WORDSWORTH'S "SALISBURY PLAIN":

AN EDITION OF THE THREE TEXTS WITH

AN ESSAY ON THEIR PLACE IN THE

DEVELOPMENT OF HIS POETRY

VOLUME TWO

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INTRODUCTION II

(i)

The chapters that follow are devoted to critical examination because I think that the study of the Salisbury Plain poems individually and as part of a pattern of development illuminates not just the early Wordsworth but the poet of the annus mirabilis. I have tried to evaluate them critically because I think them good poems which, since Coleridge's possibly over-enthusiastic praise in Biographia Literaria, have not received their due. But some explanation of this examination is needed, for major critical studies are already well known. G.W. Meyer in his study of Wordsworth's Formative Years examined in detail Guilt and Sorrow and its place in Wordsworth's growth. G.H. Hartman incorporates the poem convincingly in his subtle and imaginative reading of Wordsworth's development in Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814. Finally Miss Enid Welsford has examined the poems individually and as part of the pattern of the search which culminates, for Wordsworth, in The Excursion, in her study Salisbury Plain: A Study in the Development of Wordsworth's Mind and

Art.[97] But while acknowledging how much all readers of Wordsworth owe these scholars, I would want to argue that when their criticism centres on Salisbury Plain it is weakened by its involvement in the swing of critical fashion that has marked Wordsworth criticism in this century.

The first movement, represented in the works of Emile Legouis and George Harper,[98] found in the poem a source book for the political and moral attitudes outgrown by the later poet. Inevitably, too, without the MS evidence presented in the Oxford text, their reading of the poem is damaged by concentration on Guilt and Sorrow rather than on the earlier poems composed in the radical period of Wordsworth's thinking which is their main interest. With the revelation, however, that Wordsworth had not always been a solemn and unsexual man, but had on the contrary a past which included an illegitimate child, a second and opposing movement began which probed the poems not as documents of a certain historical moment but as records of Wordsworth's inner life.

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[97] George Wilbur Meyer, Wordsworth's Formative Years, Univ. of Michigan Publications, Language and Literature, XX (Ann Arbor, 1943); Geoffrey H. Hartman, Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814 (Yale U.P., 1964); Enid Welsford, Salisbury Plain: A Study in the Development of Wordsworth's Mind and Art (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966). Future citations to Meyer, Hartman, and Welsford.

[98] Emile Legouis, La Jeunesse de William Wordsworth 1770-1798: Etude sur le "Prelude" (Lyons, 1896). English ed. as The Early Life of William Wordsworth 1770-1798: A Study of "The Prelude" (London, 1897, 2nd ed. 1921). Trans. J.W. Mathews; George McLean Harper, William Wordsworth: His Life, Works and Influence, 2 vols. (London, 1916). Future citations to Legouis.

To Hugh L'Anson Fausset or Herbert Read [99] or even the much more scholarly G.W. Meyer the poem was not so much a social comment but the externalisation of Wordsworth's inner tensions, tensions arising from his treatment of Annette Vallon. Thus a typical comment is that the "guilt and sorrow of the sailor were his [Wordsworth's] own. He too was fugitive from the remembrance of his own fatal passion and his own lost integrity. [100] In such a reading of the poem every detail can be made to have a psychological fitness. When, for instance, Wordsworth creates the episode where the father who is beating his son before the distressed gaze of his mother is rebuked by the sailor, he is dramatising his own remorse as a father. And although G.W. Meyer treated the evidence of the poems much more carefully, his approach was little different. In his view Wordsworth transferred his own suffering to the sailor. Deprived of his inheritance, marked by the ordeal of crossing Salisbury plain, conscious of a guilty longing to uproot the authorities symbolised in Lord Lonsdale, Wordsworth has externalised all his feelings in the sailor and captured in the description of the Female Vagrant's early life the atmosphere of the idyll he wanted to share with Dorothy. The problem with such readings

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[99] Hugh L'Anson Fausset, The Lost Leader: A Study of Wordsworth (London, 1933); Herbert Read, Wordsworth (London, 1930). Future citations to Fausset.

[100] Fausset, 160-161.

is not that they can be shown to be wrong, but that because the source of the critical insight is not the poem but external knowledge about Wordsworth, different interpretations can be given to the same facts and then applied to the poem with equal authority. Thus, for instance, F.W. Bateson posits a different interpretation and believes that Wordsworth's journey across the plain was not an ordeal but an exhilarating release from social pressures. But his conclusions are shaped in the same way in that they suggest that the poetic shortcomings of _Salisbury Plain_ are explicable most readily in psychological terms.[101]

Finally, beginning perhaps with John Jones's _The Egotistical Sublime_, critics have begun to explore what we may loosely term the working of Wordsworth's imagination. Studies as different as H.W. Piper's _The Active Universe_ and G.H. Hartman's _Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814_, or C.C. Clarke's _Romantic Paradox_ and Alec King's _Wordsworth and the Artist's Vision_ all centre on the same investigation: what was Wordsworth's vision of the relation of man and nature?[102]

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[101] _Bateson_, 104-120 _passim_, but esp. 105.

