Epitaph, the Inscription, the Sonnet, most of the epistles of poets writing in their own persons, and all loco-descriptive poetry, belong to this class’.

(*Prose* III; 28)

There are important distinctions drawn here: the sonnet is not of the Narrative class, and since they are speaking ‘in their own persons’, sonneteers are to be distinguished from Dramatists. Wordsworth also separates the sonnet from the Lyric, to which ‘an accompaniment of music is indispensable’. Yet other than this, the Idyllium is in many ways a broad designation. Its function is to observe, evaluate and describe, and it takes people, feelings, events and nature as its subjects. By assigning the sonnet to the Idyllium, Wordsworth thus establishes a wider scope for the form, extending its potential, yet, at the same time keeping it within a poetics of reflection and psychological engagement. The Idyllium, for Lee Johnson, ‘concerns familiar subjects, situations, and passions common to all mankind’ (89). The concern with ‘characters, manners, and sentiments’ encompasses both strands of Wordsworth’s sonneteering inheritance, from Milton and the sonneteers of sentiment, but the Idyllium’s implicit focus upon the commonplace – lived experience in ordinary, domestic life as distinct from Milton’s (generally) more public subjects – along with the reference to ‘loco-descriptive poetry’, places the class, and by extension the sonnet, more on the side of the sensibility mode. The ‘Miscellaneous Sonnets’ share many of the Idyllium’s attributes, and in describing ‘the processes and appearances

of external nature', sentiments, and so on, each one stands as a 'moment's monument'⁶, memorialising intense experience in an enclosed space, just as the Epitaph and Inscription do. The 'Miscellaneous' group exemplifies an important aspect of Wordsworth's sonneteering art: the striving for intensity.

The job of the sonnet – and the 'Miscellaneous' ones especially, because they are occasional and thematically disparate by definition – is to capture a fleeting moment 'of heightened consciousness' (Wagner 14), and in so doing, give it new life. The 'Miscellaneous' group is built upon the gradual accumulation, over four decades, of these occasions where Wordsworth is driven to 'single out one individual' vision or thought 'where upon may be concentrated the attention' (Letter to Lady Beaumont, *Letters: Middle Years I*; 148). The act of writing the sonnet, and indeed reading it, becomes a process of rediscovering, preserving, and celebrating that moment. The 'Dedication' to the group, 'Happy the feeling...', is set apart from the other sonnets at the beginning of the collection, indicating that Wordsworth saw it as a kind of prologue, revealing the way in which the sonnets should be read:

Happy the thought best likened to a stone
Of the sea-beach, when, polished with nice care,
Veins it discovers exquisite and rare,
Which for the loss of that moist gleam atone
That tempted first to gather it.

(*PW* 1; 5-9)

With this trope, the sonnet form is represented by a stone: a small, inauspicious object holding immense latent potential, gathered up by an inquisitive wanderer / reader. Only when the stone is carefully polished by a sympathetic hand is its extraordinary beauty revealed. Likewise, the process of sympathetically *reading* a sonnet (or indeed the entire group, since this is a Dedication for the whole collection)

opens it out and uncovers its dormant power, showing it to be a 'gift' (14) both 'exquisite and rare' that belies its humble size. In using this image of the small stone to represent the sonnet form, at the very beginning of the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets', Wordsworth immediately establishes a central concern of the group: enormous potential, or 'large ambition' (Wagner 27) held within a tight, limited space.

'Praised be the Art', first published in 1815, sees Wordsworth laud George Beaumont and the power of his paintings to 'stay / Yon cloud, and fix it in that glorious shape' (*PW* 6; 1-2). While the sonnet is ostensibly concerned with *visual* art, its general sentiment regarding the ability of the artist to guard against the ravages of time is as applicable to the sonneteer as it is to the painter. The 'formal self-consciousness' (Wagner 28) of Wordsworth's sonnets – the speaker's frequent foregrounding of his role as sonneteer and of the form's enclosed space – allows the reader to interpret the final four lines as a statement on the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' as much as they are on Beaumont the painter:

Thou, with ambition modest yet sublime,
 Here, for the sight of mortal man, hast given
 To one brief moment caught from fleeting time
 The appropriate calm of blest eternity.
 (11-14)

These lines represent Wordsworth's aims for the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets': to imbue passing images and sensations with the sense of timelessness. The juxtaposition here of ambition's *modesty* and *sublimity*, marks a continuation of Wordsworth's tropological reading of the sonnet-space: greatness springing from humble origins.

The 'fleeting time' captured in Beaumont's painting and Wordsworth's sonnets recalls the twilit settings of the poet's earliest experiments with the form,

which I argued in the previous chapter were his way in to the psychological intensity of the earliest 'Miscellaneous Sonnets'. The importance of the evening setting remained, since many sonnets of the extended group are staged at this time. 'Hail, Twilight' opens in a mood reminiscent of the 'Evening Sonnets', by dismissing the dreary 'undiscerning Night', but privileging the 'shadowy Power' of the half-light, which gently dulls the senses so as to 'remove from sight / Day's mutable distinctions' (*PW* 31; 2, 11, 3-4). At this liminal moment, when the mind turns inward and the imagination is awoken, the 'one peaceful hour' (1) of twilight that Wordsworth experiences in the present suddenly expands and accommodates a corresponding moment of reflection for a prehistoric 'rude Briton' (6). Twilight, for Wordsworth, is time on the margins: blissful yet transient, forever becoming something new, and as his engaged mind works to negotiate that curious blend of reposeful stillness and constant change, it reaches back to establish a thread of continuity with the past, so as to challenge the transitoriness of the scene. Time is made malleable, and the moment is extended so that it is no longer just Wordsworth's own. The wolf-skin-clad man has also seen 'the self-same Vision which we now behold' (10). What begins as a single, personal vision of twilight becomes, by the end, a sublime 'spectacle as old / As the beginning of the heavens and earth' (13-14). A characteristic dynamic of the 'Miscellaneous' group is played out here: a humble personal experience is opened out and enlarged to become something greater, which ultimately transcends the consciousness of the pensive speaker whose aroused perception gives life to the experience in the first place. This poem is, as Curran says of the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' as a whole, about 'the infinite capacity of the mind to charge the mundane with spiritual import' (45). The sonnet is even more powerful by standing alone as one of many miscellaneous

effusions; its focused intensity is not compromised by the need to incorporate it within a wider structural narrative. The fact that the ‘Miscellaneous Sonnets’ is comprised of a succession of these enlarging epiphanies suggests that the group itself, like the sonnets’ speakers, is looking outward, beyond temporal and spatial bounds.

Yet those bounds – the sonnet’s strict formal conventions – remain, and this becomes a vital aspect of Wordsworth’s ideological and tropological reading of the sonnet-space. The ‘Miscellaneous’ group is extensive and multi-thematic because the ‘miscellaneous’ designation is all-embracing, and because the function of the group is to capture individual moments of heightened experience which are to be found everywhere. But the most significant reason for the size and broad scope of the series – and indeed the high number of Wordsworth sonnets in general – is that the sonnet, by definition, is a *small* poem. This may seem obvious and trivial, but issues of poetic scale are vital to Wordsworth’s poetics. The sonnet is different from other short lyrics – the ‘Lucy’ poems for example – in that its humble size is prescribed by convention and tradition, and most importantly, the poet *willingly submits* to those rules. For Elizabethan sonneteers, writing when the form was first in vogue, the act of composing a sonnet was seen as a test of metrical ingenuity. It is still understood to be ‘one of the most formalized, most arbitrary and most difficult of all poetic forms’ (Hess 15), yet this did not seem to be the case for Wordsworth. For him, sonnet writing was apparently rather easy. He told Landor that in times of ‘want of resolution to take up anything of length, I have filled up many a moment in writing Sonnets’ (*Letters: Later Years* I; 126). The suggestion here is that it is the sonnet’s brevity that gives rise to so many poems in the form: creativity is brought to life by formal limitation. Yet Wordsworth hints at this by way of a reference to longer,

apparently more ambitious work: ‘anything of length’. The loaded ‘want of resolution’ is key here, for Wordsworth is essentially saying that he writes so many sonnets not only due to their appealing conciseness, but also because he often lacks the desire to tackle longer poetry. He admits that a substantial part of his sonneteering energies emerge from an underlying idleness, or more provocatively, an *evasion* of longer work, namely, *The Recluse*. Jared Curtis, referring generally to the lyric poems of 1802, suggests that for Wordsworth, ‘short poems became a remedy, a release...arising almost in recompense for the poet’s discouragement and irresolution over the “work of length and labor”’ (1971, 12). Distancing himself from the anxiety and sense of failure associated with *The Recluse*, Wordsworth found in the short poem, and particularly the sonnet, a place to relieve the pressure, allowing for regular, piecemeal composition to take place.⁷ I argue that Wordsworth thrived on the constant sense of accomplishment that came with each completed sonnet, and that this provided him with the feeling that he was at least getting something done, even if it was not *The Recluse*.⁸ The instant gratification that came from sonnet writing was something that the grander *Recluse* project could not offer, with its lack of a set structure or length.

While it is, therefore, possible to read Wordsworth’s sonneteering as a manner of *Recluse*-evasion, whether conscious or not, it should not be seen unfavourably as an *escape* from serious work, or a sign of poetic impotence. I will return to the connection between sonnets and longer work in the Conclusion, but here I want to consider in more detail the idea of turning to the sonnet because of its brevity and formalised structure. In the first chapter, I made reference to Wordsworth’s comments regarding what he saw as most admirable in Milton’s sonnets. He thought their success was due to their ‘energetic and varied flow of

sound *crowding into narrow room* more of the combined effect of rhyme and blank verse than can be done by any other kind of verse I know of' (*Letters: Early Years* 379, my emphasis). The combination of rhyme and blank verse is a Miltonic staple, and is as much a feature of *Paradise Lost* as the sonnets. What is more interesting here is the idea that Wordsworth believes musical richness, intensity and energy derive from poetry that is purposely crowded 'into narrow room'. He sees that Milton, like himself, was willing to accept constriction so that he could then pack the space to the point of satiety, which would in turn invert the freedom / constraint balance: boundless, sublime poetry is the result when you begin with clear limits. The major word here is 'narrow', for it features prominently in Wordsworth's best known and most important 'sonnet on the sonnet', 'Nuns fret not', written in 1802, the same year as his remarks on Milton's versification.

The poem is familiar and regularly anthologised as a discrete sonnet but this is problematic, for as Jonathan Hess argues, such a procedure is often undertaken 'without ever making even a reference to its original title and function' (5). In its first incarnation, in 1807's *Poems, in Two Volumes*, 'Nuns fret not' was entitled 'Prefatory Sonnet' and acted as prolegomenon to *both* groups from that volume, the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' and 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty'. Later, in *Poems of 1815*, the poem was incorporated into the extended, three-part 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' as sonnet 1 of Part 1, the opening sonnet following the dedicatory 'Happy the feeling'. Its principal position indicates that Wordsworth continued to see it as fulfilling a vital role in directing the reader. This new location is something that Hess's insightful reading of the poem, which I shall come to shortly, fails to adequately acknowledge. He alludes to the poem's initial 'Prefatory' status, but then treats it as an introductory piece to the 'Liberty' series only. Admittedly, this is done

to support his strong argument, but by overlooking the sonnet's place within the 'Miscellaneous' group, he limits the poem's potential. Read as a prologue to the 'Liberty' series, 'Nuns fret not' engages only with the subject of political liberty expounded in that collection. But when read as a prologue to the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets', as was ultimately intended, the poem's central thesis becomes wider-reaching, because there is a broader range of subject matter in this group. Since it was composed contemporaneously with the first 'Liberty' sonnets, and began life as a prefatory work for those poems also, it does of course have a substantial bearing on the public, political themes of that series, as chapter three illustrated. But its ideas concerning *excessive* liberty have a resonance that stretch beyond Wordsworth's move from France to England, and inflect upon many aspects of his thinking:

Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room;
 And hermits are contented with their cells;
 And students with their pensive citadels;
 Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,
 Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom,
 High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells,
 Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells:
 In truth the prison, unto which we doom
 Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,
 In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
 Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;
 Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)
 Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,
 Should find brief solace there, as I have found.
 (PW 1-2)

The poem is a paean to the benefits of self-enclosure. It is a sonnet in praise of sealing oneself in, away from unlimited exteriority, in order to claim the bounded interiority as a space of security, and more importantly, productivity. For while the sonnet is explicit on the contentment and happiness engendered by the self-imposed

withdrawal to the 'narrow room', in each of the examples of this manoeuvre given in the octave there is an underlying concern with the centrality of *work*. Whether that work entails spiritual insight, academic endeavour, the manufacture of cloth or the production of honey, it is the physical and mental move inwards to a site of limited space that enables fruitful labour to take place.⁹ Indeed, the fact that Wordsworth ends his examples (before moving on to himself) with the bees, to whom working within the tight space of the foxglove bells is a necessity rather than a luxury suggests that it is the creativity springing from enclosure that Wordsworth privileges most, more than the accompanying happiness. Bees may spend glorious moments soaring in the heights of Lakeland peaks, but they need to work in the small flowers, just as Wordsworth needs time to work within the sonnet-space.¹⁰

Like the fellow 'sonnet on the sonnet' 'Scorn not the sonnet', which opens Part 2, 'Nuns fret not' is a firm defence of the form, with the purpose of debunking the myth that the small, fourteen-line space is oppressive, and restricts creativity. The 'prison' into which Wordsworth, along with the nun, hermit, student and others 'dooms' himself, 'no prison is'. As a clever piece of rhetorical subversion, the sonnet sees Wordsworth construct, from within his supposed captivity, an argument that confounds and undoes the very existence of a formal, prosodic 'prison'. With a hint of knowing wit, it is at the very point that Wordsworth *says* that the sonnet is not a prison with absolute control over the poet that he *metrically* shows this to be the case: the crucial two lines are spread over the octave-sestet divide, thus violating the strict Petrarchan rules and placing the sonnet in line with the more flexible style of Milton. The formal construction of 'Nuns fret not' thus becomes an exercise in poetic freedom.

Rather than a prison, the sonnet for Wordsworth is the occasion for poetic 'pastime', a 'brief solace' from other forms. His 'work' in the sonnet, his own version of the narrow room, is the most essential requirement of the poet: unrestricted composition. The narrow room grants him the freedom to write poetry, and a great deal of it at that. 'Nuns fret not' explains why Wordsworth is able to write so many sonnets, and the following 120 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' is proof of the poem's pronouncements. Yet why should this be so? Why does formal, spatial and mental limitation result in fruitful creativity? It all hinges on the sonnet's most crucial line, already addressed in chapter 3. Wordsworth is one of those souls who has felt 'the weight of too much liberty'. As Hess argues, Wordsworth's aim is to explore the 'crisis' within liberty: the poem is a response to that moment when 'liberty, in excess of itself, has yielded up its antithesis' (7).

Liberty is of course a major concern of Wordsworth's poetry and central to the way in which he sees the world. But frequently, as this study has shown, it is liberty pushed to excess, liberty passing over into licence and the consequences of this, that particularly occupies him. More often than not, it is in the sonnet that these ideas are explored, mainly because the form itself exhibits anything but 'too much liberty'. The fine balance held between 'liberty' and 'too much liberty' corresponds with Wordsworth's dialectical manoeuvres between engagement and withdrawal. With freedom comes an artistic or emotional investment, but taking the freedom too far leads to excessive, harmful licence and a compensatory retreat is required to counter it. The retreat is not an evasion of that initial investment, now corrupted, but is an attempt to preserve or indeed restore the original spirit that had defined the investment. It is inevitably with the failure of the French Revolution that this originates, for Wordsworth began by giving himself emotionally to the cause when

genuine social freedoms were at stake and able to be won. Yet once that blissful early hope had succumbed to an excess of revolutionary fervour and ideals were lost amid bloodshed, Wordsworth enacted two retreats: a move away from France and back to England, and a withdrawal from the public realm, into the private. Similarly, the sexual liberty experienced with Annette ultimately exceeded the bounds of propriety with the birth of an illegitimate child. Compounded by his inability to form a relationship with his daughter (as a direct result of ‘too much liberty’ on the political stage), Wordsworth’s early romantic freedom and emotional engagement with Annette were cut off, and a retreat to the ‘safety’ of marriage with Mary was necessary. In both cases, it is *primarily* (not neglecting *The Prelude*) in the sonnet that these issues are memorialised. While ‘Nuns fret not’ has substantive relevance to the Annette episode, it plays a more significant role – as part of Wordsworth’s concern with excessive liberty – in terms of poetic form, and beyond.

The dynamic articulated in ‘Nuns fret not’, and borne out in countless other sonnets, is that denying liberty does not, paradoxically, restrict freedom. In fact, it does the very opposite, by keeping excessive, potentially harmful liberty in check. Hess argues that ‘one can escape from the effects of “the weight of too much liberty” only by depriving oneself of liberty altogether, only by consigning oneself to the space of the sonnet’ (12). He is right, but perhaps goes too far. For Wordsworth does not deprive himself of liberty *altogether*. The form may be tight, but there is still ample space within which to manoeuvre: there is still a ‘room’, albeit a ‘narrow’ one. What Wordsworth in fact enters into when he writes a sonnet is a manner of *compromising* full formal liberty, thereby shutting out the potential for an excess of prosodic freedom. *The Recluse* is the manifestation of this excessive formal liberty that Wordsworth bypasses by writing sonnets.

Although the unfinished poem's epic blank verse structure, without predetermined length or prosodic regulation, offered complete artistic freedom to the poet, such *absolute* free rein for the imagination served more as a hindrance than a help. From the very beginning, *The Recluse* was envisioned (primarily by Coleridge) in grand terms. While still writing *The Prelude*, Wordsworth wrote to De Quincey, telling him that the 'Poem on my own earlier life' would remain unpublished until he had 'finished a *larger and more important* work to which it is tributary...a moral and Philosophical Poem' (*Letters: Early Years* 454, my emphasis). Furthermore, Coleridge saw *The Recluse* as 'a Great Work, in which [Wordsworth] will sail; on an open Ocean, & a steady wind; unfretted by short tacks, reefing, & hawling & disentangling the ropes' (qtd. in Curtis 1971, 7). With this fanciful nautical metaphor, we see Coleridge promote the very kind of excessive liberty that Wordsworth instinctively shied away from. Coleridge hopes to see Wordsworth embark on a poetic voyage of untrammelled possibility. *The Recluse* is that sublime, 'open Ocean': without bounds and navigable in every direction. For Coleridge, it is *only* in the open *Recluse* that Wordsworth can make 'steady' progress, untroubled by the smaller, petty distractions of 'short tacks', something that implies mental diversions and unproductive changes of course. For 'short tacks' read 'short poems'. Coleridge was always hostile to Wordsworth writing small poems, since he felt that time spent on them took his friend away from concentrating on *The Recluse*, the poem that would make his name.¹¹ Yet Coleridge misread Wordsworth in this regard, for it was in the 'short tacks', those times of '*brief solace*', that Wordsworth's creativity was able to flourish. The epic, monolithic scale of *The Recluse* was a daunting prospect for Wordsworth, and served to inhibit him. The sonnet, with drastically compromised formal liberty, set him free. For this was the

genuine freedom that the narrow retreat of the sonnet offered: the freedom to write, to get something done, while the weighty *Recluse* – and Coleridge’s unrealistic demands for philosophical genius that attended it – remained, for the most part, unwritten.¹²

Jonathan Hess’s reading of ‘Nuns fret not’ is a political one: he discusses the poem’s dialectic of liberty and excessive liberty with reference solely to the *public* strand of Wordsworth’s 1802 sonneteering. He suggests that the ‘crisis’ in the concept of liberty, to which ‘Nuns fret not’ is a response, occurs *outside* the space of the sonnet, in the political realm. In Wordsworth’s articulation of the problem, therefore, liberty can only be restored by a withdrawal ‘from the political field into the realm of the aesthetic, into the space of poetic form’ (12). This corrective retreat is made possible because the sonnet form enacts an *inversion* of the initial crisis, that of ‘too much liberty’ becoming problematic. If excessive liberty *outside* of the sonnet (in the political realm) begets constraint, then self-imposed ‘excessive’ (or at least profound) constraint in the formal or aesthetic realm (in the sonnet) can beget liberty. As Hess argues, ‘recast as the performance of the negation of constraint, the sonnet becomes for Wordsworth the ultimate means for the recuperation of liberty’ (21). The sonnet, in the hands of the omnipotent poet, is a site of order and control where moderate liberty may be achieved. Concluding with reference to Schiller, Hess remarks that for Wordsworth, ‘political freedom cannot be realized by strictly political means...the aesthetic does precisely what the political cannot’ (13).¹³ This accords with my argument that to restore the integrity of political liberty, Wordsworth retreats from the public sphere, and cultivates a private, individual liberty, one that particularly finds its articulation in poetic form. But what is the nature of the ‘liberty’ at stake here? As I contend, the liberty Wordsworth finds in

the sonnet is the creative freedom to get poetry written, the ability to free oneself from the oppressive weight of lengthier work and simply compose. Hess's argument adds something extra, beyond this literal freedom afforded the poet. He suggests that the sonnet becomes 'a privileged mode of discourse on liberty' (12) precisely because of the form's ability to 'recuperate' liberty by way of its dialectical inversion. In other words, since the formal attributes of the sonnet allow it to become a site of aesthetic liberty – essentially 'winning' the concept back from the excesses of the exterior political realm – the sonnet is therefore the ideal form in which to articulate the theme of liberty. That is why 'Nuns fret not' and the 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty' *are* sonnets: their thematic concern – the reclamation of genuine, uncorrupted liberty – corresponds with the formal reclamation of liberty that the sonnet-space enacts. Hess's argument dovetails with mine in that both come to the same general result: enclosure leads to freedom. The constraint of the sonnet liberates Wordsworth's creative impulse, and makes for the ideal mode for the articulation of liberty because it is a formal manifestation of a wider trend in Wordsworth's thinking.

Indeed, the wider implications of this concept are crucial here. Hess centres his argument on the 'Liberty' sonnets and matters of form, but I want to now look beyond this, and consider how the idea of freedom engendered by a retreat to an enclosed space can operate in other ways. Hess overlooks the biographical issues that are tied to this strand of Wordsworth's thought, but it has already been discussed how the Annette episode engages with this liberty debate, and I suggest more can be said. I pick up on the discussion in chapter 2 where it was argued that Wordsworth retreats from the commercial, political world so as to nurture the private freedoms of the self, where genuine morality may flourish. Yet alongside this autonomous

cultivation of liberty is a conspicuous return to the natural: a retreat to a rural, domestic setting is a major component of the humanistic model of liberty. The withdrawal from social arenas that is initiated in the ‘Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty’ is continued in the extended ‘Miscellaneous Sonnets’. While the ‘Liberty’ sonnets are about Wordsworth’s physical and mental return to England from France, the ‘Miscellaneous Sonnets’ are about the next stage: being, or rather, *dwelling* in England. More specifically, they are concerned with dwelling in the Lake District, with Wordsworth’s cherished Grasmere Vale at its core. Since, as I have argued, this is a multifarious group, not *every* sonnet conforms to this focus on domestic enclosure, but it is a concept that underpins a number of these diverse poems.

Although they were written throughout 1802 and 1803, and so after the move to Dove Cottage, the early ‘Liberty’ sonnets seem imbued with the spirit of the itinerant, uprooted Wordsworth of the 1790s. Their narrator is a weary wanderer, still caught between two geographical and emotional locales, neither of which can adequately be called ‘home’. The ‘Miscellaneous Sonnets’ are a document of Wordsworth’s rediscovery of home. They are written by the settled, *Grasmere* poet of the new century with a more peaceful and composed outlook. Johnson calls this new mood in the later ‘Miscellaneous Sonnets’, ‘pastoral quietude’, and sees a progression, throughout the three parts of the series, moving ‘farther away from the grandeur of many sonnets in the *Poems Dedicated to National Independence and Liberty* and closer to his concept of tranquillity’ (91). The sonnets act as a confirmation of Wordsworth’s developing understanding that individual happiness, personal freedom, and communal virtue are nurtured not in politics, but in the ‘domestic affections’ of rural retirement’. I take this term from a letter of January 1801, addressed to the Whig statesman Charles James Fox:

The domestic affections will always be strong amongst men who live in a country not crowded with population, if these men are placed above poverty...Their little tract of land serves as a kind of permanent rallying point for their domestic feelings, as a tablet upon which they are written which makes them objects of memory in a thousand instances when they would otherwise be forgotten.

(*Letters: Early Years* 314-5)

The letter was sent with a copy of *Lyrical Ballads* and was intended to demonstrate to Fox that ‘men who do not wear fine cloaths can feel deeply’ (315). Wordsworth demarcates the domestic affections of this ‘class of men who are now almost confined to the North of England’ (314) in order to call attention to their gradual dissolution. ‘The bonds of domestic feeling among the poor...have been weakened, and in innumerable instances entirely destroyed’ (313-4). While Wordsworth hopes that his poetry - he refers Fox to ‘Michael’ and ‘the Brothers’ - may remind readers of these diminishing domestic virtues, he also nurtures his own ‘cult of domesticity’¹⁴ through the way in which he and Dorothy (and later Mary, children, and others) live their lives in Grasmere. Wordsworth’s own life of domestic retirement in Grasmere becomes an exemplar: one that in a very small way helps to preserve that which Wordsworth believes is being lost.¹⁵

The ‘Miscellaneous’ sonnet that most perfectly crystallizes the sense of Wordsworth’s cultivated retreat is ‘Retirement’, written in 1826. The poem is a response to a critical remark from Henry Crabb Robinson. Writing to Dorothy, Robinson complained that ‘it is a sort of moral & intellectual suicide in your brother not to have continued his admirable series of poems “dedicated to liberty”’. In his view, posterity would judge that Wordsworth ‘died in the year 1814 as far as his life consisted in an active sympathy with the temporary welfare of his fellow creatures’

(*Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson* 153). Robinson's comments mark the embryonic stages of the familiar critical assessment of Wordsworthian 'decline', and Wordsworth, quick to defend himself, responded not with a letter, but with a sonnet. 'Retirement' is therefore an important, often overlooked sonnet that connects his two most significant sonnet groups, the 'Liberty' and 'Miscellaneous' collections. It stands as the crossover sonnet, justifying why his priorities have shifted from the public to the private arena:

Peace in these feverish times is sovereign bliss:
 Here, with no thirst but what the stream can slake,
 And startled only by the rustling brake,
 Cool air I breathe; while the unencumbered Mind,
 By some weak aims at services assigned
 To gentle Natures, thanks not Heaven amiss.
(PW 24; 9-14)

The sonnet advocates the life Wordsworth has made for himself in Grasmere. It lays out a program of 'plain living and high thinking' that had been gestating since the period of first taking up residence in Grasmere, almost 30 years earlier. It is a life of simplicity and tranquillity, away from the busyness and triviality of urban existence. Most importantly, the point of the sonnet is to show that he has not lost sight of the 'welfare of his fellow creatures'. The poem should not be read as a solipsistic rejection of worldliness, but instead a promotion of a particular way of living: one that nurtures the mind and the moral centre, something that fosters, rather than ignores, sympathetic exchange with fellow man.