[102] John Jones, _The Egotistical Sublime: A History of Wordsworth's Imagination_ (London, 1954); H.W. Piper, _The Active Universe: Pantheism and the Concept of Imagination in the English Romantic Poets_ (Univ. of London Press, 1962); C.C. Clarke, _Romantic Paradox_ (London, 1962); Alec King, _Wordsworth and the Artist's Vision_ (London, 1966). Future citations to _Jones_.

More subtly than ever before scholars are examining the implications and contrarieties of Wordsworth's philosophic positions. For Salisbury Plain this has meant criticism at the other extreme from that of Legouis and Harper. As Miss Welsford noted, G.H. Hartman in the major critical study of recent years can devote seven pages to Salisbury Plain "without dropping so much as a hint that Wordsworth was concerned with the horrors of war, with the inhumanity of officialdom, with the cruel injustice of the social system and the penal code."[103]

Miss Welsford's own study, the only book length criticism of the poems which "directly or indirectly sprang from the poet's experience of three days of solitary wandering in the neighbourhood of Stonehenge",[104] achieves a firmer balance between these various extremes. But the value of her study as far as it bears specifically on the Salisbury Plain poems is limited, I think, partly because she relies too heavily on the inaccurate Oxford Wordsworth text, partly because of self-imposed boundaries on the material covered, and partly because of the nature of her critical method. Miss Welsford's real interest is The Excursion. Salisbury Plain and The Borderers are regarded as steps on the way to the greater poem and are

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[103] Welsford, 160.

[104] ibid., 1.

allotted space proportionately. But she does not deal with them, even so, as one would expect since, despite the argument in her Preface in favour of a chronological study, her reading of Wordsworth's early growth and thus of the place of these poems in it is unchronological. She accepts The Prelude as reliable autobiography and uses this always as a guide to the interpretation of events and of the early poems.

(ii)

I think, then, that there is a possibility of further useful criticism on the texts presented above. In the chapters that follow I have attempted to keep a double focus. On the one hand, I have attempted to explore the Salisbury Plain poems from as many entry points as possible, in order to illuminate the different characteristics of individual poems which are too often treated collectively. This has meant concentrating in some detail on A Night on Salisbury Plain and Adventures on Salisbury Plain. On the other hand I have tried to discuss the poems as a part of Wordsworth's development up to 1798, and this has meant going beyond strictly Salisbury Plain. But if we are to grasp the importance of these poems in the years 1793-1798 it is essential to examine not just the poems but the whole span of work. For the

writings of a great poet do not issue at random. Their individual shape and their relation one to another are dictated by one force, the poet's search, albeit unconscious, for greater mastery over his materials and greater understanding of human life. Of course the quality of the works will differ - no-one would argue that A Night on Salisbury Plain is as good a poem as The Ruined Cottage - but good and bad share the same life, that is the vitality of the poet's developing imagination.[105]

The argument concerning Wordsworth's development is two-fold, and very simple. One aim of the chapters that follow is to suggest that Wordsworth's development can be seen as a movement between different positions. Wordsworth is interested in the relationship of man to his fellow men and, beyond them, to his world. He moves from conceiving this relationship primarily in social and political terms to conceiving it in psychological, philosophical and religious terms. A Night on Salisbury Plain is thrown up by the eruption of Wordsworth's indignation at the plight of the common man. It does not,

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[105] I would oppose this view of poetic development with that which is the basis of Bernard Groom's The Unity of Wordsworth's Poetry (London, 1966). Although concerned to show unity, Professor Groom seems to me to treat the early poems as a succession of interesting but isolated works. He shows their historical, biographical and compositional continuity, but as far as the imaginative drive which created them is concerned, seems to see them as essentially the accidents of genius.

however, go beyond the terms of contemporary discussion of social distress and political corruption. Adventures on Salisbury Plain widens the attack, but also pushes social considerations into the background. Now Wordsworth is concerned to examine what is really important in the life of man, namely his relationship to his own sense of what is right and just and to his fellow beings. Wordsworth is beginning to explore realities which cannot be altered by a change of government or the alteration of the poor law. The tentative exploration marks the beginning of Wordsworth's real advance. Certain themes are developed in The Borderers and culminate in The Ruined Cottage. The social scene is the same as in A Night on Salisbury Plain, but now the poet is suggesting sources of consolation and understanding which surpass in wisdom and insight any of his earlier investigations of man's lot in this world.

The second aim is to suggest that Wordsworth's development can be seen as shaped by the need to find new poetic structures to express the growing complexity of his vision and to overcome certain problems inherent in didactic writing. The problems are formulated in an examination of a passage from An Evening Walk, a passage which represents one of Wordsworth's earliest sustained attempts at humanitarian poetry. It is suggested that in didactic poetry a satisfactory balance has to be made between the raw material of the

poet's "message", the imaginative world he creates to project this, and the reader with the experience and judgment he will bring to bear. Wordsworth's problem is acute. His vision of the relationship of man to his world becomes increasingly complex and foreign to the day-to-day experience of the reader. Yet the poet has to find a way of explaining his ideas and of convincing the ordinary man without either insulting his intelligence or alienating him by strident moralising.[106] Good poem though it is, A Night on Salisbury Plain fails to find this balance. Wordsworth does not sufficiently respect the intelligence of his reader or the integrity of the poem's world. Adventures on Salisbury Plain, which works through a series of dramatic episodes, comes nearer to success, but is weakened partly by problems inherent in a loose episodic structure and partly by the limitations of the Spenserian stanza. Experiments on verse and structure point the way to The Borderers. Although this, the culmination of Wordsworth's attempt to find a fully dramatic form in which to embody his vision of man, has been generally undervalued, it is suggested that certain problems still remain. These are largely solved

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[106] The problem was a genuine one to Lamb, for instance, who wrote of The Old Cumberland Beggar: "it appears to me a fault in the Beggar, that the instructions conveyed in it are too direct and like a lecture: they don't slide into the mind of the reader, while he is imagining no such matter. An intelligent reader finds a sort of insult in being told I will teach you how to think upon this subject" (Lamb:Letters, I, 239).

in <u>The Ruined Cottage</u> in which Wordsworth turns to success what is a failure in <u>A Night on Salisbury Plain</u>. In both poems the poet has a role in his own poem, but whereas in the earlier work the poet is determined to dominate the world he has created, in the later he produces the illusion that he has to submit to it and be taught by it just like the reader. Some technical problems are still troublesome, but the successful didactic form which Wordsworth has searched for from his earliest work has been found.

Two admissions are necessary. One is that I have not found it possible to marry detailed comment with the more general presentation of an argument without some abrupt changes of perspective. Since my aim is to illuminate poems that are little read as separate works as well as to suggest ways of looking at a spread of literature, such changes will, it is hoped, be thought legitimate. The second is that I have frequently discussed Wordsworth's search for a certain kind of form as if he would have been conscious at the time of this search and would have seen it in this way. This, of course, is an illusion. <u>We</u> can see the pattern now only because it is completed successfully. It is, I think, reasonable to argue this way, however, if one conceives as I do of a developing artist as continually experimenting in new work to dispel dissatisfactions with the old. The end is obscure, both to

him and his readers, but as becomes clear when the masterpiece, the _King Lear_, _The Dunciad_, the _Little Dorrit_ is achieved, the search is not without shape or purpose. Although he could not formulate his aims at a given point on the way, the artist is not wandering without a plan, and it is this which justifies interest in the development of a great writer.

CHAPTER THREE

A NIGHT ON SALISBURY PLAIN

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It is the argument of the following chapters that the two poems A Night on Salisbury Plain and Adventures on Salisbury Plain are important achievements in Wordsworth's development as a poet. At the outset, however, we have to face the unusual and embarrassing situation that the poet himself made greater claims for these little-known works than any critic would hazard and that his claims simply have to be questioned on the evidence of the texts. When Wordsworth published Guilt and Sorrow in 1842 he accompanied it with a slightly shame-faced "Advertisement" which suggested that the poem's interest was largely as part of his biography. By emphasising the historical circumstances long since passed away which inspired the poem, however, Wordsworth contrived to suggest that even so its interest was limited in that it was not central to his development or his achievement. But in 1805, when Wordsworth was completing The Prelude, there was no question for him that the poem belonged to the most significant phase of his development as a poet. In Book XII he emphasises how he came to feel the majesty of simple people and how wide we err if we think that conventional notions of education can impart anything to

such natural grandeur. He tells too of his growing conviction that nature can "consecrate" the humblest of men and "breathe/ Grandeur upon the very humblest face/Of human life",[107] and of his perception of the one life in man and nature, when nature intermingles her passions with "those works of man to which she summons him."[108] At this time, he continues, he began to hope that he might become one of those poets, one of those men he had revered so long as messengers of the truth, each connected to the other by "his peculiar dower, a sense/By which he is enabled to perceive/Something unseen before."[109] He tells then that his experiences on Salisbury Plain, out of which the poem A Night on Salisbury Plain grew directly and the other Salisbury Plain poems indirectly, raised him to believe that he was a poet. Coleridge's praise was that Wordsworth,

> must have exercised
> Upon the vulgar forms of present things
> And actual world of our familiar days,
> A higher power, have caught from them a tone,
> An image, and a character, by books
> Not hitherto reflected. [110]

And Wordsworth, after wondering characteristically whether this was really true or not, admits that the poem belonged to

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[107] Prelude, Bk. XII, 284-286.

[108] ibid., 291-292.

[109] ibid., 303-305.

[110] ibid., 360-365. See Coleridge's statement very close to this in BL., I, 59.

that period when he thought he saw a new world, a subject fit to declare to men,

> as having for its base
> That whence our dignity originates,
> That which both gives it being and maintains
> A balance, an ennobling interchange
> Of action from within and from without,
> The excellence, pure spirit, and best power
> Both of the object seen, and eye that sees. [111]

The problem, however, is that though I want to discuss Salisbury Plain in terms of the chronology of Wordsworth's development, it is difficult to accept Wordsworth's statements here. Coleridge's praise seems irrelevant to the naturalistic and low-pitched, essentially narrative poem of 1795 and even more so to the poem of 1793-1794. It is not that the praise is nonsense, simply that one does not feel any of the imaginative recreation of the actual world felt, say, in The White Doe of Rylstone. Nor is there any evidence that Wordsworth had begun, even by 1795, to develop the part intuitive part philosophic understanding of the relationship of man and nature that was to become the focus of the poems from 1797-1805. My reading of the poems has to be less exciting, but is possibly more just. I want to argue that Salisbury Plain was vital to Wordsworth's development, not in the way he implies, but as a continuing experiment in relationships between subject matter and form. The poems reveal the poet's progress from the

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[111] ibid., 373-379.

politically committed writer to the man not unconcerned with the political world but more concerned with the relationships people build with each other. They reveal an artist who discovered on each revision that the form he thought adequate would no longer express what he wanted to say and who thus had to search for a more powerful and flexible form.