This is no idealised, bourgeois retreat of privileged seclusion. Indeed, while Wordsworth's later life at Rydal Mount was certainly comfortable, with the spacious house and the poet reaching a degree of literary eminence, life at Dove Cottage was

at times difficult, particularly before the Lowther debt was settled in 1803.¹⁶

Wordsworth was only too aware of economic strife impacting upon the rural idyll he constructs in the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets', and it should not be forgotten that though he moves away from the outspoken, declarative public involvement of the 'Liberty' sonnets, he does not avoid acknowledging political realities. As Judith Page argues, Wordsworth knew that 'domestic happiness and security depend on economic and political stability' (2003, 129). Sonnet 20 of Part 1, first published in 1827, 'Excuse is needless...' is a poem in praise of rural, domestic virtue, but it is also a lament for the decline in the cottage weaving industry. This work was 'once so dear / To household virtues', a 'Venerable Art, / Torn from the Poor' (*PW* 12; 8-10). The concluding quatrain is a scathing denunciation of those in power who have robbed the countryside of a vital domestic bond:

...Rulers, with undue respect,
Trusting to crowded factory and mart
And proud discoveries of the intellect,
Heed not the pillage of man's ancient heart.
(11-14)

Wordsworth is always conscious of political economy, but the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' focus on the more vital domestic economy. The former will always impact upon the latter, but Wordsworth's point is to encourage his readers nevertheless to safeguard their domestic happiness through their inherent personal freedoms. The sonnets bear witness to the poet's 'sublime conviction of the blessings of independent domestic life' (*Letters: Early Years* 314), as he expressed it to Fox, and they seek to persuade others to nurture their own bonds of household affection.

In the letter to Fox, Wordsworth writes that the ‘rallying point’ or spiritual foundation for a person’s ‘domestic feelings’ is their ‘little tract of land’. This is a loaded and quintessentially Wordsworthian term. It resonates with a phrase used in a letter to Coleridge, from Christmas Eve 1799, in which Wordsworth describes his very recent arrival to Grasmere with Dorothy. He refers to the cottage and its modest grounds as ‘our little domestic slip of mountain’ (*Letters: Early Years* 274). Both phrases stress a sense of ownership, of the importance of self-governance and the freedom to use the land for work, whether that be agricultural or domestic. But both also draw attention to the humble size of the land. This, for Wordsworth, is essential to their value: spatial constraint engenders freedom, and grandeur proceeds from humility. In ‘Nuns fret not’, Wordsworth explains how it is ‘pastime to be bound / Within the Sonnet’s scanty plot of ground’. Clearly something more significant than a discussion on the merits of writing fourteen lines of iambic pentameter is going on here. ‘Slip of mountain’, ‘tract of land’, ‘plot of ground’: the sonnet becomes a *physical*, not merely formal, space. It is a *territory* that Wordsworth can nourish, work and till, a patch of poetic soil in which his imagination can take root and ultimately give life. Wordsworth calls the domestic tract of land ‘a tablet upon which [the rural populace] are written’ (*Letters: Early Years* 315). The sonnet is the tablet upon which Wordsworth himself – his views, reflections and memories – is written.

It is significant that Wordsworth seizes the sonnet as a plot of ground on which to nourish and enrich himself, but it is perhaps more meaningful that he unites this tropological reading of the sonnet-space with his rendering of his local valley and homestead, his ‘slip of mountain’ and ‘tract of land’. By doing so, he associates the humble scope of the Lakeland tract of land, and his own modest slip of mountain, with the liberating constraint of the sonnet form. The outward look of ‘Nuns fret not’

– its rhetoric stretches beyond solely matters of poetic form – enables us to see both Dove Cottage and Grasmere as narrow, confined spaces within which Wordsworth can immerse himself and discover a sense of genuine liberty. The itinerant, rootless wanderer of the 1790s who had too much liberty returns to the Lakes in 1799 and encloses himself within the protective bounds of his new cottage and domestic vale. Heinzelman reminds us of the ‘narrow rooms of Dove Cottage’ (63), the physical spaces within which Wordsworth’s most intense and productive period of sonnet writing occurred. The palpable sense of enclosure and constraint that the small, gloomy rooms of Dove Cottage engendered, must have fed into Wordsworth’s conception of the intense crowdedness of the sonnet. The form, for Heinzelman, ‘epitomizes the domestic space that William celebrated at Grasmere and bestows upon that space an aesthetic analogue’ (63). It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that Dorothy’s 1802 recital had such an impact. The words she spoke were imbued with grandeur, but a grandeur springing from an enclosed space. Hearing those lines from Milton, the domestic bard, while nestled quietly in his rural retreat, surrounded by the trappings of a humble, happy and productive domesticity, Wordsworth was able naturally to associate the sonnet-space, and all that it was capable of, with the safety and imaginative freedom that he found in Dove Cottage. For although life in Dove Cottage must at times have felt claustrophobic, it was nevertheless an existence that was joyous, and gave rise not only to poetry, but also a spirit of community, shared responsibility, and a reverential respect for the natural world. Plain living and high thinking were made possible by the narrow room of Dove Cottage, just as Wordsworth is often at his grandest and most epiphanic in the narrow room of the sonnet. Grasmere life and the sonnet-space were both outwardly

humble, modest, even 'plain'. Emerging from both was lofty greatness: true 'high thinking'.

Wordsworth's cultivation of enclosed retreat is sustained not only within Dove Cottage, but also within the region of the Lakes as a whole. A seemingly endless landscape of mountains and valleys may suggest limitless freedom, but throughout Wordsworth's writing, we find evidence that he understood the history of his native region, and saw his own experience within it, as being shaped by definite bounds. In his *Guide to the Lakes*, Wordsworth describes the 'pure Commonwealth' of the region, the 'perfect Republic of Shepherds and Agriculturists', and suggests that the 'constitution' of the people 'had been imposed and regulated *by the mountains which protected it*' (74, my emphasis). In other words, the people's identity – their right to individual freedom and communal fellowship – is safeguarded by the natural boundary of the mountains. They are free and peaceful because they live within an enclosed valley, sealed off from potentially harmful intrusion. In *The Prelude*, as part of his discussion on 'Love of Nature Leading to Love of Mankind', Wordsworth returns from London to the 'Paradise / Where I was reared' and finds 'Man free, man working for himself, with choice / Of time, and place, and object; by his wants, / His comforts, native occupations, cares, / Conducted on to individual ends / Or social' (*P*; VIII, 144-5, 152-6). Crucially, their lives are lived within a '*circumambient World / Magnificent, by which they are embraced*' (VIII; 47-8, my emphasis). In describing their native landscape, he constructs an enclosing space which envelops and surrounds them from all sides:

...the silent Rocks, which now from high
Look down upon them; the reposing Clouds,
The lurking Brooks from their invisible haunts,

And Old Helvellyn, conscious of the stir,
 And the blue Sky that roofs their calm abode.
 (VIII; 57-61)

Wordsworth manages to turn the lofty landscape, which takes in clouds and the mighty Helvellyn, into a nook, almost a 'narrow room', within which the people find perfect liberty. They are free because the confines strengthen their sense of regional identity, and nurture a self-sufficient, morally-attuned community. In both of these cases, the emancipatory confines of the mountains are analogous to the restrictive, but liberating, walls of Dove Cottage and the formal 'walls' of the sonnet.

A more striking example is found in *Home at Grasmere*, a poem that can be seen as a counterpart to the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' in that it is 'written in praise of settled domesticity and the kind of ideal circumscribed freedom which the Vale of Grasmere represents for [Wordsworth]' (Jarvis 1997, 112). Recalling looking out on the Vale as a boy, Wordsworth describes what the scene means to him, and outlines his conception of home-making. His assured commitment to the Vale as a site of freedom and growth is akin to the resolute affirmation of his role as poet. He is as much a 'dedicated spirit' to Grasmere as he is to poetry:

I seemed to feel such liberty was mine,
 Such power and joy; but only for this end,
 To flit from field to rock, from rock to field,
 From shore to island, and from isle to shore,
 From open place to covert, from a bed
 Of meadow-flowers into a tuft of wood,
 From high to low, from low to high, yet still
 Within the bounds of this huge Concave; here
 Should be my home, this Valley be my World.

(*The Major Works* 174-199; 35-43)

The lines read like an enlarged version of Wordsworth's work in the 'Miscellaneous' sonnet-space. His freedom to flit between field, rock, shore, island and so on is paralleled in the opportunities he finds in the liberating sonnet, moving between various locales and subjects. The vale and the sonnet are both self-contained and self-sustaining spaces within which Wordsworth can roam. Furthermore, just as he is able to physically range from high to low in Grasmere Vale, the sonnet grants him the freedom to move between lofty and lowly subjects, finding value in both. In sonnet 9 of Part 2, Wordsworth provides a further defence of his turn to tranquil, domestic themes and argues, as he does in 'Retirement', that meaningful, sublime poetry is just as capable of springing from humble origins as it is from grand ones:

Not Love, not War, nor the tumultuous swell
 Of civil conflict, nor the wrecks of change,
 Nor duty struggling with afflictions strange –
 Not these *alone* inspire the tuneful shell;
 But where untroubled peace and concord dwell,
 There also is the Muse not loth to range...

(*PW* 24; 1-6)

The enclosed retreat of the Vale, where simply 'watching the twilight smoke of cot or grange' (7) is a source of valuable inspiration, frees the wandering Muse as much as it does the nestled dweller, who has the liberty of 'choice / Of time, and place, and object'. The strength of the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' lies in the metaphorical rendering of Grasmere. The village and its locale are rarely explicitly mentioned, but are instead subtly woven into Wordsworth's evocation of a natural setting. It is clear that the place where 'untroubled peace and concord dwell' is Grasmere, and there is a particular power in the symbolic understatement of a line such as that which closes 'Not Love, not War': 'The flower of sweetest smell is shy and lowly' (14). This is a

long way from the hustle and bustle of London or Paris. The liberated Muse is, in the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets', governed more by 'untroubled peace' than it is by 'tumultuous swell', meaning there are a number of sonnets on simple, humble themes like the cuckoo (*PW* 45), the thrush (*PW* 56), and the snow-drop, 'hemmed in with snows' (*PW* 28; 1, my emphasis). But the tonal versatility of the sonnet and the thematic inclusiveness of the 'Miscellaneous' designation means the series also contains much weightier material, like Wordsworth's lament for the 'Decay of Piety' (*PW* 13). The 'Miscellaneous Sonnets', like most of Wordsworth's sonnets, are characterised by moving 'from high to low, from low to high' (*The Major Works* 174 – 199; 41).

Yet the most important factor here, as Wordsworth says in *Home at Grasmere*, is that this flitting and ranging is always conducted 'Within the bounds of this huge Concave'. He moves away from the lexicon of 'narrowness' here, with the 'huge Concave', but significantly retains the emphasis on boundaries: living and working within limits. It is a further confirmation of a dominant strain in Wordsworth's whole way of thinking: that liberty is nurtured by the individual within established confines. The retreat to Grasmere and the retreat to the sonnet are both self-conscious manoeuvres into those confines. The 'bounds' of the valley in *Home at Grasmere* echo in Wordsworth's 'pastime to be bound / Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground'. 'Home' to Wordsworth is defined by its boundaries. The protective 'walls' of the valley encircle his entire 'World'. The sonnet, with these same walls, is as much a home to Wordsworth as Grasmere is. For Wordsworth's work in the sonnet is a re-appropriation, or a formal rendering of this ideal mode of existence that he develops in Grasmere. Elsewhere, as in the 'Liberty' sonnets, Wordsworth uses the confined space of the form for its immediacy and

Miltonic heritage, but in the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' and indeed some of those to the River Duddon, he uses the formal characteristics of the sonnet to crystallize a theoretical approach to domestic experience. He finds in the sonnet an exemplary metrical model that corresponds with his concept of fruitful living. Social 'withdrawal' is transferred from life into poetry, making for a poetics which does not so much work through its formal limitations, but rather, embraces them, making enclosure and retreat fundamental to its rhetoric. Sonnets on these themes recur throughout the 'Miscellaneous' group and the wider sonnet corpus, precisely because the sonnet itself is a kind of formal retreat, removed from the unchecked liberty of blank verse. The 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' are therefore a record of Wordsworth's mid to late life, both thematically and aesthetically.¹⁷

This, then, must be seen as one of the most important interpretive shifts that occurs when we read the Wordsworthian career, or his ethos, through the sonnets rather than *The Prelude* or the major lyrics. Perhaps the most significant orthodox view of Wordsworth is that he is the poet of the sublime, of the boundless imagination in a boundless natural world. The poet of *The Prelude* follows the growth of the imagination through his life, and 'from its progress have we drawn / The feeling of life endless, the great thought / By which we live, infinity and God' (*P*; XIII, 182-4). As his imagination compensates for the despondency that follows unknowingly crossing the Alps, Wordsworth exclaims 'Our destiny, our nature, and our home, / Is with infinitude, and only there' (*P*; VI, 538-9). And in 'Tintern Abbey', the dwelling of his 'sense sublime' is 'the light of setting suns, / And the round ocean, and the living air, / And the blue sky, and in the mind of man' (*LB* 116-20; 96, 98-100). This is the familiar Wordsworth of imaginative and spatial expansion, who derives his power from his sense of infinity. Yet when we place the

sonnet in a position of eminence, and see how Wordsworth uses it in his career, a different view begins to emerge, one where limits and bounds take precedence. The alternative sonneteering model does not necessarily undermine or negate the model of sublimity and transcendence, but it does force a repositioning of it. We must accommodate the expansive Wordsworth alongside the Wordsworth of self-imposed confinement and restriction. For in both cases, Wordsworth achieves the same thing: a sense of grandeur and internal liberty. Yet in the sonnet, the formal analogue of an ideal mode of living, this is arrived at by a different dynamic: restriction engenders liberty. By acknowledging this vital dynamic that runs through much of Wordsworth's thinking – which we do by highlighting the critical importance of the sonnet in the poet's career – certain aspects of Wordsworth's life become clearer or acquire a coherence that they otherwise lack. His move to conservatism and his failure to write *The Recluse* make more sense with this perspective from the sonnets. *The Recluse* represented 'too much liberty' which served as a block to Wordsworth's creativity, whereas the sonnets, as I have argued, were Wordsworth's space to be free. The political move is less of a class-based conservative manoeuvre, and more a cultivation of domestic virtue – the very thing the turn to the sonnet represents. To understand Wordsworth as a poet of restriction is a vital addition to our standard idea of the sublime poet: it is the sonnet that grants us this view.

There are, then, three main reasons why Wordsworth privileges the formal attributes of the sonnet. Firstly, as it has been argued, the sonnet offers him freedom. The sonnet form, and Wordsworth's method of categorisation, liberate the creative impulse, as the 'Muse' of 'Not Love, not War' makes clear. But many of the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' are also infused with a feeling of joyous independent liberty that Wordsworth also describes in *Home at Grasmere*. Since the 'homely' sonnet

form is a mimetic representation of Wordsworth's self-conscious cultivation of enclosed domesticity, many of the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' mirror that personal, lived sense of liberty that the poet experiences in Grasmere and its vale. This extends from the quiet, pensive freedom of settled contentment, such as when Wordsworth muses upon the glorious shape of Wansfell which rises over Ambleside – 'this Household has a favoured lot, / Living with liberty on thee to gaze' (*PW* 60; 1-2) – to the more jubilant sense of liberation he feels 'when mother fancy rocks / The wayward brain, to saunter through a wood' (*PW* 21; 1-2).¹⁸ Secondly, as the previous chapter and the beginning of this outlined, in many of his sonnets, Wordsworth explores moments of heightened experience: emotional epiphanies that are found in the course of everyday life. These moments are more concentrated and intense in the sonnet, because of the form's constriction.

The final reason is perhaps the most interesting. Wordsworth sees the sonnet as a form of protection, providing safety from exterior forces, and this is reflected in the subject matter of a number of the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets'. The homeliness and accessibility of the small sonnet is a 'solace' from 'too much liberty', or as Jennifer Wagner says, 'a *refuge* from another major life work, namely, the epic' (37, my emphasis). That sense of *protective*, as well as liberating and epiphanic enclosure is central to Wordsworth's domestic experience in Grasmere. Writing sonnets as a refuge from *The Recluse*, a manner of sealing oneself off as self-preservation, is the formal analogue of Wordsworth's domestic retreat to his numerous homes in Grasmere Vale. The need for safety is not weakening or defensive, but rather a dynamic, offensive strategy, conducted to ensure the success of the liberating and epiphanic manoeuvres.

'Composed by the side of Grasmere Lake' is the quintessential 'Miscellaneous' Sonnet, with its emphasis on peace and rural retreat. However, it happens to be part of the extended 'Poems Dedicated to National Independence and Liberty' series, and so marks a crossover between Wordsworth's political and private sonneteering modes. By encouraging his audience to read the poem as a public effusion, the essentially parochial outlook of the lines becomes all the more striking. 'Ruthless mortals wage incessant wars' (*PW* 127; 8) throughout Europe, but as Wordsworth concludes, "'Be thankful thou; for, if unholy deeds / Ravage the world, tranquillity is here!'" (13-14). It develops the sentiment of the early 'Liberty' sonnet, 'Composed in the Valley, near Dover', where Europe 'in Bonds' is 'Thought for another moment'. Not only does the poet take his mind away from warfare and strife, but he also firmly roots himself physically in his native scene (with the loco-descriptive title) as a protective manoeuvre. Grasmere is a site of valuable seclusion, a haven of peace 'at happy distance from earth's groaning field' (7), and it is from here, that Wordsworth can concentrate his energies in the enclosed space, to project them outwards to serve liberty, and capture moments of heightened emotional states.

However, the safety of the sonnet / Grasmere manifests itself in a different, more defensive way at the end of the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets'. An older, more disillusioned Wordsworth wrote a pair of sonnets in 1844 that deal with the fear of intrusion. The two sonnets 'On the Projected Kendal and Windermere Railway' were published in the *Morning Post* and were 'followed up by two long letters' of protest (Gill 1989, 413). These are bitter, sorrowful poems, decrying the 'rash assault' of a proposed extension of the rail system, which would bring an increase in tourists to the Lakes. Wordsworth asks if 'no nook of English ground' is 'secure / From rash assault' (*PW* 61-2; 1-2). As a continuation of the tropological reading of the sonnet

as a 'plot of ground', this poem reads like Wordsworth's fear of the sonnet-space being attacked by 'rash assault'. With his later career being so dominated by sonnets, due to their ease, accessibility, and homeliness, it is as if by this late point in his life (he was 74) Wordsworth was barricaded in to the safety of the narrow room, using it solely as a source of protection. These sonnets, about his very real fear of the Lake region's walls being breached, can also be seen as a fear of creative life outside the sonnet.

I have been arguing that Wordsworth uses the sonnet form tropologically, by writing sonnets that emblemise his way of perceiving domestic experience. He seizes upon the congruity he finds between the liberating and empowering enclosure he nurtures in domestic life, and that offered by the fourteen lines of the sonnet. In so doing, he constructs a poetics that centralises – both thematically and aesthetically – these vital constituents of his thinking. As such, we have 'Miscellaneous' sonnets that have individual liberty and the joy and protectiveness of rural retreat as their subject matter. But we also have a poet who himself, as an artist, feels both free and safe working within the sonnet-space. The most crucial distinction between Wordsworth's creative role and his domestic existence is that as sonneteer, he has *absolute* control over his highly cultivated narrow room, in a way that he does not outside the walls of the sonnet. Wordsworth can safeguard his and his fellow man's liberty, virtue and security from within the sonnet and I argue that this, along with the form's accessibility, is the reason why it became Wordsworth's dominant mode of poetic expression as his life progressed. It allowed him to do the things he could not do, or were impossible to do, in his real life. While the trajectory of Wordsworth's sonnet writing sees him moving away from the political activism of his youth, and into a more conservative tenor, it is worth noting that the

‘Miscellaneous Sonnets’ – which span the entirety of his sonneteering career, and so stretch long past the so-called ‘great decade’ – show Wordsworth at his most radical and exciting. They bear witness to a poet of sensation and emotion, a campaigner for liberty, and a firm advocate of the value of rural existence.

¹ For this chapter, I refer to the three part series from Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire’s edition of the *Poetical Works*, Vol III, based on the 1845 version.

² Curran finds ‘a surprisingly coherent pattern’ emerging in the series as they appeared in *Poems, in Two Volumes* (41). An early editor, Edward Dowden, argued that in the extended series, while ‘these poems were written at various widely-parted times, they were finally arranged so as to illustrate one another, and form not indeed a linked chain of sonnets but a sequence as far as a sequence can be made from disconnected pieces by happy ordering’ (327).

³ When writing the Duddon sonnets in 1818, Mary Wordsworth wrote to her sister Sara remarking ‘he is asleep from sheer exhaustion – he has worked so long’ (*SSIP* 49).

⁴ An early editor, Thomas Hutchinson, although speaking of all Wordsworth’s sonnets, remarks that Wordsworth ‘does not search his mind for subjects, he goes forth into the world and they present themselves’ (220).

⁵ I have been arguing, so far, that the ‘Miscellaneous’ group does not strive for coherence or a narrative structure. It is a thematically rich group, but as I come on to argue later in the chapter, there is an underlying concern throughout the group with an articulation of settled, domestic life: some notion of a dominant *focus*, rather than theme, thus begins to emerge. However, this need not stand in opposition to the fact that this is still a diverse group. Domestic tranquillity is an overarching concern, but it is explored through a range of styles and subject matter – encompassing descriptions of natural scenes, addresses to friends, reflections on gardening, and so on – and it is not dealt with by way of a linear narrative, as there is in Wordsworth’s other sonnet groups.

⁶ The phrase comes from Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s ‘Introductory Sonnet’, (Levin 85; 1).

⁷ This obviously extended beyond 1802, where Curtis focuses, as the 1822 letter to Landor testifies.

⁸ The exhaustion that often accompanied Wordsworth’s bouts of composition generally came about when he was *revising* poetry. While some sonnets were revised (various examples are mentioned throughout this study), the changes were not that extensive, sometimes an altered line or reworked punctuation. The point is that longer work like *The Prelude* or *Home at Grasmere* naturally received greater revisions, making for greater stress. In more ways than one, therefore, sonnet writing was a more accessible undertaking for Wordsworth than longer work.

⁹ Phelan (15) briefly addresses the economic and political implications of Wordsworth’s invocation of weavers and their ‘blithe and happy’ state, who in 1802 were of course ‘threatened by the industrialisation of manufacture’. A later sonnet, ‘Excuse is needless...’ picks up on this theme, and will be considered later in the chapter.

¹⁰ The opening list of characters and creatures who crave their particular ‘narrow room’ follows an interesting movement downwards from the heights of pious, ascetic devotion, through secular study, manual trade and ultimately to the humble bee. It is a classic example, in miniature, of Wordsworth’s interconnectivity of majesty and humility, showing the two states as analogous and mutually dependent.

¹¹ In 1799, Coleridge told Wordsworth, in no uncertain terms, that he was ‘wholly against the publication of any small poems’ (qtd. in Curtis 1971, 6). Other members of Wordsworth’s circle were similarly concerned that progress on *The Recluse* was scant, while work elsewhere, on supposedly ‘less important’ poems, proceeded comfortably. In 1821, in a letter to Catherine Clarkson informing her of composition on the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, Dorothy says that ‘William is quite well, and very busy, though he has not looked at the Recluse or the poem on his own life; and this disturbs us. After

fifty years of age there is no time to spare, and unfinished works should not, if it be possible, be left behind' (*Letters: Later Years I*; 50). A wryer observation from Dorothy came in an 1826 letter to Henry Crabb Robinson: '[William] has lately written some very good Sonnets. I wish I could add that the "Recluse" was brought from his hiding-place' (*Letters: Later Years I*; 500).

¹² Of course, this reading does not account for the long poems that Wordsworth did write: *The Prelude* and *The Excursion* in particular. I suggest that *The Recluse* was a different case firstly because of the added pressure of Coleridge's expectation. But also, even though *The Prelude* and *The Excursion* were long poems, Wordsworth always envisioned them as being subordinate to the larger *Recluse* project. I argue that by writing these two works with the knowledge that they were prefatory or constituent material, rather than the *complete* entity, Wordsworth (perhaps unconsciously) saw them both in reduced terms. In the gothic church metaphor, the two poems were to be shorter, more concise poems. Obviously, they ultimately became very long, but by being conceived as 'smaller poems' Wordsworth attached some semblance of formal limitation on them, even if it was only imagined, and that is what allowed him to progress with them, as my argument regarding limitation engendering creativity outlines.

¹³ See Hess 12-15 for the entirety of his complex argument.

¹⁴ I borrow the term from Kurt Heinzelman's essay.

¹⁵ It is possible that once more, Wordsworth felt an affinity with Milton in this regard. In 1665, Milton left London to escape the Plague and settled, albeit temporarily, at a cottage in Chalfont St. Giles. It was here, in domestic retirement, that he completed *Paradise Lost*.

¹⁶ Judith Page reminds us that 'although Rydal Mount was comfortable...luxury was never the issue: for Wordsworth, Rydal Mount became a domestic anchor and spiritual home' (2003, 133). This was the whole point of life at both Rydal and Dove Cottage – the cultivation of humble and fruitful dwelling, based on love and 'mutual labor' (Heinzelman 52). See Heinzelman and Page for fuller discussions of life at Grasmere. These studies, along with Mellor, establish a feminist reading, which sees Wordsworth's self-conscious cultivation of domesticity as a turn to feminine roles. I disagree however with Phelan's rendering of this manoeuvre, when he says that Wordsworth takes on roles of 'self-restraint...seclusion and passivity'. Life in Grasmere, and Wordsworth's work in the sonnet form there, was active and productive, not passive.