(ii)

"A Prelude to *A Night on Salisbury Plain*"

As prelude to discussion of *A Night on Salisbury Plain* I want to examine certain aspects of Wordsworth's first sustained attempt at humanitarian poetry in *An Evening Walk*. For the limitations of Wordsworth's art here, limitations which are crucial in any poetry dedicated to the cause of relieving human misery, re-appear in *A Night on Salisbury Plain*. Some of the weaknesses disappear but others remain to stunt the poem in certain concealed but crucial ways.

An Evening Walk is obviously a better poem than *A Night on Salisbury Plain* as *The Rape of the Lock* is better than *The Dunciad*; less ambitious and thus more easily successful. It is a poem in a highly developed tradition, demanding readers immersed in a shared culture who can take pleasure in self-conscious borrowings from other poets. Thus when the *Critical*

Review commending the new and picturesque imagery in the poem, remarked that "there are many touches of this kind, which would not disgrace our best descriptive poets",[112] it was not damning with faint praise but granting the poem a place in what R.A. Aubin has shown was a very substantial tradition.[113] It is a rhetorical tradition in which great passages, such as the "prospect all on fire" passage or the concluding sound piece in An Evening Walk, are meant to display the virtuoso artistry of the poet. And Wordsworth can meet the demand. Detail is subordinated to the total outline, sound is artfully merged with visual detail. The composing eye is evident and all the pleasures of the picturesque enjoyed. But when Wordsworth attempts to widen his range and call on love and pity for a world outside his poem, then the limitations of the technique become clear.

As will be seen in the following passage from An Evening Walk, which is quoted in full for easy reference in the discussion that follows, the limitation is that the composing eye cannot merely observe the scene of distress; it has to incorporate it, subtly altering light and shade, into the total picture.

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[112] The Critical Review; or Annals of Literature, VIII (July 1793) 347. Quoted Elsie Smith, An Estimate of William Wordsworth: By his Contemparies 1793-1822 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1932), 7. Future citations to Smith.

[113] Robert Arnold Aubin, Topographical Poetry in Eighteenth-Century England (N.Y., 1936).

Fair swan! by all a mother's joys caress'd,
Haply some wretch has ey'd, and call'd thee bless'd;
Who faint, and beat by summer's breathless ray,
Hath dragg'd her babes along this weary way;
While arrowy fire extorting feverish groans,
Shot stinging through her stark o'er-labour'd bones.
- With backward gaze, lock'd joints, and step of pain,
Her seat scarce left, she strives, alas! in vain,
To teach their limbs along the burning road
A few short steps to totter with their load,
Shakes her numb arm that slumbers with its weight,
And eyes through tears the mountain's shadeless height;
And bids her soldier come her woes to share,
Asleep on Bunker's charnel hill afar;
For hope's deserted well why wistful look?
Chok'd is the pathway, and the pitcher broke.

I see her now, deny'd to lay her head,
On cold blue nights, in hut or straw-built shed;
Turn to a silent smile their sleepy cry,
By pointing to a shooting star on high:
I hear, while in the forest depth he sees,
The Moon's fix'd gaze between the opening trees,
In broken sounds her elder grief demand,
And skyward lift, like one that prays, his hand,
If, in that country, where he dwells afar,
His father views that good, that kindly star;
- Ah me! all light is mute amid the gloom,
The interlunar cavern of the tomb.
- When low-hung clouds each star of summer hide,
And fireless are the valleys far and wide,
Where the brook brawls along the painful road,
Dark with bat haunted ashes stretching broad,
The distant clock forgot, and chilling dew,
Pleas'd thro' the dusk their breaking smiles to view,
Oft has she taught them on her lap to play
Delighted, with the glow-worm's harmless ray
Toss'd light from hand to hand; while on the ground
Small circles of green radiance gleam around.
Oh! when the bitter showers her path assail,
And roars between the hills the torrent gale,
- No more her breath can thaw their fingers cold,
Their frozen arms her neck no more can fold;
Scarce heard, their chattering lips her shoulder chill,
And her cold back their colder bosoms thrill;
All blind she wilders o'er the lightless heath,
Led by Fear's cold wet hand, and dogg'd by Death;
Death, as she turns her neck the kiss to seek,
Breaks off the dreadful kiss with angry shriek.