¹⁷ This does not mean, however, that those sonnets in other series – such as the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* – that do not centralise the theme of enclosure are separate from this poetics of emancipatory restriction. My point is that writing a sonnet, whatever the subject matter, is a liberating experience for Wordsworth. Although the presence of 'Nuns fret not' and the sonnets on Grasmere make this dynamic particularly prevalent in the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets', by self-consciously withdrawing to *any* kind of sonnet, Wordsworth is purposely confining himself to a formal rendering of the blissful enclosure he found in life.

¹⁸ See Jarvis (1997, 89-125), who discusses Wordsworth as 'pedestrian poet'. Walking was an essential personal freedom for the poet.

Chapter 6

The River Duddon and the sonnet sequence

Rivers flow throughout Wordsworth's poetry. The 'sweet inland murmur' (*LB* 116-20; 4) of the river Wye, heard from a few miles above Tintern Abbey is echoed in the tranquil drift of the Thames at dawn, which 'glideth at his own sweet will' (*P2V* 147; 12) as Wordsworth makes his way to France in 1802 across Westminster Bridge. After unknowingly crossing the Alps, the 'giddy prospect of the raving stream' (*P*; VI, 565) pulls Wordsworth into a communion with the sublime forms of nature, and it is of course the 'Beloved Derwent, fairest of all streams' (*P* 1799; I, 16) that Wordsworth seized upon as his original source of inspiration for *The Prelude* in its earliest manifestation. The poetic potential of the river became so acute for Wordsworth that he used it in 1822 as a way to follow the evolving progress of the Established English Church in the *Ecclesiastical Sketches*, although in that series – which will be considered in the next chapter – the river is entirely metaphorical and has little relation to its natural counterpart. The pure, free-flowing waters of the natural world formed a cherished and essential part of Wordsworth's spiritual wellbeing¹, and nowhere in his poetry are they more directly memorialised and celebrated, than in *The River Duddon* sonnets of 1820. Together, these 33 sonnets constitute his longest sustained meditation on the form and flow of a river, and significantly, they became his most popular and well-received collection of poetry.² In this chapter, I want to get a sense of how, and for what purposes, Wordsworth was using the sonnet form at this midpoint of his writing career. I want to consider where this series came from: what brought Wordsworth to write it, and what both the river and the collection as a whole meant to him.³ I build on work by

Daniel Robinson, Stephen Gill and David Fairer, and argue that Wordsworth wrote his sonnets as an adaption of the Wartonian river sonnet, and that he saw the Duddon sequence as a way of re-evaluating his career as poet.

In the first of his 'Essays Upon Epitaphs', published in *The Friend* on 22 February 1810, Wordsworth reflects upon the notion of immortality: the 'intimation or assurance within us, that some part of our nature is imperishable' (*Prose* II; 50). This leads him towards inquisitive musing 'upon the subject of origination' and its place in 'the mysteries of nature' (51). What follows is a compelling account of the child's first encounter with these momentous subjects, and it is in the form of the *river* that these ideas come to life:

Never did a child stand by the side of a running stream, pondering within himself what power was the feeder of the perpetual current, from what never-wearied sources the body of water was supplied, but he must have been inevitably propelled to follow this question by another: "Towards what abyss is it in progress? what receptacle can contain the mighty influx?"...the *spirit* of the answer must have been *as* inevitably, - a receptacle without bounds or dimensions; - nothing less than infinity (51).

When, in his discussions with Isabella Fenwick, Wordsworth notes that he 'first became acquainted with the Duddon, as I have good reason to remember, in early boyhood' (*Fenwick* 30), we are naturally inclined to see in this young child, with his intimations of immortality and infinity, a version of Wordsworth himself. The very form of a river and the mystery of its flow hint at something else beyond. Even the simplest and lowliest of streams can, for Wordsworth, inspire a sense of the sublime. This is a key dynamic that runs through *The River Duddon*. Wordsworth is at all

times moving between two different ways of seeing the river, holding them both in a fine balance. In one sense, the sequence shows Wordsworth working in the loco-descriptive mode, where place, feeling and memory – associated with the literal river beside him – are his central concerns. Yet operating alongside this, indeed, dependent upon this, is a symbolic mode, where Wordsworthian transcendence and an imaginative connection to the river define his riparian experience. This balance, which will be considered throughout the chapter, derives much of its energy from the fact that these are not merely river poems, but river *sonnets*.

In the ‘Essay Upon Epitaphs’ account, reason – which tells the child that the ultimate destination for the river is ‘sea or ocean’ – fails when pitted against the active imagination, which enlarges the image of the ever-flowing waters so that it may overwhelm rational bounds and become an object of infinitude, both spatially and temporally. The ‘experience’ of the river, as this account describes, is one in which the observer is necessarily led both backwards and forwards: to the origin, or ‘feeder’ of the river, and to the river’s terminus at the mighty ‘receptacle’, to the past, and into the future. The ordinary English river, just like the numerous arrayed features of immensity in an Alpine landscape can become ‘first, and last, and midst, and without end’ (*P*; VI, 572). In the opening sonnet of the sequence, Wordsworth locates his river firmly within an English, or more specifically, *Lakeland* landscape. He envies not the ‘shades’ and ‘grateful coolness’ of Horace’s Spring of Bandusia, and remains both careless of ‘Persian fountains’ and heedless of ‘Alpine torrents thundering’ (*SSIP* 56; 1, 2, 6, 7). He dismisses them so as to assert the localness and humbleness of his subject: ‘I seek the birth-place of a native Stream... For Duddon, long-lov’d Duddon, is my theme’ (9, 14). The rejection of these grand rivers tells his readers that emotional resonance and poetic merit can be found in lowly natural

scenes, but at the same time, the initial invocation of the sublime description and classical heritage is reflected onto the Duddon; Wordsworth's river assumes some of Horace's glory. Bandusia is likely to have been a small, obscure spring itself, only invested with greatness and timelessness through Horace's poetry. Wordsworth's intent was to do the same with his unsung Duddon.

Like evening, the time of day which helped Wordsworth in developing his early sonnet voice, the 'moment' of the river is always in flux. The ceaseless momentum of the water means that the constancy and permanence of the concept of a 'river' in an abstract sense are qualified by its inherent mutability. The river will always continue to be: 'Still glides the Stream, and shall for ever glide' Wordsworth writes in the sequence's famous concluding sonnet (*SSIP* 75; 5)⁴, but it is forever changing: at no two moments of time is it ever the same. Wyman Herendeen, in his survey of cultural and literary representations of rivers, encourages us to think about them in new epistemological ways:

What is a river? Where does one point when locating it? What is it materially? Is it identified by its mountain source, or by its outlet in the sea – its head or its mouth, the one of which often remains unlocated while the other keeps moving? Is it the water between its banks, or the banks which embrace that protean element? (3)

These are the kinds of questions that Wordsworth seems to be addressing in his Duddon volume. The sonnets and their accompanying prose, particularly the *Topographical Description*, explore the idea that the most significant parts of a river for a poet's imagination are its source and its outlet, and more importantly, that a river is more than simply running waters. The 'value' of a river is to be found, as Herendeen implies, in the banks which embrace the water, and 'the meadows, fields

and forests' beyond (4). The Duddon sonnets are as much about the surrounding region as they are about a small, obscure river. Indeed, they are in many ways a celebration of the Lake District *because* they take an undervalued, unsung river as representative of the region. Just as important as region, however, is the imaginative self: in following the river, Wordsworth uncovers both the history of the landscape, *and* his own past.

Faced with the inevitable mutability of his or her fluvial subject, the poet can never adequately capture the 'now' of a river. The river seems to 'exist outside of time' (Herendeen 6) and so the most productive way to engage with it is to access those moments and locales of relative stasis or perpetuity – the river's origin and final outlet, although as Herendeen points out, these too are subject to change, or may remain unknowable. By having these two limits as his aspirational markers in the sonnets – he begins by seeking 'the birth-place of a native Stream' (*SSIP* 56; 9) and ends by seeking 'that receptacle vast' into which the river's water runs (*SSIP* 74-5; 7) – the sequence represents Wordsworth's attempt to harness the entirety of the river, and in so doing, transcend spatial and temporal bounds. A poet who observes and reflects upon a river from one place at one time will only ever offer a confined understanding of the 'protean element'. The celebration of a river may be enacted in the present, but by looking to the past and into the future, it becomes timeless. Herendeen points to the necessity of an *imaginative* investment in order to fully understand the river, making the endeavour particularly suited to Romantic lyricism:

In defying the limits of time and space, the river seems to participate in the infinite, and in so doing, it suggests not only that the world is ultimately incomprehensible to humanity but also that whatever we do know of it, we know through the diviner, intellectual qualities of our imaginative faculties (7).

This is precisely the path pursued in the sonnet sequence. Wordsworth provides a tour of the river Duddon by drawing from his *creative* imagination, and by appealing to the reader's *perceptive* imagination. The sonnets give life to a river which had, for the most part, remained unknown and untraveled.⁵ We hear Wordsworth, at different stages, uncover, invent and imagine the story of the river Duddon, in accordance with three overlapping time frames that give the sequence its sense of timelessness. As Lee Johnson says, the river's progress 'is an analogue to the birth, maturity and death of man', and has 'a parallel in the course of a day, from twilight at dawn to twilight at dusk' (123), but there is also the unending progression from the river's prehistoric origins to its eternal future. It is this, combined with Wordsworth's awareness that the river means different things and takes on different identities at separate locales, that allows the poet to at once overcome and exploit the river's defiance, in Herendeen's words, of the limits of time and space.

This is all undertaken with a primarily imaginative impetus, rather than a descriptive one. Melinda Ponder suggests that 'the sonnets portray not the landscape itself, but the workings of the poet's mind upon the landscape' (165), while Johnson refers to the sonnets' 'relatively disappointing descriptions' and claims that 'to read the sequence as a compendium of outstanding sights and sounds along the Duddon's banks is simply a mistake' (122). Yet as Wordsworth sets out to follow the course of the Duddon, it appears his intent *is* to provide a descriptive memorial of the river:

How shall I paint thee? – Be this naked stone
 My seat while I give way to such intent;
 Pleased could my verse, a speaking monument,
 Make to the eyes of men thy features known.
 (SSIP 57-8; 1-4)

As soon as this is pronounced, however, he realises the difficulty of such a venture. The river's origins are so humble that Wordsworth sees nothing around him that can inspire composition – 'nature lent / To thy beginning nought that doth present / Peculiar grounds for hope to build upon' (6-8). Neither 'modern Fortune's care' nor 'Antiquity's esteem' have dignified the spot with anything that can mark the scene and make it known 'to the eyes of men' (11, 10). It is with this realisation that Wordsworth forgoes any attempt to actively seek out features of remarkable drama for the sake of providing arresting description. For while there may be a lack of spectacle in the river's locale, he is nevertheless charmed by the simple splendour of the water and its workings upon the banks:

Yet thou thyself hast round thee shed a gleam
Of brilliant moss, instinct with freshness rare;
Prompt offering to thy Foster-mother, Earth!
(12-14)

The sonnet here gestures towards a visionary mode, with the archetypal Wordsworthian 'gleam'. He realises that an attempt to describe the scenery with absolute precision, so that the 'eyes of men' may accurately perceive the shapes and colours he himself sees will not be fruitful. The 'gleam' of moss represents an appeal to our imaginative sense, and we are to see something of great spiritual significance in it. 'Thou *thyself* hast round thee shed' implies a force emanating from, and encircling the river, making us see the moss not as a product of the germination of spores on the damp fringes of the river, but rather as an aura surrounding and protecting the Duddon. The two modes – the loco-descriptive and the symbolic – are held in tension in this sonnet, for while Wordsworth moves towards an imaginative

engagement with the river, there remains an underlying desire to present the Duddon in naturalistic terms. As the sequence progresses, we see Wordsworth's presentation of the river's topographical actuality increasingly enacted *through* the symbolic mode.⁶ It is in this regard that the accompanying *Topographical Description* is important. Wordsworth wrote that he republished the prose work as part of the *River Duddon* publication, 'from a consciousness of its having been written in the same spirit which dictated several of the poems, and from a belief that it will tend naturally to illustrate them' (*Guide to the Lakes* xi).⁷ As Stephen Gill points out, this is more of an 'instruction' to the reader than 'a clarificatory footnote for future biographers' (2007, 29). Wordsworth gives us a clear indication here, of how he wants the two works to be read. The prose *Topographical Description* is a 'poetic celebration of the Lake District' (Gill 2007, 29), with personal views on the region's beauty, but it is also a factual guide for tourists, with geological, topographical and historical detail. It is here that Wordsworth is able to be specific in his descriptions of place, to adhere to a naturalistic appraisal of the landscape. The Duddon sonnets are written 'in the same spirit' in that they too are a celebration of the Lake District, but they animate the landscape through a symbolic use of the river. The *Topographical Description* 'illustrates' the sonnets in the sense that it opens up the region to the heart, but also to the *eye*. The Duddon sonnets reveal the region through the *imagination*.

In the 'Postscript' to the sonnets, Wordsworth draws attention to the numerous poets he feels are worthy of mention for their contribution to the loco-descriptive and river traditions. He names John Dyer, William Crowe, John Armstrong and ends with Virgil and Burns, observing that 'the power of waters over the minds of Poets has been acknowledged from the earliest ages' (*SSIP* 77). However, the bulk of his recognition is reserved for Coleridge, who, he explains,

played a role in the embryonic stages of the Duddon project. The implication, at least initially, is that Wordsworth's idea for the Duddon sequence was inspired by, or perhaps borrowed from, 'Mr. Coleridge; who, more than twenty years ago, used to speak of writing a rural Poem, to be entitled "The Brook", of which he has given a sketch in a recent publication' (*SSIP* 76). The 'recent publication' is of course *Biographia Literaria*, and in a midway 'chapter of digression and anecdotes', Coleridge describes what he had intended for *The Brook*. He takes what he perceived to be the structural deficiencies of Cowper's *The Task* as his starting point, noting that in that 'admirable poem', 'the connections are frequently awkward, and the transitions abrupt and arbitrary'. In recognisably Wordsworthian terms, he goes on to say that *The Brook*, by contrast, would pursue 'a subject, that should give equal room and freedom for description, incident, and impassioned reflections on men, nature, and society, yet supply in itself a natural connection to the parts, and unity to the whole' (*Biographia* 195-6). I will come back to the echo of Wordsworth's 'On Man, on Nature and on Human Life' from the Prospectus to *The Recluse* later, but for the time being, the similarities with the Duddon sonnets are worth noting. Coleridge says that he found a suitable subject 'in a stream' and that his aim was to trace it 'from its source in the hills', through 'the first break or fall', to 'the sheepfold...to the lonely cottage and its bleak garden won from the heath; to the hamlet, the villages, the market-town, the manufactories', and ultimately to 'the seaport' (196). At all times, the goal was to maintain the integrity of its constituent parts, while most importantly, providing a sense of 'unity to the whole'. Formal and thematic *unity*, emerging out of disparate reflections, is something that Wordsworth believed the sonnet was particularly capable of achieving.⁸ A river, or stream, as Coleridge points out, is especially suited to a unified poetic project, in contrast to the rather loose and

disjointed thematic drive of *The Task*. The river allows for the opportunity to consider various subjects, times, places and local tales, inspired by different points along its course, which are all linked to each other and function together because of the presence of a central unifying motif. Cowper's sofa cannot offer the same. Having a river as the primary subject ensures that every separate reflection genuinely 'flows' into the next. Just as an actual river in the natural world is 'mutable yet constant' (Herendeen 6), its literary counterpart can be changeable and inspire digression, while at the same time remaining continuous and unified. By writing a coherent sonnet *sequence*, a project presumably more analogous to the unrealised *Brook* concept than a single sonnet or group of unconnected poems would be, Wordsworth was better able to exploit this balance of separateness and unity. This is something that did not go unnoticed by the volume's reviewers, and it came to be seen as the most appealing feature of the sonnets. The *British Critic* saw the sonnets as 'the gem of the volume', and believed Wordsworth's act of following the Duddon from source to sea, in which he 'seizes on all the incidents by the way that strike his attention', to be 'a beautiful idea; each incident has the completeness and unity essential to a sonnet while the stream is the connecting link' (Reiman 194). An 1822 review of *Ecclesiastical Sketches* from the same monthly makes reference to Coleridge, and may allude to *The Brook*:

The idea of a succession in topographical and historical order of fragments of poetry which though treating respectively of separate incidents should yet be intimately connected together, and in fact form but one poem in the whole, seems to have originated with Mr. Coleridge, but the River Duddon is the first instance of such a plan being carried into execution (Reiman 196).

The relationship between the Duddon sonnets and *The Brook* is certainly a curious one, especially since the latter exists only as an idea, as an unfulfilled aspiration.⁹ In the 'Postscript' to the sonnets, Wordsworth skilfully manages to acknowledge Coleridge, while simultaneously distancing himself from any firm declaration of influence. He makes reference to the potential of his 'trespassing upon ground pre-occupied' and 'encroaching upon any right Mr. C. may still wish to exercise', but only so that he can refute such charges. Wordsworth says that he proceeded 'without perceiving' any trespass, and that he was 'further kept from encroaching' upon Coleridge's prior right by 'the restriction which the frame of the Sonnet imposed upon me' (SSIP 76). This latter piece of reasoning sounds particularly specious when we consider Wordsworth's views on the 'narrow room' of the sonnet in 'Nuns Fret Not', discussed in the previous chapter. He outlines, in the 'Postscript', how the sonnet narrows 'unavoidably the range of thought' and precludes 'many graces to which a *freer* movement of verse would naturally have led' (76, my emphasis). This is very much at odds with the freedom, 'short solace', and the lifting of 'the weight of too much liberty' that he claims to find in the sonnet almost two decades earlier. It is unlikely that his views on the form have changed; rather, it seems to have more to do with the fact that 'whereas he was ready to acknowledge Coleridge's role in *The Recluse* project, he was not prepared to concede any further indebtedness' (Gill 1989, 335). In order to avoid this 'indebtedness', therefore, Wordsworth is careful to offer reasons as to why we should not read his project as a mere imitation of a Coleridgean design – his range of thought is narrowed, the sonnets were 'the growth of many years', and most cuttingly, 'a particular subject [*Duddon*] cannot, I think, much interfere with a general one' [*The Brook*]. As Stephen Gill notes, the real 'sting' in the 'Postscript' comes with Wordsworth's suggestion that he did not

believe he was intruding on plans for his friend's intended poem, 'at least as far as intention went' (*SSIP* 76; Gill 1989, 335). Clinging to some kind of belief that Coleridge's creative genius had left him and that *The Brook* would never be completed, Wordsworth could mentally clear the way for his own project. In an early reading of the sonnets, Stewart Wilcox suggests that Wordsworth 'may have waited until he was certain Coleridge would never write *The Brook* before conceiving the Duddon cycle as a whole' (1954, 133). If Wordsworth was indeed assured, to some degree, of Coleridge's lack of drive for *The Brook*, then it makes his deferential posturing later on in the 'Postscript' – he talks of Mr. Coleridge's 'more comprehensive design' in comparison with his own (*SSIP* 76) – seem rather strained. By the end, any notion of Coleridge as an influence on Wordsworth has been forgotten, since Wordsworth manages to turn this relationship on its head, by positioning *himself* as the inspirational figure. He hopes that his sonnets 'may remind' Coleridge of his dormant poem, 'and induce him to fulfil it' (*SSIP* 76). The 'Postscript' is, in many ways then, a clever piece of rhetoric, but it fails to convince modern readers of the Duddon sonnets' distinctness from Coleridge's plan for a poem that can both flow along a natural and imaginative course, and deviate from it.

The 'Postscript' works to its climax by drawing together Wordsworth's exemplary river poets – Virgil, Armstrong, Burns – in a spirit of creative community. With an allusion to Psalms, he establishes a spiritual bond between the poets: 'There is a sympathy in streams, "one calleth to another"; and, I would gladly believe, that "The Brook" will, ere long, murmur in concert with "The Duddon"' (*SSIP* 76-7). He then says that such verses must be 'ill-fated' if they are to function 'without receiving and giving inspiration' (77). It may be seen here, how Wordsworth enlarges the idea of a river, positing it as something that can exist

beyond its own temporal and spatial limits. This ‘sympathy’ in streams suggests a dynamic, creative, and outward-looking force that can unite rivers whether in nature or in verse. Furthermore, the fact that river *poetry* must always receive and give inspiration implies that poets are in constant dialogue with one another, across different ages and locales. It is telling, in the light of these reflections, that alongside *The River Duddon*’s equivocal connection to *The Brook* is another case of Wordsworthian elision that recalls the poet’s marked silence over his indebtedness to sensibility in his earliest sonnets. Wordsworth’s borrowings from eighteenth-century sonneteering practices manifested themselves not only in the evening setting, or the sentimental and later epiphanic style of the ‘Miscellaneous Sonnets’, but also in the river motif, used to its fullest in *The River Duddon*. The river sonnet, with its focus on a specific, personally cherished location and the memories that attend it, was a well-established and well-represented strand of the elegiac mode of sonnet writing in the mid to late eighteenth century. Thomas Warton, William Lisle Bowles and Charlotte Smith were its chief exponents, and their influence is as keenly felt in *The River Duddon* as it is in the ‘Miscellaneous Sonnets’. Of course, there is no reason why Wordsworth *had* to acknowledge their influence, yet the fact that he chooses to invoke a community of poets in the ‘Postscript’ and excludes these (relative) contemporaries is interesting.

Daniel Robinson has some useful insights to offer here. He firstly claims that it is *only* in *The River Duddon* that Wordsworth ‘appear[s] to be balancing his debts between Milton and the sonnet revival of the late eighteenth century’ (2002, 449). Clearly, my discussion of the ‘Evening Sonnets’ and the ‘Miscellaneous Sonnets’ in chapter 4 puts me at odds with the full import of this argument, but it is clear that Robinson understands the eighteenth-century influence on *The River Duddon* to be a

significant one. He says that Wordsworth ‘picks up’ where previous river sonneteers ‘left off’, knowing that ‘the very act of writing a sonnet is an allusion to every well-known sonnet written prior to that act’ (450). Robinson’s most interesting contention is that realising he had invested so much in the sonnet tradition, Wordsworth ‘felt obliged to acknowledge his place in that tradition’, and ‘preserve some record of their influence’, even though that by the time he was writing *The River Duddon*, Smith and Bowles had become ‘relics of the previous generation’ and even ‘objects of scorn’ (453). In a Bloomian scenario akin to his early relationship with Milton, Wordsworth could appropriate the river sonnet to serve his own ends: he could ‘outstrip his immediate predecessors by transforming the symbol they had developed in various “illegitimate” sonnets into an extended metaphor over 33 “legitimate” ones’ (453). Paradoxically therefore, Wordsworth had to partake in the now (by 1820) unfashionable river sonnet tradition in order for posterity to take him seriously as an accomplished sonneteer. Success – marked by contemporary and future popularity¹⁰, and the ability to assimilate and rework various influences – in every field of sonnet writing, could assure Wordsworth’s place as the foremost English sonneteer of any age. It is in this way that Wordsworth’s sonnet oeuvre stands as a kind of alternate corpus in his career, a body of poetry to be read in dialogue with, but not subordinate to or parasitic on, his other published material. As a whole, the complete sonnet output is on an epic scale, and while there may be no *Recluse*, the grand sweep of all the sonnets in terms of style, tone and subject matter, can become a compensatory monument in its place. It is certainly feasible to argue that Wordsworth’s recognition of this opportunity for literary immortality through the sonnet is a major reason for his later career being so dominated by the form.¹¹

It would seem as though Wordsworth does not mention his fellow river sonneteers because the mode of sonnet he inherits from them was such a commonplace, such a sonneteering standard, however dated, that he could take it on and rework it without having to invoke the poets who popularised it. Wordsworth could openly draw from his contemporaries and allow his readers to acknowledge the heritage that lay behind *The River Duddon*, while at the same time show his readership that he was doing something different, the very thing that would set him apart from his fellow sonneteers. For *The River Duddon* exhibits a move away from the central tenets of the eighteenth-century river sonnet, and this is something that Robinson does not fully explore. The river sonnet tradition, which essentially begins with Thomas Warton's 'To the River Lodon', is characterised by what Mary Jacobus calls 'topographical elegy', or the 'revisit' poem (1976, 113). 'Place becomes a way of contrasting past and present selves', and allows the poet to assert 'continuity as well as change' (114), a dichotomy that, as has been suggested, can apply to a river itself. The best known and most accomplished revisit poem is of course 'Tintern Abbey', whose meaning is derived from Wordsworth's negotiation of his troubled 1793 self, and the nourished, mature speaker of 1798. However, the ode-like stateliness invests Wordsworth's lines with a grandeur that reaches further than a sonnet could. There is not the space, in a mere fourteen lines, to work through the same kind of psychological self-questioning and eventually arrive at a new and more profound sense of self. While the eighteenth-century river sonnet may not be as ambitious in scale as 'Tintern Abbey', it shares the same essential dialectic: I once was that, now I am this. Almost invariably, the poets use their return to a familiar and emotionally resonant spot by the side of a river to contrast a joyous and hopeful past with a mournful present as a way of lamenting the passing of time. Warton's

'To the River Lodon' provided the model that would go on to be imitated by numerous poets. The plaintive, elegiac strains of sensibility define the sonnet's tone:

Ah! what a weary race my feet have run,
 Since first I trod thy banks with alders crowned,
 And thought my way was all through fairy ground,
 Beneath thy azure sky, and golden sun...
 ...Sweet native stream! those skies and suns so pure
 No more return, to cheer my evening road!
 (*Century 27; 1-4, 9-10*)

Warton uses the river as his marker to chart his change 'from youth's gay dawn to manhood's prime mature' (13). William Lisle Bowles's 'To the River Itchin' follows an almost identical path, and notes that where the river once represented 'life's morn' (6), it now stands for all that he has lost:

Itchin, when I behold thy banks again,
 Thy crumbling margin, and thy silver breast,
 On which the self-same tints still seem to rest,
 Why feels my heart the shivering sense of pain?...
 ...Is it – that oft, since then, my heart has sighed,
 As youth, and hope's delusive gleams, flew fast?
 (*Century 47; 1-4, 7-8*)

The return to a favourite river could be the occasion for a moment of joy, or at least consolation in the midst of woe. In the closing quatrain of 'To the River Lodon', Warton reflects optimistically on what he can salvage from the passing of time: 'Yet still one joy remains, that not obscure, / Nor useless, all my vacant days have flowed...Nor with the Muse's laurel unbestowed' (11-12, 14). Similarly, Bowles comforts himself with the solace that simply being at the river provides: 'upon thy banks I bend / Sorrowing, yet feel such solace at my heart, / As at the meeting of some long-lost friend, / From whom, in happier hours, we wept to part' ('Itchin', 11-

14). However, this would always be outweighed by the sadness and despondency that attends the loss of youth. Warton negotiates this balance at the midpoint of his sonnet: 'Much pleasure, more of sorrow, marks the scene' (8). In his highly derivative contribution to the river sonnet tradition, 'To the River Otter', Coleridge follows Warton in allowing the river to awaken thoughts of his youth, only for him to be left 'beguiled'. He adopts the traditional position in lamenting his current state, and 'lone manhood's cares', eventually wishing 'that once more I were a careless child' (*Century*; 12, 13, 14).

In *The River Duddon*, the river sonnet sheds its elegiac strain and becomes altogether more celebratory. The poem that most closely resembles the sonnets of the late eighteenth century is the twenty-first of the sequence, written two decades after the height of this mode of sonneteering, and four decades after 'To the River Lodon' was published.¹² Despite the lapse of time, the diction and setting are remarkably similar; the mood, however, is markedly different:

Whence that low voice? – A whisper from the heart,
That told of days long past when here I roved
With friends and kindred tenderly beloved;
Some who had early mandates to depart,
Yet are allowed to steal my path athwart
By Duddon's side; once more do we unite,
Once more beneath the kind Earth's tranquil light;
And smother'd joys into new being start.
From her unworthy seat, the cloudy stall
Of Time, breaks forth triumphant Memory;
Her glistening tresses bound, yet light and free
As golden locks of birch, that rise and fall
On gales that breathe too gently to recal
Aught of the fading year's inclemency!¹³
(*SSIP* 68)

Wordsworth's 'roving' in 'days long past' chimes with Bowles, who 'strayed' 'along thy willowed edge / Erewhile' in his 'To the River Cherwell' (2, 1). The repetition of 'once more' in the middle of the sonnet reminds the reader that this experience carries emotional resonance precisely because it is a *return* to the Duddon, and not a first visit. It echoes Bowles, again at the Cherwell, who is 'reposed on thy lorn banks once more' (5). What is most striking here, though, is the overwhelming sense of joy Wordsworth feels, made possible because he approaches the experience in a manner antithetical to his fellow sonneteers. As Daniel Robinson says of other sonnets in the sequence, Wordsworth 'casts off the gloomy introspection of Smith and Bowles and focuses instead on the spiritual renewal the scene supplies' (2002, 455). Bowles in particular, was perhaps too drawn in to the modishness of sensibility posturing, and he exploited the sentimental sonnet's attraction to melancholy to its fullest.¹⁴

Wordsworth allows 'the kind Earth's tranquil light' that surrounds the Duddon to lift him and animate his 'smother'd joys'. His renewed relationship with the Duddon permits him to make connections where previous sonneteers could only find divisions. The point at which his recently invoked 'friends and kindred' are spiritually brought back to him – 'once more do we unite' – is a charged moment, and the sonnet's emotional zenith. By contrast, as Bowles searches for the cause of his 'shivering sense of pain', he asks 'Is it – that those, who circled on thy shore, / Companions of my youth, now meet no more?' ('Itchin', 4, 9-10) Wordsworth is able to reconnect with his past by way of the 'whisper from the heart' that fires his memory and opens up his childhood days to his imagination. Considering that many of the sonnets in *The River Duddon* deal with the failure to hear the music and voices that give life to the river's history, this whisper, however hushed, is made all the more triumphant. In sonnet 8, Wordsworth tries to imagine the prehistoric man who

first came to 'this dark dell', but in response to his questioning of the man's hopes and designs, 'No voice replies; - the earth, the air is mute' (*SSIP* 60-1; 2, 9). In sonnet 11, similar inquisitiveness is directed towards a fantastical, mythological 'Faëry Chasm' of the Duddon, but Wordsworth is left to ask 'where, oh where / Is traceable a vestige of the notes / That ruled those dances wild in character?' (*SSIP* 62; 9-11)¹⁵ The *river* may be reluctant to uncover the stories of its past, but the recovery of Wordsworth's own history in sonnet 21, takes on the intensity of a deeply-felt spot of time, because the vision of the Duddon initiates a process of imaginative restoration. The glorious union with his beloved friends is a moment of emotional climax, akin to the concentrated drama of the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets'.

While Wordsworth hears his 'whisper from the heart', Bowles's more conventional river experiences are conspicuous for their lack of hopeful sounds and voices. The 'murmurs' of the River Tweed's 'wandering wave below' offer no chance of joyous communion with his erstwhile companions, but instead 'Seem to his ear the pity of a friend' (*Century* 47; 7, 8). Similarly, where Wordsworth's revisit sonnet is marked by gain and renewal – in that he establishes a link with his past that challenges any potential for isolation in the present – Bowles's sonnets deal with loss. It is elegiacally drawn through the fading sounds of pastoral innocence: 'The shepherd's distant pipe is heard no more' at the Tweed (11), while at the Cherwell, Bowles 'bid[s] the pipe farewell, and that sad lay / Whose music on my melancholy way / I wooed' (*Century* 48; 6-8).

The feature common to all revisit sonnets is the crucial role assigned to memory, and in this regard also, Wordsworth displays his distinctiveness from other river sonneteers. The moment at which the process of remembrance is ushered in is a glorious one for Wordsworth: memory '*breaks forth*', 'Her glistening tresses bound,

yet light and free / As golden locks of birch'. The occasion is sudden and revelatory, making both the current scene at the Duddon, and Wordsworth's reimagining of the same scene in 'days long past', come alive with joy. While Wordsworth's 'Memory' is 'triumphant', Warton, at the River Lodon, welcomes only '*pensive* Memory' (my emphasis) to 'trace' the past, and this becomes the prelude to his realisation that it is primarily sorrow that 'marks the scene' (6, 8). Neither poet seems to have control over memory: memory works on them, by rejuvenating Wordsworth's spirits and crushing Warton's. Wordsworth is more confident in his faith in the restorative powers of memory, and so he is able, with this sonnet, to recast the traditional revisit poem, by consciously not succumbing to the sensibility era's demands for melancholy and cultivated grief. While it is the revisit poetics of the last three decades of the eighteenth century that shaped the familiar Wordsworthian theme of spiritual renewal proceeding from memory, as triggered by a resonant topographical scene,¹⁶ his *late* entry into the specifically *river*-based revisit sonnet mode, gave him enough distance from the more constrictive aspects of the 'cult' of sensibility to exert an independent and markedly more hopeful voice. It is in *The River Duddon* that Wordsworth most clearly positions himself within the mode established by the previous river sonneteers, so by overturning their dominant sorrowful mood he was able to extend the emotional range of the mode, and also assert his pre-eminence in it. Since the gap between *The River Duddon* and Warton, Bowles, and others was as much as thirty years, by the time Wordsworth entered the mode, its heyday was over. This left him as the sole active practitioner of the mode, so he could essentially mark the topographical, sentimentally-derived sonnet with his imprint.¹⁷

Yet this view does not provide the complete picture, for it does not *fully* address why Wordsworth would want to engage with a sonneting tradition that

was now thirty years old. Robinson, as outlined earlier, talks of ‘preserving some record’ of their influence, and ‘outstripping’ them, and there is certainly some sense in this view. However there is perhaps something more compelling going on, as regards Wordsworth’s approach to sonnet writing. It would seem as though in *The River Duddon*, Wordsworth is re-enacting the strategies that had earlier been employed when composing the ‘Evening Sonnets’ and the earliest ‘Miscellaneous Sonnets’. There, he borrowed from the sensibility tradition, but then self-consciously distanced himself from it, thereby stressing his development and independence. Something similar is happening in *The River Duddon* – he aligns himself with the tradition but foregrounds his distinctiveness – yet he does not necessarily do this to ‘distance’ his work from his influences, since the gap of thirty years already makes this distance self-evident to both Wordsworth and his readers. Instead, it seems as though a pattern of repetition is at work: Wordsworth’s invocation and development of a tradition appears to be a kind of poetic tic or habit that he depends on as a form of creative self-defence. With the ‘Evening’ and ‘Miscellaneous’ Sonnets, Smith, Bowles and others *were* his contemporaries and so the move away from them was a genuine and necessary manoeuvre to assert his own voice. By the time of *The River Duddon*, the sensibility tradition and the river sonneteers were, as Robinson suggests, ‘relics of the previous generation’, so there was no need to subvert their practices to affirm the self, yet Wordsworth still does. The same can be said of Coleridge and *The Brook*. *The River Duddon* is far removed from 1798, and Wordsworth is no longer in a tussle with Coleridge for poetic power, yet the ‘Postscript’ still sets up such a situation. It is as if Wordsworth is always compelled to enact this defensive strategy of distinguishing his work from that of a predecessor or apparent competitor. Whether that figure be Milton, Coleridge, Bowles, Robinson,

Warton or Smith, this strategy seems to operate consistently throughout his sonnet corpus. This suggests that Wordsworth was particularly mindful of both the heritage of the sonnet tradition he was inheriting, and also the integrity of his own sonneteering voice. He certainly invested much more in his sonnets as an entire generic entity, than criticism has generally acknowledged.

To return to ‘Whence that low voice?’, there seems to be a meta-textual, communal dimension to Wordsworth’s ‘triumphant Memory’ in the form of a latent attachment to his predecessors that works alongside his ambiguous connection to them, outlined above. This offers a different interpretation of Wordsworth’s relation to influence and tradition. Simply by writing under their (albeit reconfigured) influence, Wordsworth engages in a process of memory – separate from his own personal memories and the history of the Duddon – that reanimates the earlier river sonneteers and places them all, Wordsworth included, in a timeless community. ‘Once more do we unite’ goes beyond just a reconnection with Wordsworth’s childhood companions, for it embraces the spirit of those poets who inform the essential narrative structure of Wordsworth’s sonnet series. The ‘sympathy in streams’ that calls to one another may be read as a sympathy in *sonnets*, yet what brings these poets and sonnets together into sympathetic alliance is their one central difference – the river itself. A community of sonneteers is forged by their regional distinctiveness. The symbolic and the loco-descriptive are again held in balance here, for the imaginative union of sonneteers is possible because of the naturalistic reality of the literal river. The poets are able to assert their individual, locally-rooted particularity through their association with their ‘native’ river, whether it be Lodon, Tweed, Itchin, Otter, Arun (Charlotte Smith), or Duddon.¹⁸ Their identity as

topographical sonneteers is given meaning by their presence in, and participation in, their local scene.

Robinson has argued that the Duddon is ‘more anonymous and more generalized’ than other rivers in sonnets, and suggests that Wordsworth ‘loses somewhat his identity’. I disagree with this, for although the Duddon perhaps lacked the same number of ‘close childhood associations he would have held with the Derwent’ (2002, 456), it was certainly not ‘free’ of any such associations, as Robinson suggests. Wordsworth explained to Isabella Fenwick that an early unsuccessful fishing trip led to him at one time being unable to think of the Duddon ‘without recollections of disappointment and distress’, but went on to say, that he had ‘past many delightful hours upon the banks of this river’, with the memories of time spent there ‘during my college-vacation and two or three years afterwards’ becoming ‘the subject of the 21st Sonnet’. He also remarked that he had ‘many affecting remembrances’ connected with the Duddon (*Fenwick* 31).¹⁹ The most likely reason for Wordsworth’s choice of river lies in the Duddon’s relative obscurity. ‘Local specificity, local pride, loving attention to the unsung and little known are the key notes’ of this volume for Stephen Gill (2007, 24). A thread that runs through Wordsworth’s sonnets, as my study has shown, is the poet’s attraction to objects, moods and experiences that exhibit humility, or a kind of Miltonic ‘magnanimous meekness’. Wordsworth sees this condition as the starting point for achieving true greatness, genuine liberty or epiphanic insight. This relationship between modesty and grandeur finds its correlative in the sonnet form itself – enormous potential contained within a limited space, as the previous chapter argued. And it is true too, of the Duddon: a modest and unassuming river, whose natural

quietness and serenity appeals to Wordsworth's inclination towards a retreat from the jarring and distracting influences of commerce and public life. The Duddon is 'remote from every taint / Of sordid industry' (*SSIP* 57; 1-2). Applying a maritime metaphor to contrast with the 'sovereign Thames' (*SSIP* 74; 12) as he nears the end of his progress along the river, Wordsworth claims that 'lowly is the mast' and 'humbly spread [is] the sail' of the Duddon (*SSIP* 74-5; 3, 4). It is this meekness of the Duddon that encourages the wanderer poet to lift his vision and look outwards to infinity, to be 'Prepared, in peace of heart, in calm of mind / And Soul, to mingle with Eternity' (13-14). By celebrating the ordinary and commonplace sights and sounds along the Duddon, *everything* has the potential to be invested with glory and splendour.

In sonnet 27, 'Journey Renewed', Wordsworth resumes his roaming after a period of rest, and notes the richness of animal life he sees and hears around him 'On Duddon's margin':

I rose while yet the cattle, heat-opprest,
 Crowded together under rustling trees,
 Brushed by the current of the water-breeze;
 And for *their* sakes, and love of all that rest,
 On Duddon's margin, in the sheltering nest;
 For all the startled scaly tribes that slink
 Into his coverts, and each fearless link
 Of dancing insects forged upon his breast;
 For these, and hopes and recollections worn
 Close to the vital seat of human clay;
 Glad meetings – tender partings – that upstay
 The drooping mind of absence, by vows sworn
 In his pure presence near the trysting thorn;
 I thanked the Leader of my onward way.

(*SSIP* 72)

The sense of peace and listlessness established in the opening quatrain, centred on the slow movements of the cattle and the gentle breeze, recalls the third of the early 'Evening' Sonnets, where 'the kine obscurely seen before me lie' amid 'Silence' and a 'timely slumber'. This close affinity, connecting poems written over thirty years apart, is no coincidence, but nor is it necessarily intended. Wordsworth's ability to store and call upon significant moods and sensations without always being conscious of their origin is an essential constituent of his poetic power.

The poem is a masterful performance of a poet using the tight, enclosed space of the sonnet to build an increasing sense of drama and anticipation. It is structurally and rhetorically effective, taking the shape of a single, unified utterance in the manner of Milton. While there is a pause at the end of the octave, it is not used to signal a turn or change in the sense, but instead an intensification of it.²⁰ The octave begins to tell the reader that Wordsworth does something on behalf of, or in celebration of, the creatures before him – 'for *their* sakes, and love of all that rest', 'For all the startled scaly tribes' – but the 'something' is not given. The reader is then led to believe that the sestet – which follows a heavy semicolon and is musically different due to the new rhyme scheme – will reveal what the octave has been gesturing towards, since it begins immediately with the crucial repeated preposition: '*For* these'. However, the resolution is again deferred, heightening the sense of expectation further. With five line-ending semicolons, the sonnet frequently reaches what seems to be the beginning of a closing pronouncement, before a breath is taken, and the sense goes on once more. There is just one full-stop, occurring in the final line, making this a single, continuous flow of thought by Wordsworth. His view, which accumulates with each clause, reaches beyond the cattle and insects, to engage with something more essential and visceral, 'hopes and recollections worn /

Close to the vital seat of human clay'. The sonnet's revelation is left until the very final line, which completes the sweeping thrust of the preceding thirteen lines and evades bathos by being delivered with both understatement and jubilation. By leaving the final pronouncement to the last possible moment, Wordsworth gives the sonnet a particular intensity. The crucial line seems only just to fit in before the poem's small space is forced to close, and so Wordsworth uses this imposed restriction to get the fullest resonance from the sonnet's dialectic of anticipation and fulfilment. The realisation is significant – it is for the very existence of the creatures, and their participation in the scene (and by extension, Wordsworth's experience) that he 'thanked the Leader of [his] onward way'. Simply being at the Duddon and being alive to its varied locale is enough to drive him forward on his journey, while the ambiguous 'Leader' perhaps hints at a divine presence. What this sonnet demonstrates is that often throughout *The River Duddon*, it is not specifically the river that is described, but instead the river's natural and animate surroundings. The experience of the river goes beyond the running water and the banks, and takes in everything, even the familiar and commonplace. As Stephen Gill says in discussing the *Topographical Description*, the Lakes region 'demands an active response, and...its rewards are found not just in the grand prospects but everywhere, coming most abundantly *when unexpected*' (2007, 30, my emphasis).

Wordsworth begins 'Journey Renewed' after a period of rest when his senses are relaxed. This is what enables the ordinary sight of the cattle and insects to be charged with meaning. The experience is not unlike that of his vision of ships in 'With ships the sea was sprinkled', discussed in chapter 4. For both of these poems, as with many of Wordsworth's sonnets, the central event is heightened to a point of spiritual epiphany through a combination of an initial sensory idleness, and a focused

intensity, which is engendered by the poet's and reader's awareness of spatial restriction being pushed to its limits. It is the tightness of the sonnet's 'narrow room' that forces Wordsworth to compress his reflections so that they may burst outward, investing his sonnets with a scale that belies (or perhaps takes advantage of) their formal limitations.

In a sonnet such as 'Journey Renewed', we hear Wordsworth affirm his emotional attachment to the river and declare his love for its simple pleasures. This, in my view, is the very opposite of the poet losing his identity, or the Duddon becoming anonymous, as Robinson has it. Indeed, as I will argue in the remainder of this chapter, the poet's past and future are *foregrounded* in this sequence. While the first-person narration may be muted or even absent in many of these sonnets, that is not to say that the 'egotistical sublime' (to use the term non-pejoratively) is not in operation here. With an understanding of self, derived from a sense of place alongside the Duddon, Wordsworth can better appreciate his role as river sonneteer in relation to others. The sonnets were written as a 'celebration' of the Duddon, 'in a strain of love and admiration' (*Fenwick* 31), and the act of committing that reverence to the *sonnet form* means that he may know what it is to love the Itchin or the Lodon. For this is my point regarding Wordsworth's 'sympathy in streams' and his implicitly meta-textual 'triumphant Memory': respect for one river becomes respect for others, because of his self-conscious engagement in a sonneteering dialogue with the river sonneteers of the eighteenth century. Each poet has an emotional attachment to their own local river, and it is this regional distinctiveness that shapes *individual* identity – Warton is who he is because of how *his* River Lodon shaped his early experiences and nurtured his powers of memory; the same for Bowles at the Itchin and so on. Sharply defined local, individual identity provides the ideal

foundation for a collective identity of river sonneteers. With *The River Duddon*, Wordsworth invents and joins a group which is unified by the congruity of its subject matter, and by the diversity of its riparian locales.

Yet as I have suggested, while Wordsworth does adopt many of the key features of eighteenth-century river sonnetting – the revisit motif, the emphasis on the local region, the power of memory – he writes in an altogether more optimistic register and I believe this is to do with the sequential nature of *The River Duddon*. When David Fairer says that the river sonnets of the Wartonian School were about ‘the revisiting of a river bank as the locus for a meditative self-assessment’ (331), the locational term ‘river bank’ is the crucial one. It implies stasis, a fixed site by the side of the river where the poet compares his stationary, present-day self with his (marginally more active) self of the past. There is a sense of movement or travel in the early river sonnets – Warton thinks how long has past since he ‘trod thy banks’ (*Century* 27; 2), and Bowles says he ‘strayed’ along the ‘willowed edge’ of the Cherwell (*Century* 48; 2, 1), but these times remain in the past, and walking along the river in the present-day (that is, the moment of the poem’s composition) is never fully dramatised. Rivers may symbolise motion and progression and can represent the advancing flow of human life, but the sonnets of Warton, Bowles and others only give the illusion of the passing of time. The symbolic potential of the river is often underplayed. They invoke just three separate time periods which do not so much flow into one another, as sit awkwardly alongside one another. There is the initial visit or visits to the river, the renewed visit in the present, and the rather shadowy ‘varied interval’ or ‘vacant days’ in between (*Century* 27; 7, 12).

I am at odds with Fairer in this matter. He argues that Warton’s ‘characteristic impulsion’ was to ‘recover and reanimate the past in a way that traced

connecting threads with the present', and that at the River Lodon, 'the gap between past and present selves does not close' (321, 329). By contrast, I contend that while Warton's sonnet (and indeed those of his followers) may engage with the tension between continuity and change, the focus is primarily on change, the source of the overriding sense of elegy. By returning to the same spot and recalling the initial youthful visit, the river sonneteer strives for continuity but because they are immobile, frozen at the river bank and trapped in their immediate condition, they can only see dislocation from their past. Memory is invoked, but it only serves to reinforce the fact that their youthful selves have gone. Fairer suggests that 'thanks to the river', Warton 'remains in touch with a sense of his developing life and what it owes to the past', but I see this mode of river sonnet as documenting a *break* in what Fairer terms the 'Burkean continuum of history' (330). These poets mourn because of a disjunction that has forced the creation of two separate selves: hopeful youth and sorrowful middle age. 'Those skies and suns so pure / No more return, to cheer my evening road!' Warton exclaims regretfully (*Century* 27; 9-10). This happens because the archetypal eighteenth-century river sonnet is a hermetically-sealed unit with the entire revisit experience confined to a mere fourteen lines. The formal limits of the sonnet prevent any substantial mental progression along the 'continuum of history'. *The River Duddon*, however, is a sequence, and by charting and following the *entire* progress of the river – not merely isolating just two separate experiences of standing at the bank, from the present and a loosely defined past – Wordsworth's aim is to assert a definite sense of continuity. He extends the formal bounds of the single sonnet, giving him the room for a wider, developing narrative that mirrors the continuous and circuitous flow of the river itself. In his notes to the sonnets, Wordsworth claims that together, they 'may be considered as a Poem' (*SSIP* 84).

Even more explicitly, in a December 1818 letter to Sara Hutchinson, Mary writes that Wordsworth ‘has written 21 sonnets (including 2 [o]ld ones) on the river Duddon – they all together compose one poem’ (*SSIP* 49). Each poem individually represents a different reflection or location along the river’s course, but collectively, the sonnets are one unified poem to illustrate the one unified river. The sequence / river moves steadily from origin to destination, from an initial gentle, ‘undaunted Rill’ (*SSIP* 58; 9) to a ‘Brook of loud and stately march’ (*SSIP* 61; 2), through difficult obstacles that are overcome (‘The Stepping-Stones’), through pauses along the journey (‘The Resting-Place’), and via mental and topographical digressions (‘Seathwaite Chapel’, ‘American Tradition’). The progression along the Duddon is a journey of growth and discovery, not just through a topographical landscape, but also through Wordsworth’s own life and career. James Chandler rightly claims that the ‘sequence and river are analogues for one another, and, together, emblems for time’ (170). As an extended, developing sequence, *The River Duddon* is not governed by the same dialectical balancing act of two extremes, ‘optimistic past’ and ‘rueful present’ (Fairer 331).

Wordsworth subtly undoes such abstract comparison of two separate ages of man in a sonnet pair in the sequence’s first third. ‘The Stepping-Stones’ portrays two representative types – the carefree ‘Child’ and ‘Declining Manhood’ (*SSIP* 61; 12) – crossing the Duddon over a symmetrically-placed series of stones, at a particularly turbulent point on the river’s course. The fearless child tests his courage by apparently striding out when the ‘high-swoln Flood runs fierce and wild’ (10), while the frail and unsteady man ‘learns to note the sly / And sure encroachments of infirmity, / Thinking how fast time runs, life’s end how near’ (12-14). This shrewdly drawn juxtaposition of youth and age, both tested by the tempestuous waters of

advancing time and achieving opposing results, is the point at which the Wartonian dialectic would end. Wordsworth, however, evades a resolution at this point, since the next sonnet, 'The Same Subject', dispenses with the elegiac age distinction and shows a pair of lovers at the same stones, 'whose youthful spirits dance / With prompt emotion, urging them to pass' (*SSIP* 61-2; 1-2). The scene is joyous and playful and the couple are untouched by the hand of time. It is that rare thing, a Wordsworthian love poem, where the unashamedly jubilant ending – which is given added impact by the uncharacteristic rhyming couplet²¹ – undercuts the mournful climax of the preceding sonnet: 'The frolic Loves who, from yon high rock, see / The struggle, clap their wings for victory' (13-14).

The River Duddon is therefore a combination of the free-standing sonnets of the eighteenth-century tradition, and Coleridge's idea for *The Brook*. Wordsworth takes the role of memory, a cherished regional locale and the revisit conceit from his predecessors, and merges them with Coleridge's concept of following a river, thus making the experience a *journey*. It is this addition of travel that makes the actual flow and progression of the river participate in the narrative. The largely chronological (in terms of the river's history, the passing day, and the duration of a human life) and connected sonnets create a cohesive and unbroken line that gives a *complete* sense of time. In this way, I see Wordsworth's project as being much more Burkean in its structure than the sonnets of his predecessors. The Burkean 'continuum of history' that Fairer sees in Warton, I instead see in Wordsworth, because the speaker / wanderer of *The River Duddon* treats his subject as a fluid, evolving symbol of passing time, and not just a topographical feature at which to locate oneself, as Warton and Bowles essentially do. Wordsworth is attracted to the river as a subject precisely because its physical composition has a close affinity with

Burke's political principles. For the increasingly conservative Wordsworth, with his interest in tradition and history²², the organic and continuously flowing river represents the perfect vehicle for transferring Burke's view on political structures and national liberty to a symbol of life. The river he walks along in the present is part of a scene that has been handed down through the ages, 'inherited'²³ from the innumerable Lakeland personages who have inhabited the land previously, going back to the first prehistoric Man who 'slaked his thirst' (*SSIP* 60-1; 3) in the Duddon.²⁴

This backwards gaze, to a time 'Thousands of years before the silent air / Was pierced by whizzing shaft of hunter keen!' (*SSIP* 57; 13-14) evokes a mysterious and uncertain time for the Duddon. The river's birth is ambiguous. It is a 'Child of the clouds' (*SSIP* 57; 1) – scientifically accurate, but poetically, an image of fleetingness – and has 'Frost' as a 'hand-maid' (5), and 'Earth' as its 'Foster-mother' (*SSIP* 57-8; 14). The time and location of origination are obscure, and deliberately so. Wordsworth looks for the starting-point of the river, the beginning of the evolving continuum, or the 'actuating power of influence' (Robinson 2002, 457), and while his search is not entirely fruitless, the results are indeterminate. It creates the sense that the river has been flowing forever, from time immemorial, without the interruption of what Fairer calls (albeit with reference to Warton) 'a Painite originating moment when his identity was inaugurated' (330). This faith in the process of time working on the river since an undefined moment in prehistory is continued in typically Burkean fashion by looking to the future, in the final poem, 'After-thought'. As Chandler argues, Wordsworth views the sonnet sequence and the river as emblemizing time 'from a point of view which is traditionalist, in that it sees time as always passing on and never passing away' (170). In his discussion of

Wordsworth and traditionalism, Chandler draws attention to an introductory poem in the volume that precedes the sonnets, 'To the Rev. Dr. W – '. In the poem, Wordsworth encourages his brother Christopher, to whom the lines are dedicated, to look to his past and allow the memories of history and thoughts of tradition and 'ancient Manners' (*SSIP* 79; 55) to inform his present:

Yes, they can make, who fail to find,
 Short leisure even in busiest days;
 Moments – to cast a look behind,
 And profit by those kindly rays
 That through the clouds do sometimes steal,
 And all the far-off past reveal.
(*SSIP* 78-80; 67-72)

The 'look behind' amidst 'busiest days' is a typical Wordsworthian manoeuvre. Here, as part of this volume, it represents following the continuous river into the past to enlighten the present, and it participates in Wordsworth's backward gaze to his sonneteering predecessors.