> Snatch'd from her shoulder with despairing moan,
> She clasps them at that dim-seen roofless stone-
> "Now ruthless Tempest launch thy deadliest dart!
> Fall fires- but let us perish heart to heart."
> Weak roof a cow'ring form two babes to shield,
> And faint the fire a dying heart can yield;
> Press the sad kiss, fond mother! vainly fears
> Thy flooded cheek to wet them with its tears;
> Soon shall the Light'ning hold before thy head
> His torch, and shew them slumbering in their bed,
> No tears can chill them, and no bosom warms,
> Thy breast their death-bed, coffin'd in thine arms.
>
> Sweet are the sounds that mingle from afar,
> Heard by calm lakes, as peeps the folding star,
> Where the duck dabbles 'mid the rustling sedge,
> And feeding pike starts from the water's edge. [114]

The tone of this passage is determined by many factors, but the most important is that we are never free from Wordsworth himself. This is, of course, the mark of the genre. This is an epistle "addressed to a young lady." It is a progress poem recording only the sights and sounds the poet sees and hears. Its melancholy is diffused uniformly, embracing man and the external world:

> . . . o'er the sooth'd accordant heart we feel
> A sympathetic twilight slowly steal,
> And ever, as we fondly muse, we find
> The soft gloom deep'ning on the tranquil mind. [115]

But while this egocentricity is admirable as long as the poet is just passing through nature as a sensitive recorder, it limits him once he tries to incorporate other human figures

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[114] An Evening Walk, ll. 241-304. PW., I, 26-30.

[115] ibid., ll, 381-384. PW., I, 34.

into the scene. Here the woman struggling over the moor, pitifully attempting to amuse and then to shelter her children is never dramatically independent because the consciousness of the poet is so obtrusive. The passage, we are reminded, is imaginative vision only: "I see her now, deny'd to lay her head." It begins with an apostrophe to the swan and ends with one to the mother:

> Press the sad kiss, fond mother! vainly fears
> Thy flooded cheek to wet them with its tears.

It is, the structure announces, the poet who conjures the scene and the poet who dismisses it.

The effect of this obtrusive narrator is especially damaging at one point, since it tips already unlikely fact over into sentimentality. Wordsworth follows "I see her now" with a description of the mother turning her children's cries to smiles by pointing at a shooting star. The next part of the narrative has to re-emphasise that the scene is still present to the poet with all its harrowing immediacy, but instead of pointing the terrible irony of the scene the details make it comically sentimental. The mother's "elder grief" raises his hand as if in prayer to the star, shooting indifferent to their suffering across the sky, and asks:

> If in that country, where he dwells afar
> His father views that good, that kindly star?

Immediately to underline an already unmistakeable point Wordsworth answers the child with a literary allusion:

> Ah me! all light is mute amid the gloom,
> The interlunar cavern of the tomb.

Such an apostrophe is always dangerous. Here, as when Dickens addresses Tom Pinch, one is uneasy that the writer should need to declare that he is moved by the figure he has created. But the details about the child could have worked. His innocence shadowed by his approaching death, his longing for a dead father, his trust in the heaven his mother has spoken of - all of this would have been moving had Wordsworth not reminded us in the apostrophe and a phrase such as "elder grief" that he has selected and ordered every detail for maximum pathetic effect.

The lack of dramatic life is felt also partly because the artfulness of the passage is so clear. Such a piece inverts the ideal ars est celare artem with a structure designed as if to exhibit the range of Wordsworth's powers. A variety of approaches and not a simple narrative method presents the figure in diverse ways. The opening apostrophe to the swan gives way to third person narrative description. After the woman's plight has been described as vividly as possible, the final immediacy of a snatch of direct speech is introduced at her death moments:

> Snatch'd from her shoulder with despairing moan,
> She clasps them at that dim-seen roofless stone-
> "Now ruthless Tempest launch they deadliest dart!
> Fall fires- but let us perish heart to heart."

With the woman now present as a dramatic figure the poet can address her directly as the passage ends. Nor is the narrative without embellishment. It focusses on two pictures of the woman, each composed with a different but very obvious art. The lines beginning "When low-hung clouds each star of summer hide", present a wide view with the sky clouded over, the valley's "far and wide" unpeopled, the road, dark in turn, "stretching broad." Small touches such as "painful road" and "bat haunted" emphasise the distress and fears of the woman. But she forgets the distant clock and the chilly dew and with this declaration that she is immune to these cares the focus of the passage narrows. Surroundings are blotted out as the poet concentrates on the self-enclosed world of the woman with her children on her lap. Their "breaking smiles" deny the dusk as if the stars were breaking through the clouds and their delight denies the painful road. The glow-worm tossed from hand to hand and shining on the road around them contrasts with the earlier "dark with bat haunted ashes" and in the contrast concludes the pattern of the vignette.

The second picture, beginning "Weak roof a cow'ring form two babes to shield", is artful in a different way, offering a linguistic as well as a pictorial pleasure. The desperation of the woman's dying moments is revealed in the description of her trying to shield her children from the night with her own body, but the impact of such a vignette, the hopelessness of the woman instinctively cowering down, is lost as Wordsworth

elaborates the conceit that the woman's body was her children's bedroom. The opening is just an observation:

> Weak roof a cow'ring form two babes to shield,
> And faint the fire a dying heart can yield.

The next couplet is more elaborate. Simple facts such as that the mother's cheek is wet with tears are puffed out to "vainly fears/Thy flooded cheek to wet them with its tears." But it is the conclusion which makes the whole picture seem an exhibition of virtuoso writing. Wordsworth distances the mother momentarily from the children (in the suggestion that the lightning will come like a lighted torch to show the mother her children "slumbering in their bed") only to turn on her again in the highly wrought image of the last lines:

> No tears can chill them, and no bosom warms,
> Thy breast their death-bed, coffin'd in thine arms.

Wordsworth is using Pope's art here, but in the wrong context, so that it seems as if the whole picture only exists to justify the conceit and the brilliance of the shocking compression of "coffin'd in thine arms." One wants to comment, as Wordsworth himself did of some lines of Byron, that "sentiment by being expressed in an <u>antithetical</u> manner, is taken out of the Region of high and imaginative feelings, to be place[d] in that of point and epigram." [116]

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[116] WW. to R.P. Gillies [9 June, 1817]. <u>MY</u>., II, 790. Cf. also Coleridge's remark to Southey [27 December, 1796], "who after having been whirled along by such a tide of enthusiasm can endure to be impaled at last on the needle-point of an Antithesis?" <u>Griggs</u>, I, 290.

The relation of the whole passage to the rest of the poem is no less artful. Clear patterns mark out its structure. The progress poem in time moves from day through evening to night; in space from the poet's home as he is lured out by "eve's mild hour", back to it as night comes on. The vagrant woman passage is part of a pattern within this larger frame. Wordsworth watches a swan and lingers over the security of its life and the mother's love and care for her family:

> She in a mother's care, her beauty's pride
> Forgets, unweary'd watching every side,
> She calls them near, and with affection sweet
> Alternately relieves their weary feet. [117]

The contrast, so indulgently prepared for, is inevitable. The bird can provide what the human mother cannot. Unlike the vagrant woman she never has to throw her young on "winter's winding sheet of snow." The woman's story is now told concluding with the expansion of the "winding sheet" image in "Thy breast their death-bed, coffin'd in thine arms." At once there is one more shock juxtaposition. The irony of man's insecurity amid nature's calm, the pleasing discord of such description in a melancholy evening piece, is underlined by the opening of the next section:

> No tears can chill them, and no bosom warms,
> Thy breast their death-bed, coffin'd in thine arms.

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[117] An Evening Walk, ll, 213-216. PW., I, 24.

> Sweet are the sounds that mingle from afar,
> Heard by calm lakes, as peeps the folding star,
> Where the duck dabbles 'mid the rustling sedge,
> And the feeding pike starts from the water's edge. [118]

The effect of this shock juxtaposition, however, is not to sharpen our sense of the woman's plight, but to remind us that the whole passage is no more than a piece in an atmospheric mosaic. Wordsworth needed a bitter contrast for the pleasing picture of the swan and he provided it.[119] Atmospherically it is effective, but as an evocation of human distress it is offensive. Wordsworth is shielded from this kind of suffering, yet by his apostrophes and _sententia_ he tries to work up the immediacy which would suggest personal involvement. What they actually emphasise by their rhetorical indulgence is that he is detached. It is illuminatingly different when he returns to the image of the swans in "Home at Grasmere." Here they again emphasise aspects of human life, but now particularised to Wordsworth's own life. Like Dorothy and William the swans found in Grasmere a retreat, a safe resting place. Now Wordsworth, missing them, wonders if they have been

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[118] _An Evening Walk_, 301-304. _PW._, I, 28-30.

[119] The kind of imagination from which the portrait of the woman springs is described by Wordsworth in _The Prelude_, VIII, 511-559. Wordsworth's own fancy combined with the meretricious images of books to feed his mind with pictures of the widow perpetually visiting her husband's grave, or the vagrant with her babes always by the fox-glove, "And Nature and her objects beautified/These fictions, as in some sort in their turn/They burnish'd her" (523-525).

killed. For our understanding of "Home at Grasmere" this is very revealing, suggesting how brittle Wordsworth felt his joy to be; but what is important for this discussion is that it does not now seem absurd to endow the swans with such significance, since the poet is speaking only of himself, not of another human being. "Home at Grasmere" is a no less egocentric poem than An Evening Walk, but Wordsworth can now make the strained parallel between the birds and man without offence, since he limits his discussion to what we know he alone can feel, to his own fears, and does not extend it to the imagined distress of a dying woman.

That Wordsworth can use the woman in this way, as detail in a larger atmospheric pattern, points the weakness of the whole passage, namely, that his attitudes to her as a human being in distress are so limited. It is as if the poet is cocooned in his art, disarming all that might wound by a protective layer of couplet and image. He has not advanced on the tritest contemporary treatments of this worn theme. Z.S. Fink points to the analogous A Winter Piece - as he says a "sorry specimen" - and comments on verbal parallels with An Evening Walk.[120] What is really striking, however, is how far Wordsworth has followed not the verbal but the emotional formulations of contemporary treatments of distress. To a Wretch Shivering in the Street is a typical offering from

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[120] Fink, 34-35.