Owing to *The River Duddon's* preoccupation with the passage of time, it has been a critical commonplace to view the river as a symbol of human life, flowing continuously into the future.²⁵ Lee Johnson reads the sequence as a 'spiritual biography of *general* humanity' (120, my emphasis). In what I have been arguing, I wish to go a stage further and suggest that Wordsworth uses the river as a symbol of *his own* life. David McCracken cautiously distinguishes river and poet as 'separate beings' but then does go on to admit that the two 'do move in the same direction...from obscure origins...moving inevitably toward an end which consists of a mingling with something infinitely more vast' (185). The Duddon's obscure origin chimes with Wordsworth's own difficult and restless early years: the remoteness and

transitoriness of the river's 'mother', the clouds, is the counterpart of Wordsworth's curtailed relationship with his mother, who died when he was only seven. Both river and poet knew only the maternal love of their foster-mother, 'Earth', or nature.²⁶ The 'quest for the source of the river' is thus linked to 'his own origins' (Robinson 2002, 456)²⁷, and by seeing himself and the river as a united entity, the rediscovery of the river's sights and sounds, as he progresses along it, is synonymous with a rediscovery of self. And it is primarily a self as defined by its role as sonneteer: the journey along the river is about Wordsworth coming to a better understanding of himself *as a writer of sonnets*. By asking where the river comes from, and where it is going, Wordsworth is, by extension, seeking to determine where *he* comes from, and where *he* is going as a sonneteer. Daniel Robinson has made a convincing case for *The River Duddon* 'saving' the poet's 'faltering career', perhaps 'calculated to ensure Wordsworth's poetic fame' (2002, 450, 451). He mentions the *Blackwood's* and *British Critic* reviews, which became 'lengthy re-evaluations' of Wordsworth's career, finding him 'much maligned' (452).²⁸ I argue that Wordsworth anticipated such a reaction.²⁹ It seems as though this sequence is concerned with reassessing and rejuvenating a flagging reputation, which Wordsworth achieves by writing in the form that was often well received by readers. The backwards look and survey of the river's development is as much a survey of his poetic career, and the sonnet's place in it. It is not surprising to find two sonnets in the sequence, 'O Mountain Stream!' and 'Return, Content!' that date from 1800-1807.³⁰ The recycling of these sonnets may, in Johnson's words, celebrate 'the value of a lifetime's companionship with streams' (133), but it is also proof of Wordsworth's valuable relationship with the sonnet form. By relocating and reimagining these sonnets in a broader rhetorical setting, where they can engage in a more extensive river-based thesis, Wordsworth

demonstrates both his lifelong creative investment in the sonnet form, and the fluidity of his sonnet categorisation procedures.

Wordsworth's reassessment of his career as sonneteer has its fullest manifestation in a subtly drawn sonnet on the sonnet. 'The Resting-Place' memorialises a moment of physical pause along the journey, opening the poet up to imaginative reflection. As Wordsworth describes his surroundings, it becomes clear that he endows the scene with a familiar 'sonnetness':

Mid –noon is past; - upon the sultry mead
 No zephyr breathes, no cloud its shadow throws:
 If we advance unstrengthen'd by repose,
 Farewell the solace of the vagrant reed.
 This Nook, with woodbine hung and straggling weed,
 Tempting recess as ever pilgrim chose,
 Half grot, half arbour, proffers to enclose
 Body and mind, from molestation freed,
 In narrow compass – narrow as itself:
 Or if the Fancy, too industrious Elf,
 Be loth that we should breathe awhile exempt
 From new incitements friendly to our task,
 There wants not stealthy prospect, that may tempt
 Loose Idless to forego her wily mask.
 (SSIP 70)

The lexicon of beneficial, self-imposed constraint is in abundance here: 'Nook', 'recess', 'grot', 'enclose', and most significantly, 'narrow'. The sonnet acts as a companion-piece to 'Nuns Fret Not', where it is 'pastime' for Wordsworth to be bound in by spatial restriction. The nook's 'narrow compass' echoes the 'narrow room' of the sonnet's fourteen lines, where creative freedom may be released and the poet can find 'short solace' from the weight of the world around them.³¹ Here, body and mind are enclosed, freeing them from an indeterminate 'molestation'. The poem marks another stage of Wordsworth's sonneteering predisposition to using images and subjects of restraint or mental retreat, away from the troubling influences of

‘worldliness’. It is no surprise that his resting place imaginatively becomes the narrow mental space of the sonnet. The symbolic unbroken flow of the river allows him to look back and trace his thirty year relationship with the sonnet, and then in this poem of physical rest and mental reflection he is afforded a moment to take stock of what the form means to him, and how he has used it. The whole story of Wordsworth and the sonnet may be summarised as an ‘enclosing’ of ‘body and mind’ so as to awaken the creative impulse.

It is significant that Wordsworth uses the sonnet to provide this career rejuvenation and re-evaluation, for while the general thrust of my argument is to see the sonnets as a kind of alternate corpus, in *The River Duddon*, they also participate in an overhaul of the Wordsworthian oeuvre as traditionally conceived (i.e. Hartman) as the contemporary critical reviews testify. Considered in this way, we see the Duddon sonnets acting as a self-reflection on not only Wordsworth’s sonnet career, but also, the entire writing career as a whole.³² The sequential, organic nature of the sonnets, whereby the river symbolically becomes a human life, combined with their thematic reliance upon reflection and memory, allows for a kind of retrospection that other forms could not offer. This is a fundamental reason why we should read Wordsworth’s sonnets as a central part of his poetic output, and not a mere parasitic component of a larger, more important career. It is in ‘After-thought’ that this sense of a career survey particularly comes to prominence.

In this closing sonnet of the sequence, Wordsworth eventually looks to the future, thus completing the dialectical progression from origins to destinations. Chandler’s view of Wordsworthian ‘time’ – ‘always passing on and *never passing away*’ – becomes significant here. Critics have often been troubled with ‘After-Thought’, since it comfortably stands as a self-sufficient effusion, and seems to

undermine, or at least ‘threaten’, the ‘validity of the symbolic equivalence between the stream and human consciousness’ (Johnson 126). If man and stream are united, then the Duddon should die as it reaches the ocean, but as Wordsworth looks back, he sees ‘what was, and is, and will abide; / Still glides the Stream, and shall for ever glide’ (*SSIP* 75; 4-5). Unlike corporeal man, the river remains and always will do, flowing, emptying into the sea, and being reborn at its head, all simultaneously. The river is ever-living as much as it is ever-dying. Jonathan Bate resolves this breakdown of the man / river analogy by arguing that it shifts ‘from the individual human who “must vanish” to human aspiration in the largest sense’ (Bate, 2000, 223). I argue that perhaps the analogy can still hold by pertaining to Wordsworth as an individual, and as a poet. For Johnson, Wordsworth ‘severely restricts the meanings of his carefully-developed symbol and its identification with human life in the “After-Thought”’ (124-5), but not, I argue, if we see this ‘human life’ as that of a poet. Wordsworth begins the sonnet by chastising himself for believing that the Duddon – ‘my partner and my guide’ (1) – had ‘past away’: ‘Vain sympathies!’ (2) The backward look shows him that

The Form remains, the Function never dies;
 While we, the brave, the mighty, and the wise,
 We Men, who in our morn of youth defied
 The elements, must vanish; – be it so!
 Enough, if something from our hands have power
 To live, and act, and serve the future hour;
 And if, as tow’rd the silent tomb we go,
 Thro’ love, thro’ hope, and faith’s transcendent dower,
 We feel that we are greater than we know.

(6-14)

‘After-Thought’ marks the culmination of the symbolic unity, developed throughout the sequence between poet, river and sonnet: here, they all come together in the

clearest manner so far. As Robinson has suggested, 'Form' in this poem is as applicable to the sonnet form as it is to the physical form of the river (2002, 451). The river will always remain as part of the landscape³³, flowing eternally just as the established, historic English sonnet tradition will always continue to be. The 'sonnet' is made into a constant, flowing through the terrain of an English literary heritage. By fixing himself to the sonnet tradition and investing a great deal of his (supposedly) twilight years in it, Wordsworth could therefore ensure that 'poetic fame' and 'immortality' (Robinson 2002, 451) would be conferred upon him.

'Form' is important in this sonnet, but so is 'Function'. The river / sonnet not only exist eternally, but are also of significant use, fulfilling a purpose that 'never dies'. The major shift in the poem occurs at line seven, where the focus moves from the river to 'we'. Having the change at this point makes for an inverted Petrarchan structure: the sonnet goes against convention by being weighted towards the second section. The majority of the sonnet's thesis is therefore devoted to 'the brave, the mighty, and the wise', instead of the river. The crucial moment occurs when Wordsworth essentially accepts the physical, elemental reality of death: 'be it so!' He can do this because he knows that the *essence* of his being will live on. He will continue 'and shall for ever glide' not because he is a man, but because he is a *poet*. The 'something from our hands' can of course represent any kind of creative product, but coming at the end of a sequence that invests a great deal in the creation of a *poetic* identity, there is the definite sense here that it is Wordsworth's poems that are asked to 'act, and serve the future hour'. This process becomes a form of life, a manner of maintaining the continuum. By acting and *servicing* the future hour, the 'something' from these Men – the poem, or more specifically, the sonnet – carries out its 'Function', just as the river fulfils its function of perpetually carrying water to

the sea, and each subsequent reading of the sonnets becomes a kind of rebirth for the poet, just as the river is continuously reborn from the clouds. Wordsworth uses his absolute assurance of the river's continuity to provide literary immortality for himself.

The power of his poetry to *serve* the future hour, recalls his 1807 letter to Lady Beaumont, quoted previously, where he looks to the 'destiny' of his works. He wants to 'teach the young & the gracious of every age, to see to think and feel, and therefore to become more actively & securely virtuous; this is their office which I trust they will faithfully perform long after we, (*that is, all that is mortal of us*) are mouldered in our graves (*Letters: Middle Years I; 146, my emphasis*). Bate sees this collective 'we' as 'human aspiration in the largest sense'. I am more inclined, following the thread of this chapter's argument, to see these 'mighty' and 'wise' as poets, and specifically, sonneteers. Wordsworth is deliberately vague, in order to achieve his resounding, inclusive climax, and it may seem fanciful to envisage Warton, Bowles, Coleridge, Burns and others as this noble band who head 'tow'rd the silent tomb'. Yet, it would make for a fitting coda to have these poets, and their 'sympathy in streams' unite once more in spirit for the symbolic moment of passing into the eternal sea. What separates Wordsworth from his sonnet-teering predecessors, however, is his faith in a future *beyond* the rueful moment of return to the river. Others looked back to see what they had lost; Wordsworth looks back as a prelude to looking forward, where he sees everything that he will gain with posterity. It is for this reason that the Duddon sonnets, and particularly 'Whence that low voice?' are substantially more hopeful and more joyous than the conventional Wartonian experience, and why they are a vital part of Wordsworth's re-evaluation of his whole career.

The River Duddon becomes a monument that remains, a sonneteering statement that fulfils what Peter Larkin calls Wordsworth's 'concern for a poetic after-presence' (435). I want to conclude by briefly asking what kind of 'monument' it is (and I discuss this further in the Conclusion). I go back to Coleridge's proposed plan for *The Brook*: it was to concern itself with 'men, nature, and society', a triptych remarkably similar to the 'On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life' of *The Recluse*.³⁴ Neither *The Brook* nor *The Recluse* was ever completed, but *The River Duddon*, which borrows the former's subject and narrative structure, certainly was. Later in the 'Prospectus', from which 'Man, Nature, and Human Life' come, Wordsworth says that his aim in the great philosophical epic is to explore 'How exquisitely the individual Mind... / to the external World / Is fitted: - and how exquisitely, too - / Theme this but little heard of among men - / The external World is fitted to the Mind' (*Works* 755; 63-68). The whole point of *The River Duddon* is to 'fit' Wordsworth's mind to the flowing waters of the Duddon in the external World, so as to explore his evolving, immortal life as a sonneteer and as a poet in general.

My suggestion, which I expand upon in the Conclusion, is that Wordsworth's sonnets represent a corpus of poetry that compensates for work that was never written. *The River Duddon* is central to this. The subject of the sequence truly is 'Man, Nature, and Human Life' – Wordsworth and the natural river are symbolically united as part of a wider dialogue with the river sonnet tradition, and the 'Human Life' is represented by the lives of Rev. Walker, and the unnamed citizens of the Lakes region who populate the *Topographical Description*. As Barker has suggested, Wordsworth's plan was to focus on *The Recluse* after *The River Duddon*. Perhaps this was never realised because Wordsworth had, in a sense, exhausted his most fruitful ideas and concepts on man, nature, and human life in the grand, epiphanic

‘Miscellaneous Sonnets’, and the Duddon sonnets, and would continue to focus on the short, instant release engendered by the sonnet form through further ‘Miscellaneous Sonnets’. The scope of *The River Duddon* – embracing a large geographical region (even greater if one includes the accompanying *Topographical Description*), concerning itself with the life of man and the immortality of poetry, and reaching out to a sense of the infinite – is lofty, and belies its size of a mere 33 sonnets. The power of the sonnet, however, is its condensed intensity, and by writing short, individual constituents of a larger, single, sequential poem, Wordsworth could make more controlled progress than he could with *The Recluse*, tackling one 14-line thought process at a time. I see *The River Duddon*, alongside the rest of the sonnet corpus, as the *Recluse* that *could* get written because of its more workable, piecemeal structure, but also because of its appropriateness to grand philosophical topics. Wordsworth saw *The Recluse* as the poem that would make his name and secure his reputation for posterity. With ‘After-Thought’ and the sonnets that precede it, he had already set out his vision for a poetic monument that would outlive him, and by dedicating his later life to sonnets and not to *The Recluse*, it is possible that a part of him believed that it would be his sonnet output that would make his name. Scholarship has never seriously interpreted Wordsworth’s career in this way. I argue that we should reconsider this conventional view.

¹ Stewart Wilcox (1954) reminds us that Wordsworth ‘was born beside a river, swam and fished in running pools, compared his college days to a domesticated brook...and in *The Prelude*, summed up his imaginative growth in the stream-figure’ (133).

² I will consider this in more detail later. See Khan’s overview of the volume’s original reception which draws together the numerous, almost entirely positive, reviews.

³ It is important to remember that these sonnets are part of a larger, multi-faceted volume. They were published originally as *The River Duddon, A Series of Sonnets: Vaudracour & Julia: and Other Poems. To which is annexed, A Topographical Description of the Country of the Lakes, in the North of England*. Although it will not feature as a main part of the argument, there will be brief discussion

of how the sonnets partake in a dialogue with other poems, notes and prose passages, from the volume. Stephen Gill (2007) addresses these issues more directly. See also Kim (2006).

⁴ Originally, this sonnet went under the title 'Conclusion', but in editions from 1827 onwards, it was known as 'After-thought', and the entire poem was italicised to set it apart visually from the rest of the sequence.

⁵ Gill (2007) points out that not one of the numerous Lake District guidebooks published between 1750 and 1820, including those by Thomas Gray, Thomas West and William Gilpin, 'ventures into the Duddon valley' (26).

⁶ Although as I will go on to argue, the loco-descriptive remains vital throughout the sequence, particularly as Wordsworth draws meaning from the river through his personal memories and his deep sense of connection to place.

⁷ See Ernest de Selincourt's introduction to the *Guide to the Lakes / Topographical Description* (ix-xxiv), in which he explains the publication history of the piece, including its evolving title.

⁸ In a letter to Alexander Dyce, previously quoted, he praises Milton's (and by extension, his own) overflowing style of sonnet that dispenses with the inflexible volta after the eighth line, since it aids in 'giving that pervading sense of intense Unity in which the excellence of the Sonnet has always seemed to me mainly to consist' (*Letters: Later Years* II; 604-5). An earlier letter, of 1802, refers to the 'unity of object and aim' (*Letters: Early Years* 379) in Milton's sonnets.

⁹ In the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge writes that 'many circumstances, evil and good, intervened to prevent the completion of the poem' (196).

¹⁰ Khan notes that while Wordsworth's longer poems never fared well with critics, 'his sonnets published earlier were consistently praised, even by the critics hostile to him' (54), including Byron, who admired the 'Liberty' sonnets from *Poems, in Two Volumes*. Writing *The River Duddon* therefore had a fortunate payback (perhaps calculated): popularity with his readers.

¹¹ Robinson suggests that the Duddon sequence shows Wordsworth 'deliberately involved in saving his faltering career and attempting to preserve his reputation for the future by reinvigorating a mode of sonnet that had gone out in the 1790s' (450). The place of this sequence in Wordsworth's career will be looked at later in the chapter, and the idea of the sonnet corpus and its relation to 'larger work' will be taken up again in the Conclusion.

¹² Wordsworth read Warton's *Poems* in his youth, at some point during the 1780s. See Wu (1993), 144.

¹³ John Beer's compelling reading of this sonnet sees these references to 'friends and kindred' as clues to the identity of Wordsworth's Lucy.

¹⁴ Stuart Curran refers to Bowles's 'nurtured grief', which had some basis in personal circumstance (the rejection of marriage from a young woman), but was nevertheless a 'higher fiction' (32).

¹⁵ See also Ponder, 173-4, for her discussion of listening and echoing in the sonnets.

¹⁶ Fairer's essay locates the literary antecedents of 'Tintern Abbey' in Warton and his contemporaries.

¹⁷ See Philip Cox (42-50) who deals with Wordsworth and the revisit sonnet. He too sees Wordsworth subvert the revisit tradition, but locates this within a gender debate. Wordsworth rejects the revisit conceit, in Cox's view, by laughing at his younger self as part of an assertion of masculine independence from a 'dangerously excessive feminine sensibility' (49).

¹⁸ Fairer (334) draws attention to the recurrence of this term 'native'. The refrain is established by Warton's 'sweet native stream!' and is still present in *The River Duddon*: 'I seek the birth-place of a native Stream'.

¹⁹ See McCracken (176-185) for an overview of Wordsworth's personal associations with the Duddon. McCracken refers to Wordsworth's admission that the Duddon was his 'favourite River' (176).

²⁰ This unity and forward momentum has always been seen as the archetypal feature of Milton's sonnets. In probably the first study of Wordsworth's sonneteering, Thomas Hutchinson writes of Milton's sonnets holding an 'onward course'. My reading of Wordsworth's Duddon sonnet is analogous to Hutchinson's view of Milton: 'the sonnet-wave advances with a steady *crescendo* in the octave, till, culminating in the eighth line, it turns *over* (not *back*) to sweep rapidly forwards in the sestet to its death' (216n.).

²¹ Wordsworth disapproved of Shakespeare's concluding couplets, which he saw as 'heavy' versification (*Letters: Later Years* II; 455). In later sonnets, Wordsworth would however sometimes use a final couplet, and in the instance here, it contributes to the punchy, celebratory climax.

²² 'Tradition' may not be as popular and fashionable a term in Wordsworth studies as it once was, but I see it as still having substantive importance in the poet's career, particularly in the later period. The *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, written roughly three years after the Duddon sonnets, follow the history and traditions of the English Church as a way of *preserving* that ancient heritage. *The River Duddon* is much the same in that it celebrates the river's past in order to eventually secure its 'function' to 'heal and to restore, / To soothe and cleanse' (*SSIP* 60-1; 13-14) in the future.

²³ The value of 'inheritance' is fundamental to Burke's agenda in the *Reflections*. Our liberties, he asserts, are 'an *entailed inheritance* derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity' (33).

²⁴ The Rev. Walker is the most significant of these personages, whose legacy of love, faith, charity and rootedness are a large part of the Duddon valley's identity. He is celebrated by Wordsworth in a long note to 'Seathwaite Chapel' (*SSIP* 84-97). See also the brief discussion of Walker in the next chapter.

²⁵ See Johnson 120-6, 134-44 and Wyatt 33-42.

²⁶ The early books of *The Prelude* recount Wordsworth's growth and maturation under the guidance of nature, a surrogate for parental guidance. 'Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up / Fostered alike by beauty and by fear' (*P*; I, 305-6). The great Wordsworthian poet-Creation myth has nature as the major force, framing him as a 'favoured being' (I, 364).

²⁷ In the Fenwick Notes, Wordsworth imaginatively attempts to pinpoint the river's origin, remarking 'in my own fancy I have fixed its rise near the noted Shire stones placed at the meeting point of the counties Westmoreland, Cumberland and Lancashire' (*Fenwick* 30). It is *fancy* that locates the origin, a compensatory gesture for the inability to properly know the site of origin. By placing the river's birth at the confluence of the three counties of the Lakes region, Wordsworth subtly proclaims himself – the river's human counterpart – as intimately bound to his native landscape.

²⁸ The *Blackwood's* review is in Reiman 99-107. 'Ever since Wordsworth began to write, he has fixed the attention of every genuine lover and student of English Poetry; and all along he has received from these the tribute of honour due to the felt and received power of his genius' (100-101). The *British Critic* review is in Reiman 183-95.

²⁹ A year before he died, in 1849, Wordsworth said that 'my sonnets to the river Duddon have been wonderfully popular. Properly speaking, nothing that I ever wrote has been popular, but they have been more warmly received' (*PW* 505). Their success, amidst what he saw as a largely unpopular career, remained important to him throughout his life.

³⁰ The first was originally a 'Miscellaneous' Sonnet; the second, a reworking of the previously unpublished 'Dear native Brooks'.

³¹ 'Narrow room' also appears in a stanza from the publication's dedicatory poem 'To the Rev. Dr. W –': 'Hail, ancient Manners! sure defence, / Where they survive, of wholesome laws; / Remnants of love whose modest sense / Thus into narrow room withdraws; / Hail, Usages of pristine mould, / And ye, that guard them, Mountains old!' (*SSIP* 78-80; 55-60). The rituals and customs of Wordsworth's Lakeland, vital components of his Burkean traditionalism, are protected by the sense of enclosure from the mountains, just as the defensive 'walls' of the narrow sonnet protect him, and the English sonnet tradition, from the 'excess' of liberty in other forms. This poem has much in common with the dynamic of many of the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets'.

³² Indeed, in July of 1820, just three months after publication of *The River Duddon*, Wordsworth reissued all his previous published work in four volumes. Juliet Barker remarks on the 'air of finality' which pervades 'After-Thought', and Wordsworth's own mood at that time (368). As a poet of 50, obsessed with 'poetic tradition and reputation' (Robinson 2002, 452), and with increasing ailments, in particular worsening trachoma, it is not surprising that *The River Duddon* represents a reappraisal and consolidation of his career. Wordsworth may well have seen the Duddon sonnets as a lyrical swansong, an end to miscellaneous poems because 'from now on he intended to work solely on *The Recluse*' (Barker 368-9).

³³ Recent ecocriticism would question even this though. This sonnet's meaning is dependent upon Wordsworth's assurance that the river will always flow. As Bate remarks though, Wordsworth could never have anticipated drought, 'profiteering privatized water companies' and water pollution. (2000, 222).

³⁴ Since it was Coleridge who developed the idea for *The Recluse*, and remained the main driving force behind it, it is likely that both incarnations of these three terms originated with him.

Chapter 7
Wordsworth and the history of the Anglican Church:
The Ecclesiastical Sonnets

Since the Arnoldian concept of Wordsworth's decline after 1807 is now so firmly ingrained in Romantic scholarship,¹ much of the later poetry has perhaps been too easily dismissed as being the dull, pious exhortations of an aging conformist. The commonly held belief is that once it became clear to Wordsworth that *The Recluse* could never be completed (a realisation that occurred following *The Excursion*'s publication in 1814), the poetic voice began to shift. What had once made Wordsworth great, his 'Miltonic heritage, an insistence upon the creative autonomy of the individual soul' (Bloom 1971, 141), had been lost forever: the energy of the Romantic imagination sacrificed for a more conservative mode of expression. The problem with this standard interpretation is the inevitable privileging of the early Wordsworth over the later, which implies a disjointed career, ending in relative failure. Numerous critics, including Jonathan Bate (1991) and William Galperin (1989), have contributed important studies to counter this accepted notion, by retrieving *The Excursion* from critical ignominy as a vital eco-critical text, and by providing an outright challenge to the rigid demarcation in Wordsworth's career, respectively. In this final chapter, my intention is to follow a similar course, by focusing on one of Wordsworth's most derided collections, the *Ecclesiastical Sketches* (which became the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* in later editions).² My aim is not to show them to be great poetry on a par with the work of 1797-1807. It is difficult to ignore their inherent shortcomings as artistic statements: this must be acknowledged right away. Rather, the purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that the sequence is a more important part of Wordsworth's sonnet corpus than previous criticism has allowed. More precisely, I aim to show how the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* mark a

continuation of the ideas and beliefs that were central to the early poetry, rather than a complete break with what had gone before.