The Monthly Magazine's section of original verse:

> Thy plaintive voice, so eloquent and meek,
> Poor child of Wretchedness! I never hear,
> But silently I turn t'indulge the tear
> Which Pity gives! To me thine accents speak,-
> Haply, of her who knows no friend, the fate;
> Or one, to dark Despondency consign'd,
> Or cast to the cold mercy of mankind,
> On Life's bleak waste!- But thou, tho' desolate,
> Shalt find no shelter! thro' her proud abode,
> Grandeur, in Folly's splendid robes, shall flaunt;
> Riot his song of merriment shall chaunt:
> But thou shalt journey friendless on thy road,
> Nor shall one friendly brother think on thee, [121]
> Save him, who pitieth poverty, like me!

There are odd echoes here of A Night on Salisbury Plain and the heavy reliance on Personification is to be expected in the period, but two coincidences are especially striking. Both writers use the sententious image of life as a desert (See ANSP. l.419) and both contrast their destitute "friendless" figure with the opulent. But what really links this poet "L" and the early Wordsworth is the egocentricity of their grief. Each addresses his creation, thus distancing himself from their distress, and turns "t'indulge the tear/Which Pity gives." The word "indulge" itself underlines the limitations of such a stance.

It is not as if Wordsworth has exploited a weak genre to the full. Later he was to take accepted forms and revitalise them in many of the Lyrical Ballads,[122] but if we compare the Evening Walk passage with similar pieces in Langhorne, Goldsmith

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[121] The Monthly Magazine; and British Register, II (December, 1796), 889.

[122] See Robert Mayo, "The Contemporaneity of the Lyrical Ballads", PMLA, LXIX (1954), 486-522.

or Cowper more limitations are revealed. The Critical Review made the suggestion when it commented that the "beggar, whose babes are starved to death with cold, is affecting, though it has not equal strength with the soldier's wife is Langhorne's Country Justice, which seems in some measure to have suggested the idea."[123] The distinction is genuine. Wordsworth's interest in the woman is a damagingly aesthetic one. She fits well into the pattern of the poem: the result is an "affecting" passage. Langhorne, on the other hand, while just as inclined to linger over the sentimental detail sees the woman in a much bigger context. Taken in isolation the two passages seem much alike. Langhorne's is as pictorially composed as Wordsworth's:

> Bent o'er her Babe, her Eye dissolv'd in Dew,
> The big Drops mingling with the Milk He drew,
> Gave sad Presage of his future Years
> The Child of Misery, baptiz'd in Tears! [124]

But in context Langhorne's attitude can be seen to be much broader and more humane than Wordsworth's. He sees the woman as part of the detritus of war. She is a reproach to a nation

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[123] The Critical Review, VIII (July, 1793), 348. Smith, 8. The review is making special reference to Wordsworth's rephrasing of Langhorne's "Cold on Canadian Hills, or Minden's Plain/Perhaps that Parent mourn'd her Soldier slain", in An Evening Walk, ll. 253-254, "And bids her soldier come her woes to share/Asleep on Minden's charnel plain afar." In the revisions this became Bunker's charnel hill afar." See PW., I, 27, app. crit., and for wider comment, Roger Sharrock, "Wordsworth and John Langhorne's The Country Justice", N&Q, CIC (1954), 302-304, who does not, however, point out that the connection had been made by the 1793 reviewer.

[124] John Langhorne, The Country Justice (1774-1777), no line numbers, p. 18, Part One (1774).

that demands so much from its soldiers and gives so little. She is (or should be) a reminder to the country justice that true justice examines the causes of crime and offers compassionate help to those who have lived for so long with despair. Remember, Langhorne declares,

> The friendless, homeless Object of Despair;
> For the poor Vagrant, feel, while He complains,
> Nor from sad Freedom send to sadder Chains. [125]

Goldsmith's description of the country girl who follows her betrayer to London is not just a vignette of innocence violated, but evidence in an attack on contemporary England which rests on solid and comprehensive belief:

> Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,
> Where wealth accumulates, and men decay. [126]

In Langhorne, in Goldsmith, the woman is there as part of a wider statement. In An Evening Walk, though we are told she is a soldier's widow, no wider statement is made. The poem's world is a narrow one and the poet's attitude uncomplicated by anxieties over what the woman's death implies about the state of society.

The balance that fails here between the actual facts of the real world where a woman can die in this way and the literary facts involved in the composition of a poem in an

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[125] ibid., p. 17.

[126] Oliver Goldsmith, The Deserted Village (1770), ll. 51-52. The Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith, ed. Arthur Friedman, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1966), IV, 289.

established tradition, is one that must be struck if any didactic work can succeed. The reader who feels the "palpable design"[127] of the poet must not feel that he is being subjected unfairly to propaganda or emotional over-stimulation. It is a balance that was still more difficult to achieve in Wordsworth's next major work, A Night on Salisbury Plain. For if the weakness of the passage from An Evening Walk is that Wordsworth is too distant from the human situation that is his subject, the weakness of A Night on Salisbury Plain is, paradoxically, that he is too passionately involved and has not yet the poetic power to deal tactfully with this depth of feeling. This involvement, as I hope to show, is the strength of the poem too, a strength which stems from Wordsworth's knowledge of his subject and more comprehensive vision. But it is also the source of a weakness which suggests how far Wordsworth still was from discovering a form which should harmoniously combine the demands made by the passions of the poet, the experience and reactions of the reader, and the purely 'literary' elements of the work.