In this way, then, my intentions are similar to those of William Galperin and his revisionist rereading of the Wordsworthian canon. He too sees a degree of continuity between the two phases of Wordsworth's career, but his key text of the second phase is *The Excursion*. For Galperin, the dynamic at work between the early and late Wordsworth is a battle over what he terms 'authority'. He argues that 'Wordsworth does not "become" an orthodox Christian in his later phase. Instead, his orthodoxy cancels the authority it supersedes so as to cancel *all* authority, including, of course, the authority of orthodoxy itself' (Galperin 2). I follow a similar line in suggesting that the later conservatism is not a wholly new condition that Wordsworth arrives at – he certainly does not suddenly become an orthodox thinker – but my contention is perhaps more straightforward than Galperin's. Standard twentieth-century literary criticism on Wordsworth has worked to situate *The Prelude* at the centre of the canon, acting as a starting point and a focus for interpretation of the poet. Supported by the great democratic lyrics of 1798 and – although perhaps to a lesser extent – those published in 1807, this *Prelude*-centred understanding of Wordsworth has established the common contemporary idea of him as a radical humanist guided by the individual imagination, meaning that the later orthodoxy is read as a distasteful aberration. Yet of course, this is not the way that Wordsworth has always been read. *The Prelude* was virtually unknown to the Victorians, who instead had *The Excursion* as their great Wordsworthian monument. In addition, Wordsworth's Victorian readership – with Matthew Arnold the exception – did not detect any significant 'falling off' in the poetry, but saw his corpus as a unified, progressive whole.³ Their interpretation of his career did not coldly designate a

'great' and a 'weak' period, but instead, as Stephen Gill notes, separated earlier and later poetry simply by marking the division by a point in time roughly in the middle of Wordsworth's entire writing period. An 1889 selection called *Early Poems of William Wordsworth* did not stop in 1798 as it would today; rather, it 'begins with a poem dated 1786 but concludes with a sprinkling of the *River Duddon* sonnets of 1820' (Gill 1998, 2). A return to Victorian ways of reading, that prioritise *The Excursion*, would be anachronistic. The point is that perhaps more flexibility is required in understanding Wordsworth's career: it is important to question the validity of the *Prelude*-centred interpretation of the poet. The one aspect of the Victorian assessment that is worth pursuing is the idea of some kind of continuity in the Wordsworthian oeuvre, something that a reading biased towards the 'great decade' of 1797-1807 inevitably obscures. If we read Wordsworth's career through his sonnets, as this study has sought to do, a different story, or picture of Wordsworth emerges. This method may be censured for simply replacing one form of limitation on the poetry with another. Yet restricting the scope to the sonnets only is not as limiting as the isolating of one coherent ten-year period. This is because sonnets feature throughout the entirety of Wordsworth's writing period, and so constitute a central and persistent preoccupation. We must also be mindful of Wordsworth's seemingly innate impulse to use the sonnet form: over five hundred examples of a form he had once thought 'egregiously absurd', suggests an instinctive compulsion to write them.

Using the sonnet as a representative marker of the whole corpus is not the distorting restriction it may at first appear to be. The interesting result that comes from focusing on the sonnets is that this new story of Wordsworth that emerges seems to subvert the commonly held one. It becomes apparent that the general

conservatism of the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* is not a position first arrived at in the years following *The Excursion* – there are certain strong elements of it in the supposedly radical sonnets of 1802. We have seen in the ‘Liberty’ sonnets a gradual movement towards retreat, but it is only when these early poems are read in the context of the later *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* that their Toryism becomes clearest. Therefore, by using the late sonnets as a starting point, or as a model by which to read the early ones, a continuity is achieved between the two parts of Wordsworth’s career which is impossible when one reads from the perspective of the ‘great decade’, for that just serves to compound the notion of a decline by judging the late poetry by the standards of the great poetry, where it will inevitably be found wanting. The poetry of the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* is of a poorer quality than that of the ‘Liberty’ sonnets, but this does not mean that they should be ignored, for they provide a compelling perspective on the ‘Liberty’ sonnets, through this retroactive reading process. Furthermore, they must be acknowledged so as to do justice to the integrity of the *complete* Wordsworthian oeuvre. In many ways, the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* can be read as a kind of summation of Wordsworth’s career – drawing together various strands of his philosophy into a long, sustained sequence.

It is the dryness of the verse which is the chief problem with the sonnets, and which has prevented most readers from tackling them in the first place. Yet it is worth reminding ourselves that it is not the apparent dryness of the *subject matter* – a chronological narrative history of the Anglican Church from Christianity’s introduction to Britain, to the present day – that is the collection’s failing. There is nothing inherently dull in poetry that concerns itself with religion. The problem is that this was a poet whose personal, individual voice was both his defining characteristic and greatest asset, and so having to sacrifice that autonomous vision in

order to adhere to a project committed to a generalised, depersonalised telling of historical fact, compromises that which is 'poetic' about Wordsworth. Subjective experience, the authority of self, is subsumed into a larger persona: that of the historian, and the authoritarian objectivity that attends such a position. This interpretation will, however, be challenged later on in the chapter.

Revealingly, as Lee Johnson shows, particular words and even entire sentences are lifted wholesale from the many prose sources that Wordsworth consulted for his research: 'his diction, in other words, is often not his own' (Johnson 154). Yet Wordsworth himself was fully aware of the shortcomings of writing poetry based on historical fact:

The Ecc: Sketches labour under one obvious disadvantage, that they can only present themselves as a whole to the Re[ader w]ho is pretty well acquainted with the history of [this] Country; &, as separate pieces, several of t[hem] suffer as poetry, from the *matter-of-fact* – there being unavoidably in all history, except as it is a mere suggestion, *something that enslaves the Fancy*.

(*Letters: Later Years I*; 119)

Even though Wordsworth is encouragingly frank about the sonnet's weaknesses, his words here inadvertently write off 'several' of the poems altogether. He admits that his raw materials actually *enslave* the Fancy, and also that the common reader will be unable to partake of any experience enacted in the poems, or to engage imaginatively with their subject matter, since these things are largely beyond their comprehension – few would have come to the series with what Wordsworth deemed the requisite historical knowledge to fully appreciate them. This is most unlike the Wordsworth of the *Lyrical Ballads*, who endeavours to draw the reader in to share in his emotional experience.⁴ In paraphrasing Charles Lamb's review of *The Excursion*, Jonathan

Bate notes that 'he [Lamb] cannot single out the versification and write a piece of purely literary criticism, for everything about the book is bound up with its moral argument. The primary attraction of *The Excursion* for readers... was its ethical content' (Bate 1991, 64). A similar observation may be made of the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*. It is difficult to carry out a traditional close critical reading on most of the poems, since the heavy-handed moral impetus behind the series prevents the emergence of any strong *poetry*. Hoxie Fairchild suggests that 'with a few familiar exceptions, the sonnets are mildly agitated pieces of rhetoric rather than poems' (Fairchild 227-8). Yet this may not actually be the problem for textual analysis that it would at first appear to be. If the sonnets' ethical drive overpowers their poetic worth, then the focus should not be on what the tired prosody tells us about Wordsworth the poet, but instead on what their dominant moral purpose tells us about Wordsworth the man, and the larger project he was committed to. In short, *what* Wordsworth has written – the heavily researched historical detail, and the sequence's overall style – is not the main point of interest; *why* he wrote the series in the first place, however, is.

Clearly, the attempt to fulfil some kind of religious purpose is the sequence's guiding principle. The *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* are by far Wordsworth's longest, most sustained meditation on a religious theme to be found anywhere in his corpus. Such a lengthy dedication to orthodox Anglicanism is in itself remarkable, when one considers Wordsworth's frequently ambiguous religious nature, something that had encompassed, by turns, apathy, pantheism and scepticism.⁵ Furthermore, it must be borne in mind that Wordsworth, at this time, was a pioneer in devotional sonnetting. 'The Liberty' sonnets were written under the spiritual tutelage of Milton, and *The River Duddon* and 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' showed the

contemporaneous influence of Smith, Bowles and others. Yet by the 1820s, the sonnet seems to have fallen once again into one of its many brief barren spells, a tentative position after the sonnets of the Romantic age and before their rebirth in the Victorian age. There is no textual evidence (in the sonnets themselves or surrounding commentary) to suggest that the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* are engaging with any particular 'movement' within sonnet writing; there is no sense of a cultural exchange between like-minded poets as there had been before.⁶ A glance at the kind of sonnets being published throughout the 1820s gives an immediate idea of the rather conventional themes that were being pursued. Bernard Barton dedicated his to 'Violets' and 'Patience', and John Hamilton Reynolds to the 'Picture of a Lady'. It is not necessary to give lots of examples, suffice to say that 102 sonnets on the history of Anglicanism were unlike any of the sonneteering at the time when they were published in 1822.⁷

The drive to write sonnets dedicated to orthodox Christian belief in England is very much Wordsworth's own, then, and would therefore seem to spring from a real desire to explore the role of religious history in his native land. Various explanations have been given for the strengthening of his religious belief as he grew older, perhaps the most obvious being that he turned to the Church as a way of coping with the loss of family members. The death of his brother John in 1805 served to drive a wedge between the poet and nature, throwing the confident assertion of 'Tintern Abbey' – 'Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her' – into some doubt. More substantial however, were the deaths of two of his children, Thomas and Catherine, in 1812, which caused Wordsworth immense grief, and perhaps led him to seek solace in institutional Christianity. In a letter of 1817 to Benjamin Robert Haydon, Wordsworth talks of his continued pain over their deaths,

and copies out his short poem dedicated to Thomas, 'Six months to six years added, he remained'. It was not published until 1837, but was inscribed on Thomas's headstone. It implores the 'blessed Lord' to 'support us – teach us calmly to resign / What we possess'd – and now is wholly Thine' (3, 6-7). In the letter, he goes on to say 'these verses I have transcribed because they are imbued with that sort of consolation which you say Scott is deprived of. *It is the only support to be depended on*, and happy are they to whom it is vouchsafed' (*Letters: Middle Years II*; 361, my emphasis). Here, then, we see a fundamental strand of Wordsworth's Christianity – it is used as a consolatory mechanism, something to be 'depended upon' during times of emotional hardship. This is certainly the tenor of Wordsworth's faith that is evident in *The Excursion*, arguably the first of his poems where his philosophy is grounded in a firm belief in a caring, ever-attentive God. At the beginning of Book Fourth, the Wanderer speaks with a calm assurance of God's guiding hand:

One adequate support
 For the calamities of mortal life
 Exists – one only; an assured belief
 That the procession of our fate, howe'er
 Sad or disturbed, is ordered by a Being
 Of infinite benevolence and power;
 Whose everlasting purposes embrace
 All accidents, converting them to good.

(*Works* 754-896; IV, 10-17).

This is a religion of stoicism, one that centralises God and His place in the daily flux of real human experience, a religion that *The Excursion's* Victorian readership found profoundly appealing. Yet this is not the perspective on Christian faith to be found in the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*. It has already been said that for the most part, the sonnets bear witness to a Wordsworth suspending his autonomous voice for that of a detached other so as to recall the cumulative history of Anglicanism. As such,

'personal' faith, and the *individual's* relationship with God, as evinced in the quotation above, plays a secondary or at times non-existent role. Although the sonnets are certainly aimed towards, and read by, a public brought up on *The Excursion*, Wordsworth is doing something very different in 1822 from what he did in 1814.⁸ Some might think that if the role of God in everyday life, or the common man's exercise of faith, are not vital to the sonnets' purpose, then can they really be seen as religious poems at all? Shorn of *The Excursion's* striking message of faith's power to console and comfort, are the sonnets not instead a straightforward *historical* narrative? It is telling that the *British Critic*, a High Church monthly, published a decidedly lukewarm review of the sonnets. One would have expected them to welcome the poems adhering as they *outwardly* do to the religious sympathies of the paper. The reviewer said, however:

We wish the *method* of this work appeared alone objectionable to us, but we are obliged to say that in our judgment not less than two-thirds of the Sonnets themselves are equally so.
(Reiman 196)

The review is curiously silent over any 'ecclesiastical' matter in the poems, and instead devotes the majority of its time providing a general assessment of the formal qualities of a sonnet. Fairchild observes that the sonnets demonstrate Wordsworth's 'inability or unwillingness to grapple with theological principles' (228). I argue that in these sonnets, Wordsworth is more interested in the social function than the theological definition of religion and the Church. His concern is with the social benefits of the Church and with religion as an evolving, immutable force for national cohesion. Throughout his career, as this study has argued, Wordsworth wrote political, epiphanic and loco-descriptive sonnets. In *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*,

Wordsworth writes *edifying* sonnets, with the aim of morally improving the English people. This is always a concern of his sonneteering, but it becomes the dominant purpose of the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*. As Fairchild pointedly remarks, ‘Wordsworth became an ardent Church-and-State Anglican before he became a Christian’ (219).

‘Introduction’, the opening sonnet of the sequence, serves as a statement of intent:

I, who descended with glad step to chase
 Cerulean Duddon from his cloud-fed spring,
 And of my wild Companion dared to sing,
 In verse that moved with strictly-measured pace;
 I, who essayed the nobler Stream to trace
 Of Liberty, and smote the plausive string
 Till the checked Torrent, fiercely combating,
 In victory found her natural resting-place;
 Now seek upon the heights of Time the source
 Of a holy River, on whose banks are found
 Sweet pastoral flowers, and laurels that have crowned
 Full oft the unworthy brow of lawless force;
 Where, for delight of him who tracks its course,
 Immortal amaranth and palms abound.⁹
 (SSIP 138-9)

The immediacy of the ‘I’, tellingly placed as the very first word of the series, asserts the primacy of the poet, calling attention both to his control over the progression of the sequence, and also – as the remainder of the poem makes clear – to his suitability at undertaking such a task. The sonnet reminds the reader that the poet is already an established sonneteer. He has written sonnets on the River Duddon, and a series dedicated to Liberty, and, therefore, a series that follows the advancement of ‘a holy River’ is merely the continuation of a metaphor begun twenty years previously. The self-conscious way in which Wordsworth constructs his own career here is of real interest. He is keen to stress, before the series has properly got under way, that he considers his poetic identity as being shaped by the sonnet form itself. Wordsworth

emerges from this poem as a sonneteer first and foremost: any notion of him also being a writer of lyrical ballads or blank verse is buried under the weight of the authoritative voice, confidently declaring its pre-eminence and adeptness in the earlier sonnet cycles. This poem alone should be proof enough of the line of continuity that runs between the early and the late Wordsworth, for Wordsworth himself invites us to draw connections between these three sonnet series. It is for this reason that I disagree with Lee Johnson's comments on the river metaphor that features in this sonnet. Admittedly, Johnson is correct when he says that the narrative function of the river in the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* is generally superfluous, especially when compared with the central role it plays in *The River Duddon*. Indeed, 'Down a swift stream, thus far, a bold design', later incorporated into Part 3 (*SSIP* 207), is the only other significant allusion to the river metaphor in the series, other than 'Introduction' and 'Conclusion'. However, I am at odds with Johnson when he dismisses the river outright, claiming 'it is, in short, a mere embellishment that could be removed without damaging his [Wordsworth's] theme' (Johnson 146). This is to ignore the full import of the introductory sonnet, for Wordsworth is not necessarily imposing the river metaphor purely on the poems that constitute the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*. It has almost no narrative or thematic importance on the series when read in isolation, but is instead a vital thread of continuity that links these sonnets with their earlier counterparts. Therefore, when Wordsworth endeavours to 'seek upon the heights of Time the source / Of a holy River', we should read this as not so much a metaphor of the historical progression of the Anglican faith, but as a metaphor of the poet's career, since the river is conspicuously juxtaposed with the 'Cerulean Duddon' and 'the nobler Stream...Of Liberty'. The river motif may be central to *The River Duddon*, but it plays no role whatsoever in the 'Liberty' sonnets. Since the

existence of the metaphor is not borne out from a reading of either the 'Liberty' sonnets or the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, it must be read as Wordsworth's attempt, in 1821, to draw his sonnets together under an even larger metaphorical framework. There are not three rivers alluded to in this poem: there is just one, and it represents the sonnet itself. The sonnet form, manifested as a progressing, ever-flowing river, therefore becomes a vital *constant* in Wordsworth's career, something that would always be present and reliable as it meanders between the highs and lows of the physical landscape that represents a poetic career. By seeking 'upon the heights of Time' Wordsworth does search for the origins of the Anglican Church, but crucially, he also reaches into his *own* past as sonnet writer, gaining strength from the knowledge that the present collection of sonnets is part of a larger, dynamic whole.

Earlier, it was suggested that Wordsworth seems to sacrifice imagination for history in these sonnets with the inevitable consequence of the artistic integrity of the poetry suffering. This is certainly the accepted critical standpoint on the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, but perhaps this needs to be reconsidered in the light of what has been suggested from 'Introduction'. The drive behind this sonnet is the identification of Wordsworth as primarily sonneteer, rather than historian. It is his fidelity to a poetic form, and *not* his adherence to historical fact, that is the overriding sentiment in this crucial opening poem. Here, I diverge from Nancy Easterlin, who seems to stand firm on the notion of Wordsworth losing his poetic voice. She argues that 'the emphatic "I"'s of the first sonnet, far from identifying the independent authority of the poet, demonstrate that he is virtually brought into existence by his social function'. She goes on to say that this sonnet attests to 'the suppression rather than the assertion of self' (Easterlin 128). In other words, 'Wordsworth' is no longer present; he exists solely by virtue of his role as historian. My argument that

Wordsworth is strongly asserting his own voice by defining himself as long-time sonneteer clearly runs counter to this, and I aim to support my contention by considering what Wordsworth is doing historiographically.

When one pauses to reflect on what Wordsworth is doing with history, it becomes clear that the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* project is more ambitious and dynamic than is usually given credit for. By reducing such a breadth of historical detail into an ordered accumulation of events, which is then shaped into a *sequence of sonnets*, the very notion of what constitutes 'history' comes into question. In the process of being recast as poetry, 'history' in the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* is no longer constrained within the bounds of objective fact: it is reconfigured so as to assume the form of an imaginative story that Wordsworth, in the role of poet, can use for his own ends. His tendency to lift entire phrases from his sources¹⁰ and import them wholesale into the sonnets, as alluded to earlier, may not actually signal the loss of his poetic autonomy. By being placed within an entirely different literary context – from scholarly historical narrative prose to sonnet sequence – the phrases may remain unaltered, but are read in a wholly new way. They lose the loose, discursive mode of prose, and are integrated into the tight, structured form of the sonnet and as such, come under Wordsworth's control as poetic craftsman: they are reborn into an *artistic* medium. Of course, this also applies to those sonnets where Wordsworth does not copy from his sources verbatim. The point is that he is taking history *as his own*, reshaping it into a personal interpretation of Anglicanism. This means that I cannot see Wordsworth, as Easterlin does, as a 'tradesman who assumes an objective reality to which he maintains an entirely dependent relationship'. She claims that 'although Wordsworth periodically resorts to the first person, this is predominantly a device for dramatizing the merging or alignment of the self with history' (128). This implies

that Wordsworth is somehow in thrall to history, having to utterly adjust his position according to the dominance of historical circumstance. My argument is the opposite; the sonnets should not be read as Wordsworth succumbing to history, and defining his identity solely through the recounting of a communal past. Instead, we should read them as Wordsworth reconstituting history, moulding it into a *personal* artistic expression. There is a sense of this in a March, 1821 letter from Dorothy to Catherine Clarkson, when she writes:

William is at present composing a series of Sonnets on a subject which I am sure you would never divine – the Church of England, - but you will perceive that in the hands of a poet it is one that will furnish ample store of poetic materials.

(SSIP 130)

There is no thought in Dorothy's mind that her brother needs to sacrifice his poetic credentials in order to fulfil this project. The subject of the Church of England will provide him with the materials that he can use to create poetry: Wordsworth works on, and shapes his historical sources to make an ideological point.

How then, does Wordsworth use history? What is the moral purpose that underpins the sonnets? It is in the 'Advertisement' to the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* that we discover the impetus of the series. Wordsworth informs us of the events that occasioned their composition and that acted as joint catalysts, one personal and one public. He begins by describing the personal experience, a walk with Sir George Beaumont around his estate at Coleorton Hall in December 1820, and their discussions regarding plans to build a new church on the site. The walk proved to be an archetypal Wordsworthian moment of sudden inspiration, as the pleasant

surroundings, and talk of the spread of Christianity, led Wordsworth to secure the memory of the day with a poetic monument:

Our feelings were in harmony with the cherishing influences of the scene; and, such being our purpose, we were naturally led to look back upon past events with wonder and gratitude, and on the future with hope. Not long afterwards, some of the Sonnets which will be found towards the close of this Series, were produced as a private memorial of that morning's occupation.
(‘Advertisement’, *SSIP* 137)

The sonnets in question are those on Church architecture which close the third part, and as Wordsworth says, they stand as a ‘*private* memorial’ to the day’s events. Of more significance, however, is the sonnets’ public occasion, a highly contentious political issue:

The Catholic Question, which was agitated in Parliament about that time, kept my thoughts in the same course; and it struck me, that certain points in the Ecclesiastical History of our Country might advantageously be presented to view in Verse.
(‘Advertisement’, *SSIP* 137)

Wordsworth here refers to the Roman Catholic Relief Bill which was passed in 1829, but, as he points out, much debated in Parliament during late 1820 and 1821. The fact that ‘the Catholic Question’, the prime issue of public debate at this time, keeps Wordsworth’s ‘thoughts in the same course’ as his musings on a potential new church is telling. In recalling how his thoughts had moved seamlessly from considering the growth of *Anglicanism* (through the symbolic new church) to the imminent emancipation of the *Catholics*, Wordsworth (purposely?) establishes a juxtaposition that speaks of his own political / religious views on the issue. Although

here in the Advertisement, he is subtle and casually implicit, elsewhere he was more outspoken. In 1809, he wrote, with mild apprehension, to Francis Wrangham:

With the Methodists on one side, and the Catholics on the other,
what is to become of the poor Church and people of England, to
both of which I am most tenderly attached?

(*Letters: Middle Years I*; 313)

With the deepening of his religious sensibility came a hardening of his position, and by 1825, roughly contemporaneous with the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, Wordsworth wrote to Sir Robert Harry Inglis, Tory MP and staunch high churchman, to respond to the latter's recent speech regarding the Catholic Relief Bill. The letter is a savage attack on the Papacy, declaring it to be 'founded upon the overthrow of private judgement – it is essentially at enmity with light and knowledge'. Even more aggressively, he states 'persecution must go hand in hand with ignorance – a sincere Romanist is *by duty* a persecutor' (*Letters: Later Years I*; 360). By extension, the letter also serves as an impassioned defence of Protestantism: 'I reprobate as of the most injurious tendency, every Measure that does not point to the maintenance of Protestant ascendancy, and to the diffusion of Protestant principles' (359-60). He firmly claims that 'the two religions cannot coexist, in a country free as our's upon equal terms' (359). The message of the Advertisement to the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* now appears clearer: Wordsworth perceives the continued growth of Anglicanism, indeed, even the very constitution of the country, to be under threat from Catholic emancipation, and as such, his response as poet is to write a verse 'Ecclesiastical History of our Country' (*SSIP* 137) as a way of protecting his beloved institution, using the past to preserve the present.

Of course, it is inevitably Wordsworth's own version of the past, an ecclesiastical history mediated by a troubled conservative with a clear political agenda. While the anti-Catholic sonnets may not necessarily spring from moments of lived experience as so much of Wordsworth's best poetry does, they nevertheless expose a very personal voice, something that works against the standard notion of the series being almost entirely governed by a dry factuality. Wordsworth's anti-Catholic sentiments are diverse in their nature. He rails against the 'awe and supernatural horror' that proceeds from transubstantiation, a rite that 'trample[s] upon soul and sense' (*SSIP* 165; 6, 14). In 'Revival of Popery', added to the sequence in 1827, Mary's accession to the throne in 1553, following two decades of Protestantism, marks the return of idolatry and, as Wordsworth laments, the use of Latin in services: 'prayer, man's rational prerogative, / Runs through blind channels of an unknown tongue' (*SSIP* 206; 13-14).

Yet the threat from Catholicism represented something altogether more grave for Wordsworth – spiritual enslavement. This serves as the theme for the final four sonnets of Part 1, which begins with 'An Interdict'. By this point in the series, Wordsworth has reached the reign of Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) under whom the Papacy was at its most powerful. The sonnet documents the promulgation of an interdict by the Pope upon the people of England, as a way, according to John Delli Carpini, to 'punish King John for not recognising the appointment of the prelate, statesman, and scholar Stephen Langton as the Archbishop of Canterbury' (9). Wordsworth's source for this episode was the seventeenth-century historian Thomas Fuller, whose account of it has an evocative metaphorical quality. He describes how the Pope's 'long *arm* could reach from *Rome* all over *England*, and lock the doors of all *Churches* there; an *Emblem*, that in like manner, he had, or might have bolted the

Gates of Heaven against them' (SSIP 251). Wordsworth uses the source to explore the implications that the Pope's dominance and power has for the humble English Church:

Bells are dumb;
Ditches are graves – funereal rights denied;
And in the Church-yard he must take his Bride
Who dares be wedded!

(SSIP 158-9; 9-12)

Services and rites are halted meaning that 'the channel of grace which flows from the sacraments and the liturgy' to the people is cut (Carpini 9). Yet as for addressing the Pope directly in this sonnet, Wordsworth is silent; the actual figure of Innocent III is kept out of the foreground, meaning that the assault on his arrogance is here muted. The anti-Catholic sentiment is deliberately underplayed in 'An Interdict', since it is drawn out over the three remaining sonnets, 'Papal Abuses', 'Scene in Venice', and 'Papal Dominion'. Thematically united, the four poems work together as a short sequence within the series, made all the more effective by coming at the end of the first part. This structurally isolates them and gives them the feel of a separate mini-treatise. Each one gives an example of the tyranny of papal domination, including Henry II being flagellated by the Monks of Canterbury: 'Saw we not Henry scourged at Becket's shrine' (SSIP 159-60; 9). Spread out over four poems, the attack on Papacy gathers momentum until eventually reaching a climax in the final sonnet. It is in this way that Wordsworth demonstrates his authorial control over his sources. Disparate events are distilled into a focused, book-ended sequence which gains its rhetorical power from the *gradual* accumulation of anti-Catholic expression. Wordsworth shapes his sources to fit his agenda by structuring and ordering his sonnets in this manner: he is elusive and implicit to begin with, but in the final

sonnet, 'Papal Dominion', he draws the various strands together and is suddenly brutally direct in his denunciation:

The ancient thrones of Christendom are stuff
 For occupation of a magic wand,
 And 'tis the Pope that wields it – whether rough
 Or smooth his front, our world is in his hand!
 (SSIP 161; 11-14)

The emphatic cry of those final six words bring a dramatic end to Part 1, a striking climax that is carefully positioned to ensure maximum effect. In an England less than a decade away from granting emancipation to Catholics, Wordsworth's declamatory warning was aimed at his fellow Anglicans, to take heed of the lessons of seven centuries earlier, that is, to not be led to a state of thralldom by the Pope. His aim in this quartet of sonnets is to show how Catholicism necessarily enslaves; the very makeup of its hierarchy is seen to be repressive, since it positions one man in an unnaturally dominant role. Thus, we see emerging here, a line of continuity between these sonnets and those of 1802. The threat of an imperial France has been reconstituted, twenty years later, in the form of an imperial Catholicism. I would suggest that we can justifiably see the figure of the Pope as a replacement for Napoleon in Wordsworth's mind. The *political* autarch is succeeded by the *religious*, and though the terms may have changed, Wordsworth's position is essentially consistent with that articulated in the 'Liberty' sonnets: his denunciation of 'Popery' is a further expression of his radical scepticism of single person rulers.¹¹ The sense of impending menace established in 'Calais, August 15th, 1802' – 'This is young Buonaparte's natal day; / And his is henceforth an established sway, / Consul for life' – which comes immediately before the sonnet on France's 'Extinction of the Venetian Republic' in the Liberty series, is ominously echoed in 'Papal Dominion':

Unless to Peter's Chair the viewless wind
 Must come and ask permission when to blow,
 What further empire would it have?
 (1-3)

This hostility to the single ruler structure of Catholicism, deriving from its potential to engender tyranny, shows Wordsworth adopting a strongly democratic, or even radical position. He speaks out against the 'enslavement' of the many by the few in power whose status is achieved without the full sanction of the people. This series and that to 'Liberty' begin with a tentative radicalism by attacking the unfit rule of single leaders, who, by the very nature of their position, subject the people to enforced servitude. Yet, in the same way that the 'Liberty' sonnets begin with the threat from France *as a way in* to focusing on the state of England, the denunciation of Catholicism, while being a major part of the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, is ultimately the precursor to the main issue of the series, as we shall see.¹²

Wordsworth's concerns about the emancipation of Catholicism were not based on any conflict over ecclesiastical ideology, ritual or liturgy. The problem was more of national identity, and what the Catholic Church represented to him: namely, a foreign, 'continental' religion, which would provide a fundamental challenge to the English Constitution, and would destroy the very nature of an 'English' Church. This fear was not exclusive to Wordsworth – it was the primary objection to Catholic emancipation in the period. Here we see Wordsworth's conservative agenda emerge. When he says in the Advertisement that he intends to trace the 'Ecclesiastical History of our Country', he means to uncover the social and cultural ramifications of Anglicanism which contribute to the construction of nationhood, rather than primarily its theological workings. While the original incentive to write the

Ecclesiastical Sonnets may have sprung from the very real contemporary threat from the Catholic ‘other’ – a force from ‘outside’ – the focus of the series, and its true essence, lies in that which is within: the sober, stoic character of the English Christian. In 1802’s sonnets, the fear of France turns Wordsworth inward, and towards a process of reinvigorating the increasingly materialistic English people. A similar impetus drives the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*: the threat from without, leads him to consider and remedy the problems within. The attack on Catholicism is subsumed into the larger narrative of ‘rekindling waning nationalism and reanimating neglected ethical principles’ (Carpini 58), written in the same kind of ameliorative spirit that underpins the ‘Liberty’ sonnets. For in the same way that Wordsworth saw England, twenty years earlier, as a ‘fen / Of Stagnant waters’, peopled by selfish creatures who were ruled by ‘getting and spending’, he was aware that the moral and spiritual climate of the early 1820s was in a perilous state. This was, after all, the era of crisis in Anglicanism, which the Oxford Movement sought to address. John Keble’s seminal sermon on ‘National Apostasy’ in 1833 dealt with the decline of Anglicanism, claiming Britain was ‘fast becoming hostile to the Church’ (Knight and Mason 91). The movement endeavoured to revive High Church traditions and in so doing, wholly reinvigorate a divine institution which was suffering from crippling inertia. The *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* are conceived in much the same spirit as the Oxford Movement.¹³

Wordsworth’s fear was that the bond between the people and the Church had been severed. Part of the problem, which contributed to the Church losing its central role in people’s lives, was the desperate shortage of actual church buildings for people to attend in some areas due to the rapid growth of the industrial towns. Wordsworth was all too aware that many more needed to be built (something that

throws the personal experience with Beaumont that occasioned the sonnets into sharper focus). The high Tory bent of his call for more churches in poorer areas is clear:

In quarters where there is not an attachment to the Church, or the landed aristocracy, and a pride in supporting them, *there* the people will dislike both, and be ready...to join in attempts to overthrow them.
(qtd. in Fairchild 223)

The loss of the social cohesion and sense of cultural identity that the Church fosters, threatened the integrity and moral worth of the nation. As such, Wordsworth saw it as his duty to turn to the past and document, not so much the history of Anglicanism in England, but the history of England and its people, as governed by the unifying, humanising power of the Anglican Church. The *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* project is therefore thoroughly invested in an attempt to *improve* the English people. It is a poetics of moral instruction: edification on a national scale. If the shortage of churches meant many people were cut off from receiving God's teaching directly, Wordsworth's sonnets could act as ministry in their absence. Wordsworth celebrates the noble endeavours and stoic fortitude of representative men who embody the ethical, steadfast values that he is desperate to advocate in an age that appears to be so devoid of them. In 'Persecution', the sixth sonnet of the series, he uses Alban as his exemplar, praising his selfless act of dying to protect his faith:

Thus was Alban tried,
England's first Martyr! whom no threats could shake;
Self-offered Victim, for his friend he died,
And for the faith – nor shall his name forsake
That Hill, whose flowery platform seems to rise
By Nature decked for holiest sacrifice.

(SSIP 142-3; 9-14)

Similarly, the Crusaders are lauded for their 'labours' 'on distant shores', and we are reminded that their honourable virtues live on after their noble deaths:

Requiem which Earth takes up with voice undaunted,
When she would tell how Good, and Brave, and Wise,
For their high guerdon not in vain have panted!
(*SSIP* 164; 6, 5, 12-14)

In poems such as these, we see again how Wordsworth assumes complete control over his sources, through the process of assimilating them into his larger narrative. Individual events, such as Alban's martyrdom, lose some of their significance in their own terms, but by being grouped together with other historical moments, they become part of the same rhetorical thrust, and therefore serve the new purpose of supporting Wordsworth's nationalist message. In these sonnets, there is no attempt to investigate the intricacies of religious orthodoxy. English Christianity is considered in an abstract sense by being promoted as an ideal community of righteous and dutiful individuals. It is a community that Wordsworth believes engenders stability in society, but also exhibits stability in itself. With the Norman Conquest came immense changes in the political, linguistic and legal realms, but the Church, in Wordsworth's eyes, remained untouched:

Even so a thralldom studious to expel
Old laws, and ancient customs to derange,
Brings to Religion no injurious change.
(*SSIP* 156; 12-14)

Such grandiose proclamations are rooted in a profoundly idealised understanding of the Church's endurance and fortitude, and provide a clear indication of Wordsworth's bias towards what the Church *represented* to him, rather than what it actually constituted in ecclesiastical terms.

'The Norman Conquest' demonstrates the importance Wordsworth placed on the *perseverance* of the Church during times of trouble and upheaval, the fact that it could undergo a period of substantial change, with its fundamental essence remaining intact. These were values Wordsworth was keen to transfer to the people, but with an increasingly industrialising society, and a more acute materialistic ethos dictating the way of life, his concern was that the rift between the people and the Church would only grow wider, and the legacy of perseverance and essential changelessness would soon be lost. By losing touch with the stabilising institution of Anglicanism, and therefore forgetting their national heritage, Wordsworth positions his countrymen in much the same place as he did two decades earlier, when he upbraided them for having 'forfeited their ancient English dower / Of inward happiness' (*P2V* 165; 5-6). The sonnets of both 1802 and 1822 seem to derive their power from Wordsworth initially locating the people of England in a weakened, submissive position, out of which he can lift them with his ennobling and declamatory sonnets. Inevitably, by doing this, Wordsworth creates a very powerful role for himself and he becomes, once more, the Miltonic 'saviour' figure, working to teach and guide a wayward populous. Combined with the weakened poetic voice, this makes for, in many places, poetry with a rather sanctimonious flavour, especially in those sonnets where the didacticism is at its strongest.¹⁴ One such poem is 'Obligations of Civil to Religious Liberty'. Here, Wordsworth's criticism of his apathetic countrymen is as blunt as anywhere else in the series:

Ungrateful Country, if thou e'er forget
 The sons who for thy civil rights have bled!
 How, like a Roman, Sidney bowed his head,
 And Russel's milder blood the scaffold wet.
 (SSIP 192; 1-4)

The striking opening remark signals the beginning of the dynamic, whereby Wordsworth scolds the people of England for their apparent ungratefulness when it comes to appreciating their historical inheritance. By thus deflating the addressee, the remainder of the sonnet works to recover and ameliorate by imploring the reader to learn from, and emulate, the example of these great Christian patriots:

But These had fallen for profitless regret
 Had not thy holy Church her Champions bred.
 (5-6)

It is worth noting that Wordsworth alludes to Algernon Sidney, who was beheaded for his role in the Rye House Plot of 1683, the attempted capture and murder of Charles II. It is a significant echo of the 'Great Men' sonnet of 1802, and shows that despite Wordsworth's position as very much part of the Establishment in the 1820s, he could still exhibit admiration for those who gave their life so that 'The Star of Liberty' (8) could rise.

'Obligations of Civil to Religious Liberty' exemplifies Wordsworth's endeavour to 'improve' the English people, since it strives to remedy the fact that the people have forgotten their national heritage. If the purpose of the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* is to improve by teaching or even *reminding* the people of the history of their nation, then 'Ungrateful Country, if thou e'er forget' could well stand as the sonnets' rallying cry. Part of this heritage that Wordsworth wanted to invoke and protect was

the particularly *English* Christian character. Indeed, he does not limit himself to praising purely ‘historical’ figures. In ‘Pastoral Character’, which comes two sonnets after ‘Ungrateful Country’, the picture of a gentle country Pastor is tenderly drawn:

A genial hearth, a hospitable board,
 And a refined rusticity, belong
 To the neat Mansion, where, his Flock among,
 The learned Pastor dwells, their watchful Lord.
 (SSIP 193; 1-4)

Wordsworth was naturally drawn to religious men of this type, since they simultaneously represented that state of sublime authority that comes from acting on behalf of God, but also, the quiet dignity and grace requisite for serving in a rural community.¹⁵ What emerges strongly from the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* is Wordsworth’s deep respect for this English character which is preserved and perpetuated by the continuation of a harmonising national religion. Again, similarities are evident with the ‘Liberty’ sonnets. Pulling away from political activism, Wordsworth in 1802 sought true personal liberty in a life of humble domesticity. In 1822, Wordsworth endorses these same attributes, seeing the genuine English Christian as meek and selfless, and thus, as William Galperin argues, more Christ-like than the authoritarian Christians of Rome (225). The earlier sonnet sequence saw personal freedom as the reward for adhering to this virtuous ideal. The more staunchly conservative poet of the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* saw this character as ‘the principal bulwark against barbarism’ (Note to ‘Pastoral Character’ SSIP 231), and thus vital for the protection of English culture and identity.

Wordsworth becomes much more explicit about his concerns for England at the beginning of Part 3. This final section of the series opens with one of the few truly personal sonnets, ‘I saw the figure of a lovely Maid’, which depicts the poet’s

momentary vision of his daughter Dora. He was to later tell Isabella Fenwick that ‘I had the dream described in this sonnet...the whole past exactly as here represented’ (*Fenwick* 35). The poem’s purpose is to ‘reinforc[e] the poet’s awareness of mutability’ (Easterlin 138) – Dora’s ‘Shape, limbs, and heavenly features’ gradually dissolve before they are ‘melted into air’ (*SSIP* 187; 12, 14) – but it at first seems out of place in the series, owing to its private, domestic theme. However, its meaning is qualified by the following sonnet, ‘Patriotic Sympathies’, which opens up this isolated moment of visionary experience to embrace ‘a meditation on the mutability of nations’ (Easterlin 138):

Last night, without a voice, this Vision spake
 Fear to my Spirit – passion that might seem
 To lie dissevered from our present theme;
 Yet do I love my Country – and partake
 Of kindred agitations for her sake.

(*SSIP* 187-8; 1-5)

Wordsworth here initially admits that the ‘vision’ of Dora in the previous sonnet spoke of a ‘sadness’ seemingly ‘dissevered’ from the ‘present theme’ of the series, but then accounts for its inclusion by transferring the sadness derived from the experience of seeing Dora outwards and onto his country. The ‘lovely Maid’ (*SSIP* 187; 1) is envisioned as a beautiful, ideal figure, but one that grows thin and eventually disappears. Even though Dora was not ill at this time – and so the poem is unlikely to be an echo of the poet’s earlier fears for Thomas and Catherine who both died after long illnesses in 1812 – her fading presence is still the occasion for this quiet rumination on human mortality. That this anxiety for his beloved daughter should be so self-consciously juxtaposed with similar ‘kindred agitations’ for England is of real importance. ‘Patriotic Sympathies’ is an expression of

Wordsworth's fears about England's decline, the impairment of its beauty and the possibility of the destruction of its moral principles, but when read in conjunction with the previous sonnet – something actively encouraged by the 'this' of line one – a more profound *filial* relationship between man and country is established. The private experience of the first sonnet is subsumed into a larger, public one in the second, enabling us to see Wordsworth feeling as strongly about clinging onto his unchanging country as he does for preserving the real figure of his daughter. This prepares us for the final three lines, where the intensity of the bond that exists between Wordsworth and England is articulated:

If she hath fallen and righteous Heaven restore
 The prostrate, then my spring-time is renewed,
 And sorrow bartered for exceeding joy.
 (SSIP 187-8; 12-14)

The 'filial love' (11) that Wordsworth has for England, mirroring the love between Dora and her father, leads to a situation whereby the poet's 'spring-time' – his own period of spiritual renewal – is inextricably bound up with the fate of his country. This is a bold claim, and marks the culmination, in personal terms, of his treatise in support of the Church. The Anglican Church is needed to ensure the moral and ethical survival of the country, and the survival of the country is required in order for Wordsworth to preserve *himself*. 'Nation, poet, and daughter' (Easterlin 138) coalesce in these two sonnets, meaning the dissolution of one leads to the dissolution of all. Furthermore, Wordsworth skilfully manages to make England's 'fall' a credible potentiality. At this point in the series, the narrative has reached the Restoration under Charles II, and thus the poem carries with it the conditions of the period's historical moment: its struggles, upheavals and so on. Indeed, the sonnet

following on from these two, 'Charles the Second', tells how 'already stands our Country on the brink / Of bigot rage' (*SSIP* 188-9; 10-11). 'Patriotic Sympathies' is therefore carefully positioned. Its sense follows on from an intensely private sonnet, written in the first person and set in the present day, yet its lament for a fallen England takes on an added historical resonance once it is qualified by 'Charles the Second', meaning a curious blend of time periods occurs. Sandwiched as it is between two very different types of poem, 'Patriotic Sympathies' derives its meaning from the merging of a personal expression of mutability in the 1820s, and a public utterance of seventeenth-century turbulence. The very real destabilising troubles of the Restoration, this unsettled period of England's past, are thus brought into alignment with the country's present day condition: a clever rhetorical trick that magnifies the social problems facing early nineteenth-century England, which in turn makes Wordsworth's role as moral saviour seem that much more necessary. At the beginning of Part 3, therefore, Wordsworth heightens the register of his defence of English values, while simultaneously subtly justifying his reasons for doing it.

Yet while the stabilising, unifying nature of the Church is certainly the one that underpins the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, Wordsworth does not suggest that Anglicanism is *always* inherently synonymous with social order. Indeed, with the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 came the return of the Church of England, but the period was still marked by struggles and conspiracies. The point Wordsworth aims to make is that the Church, throughout its long history, has come up against countless challenges and schisms, including war and papal corruption, that threaten to undermine its authority, but crucially, *it has overcome them*, proving its endurance and fortitude and therefore ensuring its place as the cornerstone of an evolving English nation. In a sonnet incorporated into Part 2 of the series in later editions,

‘Where long and deeply hath been fixed the root’, Wordsworth sees the Church as a tree, and ‘blighted or scathed tho’ many branches be’, it ‘Can never cease to bear celestial fruit’ (*SSIP* 221; 3, 5). The Church may experience dark days, but its future progress is assured, rooted as it is in ‘the blest soil of gospel truth’ (2). The final three lines confidently assert Wordsworth’s belief in the Church’s continual growth, regardless of struggle:

All promises vouchsafed by Heaven will shine
 In light confirmed while years their course shall run,
 Confirmed alike *in progress and decline*.
 (12-14, my emphasis)

The authorial voice of the series is therefore defined by a dynamic of fear and assurance; England’s mutability and the threat of Catholic influence are genuine concerns for Wordsworth, but his confidence in Anglicanism’s power to endure, and as such provide perpetual guidance for the English people, acts as his defence from such threats. While this dynamic, in the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, is played out in terms of nationhood and cultural identity, it mirrors the balance of faith and doubt that constitutes the essence of the devotional Christian’s *spiritual* relationship with God.

With its vast accumulation of incidents, and more importantly, the breadth of its numerous personages throughout the ages, the expansive historical structure of the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* serves to posit the Church’s progress as an organic, slowly evolving process in the Burkean model of history – something Wordsworth sees as a more beneficial form of development than sudden, violent change. The general feeling that this establishes is that despite being separated by hundreds of years, the adherents of the English Christian Church depicted by the poet are all members of the same family. The Church changes gradually as it advances, but remains at all

times one complete, consistent body: a *community* of believers. The appeal to, and need for, community was always important to the Wordsworthian ethos, but arguably became more so in his later life. With deaths of loved ones, concerns for societal problems, and disillusionment with the effectiveness of politics to remedy such problems, the support offered by community, especially in the form of an established, institutional community like the Church was essential. Wordsworth evokes this sense of a Christian community, and then in the very act of writing as a 'Christian' poet, works to place *himself*, in the present day, within it. For as Anne Rylestone argues, 'he assimilates the past in such a way that his life becomes part of a continuum' (19). While the identity of an Anglican community, developed over hundreds of years, is established in the first two parts, the liturgical sonnets of the third part show the community in practice. Baptism, confirmation, marriage and the funeral are the ceremonial manifestations of the Christian community at work – a visual marker of people coming together at important moments of the life-cycle, in the name of God. In 'Conclusion', the final sonnet of the series, the dutiful Christian is assured of his place in Heaven where the community lives on:

The living Waters, less and less by guilt
 Stained and polluted, brighten as they roll,
 Till they have reached the Eternal City – built
 For the perfected Spirits of the just!
 (SSIP 204; 11-14)

John Delli Carpini speaks of the great value Wordsworth places on the religious community in the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, and even suggests that the *independence* he strove for in his youth was eventually discovered in the absolute *dependence* upon the community of the Church (106). This is an insightful observation, since it implies

that the often pejorative 'dependence' is actually the beneficial germ for 'independence'. Wordsworth's embracing of a wider community is not a weakening manoeuvre indicative of a doubting self or 'orthodox censor'.¹⁶ Instead, the community of the Anglican Church is envisioned by Wordsworth as a positive space that, through its communal guidance and support, can nurture individuals and help them to flourish.

Interestingly, however, this process of 'self-abnegation', of Wordsworth seeking the 'solace of conformity' (Easterlin 131) in a half-imagined community that spreads over hundreds of years, is set against a drive towards a retreat to the self, a theme articulated in a three-sonnet sequence in Part 1.¹⁷ The triad begins with 'Seclusion', where Wordsworth describes a Saxon king who has abdicated so as to lead the life of a reclusive monk. Yet this is no ideal retreat. He 'quits the world – to hide / His thin autumnal locks where Monks abide / In cloistered privacy' (*SSIP* 151; 4-6), yet the most important detail of his withdrawal is that his 'Lance, shield, and sword [are] relinquished' (1). His turn away from the world is thus a turn away from the war and bloodshed that attended his political position. His retreat has been brought about by the sickness and violence of the world, and this is mirrored in his cell's natural surroundings. 'Penitential cogitations' cling 'round the decaying trunk' and 'in grisly folds'. He finds no 'soft repose': his retirement is unproductive and perhaps even as destructive as his years as a soldier that preceded it (10, 8, 12, 7).

The following two sonnets offer a different view on self-imposed exile, with 'Reproof', the third of the set, certainly the most important. As a panegyric to 'venerable Bede', the 'Sublime Recluse' (*SSIP* 152; 4, 9), the poem celebrates retreat and articulates the manner in which retirement from the world can serve a public end. The sonnet is deliberately self-referential in that Wordsworth depicts Bede immersed

in scholarly enterprise, writing the works that Wordsworth himself will come to use as a major source for the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*. Bede is ‘the Saint, the Scholar, from a circle freed / Of toil stupendous, in a hallowed seat / Of Learning’ (5-7). Where the king’s ‘seclusion’ is drawn as a slow, decaying isolation, Bede’s retreat is a productive manoeuvre, since it allows him to step back from the distracting influence of the world’s toils which in turn enables him to pursue his studies. In the poem’s final lines, Wordsworth recalls the famous account of Bede translating St. John’s Gospel in the final moments before he died, ‘in the hour of death, / The last dear service of thy passing breath’ (13-14). Bede, in a literal sense, contributed to the widening of historical and theological understanding until the very end of his life. Indeed, it is this ‘dear service’ to scholarship that his works provided that Wordsworth finds most appealing, and is the reason why Wordsworth uses him as exemplar. For Bede’s seclusion is not a self-serving escape as it is with the king. Rather, his withdrawal from society is posited as the necessary condition for ‘a higher mode of social engagement’ (Easterlin 134). Through deep thought, serious scholarship, and most importantly, the act of writing, Bede is able to operate within two seemingly contradictory realms: he works in cloistered *privacy*, but his output serves *society* by establishing a sense of national community, through its documentation of a shared historical heritage. Geoffrey Jackson has suggested that ‘Reproof’, despite being placed third in the triad, may have been written or at least ‘conceived’ before its two counterparts (*SSIP* 247). This is certainly a feasible contention, particularly since ‘Reproof’ seems to offer Wordsworth’s ideal notion of the benefits of a monastic existence.¹⁸ It is another version of the type of retreat advocated in the ‘Liberty’ sonnets, and more fully in the ‘Miscellaneous Sonnets’. There, the withdrawal from the ephemera and triviality of consumerist society

fostered that most gracious of character traits, ‘magnanimous meekness’, as well as the contribution to a social end. Shielded from the dehumanising spirit of the materialist world, Bede is able to pursue a vocation that reaches out to, and serves, the English community by capturing and memorialising it – both past and present – through the permanence of the written word. By being carefully placed third in the triad, the poem is able to carry full rhetorical significance, since it qualifies and corrects the earlier unproductive mode of retreat set out in ‘Seclusion’.

Yet in between these two sonnets is ‘Continued’, the one autobiographical poem of the triad. Its title implies a following on from ‘Seclusion’, and while the theme of retreat is certainly continued, Wordsworth immediately distinguishes his withdrawal from that of the king:

Methinks that to some vacant Hermitage
My feet would rather turn...
 (SSIP 151-2; 1-2)

By italicising ‘my’, Wordsworth enforces a distancing effect. While the poem’s placement suggest that Wordsworth’s own desire for seclusion is initially inspired by the king’s example, the conspicuous focus on self signals a different kind of retreat, distinct from the king’s crippling isolation. Familiar Wordsworthian tropes are rehearsed in the form of a comfortable, enriching natural retreat. The poet’s ‘dry nook’ should be ‘scoop’d out of living rock’ and ‘a beechen bowl, / A maple dish [his] furniture should be’ (2, 3, 9-10). It is an altogether more fruitful, beneficial mode of separation from the world. However, the sonnet has been read as ‘a cautionary reminder’ against a type of ‘inappropriate’ withdrawal. It is seen as an ‘imperfect’ form of retreat, since it depicts an ‘invented’ or imagined seclusion

(Easterlin 133-4). While it is of course an idealised vision, to read the poem as a critique of ‘false’ desire is to ignore the sonnet’s function in the triad, and its significance in terms of Wordsworth’s perception of his status as poet. Positioned as the middle sonnet, ‘Continued’ displays a developed, or improved mode of retreat from that seen in ‘Seclusion’ – regardless of whether or not it is ‘idealised’ – and also prepares the way for the productive retreat exemplified by Bede in ‘Reproof’.

For example, in ‘Reproof’, there is an echo of the tiring and toilsome ‘industry’ of the world that drives Wordsworth to his rural retreat in ‘Continued’ (14), but the term is cleverly subverted so that it comes to represent Bede’s unceasing dedication to his studies: the beating billows of the wild Jarrow coast are ‘rough monitors to feed / Perpetual industry’ (*SSIP* 152; 8-9). As the triad progresses and the concept of retreat is depicted ever more favourably, each character is sublimated into the next, ameliorated as they do so. The lot of the *decaying* king is corrected by Wordsworth’s invented, yet *nourishing* seclusion, which is in turn perfected by Bede’s socially *active* mode of retreat. It is for this reason that I cannot agree with Nancy Easterlin when she says that ‘the state of mind and the fantasy of retreat are overtly condemned’ in ‘Continued’ (134). Fantasy it may be, but it is a vital one that shows the poet exploring the possibilities of what can be achieved from a position of withdrawal, working his way towards the kind of socially engaged retreat that had already been set out – since it was arguably written first – in ‘Reproof’. In other words, Bede is Wordsworth’s primary ideal model, and ‘Continued’, even though it makes no overt reference to study or scholarship, demonstrates the poet’s desire to emulate him (Bede) due to the way in which the triad functions rhetorically. Indeed, one need only consider the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* project as a whole to see that Wordsworth was striving for a Bede-like dedication to learning and written

production that could provide a social benefit. Wordsworth's long hours of research and rigorous writing schedule that contributed to the sonnets' composition mirror Bede's own studious seclusion, and as has previously been noted, a fundamental aim of the series was to provide a 'dear service' to the English people, teaching them of the moral cohesion that the Anglican Church promoted. I argue that Wordsworth liked to see himself as a modern day Bede, something the seclusion triad hints towards. *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* is similar to Bede's own *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, or 'Ecclesiastical History of the English People', in both name and purpose. As with the poet's reverence for Milton, it is the privately driven, publicly serving role Wordsworth grants Bede, that he both admired and aspired to.¹⁹ The sonnet form itself enacts this same dynamic.

From private reflection, comes public declaration. Such is the case for much of Wordsworth's poetry, and the sonnets in particular. The sonnet may be a 'narrow room' suitable for exploring some 'lonely feeling', but as we have seen in many of the different modes of Wordsworthian sonnet, including those in the *Ecclesiastical* sequence, this limited, private space can be used for grand, declamatory expression, for speaking to, and on behalf of, a wider community. In Wordsworthian poetics, this public tenor inevitably manifests itself in the call for securing and upholding liberty. With its origins in his idyllic and egalitarian childhood among the Lakes, Wordsworth's desire for freedom – 'unlimited, careless, insolent freedom' in De Quincey's words (qtd. in Fairchild 139) – governed his life and works.

By the time of the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, Wordsworth saw the social, economic, and spiritual landscape of the English nation in an even more vulnerable state than it had been twenty years previously,²⁰ and believed that the preservation of personal freedom required a higher power, something more sacred and permanent

than politics, or rural retreat: hence the turn to institutional religion. The cohesive and stabilising power of religion in the later poetry, particularly the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, thus marks an important stage in his changing understanding of what liberty is and how to achieve it. This divine fulfilment of personal freedom, standing in many ways as the summative chapter of Wordsworth's career, is surely reason enough for the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* to be counted as major poetry and not a tired late collection. At each stage of his search for liberty, he turned to the past for guidance in the present. For the political sonnets of 1802, he gained inspiration from the seventeenth-century classical republicans. For much of the nature poetry, including *The River Duddon*, he looked into his own past in the Lake District, and for the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, he researched the major events of England's ecclesiastical history. But herein lies a potential problem. For as has already been argued, Wordsworth's move towards the Church in the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* is not primarily based on any desire to understand the theological intricacies of the Godhead; rather, it was to firmly resituate the social, nation-building aspect of the institution at the centre of English life: his vision of Anglicanism is deeply coloured by a restrictive English nationalism. While the Church was undoubtedly a force for moral good in Wordsworth's eyes, there was a sense of *exclusivity* about its application. Wordsworth believed the Church could promote virtue and safeguard liberty, but it was a liberty nationed *English* and more specifically, reserved for those who followed the *Anglican* faith, and not Catholicism. Towards the end of the chapter, I question whether we can read this 'problem' in a more positive way.

Mary Moorman detects no 'partisan colouring' to the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, and instead asserts that they show him to be 'a passionate advocate of toleration' (Moorman *Later Years* 395, 398). It is certainly true that Wordsworth respected the

accomplishments of the monasteries and lamented their loss.²¹ Moorman says that Wordsworth had a 'poetic sympathy and admiration for much that was then rejected' in the Reformation (395). However, I find it difficult to follow Moorman entirely in this regard. The vehemently anti-Catholic sonnets, and his contemporary correspondence on the issue, both discussed earlier, show that Wordsworth was not able to see Anglicanism and Catholicism as compatible. The *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* seem, therefore, to be enforcing a sense of religious nativism, something that severely limits the scope of Wordsworth's call for liberty, since it extends only to the Anglican English. John Delli Carpini comments upon England's changing position on 'The Catholic Question'. He suggests that 'what began in Anglo-Saxon centuries as an aid to England's progress had become in Elizabethan times an open threat, and in Wordsworth's time, a calamity' (122). It is worth noting that this mirrors Wordsworth's own relationship with France through the 1790s and into the early nineteenth century. Initial support for the Revolutionary cause soon became distrust, and by the turn of the century, a rejection of France in favour of England. This parallel is significant, since a major part of this chapter's argument has been to show how the threat from France in 'Sonnets, Dedicated to Liberty', is echoed in the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* in the form of an 'invading' Catholicism, something that makes the didactic thrust of the two series remarkably similar. To summarise: Wordsworth establishes an antagonist (French imperialism / Catholic emancipation), which must be opposed in order to preserve the integrity of the English constitution. As such, the most effective defence is to promote the values of a virtuous, humble existence, to demonstrate the individual *and* communal benefit of a productive retreat from the world's affairs, and most importantly, to strongly assert *Englishness*, through its representative personages, morals, and cultural markers.

Here, then, is where the point made at the beginning of this chapter – regarding the order in which Wordsworth’s poems are read – becomes crucial. If we read these two series of sonnets chronologically, that is, the ‘Liberty’ collection first, we read the earlier group as triumphant poems, fighting for the cause of liberty, made all the more challenging and engaging, since they show a poet working through an immense personal crisis, his sympathies torn between a residual idealism directed towards a foreign nation once so full of hope and possibility, and an innate patriotism: a struggle that forges poetry of great passion and energy. However, if we allow our reading of the ‘Liberty’ series to be coloured by an understanding of the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* – in effect, taking the late Wordsworth as our starting point and reading the earlier works in the light of that later voice – we see the ‘Liberty’ group as fitting comfortably into their conservative model. We think of the reactionary Wordsworth as emerging at some point between 1807 and 1815, but by seeing the ‘Liberty’ sonnets as an early manifestation of what will become more clearly delineated in 1822, this theory of a post-‘great decade’ decline into conformist piety needs to be adjusted. The 1802 political sonnets may initially strive for a liberal position with their emancipatory politics, but reading them retrospectively shows that they are driven in part by an English nativism recognisably similar to that of the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*: the concern of both is with improving a struggling English people in order to return them to a position of greatness again. It is therefore important to pay due consideration to the later Wordsworth, regardless of the general quality of the poetry, since it means we may better understand the early work.

Perhaps it can be concluded from all this, that although it is certainly in the older Wordsworth that we see the depth of his Tory leanings, there are, nevertheless,

strong elements of it in the earlier, supposedly radical poetry. Were Wordsworth's political sympathies perhaps *always* conservative? At the risk of over simplifying the term, I see two fundamental strains to Wordsworth's conservatism. The first is that of class. Reading from the vantage point of the later poetry, Peter Manning perceives Wordsworth's political leanings as being just as conservative in the early years as they are in the later. He sees the radicalism of the 1790s as an 'interruption', suggesting that 'Wordsworth's revolutionary ardors' were an 'aberration from a pattern of family service to the Lowthers'. The implication is that Wordsworth was born into a respectable middle-class existence which was maintained throughout his life, despite brief moments of activism outside of Establishment norms. Manning uses this thesis as a defence against accusations of a 'falling off' in the poetry, from revolutionary to reactionary. Wordsworth, he asserts, followed a consistently conservative line in his politics, because of his class, 'fulfilling a destiny predicted by his beginnings in that fine, comfortably bourgeois house in Cockermouth' (51). Yet the aspect of his conservatism I believe to be more important, particularly to the sonnets, is that which has occupied a large part of this chapter's argument – his nationalism. It is, as I have suggested, one of the more contentious areas of his poetry – this idea of 'religious nativism' – and I want to end by briefly considering what nationalism meant at the time Wordsworth was writing, so as to argue that his fervent pro-English stance was not an act of bigoted exclusivity, but instead a campaign with real social worth.

Gerald Newman's illuminating study of English nationalism demarcates 1740 – 1830 as the crucial years of nationalism's emergence and growth, roughly contemporaneous with the Romantic era. His prime contention is that 'nationalism' as we commonly understand it, established itself as a recognisable 'movement', or

way of thinking, in the second half of the eighteenth century, initially as a way of countering the ‘corrupting spiritual influences originating...in France’ (51). It is posited as a rejection of ‘cosmopolitan internationalism’ (50) and a corresponding promotion of domestic cultural identity. He outlines, at length, why England at this time was ripe for a rising nationalist fervour,²² and he offers various interpretations of what nationalism constitutes. Patriotism, something slightly different, ‘focuses outward’ (54) and is aligned more with support of the nation during a time of war. Nationalism, on the other hand, ‘carried with it a complex idea of *national solidarity* in peace as well as war’ (53), something that obviously applies to the period when Wordsworth was writing the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*. Nationalism takes ‘*all the nation’s affairs*, internal as well as external, into its compass’ (54) and while it may begin as a ‘cultural activity’ (55), it works as a ‘response to *specific political economic, and social conditions*’ (54). Perhaps most important to nationalist ideology is the role ‘aliens’ or ‘outsiders’ play in forming group consciousness. Newman explains:

The activity is cultural at the outset, its causation is originally defensive and reactive, and its purpose is to create or revive, by conscious self-comparisons with the alien culture, a more distinct sense of we-group identity (55).

The defensive, protective, ‘conservative’ line Wordsworth adopts in the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, and also the ‘Liberty’ sonnets, accords with this theory of nationalism as defined in its eighteenth / nineteenth-century context, and so the poetry is part of a larger cultural movement. Also worth pointing out – considering the subject matter of the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* – is that although this ‘phenomenon’ of nationalism did later take on ‘religious ramifications...there is no reason to

suppose that it thereby became in any real sense a religious movement' (Newman 238). Again, as previously stressed, it is more helpful to read the sonnets as being more focused on *moral and social* concerns rather than theological ones, two terms that Newman sees as 'the inner dynamics of the nationalist movement' (239). What this all means is that France in 1802, and Catholicism in 1821, are positioned by Wordsworth in opposition to his own English culture, as a way of showing them as being inherently inferior. Thus, by being presented as distinct from, and by implication, 'better' than, the foreign culture, English national identity can be more clearly defined, and becomes, in Wordsworth's mind, a stronger unified entity.

This kind of nationalism is often associated, in the present day, with extremism and malignant supremacist thought, but it is unwise to judge eighteenth and nineteenth-century nationalism with twenty first-century values. Newman's most crucial observation is to point out that it is misguided to evaluate the nationalist writers of this time solely along a '*political* continuum', and we should instead consider a '*social* continuum' (241). In other words, the nationalism of this period, in order to be properly understood, must be judged on the basis of its impact upon society in real terms. A compelling, more generous interpretation of Wordsworth's position in the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* emerges:

The long reign of 'Tory Repression' was, if unintentionally, Britain's own social Reign of Virtue...the patriotic anti-French values of 1795-1820, if bigoted, anti-intellectual, and morally and politically repressive, for these very reasons tended to further the rapid *mental unification, moral reformation, and social reorganisation of the country* (242).

'Anti-French values' may not strictly apply to the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, but the sentiment behind the nationalist drive certainly applies to Wordsworth at this time.

The social benefits Wordsworth believed the Anglican Church could offer the English people were those that the nationalist ethos, with its central concern for domestic welfare, enabled to be put into action. By reading early nineteenth-century nationalism as a more 'valuable' system for maintaining society than the 'anti-nationalist, pro-French and pro-Whiggish' writers like Byron and Shelley, who served to 'sustain...the mental, moral and social divisions of traditional and hierarchical society' (243, 242), it is possible to see the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* as promoting a *progressive* agenda for the well-being of the English people. The problem of the exclusion of Catholics remains, however, but perhaps this cannot ever be fully reconciled with Wordsworth's sense that it is only through innate goodness that society could begin to mend itself. Yet ultimately, 'society' and 'nation' are as susceptible to the destructive whims of mutability as any other 'outward forms' (*SSIP* 197; 7) of the world. As Wordsworth says in 'Mutability' – the best known and most anthologised of all the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* – although 'from low to high doth dissolution climb' (1), *inner* freedom, and the spiritual life, cultivated through the blend of personal and communal enrichment offered by the Church, is permanent: 'Truth fails not' (7).

¹ Sperry's was the first prominent full-length study on the idea.

² Throughout the chapter, I shall refer to the sequence as the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*.

³ This is much like Wordsworth's own view of the 'gothic Church'. *The Prelude* was merely the 'ante-chapel'. (*Prose* III; 5).

⁴ I am thinking especially of the moment in the 1802 Preface where he directs us specifically to the final stanza of 'The Childless Father' so that we might better understand his concept of the poem's feeling giving importance to the action and situation, and not vice versa (*LB* 746).

⁵ I do not intend to trace the intricacies of Wordsworth's religious belief throughout his life. The ground has been well trodden, by, among others, Stephen Prickett, Fairchild and Gill (1998).

⁶ Of course, as I argued in the previous chapter, there were no contemporaries at the time of the *Duddon* sonnets, but Wordsworth consciously projects them into his sequence. This is not the case with the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*.

⁷ See Phelan (85-106) for his discussion of the 'Devotional Sonnet' in the nineteenth century. He says that 'the much-derided *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* foreshadow, as we shall see, some of the main lines of the development of religious poetry' (85).

⁸ My dates refer only to years of publication; most of *The Excursion*'s first four books were written prior to 1807.

⁹ In this edition, the poems are grouped as the 1822 *Ecclesiastical Sketches*, with poems added to later editions collected together at the end. However, within the study, I refer to the series as the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, thereby encompassing the entire group.

¹⁰ Galperin (229) lists the numerous sources Wordsworth referred to in his research for the series.

¹¹ Of course, this is at odds with Wordsworth's royalist sympathies at this stage of his life. However, the similarities between Napoleon and the Pope in the poetry arguably shows a residual democratic impulse in 1822.

¹² Indeed, it has been argued that while there are undoubtedly anti-Catholic sentiments throughout the series, Wordsworth was actually drawn to certain elements of Roman Catholic ritual, perhaps because, as Fairchild argues, 'in being superstitious, they contain a precious imaginative element which flouts that "false secondary power", the lower reason' (230). Lee Johnson observes that 'the original rhetorical purpose of the series, that of cautioning against the spread of Catholic influence in England, was further diluted over the years by other additions' (153), specifically the sonnets on Christianity in America, and those on liturgy.

¹³ A note to *Musings near Aquapendente* comments upon this 'religious movement' which has 'made itself felt, more or less strongly, throughout the English Church': 'I would draw cheerful auguries for the English Church from this movement, as likely to restore among us a tone of piety more earnest and real, than that produced by the mere formalities of the understanding, refusing, in a degree, which I cannot but lament, that its own temper and judgment shall be controlled by those of antiquity' (*SSIP* 790-1). Stephen Gill has shown (1998, 73-4) that the note, while representative of Wordsworth's views, was actually written by the poet's friend Frederick Faber. For more on the Oxford Movement see Gill (1998, 64-6) and Knight and Mason (87-119).

¹⁴ John Delli Carpini highlights a few instances of Wordsworth's exhortatory tone throughout the series (91). Also, Anne Rylestone, in an appendix, brings together a list of first-line exclamations from the sonnets, 'many of which are imperatives', and 'lend immediacy to the sonnets' (111). 'Watch, and be firm!' (*SSIP* 143-4), 'Woe to you, Prelates!' (169-70), 'Woe the crown that doth the Cowl obey!' (155) and 'Deep is the lamentation' (174) are a few of the more fiery examples.

¹⁵ The character recalls the pastor in *The Excursion*, and the Rev. Robert Walker, about whom Wordsworth wrote a long memoir as a note to 'Seathwaite Chapel' from *The River Duddon*. He is praised for his 'candour and meekness, his sober, chaste, and virtuous conversation'. His exemplifies the 'plain living and high thinking' that Wordsworth cultivates: 'The frugality and temperance established in is house, were as admirable as the industry'. In his ecclesiastical role, Walker, as he says in his own words, looks over members of a specifically *English Church*: they are 'sincere Christians, and sound members of the established church, not one dissenter of any denomination being amongst them all' (*SSIP* 88, 92, 89).

¹⁶ Bloom (1971), 141. Bloom finds some of the late Wordsworth's revisions 'unfortunate', and provides an example from *The Prelude*. In 1805, the poet worshipped 'among the depths of things / As my soul bade me'. In the 1850 text, this second line was changed to 'As piety ordained'.

¹⁷ 'Seclusion', 'Continued', and 'Reproof' (*SSIP* 151-2).

¹⁸ Wordsworth's admiration for the monastic life can be found throughout the series. Although 'Abuse of Monastic Power' (*SSIP* 170) and 'Monastic Voluptuousness' (171) focus on the corruption and indulgence that pre-empted the Dissolution (II: 171), 'Cisterian Monastery' (162) and 'Monks, and Schoolmen' (162-3) celebrate the 'gentler life' (162; 12) and 'the intellectual sphere' (162-3; 12) that the monasteries promoted. See also Manning (35) for a discussion of the poet's attraction to monastic institutions.

¹⁹ The sixteenth sonnet of Part 1, 'Persuasion', is a reworking of Bede's account of the 'Conversion of Edwin', which Wordsworth found 'highly interesting' (*SSIP* 228-9).

²⁰ See Carpini 94-95. Industrialisation and governmental ineptitude meant Wordsworth sensed the onset of 'dehumanisation, poverty, and self and communal alienation'.

²¹ See *SSIP* 171-4: 'Dissolution of the Monasteries', 'The Same Subject', 'Continued', 'Saints', 'The Virgin', 'Apology' and 'Imaginative Regrets'. See also note 18.

²² These include 'an instinct to defend...land, culture and people', 'war with the historic enemy' (France), 'social humiliations', 'a present which is experienced as incohesive [and] fractured', and 'an intellectual thrust, initially defensive and intensely cultural in character' (58). See 49-60.

Conclusion

*It is the habit of my mind inseparably to connect loftiness of imagination
with that humility of mind which is best taught in scripture.*

(Letters: Later Years II; 465)

Much of Wordsworth's thinking and writing concerns itself with the interrelationship of 'loftiness of imagination' and 'humility of mind', mightiness and lowliness. In his poetics, lofty subject matter is often placed alongside, or is even dependent upon, more humble and small-scale concerns. Richard Cronin notes that Wordsworth's poems 'may address a daisy or Milton, an infant girl or "England". They may chronicle domestic doings or great international events...' (116). His comments are part of his discussion of *Poems, in Two Volumes*, where he argues that the nation's war-like spirit is dependent upon humble domestic virtues, but the point he makes about heterogeneousness and thematic and tonal range applies to any part of Wordsworth's poetic output. His whole way of perceiving, and his approach to poetry, is informed by this merging of the high and the low, showing that lowly objects and reflections are as capable as mightier forms of guiding the imagination to greatness. The sonnet which opens Part 3 of the extended 'Miscellaneous Sonnets' is a dramatisation of this privileging of modest forms:

Though the bold wings of Poesy affect
The clouds, and wheel around the mountain tops
Rejoicing, from her loftiest height she drops
Well pleased to skim the plain with wild flowers deckt,
Or muse in solemn grove whose shades protect
The lingering dew – there steals along, or stops
Watching the least small bird that round her hops,
Or creeping worm, with sensitive respect.
Her functions are they therefore less divine,
Her thoughts less deep, or void of grave intent
Her simplest fancies? Should that fear be thine,
Aspiring Votary, ere thy hand present

One offering, kneel before her modest shrine,
 With brow in penitential sorrow bent!
 (PW; 39)

The 'bold wings of Poesy' may fly through lofty scenes, but just as vital are the more humble subjects. It has been suggested in this study that while the duality of high and low is common to Wordsworth, it is particularly prevalent in the sonnets, owing in large part to the versatility of the form. The *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* chart the history of kings, popes and wars, but the story of the Anglican faith is only complete with an acknowledgement of the lowlier scenes: the poet and Bede in their sequestered nooks, or the simple act of charity whereby ministers are sent 'to kneel / Beside the afflicted' and 'soothe the heart' of those in need (*SSIP* 224; 5-6, 7). In the 'Liberty' sonnets, Wordsworth laments the extinction of the Venetian Republic, yet he also addresses the imprisonment of just one man, Toussaint. Both are worth his attention, for they both hold the potential for sublime reflection. While the more modest scenes may be *outwardly* humble, they still hold great power. Poetry is not, as the rhetorical questioning of 'Though the bold wings' indicates, 'less divine, / Her thoughts less deep, or void of grave intent' when it concerns itself with these scenes and forms.

Yet the blending of sublimity and humility extends beyond subject matter, and I contend that Wordsworth saw issues of form and poetic scale as engaging with this balance. In chapter 5, I argued that Wordsworth's sonneteering energies derived, to a substantial degree, from an evasion of *The Recluse*: sonnets are shorter and more accessible than the longer, formally loftier poem, and so offer him a sense of poetic release. He writes sonnets because in strictly formal terms, their fourteen lines are humble and modest.

This study has shown, however, that formal bounds do not necessarily limit the scale of Wordsworth's sonnets in terms of their ambition and outward vision. Those sonnets that are part of a sequence, such as those on the Duddon, reach beyond the scope of the single poem, and become part of a wider narrative. The sonorous, rousing energy of the political sonnets forces their rhetoric outward, to exceed the formal bounds. And most significantly, many of Wordsworth's sonnets, particularly those from the 'Miscellaneous' group, explore moments of elevated consciousness, where an initial sensory numbness leads to a visionary state and is expanded to become a sublime epiphany. Wordsworth's sonnets frequently demonstrate that while the form may be outwardly lowly, it is nevertheless charged with enormous potential. 'Though the bold wings' is therefore more than a simple outline of the range of subjects that poetry should address. The 'loftiest height' of the 'mountain tops' is a metaphor for epic, sublime poetry: in Wordsworth's mind, *The Recluse*. As the wings descend to the 'wild flowers' and 'lingering dew', we enter the realm of the small poem: the sonnet. In this poem, written in 1842, Wordsworth tells his readers why he has written so many sonnets, and he invites them to kneel before the 'modest shrine' of the sonnet form. This is not a defensive manoeuvre, designed to justify why he has spent so much time within the narrow room of the sonnet, instead of dedicating himself to larger, more substantial work. It is instead a celebration of the modest sonnet's ability to be as grand and as philosophical as the epic.

Jennifer Wagner has a similar view of the central dynamic of Wordsworth's sonnets, suggesting that they operate in an 'essentially synecdochic' manner, whereby 'one significant detail' in an experience is seized upon within the sonnet and enlarged so as to become something much more significant. She claims, 'each of

the sonnets is a synecdoche of the much larger and more powerful visionary world that [Wordsworth's] imagination can create out of such moments; each poem can enclose a single moment or thought and hold it forth as a monument to that moment of heightened consciousness or fancy' (44). The individual sonnet is a manifestation of the tension between high and low – it is formally modest, but that is used as the precondition for the internal dynamic that makes for sublime reach.

What happens then, when these numerous moments of personal, political, historical, loco-descriptive and psychological reflection are brought together and function as a corpus, so that in terms of formal length, as well as internal dynamic, they assume a size that is on an epic scale? Wordsworth himself sees the accumulation of parts to make a whole, as being essential to the establishment of grandeur. Writing about the 'Moods of my Mind' section in *Poems, in Two Volumes*, to Lady Beaumont, he remarks, 'there is scarcely a Poem here of above thirty Lines, and very trifling these poems will appear to many; but, omitting to speak of them individually, do they not, *taken collectively*, fix the attention upon a subject eminently poetical...' (*Letters: Middle Years I*; 147, my emphasis). A more compelling account is found in the *Guide to the Lakes*. If we maintain the tropological reading set out in chapter 5, where it was argued that the sonnet-space is analogous to the enclosing space of the Lake region, then these comments from the 'Miscellaneous Observations' in the *Guide* can be seen as having a major bearing on the sonnets. He suggests that though the peaks of the Alps may individually be larger than those of the Lakes, in his native region 'the sense of sublimity depends more upon form and relation of objects to each other than upon their actual magnitude' (*Guide to the Lakes* 101). Though the 'actual magnitude' of the sonnet, in terms of its formal size, may not be great, the relation of sonnets to each other can engender a

‘sense of sublimity’. A sonnet corpus, which brings together these small poems with large ambition to function collectively, can demonstrate that Wordsworth’s sonnet project is one that is conducted on an epic scale.

Wagner suggests that we read the ‘Miscellaneous Sonnets’ in the context of *The Prelude*, as a ‘different kind of autobiographical long poem’. The intention of *The Prelude* is to trace the growth of the poet’s mind, and ‘the analysis of that mind is no less the intention of his sonnet writing as a whole’ (39). While I agree with her, we could go further. In chapter 6, I suggested that *The River Duddon* represents a kind of *Recluse* project in miniature. Here, I reiterate a point made in chapter 5 that we treat the larger sonnet corpus, as it has been delineated throughout this study, as a compensatory project for the unfinished *Recluse*.

My purpose in this thesis has been to demonstrate that the sonnets are not parasitic on Wordsworth’s lyric poetry, but are instead fundamentally important in their own right in terms of shaping an understanding of the poet. They are vital because they interact, in terms of their content and form, with the stated preoccupations of Wordsworth’s poetics, and his life. They accord with what can clearly be recognised as Wordsworthian – the desire for liberty in its many forms, the possibility of epiphanies rising from common experience, greatness emerging from humility – but they also give continuity and structure to the career. The sonnet corpus has, I argue, a *Recluse*-like scale and ambition.

Milton wrote his sonnets on his way to the epic: I contend that Wordsworth’s sonnets *are* his epic. There is a sense that Wordsworth consciously acknowledged such a relationship between the humble sonnet and epic poetry. In the ‘Advertisement’ to *Poems, in Two Volumes*, which has the two major groups of sonnets at its core, he writes, ‘the short Poems, of which these Volumes consist,

were chiefly composed to refresh my mind during the progress of a work of length and labour' (P2V 527). He admits to a symbiotic relationship between the two forms, the mighty and the lowly, with the composition of the short poems nourishing him as he writes the longer work. Wagner suggests that through this, Wordsworth implies a 'synecdochic relation between the sonnet and epic genres' (39). It would be difficult to claim that Wordsworth consciously saw his sonnet writing as supplanting the plans he had for *The Recluse*. I am not suggesting that Wordsworth deliberately set out to write sonnets as his epic monument, but as I have argued here, it is likely that Wordsworth believed small poems, and particularly the sonnet, could have the *potential* to stand, collectively, as a body of work on a grand scale. When it became clear to him that *The Recluse* would not be completed, he focused on the sonnet to commit himself to a project that firstly, *could* get written, and secondly, had the ability to assume an epic scope. Stephen Gill locates a key stage at which the sonnet and the epic overlap. From 1836 onward, the title-page to *The Excursion* no longer announced it as 'a Portion of the Recluse'. It was in this year, Gill suggests, that Wordsworth finally abandoned any hope that *The Recluse* would be written (1989, 390). Wordsworth was asked in 1838 why he did not finish *The Recluse*. His response was to ask why Gray did not finish his long poem on a similar subject: 'Because he found he had undertaken something beyond his powers to accomplish. And that is my case' (qtd. 390). That same year, *The Sonnets of William Wordsworth: Collected in One Volume* was published. It is as if all of Wordsworth's unfulfilled energies for *The Recluse*, which he had only just let go, were channelled into this 'handsomely printed' edition. Gill suggests that 'Wordsworth knew that he was presenting an achievement which was, in its own way, quite as substantial artistically as *The Excursion*' (390). This publication was Wordsworth's final

assertion of his pre-eminence in the sonnet form, and an indication, perhaps, that he saw his collected sonnets as his realised epic monument.

Wordsworth writes in the 'Prospectus' that 'the Author retired to his native mountains, with the hope of being enabled to construct a literary Work that might live' (*Prose* III; 5). The trajectory from the 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty', through the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets', and into *The River Duddon* and *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* follows Wordsworth doing just this: retiring to Grasmere to commit himself to the 'Work that might live'. I argue that the sonnet corpus is Wordsworth's magnum opus.

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