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[127] John Keats to J.H. Reynolds, 3 February, 1818. The Letters of John Keats, ed. Hyder Edwards Rollins (Cambridge U.P., 1958), I, 224. Future citations to Keats: Letters.

(iii)

"A Night on Salisbury Plain in its Time"

It is with the intensity of Wordsworth's involvement and the violence of his poetic voice that any consideration of A Night on Salisbury Plain must begin. For these are the characteristics of the poem which distinguish it most strikingly from An Evening Walk. Five years had been enough to shatter Wordsworth's refuge in a literary cocoon and to drive him to the other extreme of commitment to the radical and humanitarian cause. The bulk of the passage from An Evening Walk was written in 1788, but it was not published till 1793.[128] The years in between saw the beginning of the conflagration that touched the whole of Europe in the next decade. In them Wordsworth was moved to revolutionary sympathy in Cambridge and in France. And the year that saw his first publication also saw the outbreak of war between England and France, the further restriction of the liberties of the individual and the publication of Godwin's Political Justice. Though the collocation of these events was coincidental, it is emblematic of the period. It reveals the way in which intellectual warfare paralleled real war.

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[128] See Reed, 307-312, Appendix V, "Four Notebooks: Their Use in Dating An Evening Walk and other Early Composition."

The struggle had been long, and shadowed Wordsworth's early manhood, as in the years following the American War politicians sought to stop commercial decline and social distress and thinkers to understand what was wrong at the core of the social order.

It is impossible to say what Wordsworth read or heard, but no man with any interest in public affairs, however, slight, could have missed the heat of the controversy generated once the Revolution of 1789 had revealed sharply what the real issues were, for it was conducted at all levels, in lectures, pamphlets and books and in the comprehensive surveys of the leading reviews. Godwin's two massive volumes were afforded long, considered reviews; Paine's more popular writing answered by many, frequently scurrilous, pamphlets. Sermons were preached in favour of the government and addresses given and published urging men to fight the loss of their liberties. And all of this was reflected in the leading reviews. In the year we are considering, for instance, 1793, the March number of The Analytical Review handled Watson's "Appendix" very moderately, drawing special attention to what the Bishop had to say about the provisions for the poor. [129] In the same month The Monthly Review began a series of long articles on Political

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[129] The Analytical Review, or History of Literature, Domestic and Foreign, XV (March, 1793), 310-312. Future citations to Analytical Review.

Justice, each of which quoted largely and gave fair summaries of Godwin's position.[130] In May the new journal The British Critic reviewed John Bowles's The Real Grounds of the Present War with France and introduced Bowles as a valued opponent of Paine's Rights of Man, claimed to agree with all his views.[131] In June The Analytical Review published the first of its long articles on Godwin[132] and dismissed a complacent little pamphlet by Thomas Somerville called Observations on the Constitution and apparent State of Great Britain as at variance with the facts when "distress seems to be felt in every corner of the island, when our commerce languishes, and our manufactures are in danger of being annihilated."[133] In the same issue Bowles's Real Grounds was again reviewed together with John Adams's An Answer to Paine's Rights of Man,[134] and a very long article reviewed the second part of Priestley's An Appeal to the Public, on the Subject of the Riots at Birmingham.[135]

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[130] The Monthly Review; or Literary Journal, X (1793), 311-320, March; 435-445, April; XI, 187-196, June.

[131] The British Critic, A New Review, I (1793), 100-102.

[132] Analytical Review, XVI (1793), 121-130, June; continued 388-404, August.

[133] ibid., 192.

[134] ibid., 198-201 and 203-207.

[135] ibid., 222-230. The pamphlet may have reminded Wordsworth of one illustration for his letter to Watson, for he asks: "Left to the quiet exercise of their own judgement, do you think that the people would have thought it necessary to set fire to the house of the philosophic Priestley, and to hunt down his life like that of a traitor or a parricide?" See Alexander Grosart, The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, 3 vols., (London, 1876), I, 10. Future citations to Grosart.

During his last months in London Wordsworth could have traced the movement of the controversy in these and many other items. In July, the month most probably spent watching the fleet prepare for war, Wordsworth could have read in The English Review of Erskine's address on the liberty of the press,[136] yet another attack on Paine "proving the Fallacy of his Principles as applied to the Government of this Country",[137] a Cambridge sermon "tending to prove the policy of being resigned to our several stations, and the danger of trying experiments to improve a constitution already so excellent."[138] In the same month The Gentleman's Magazine, declaring it its duty to do so, offered the text of Watson's "Appendix", and the following comment on the Honourable John Cocks's A Short Treatise on the dreadful Effects of Levelling Principles:

> It must give pleasure to every reflecting mind, who has any regard to the happiness of his country, or his own as undivided, to see the members of the legislature contributing their exertions to defend our happy Constitution from the inroads of evil-minded persons, who find an interest in overturning the fundamental principals of order and society.

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[136] The English Review; or, an Abstract of English and Foreign Literature, XXII (July, 1793), 68. An Adress to the Public from the Friends of the Liberty of the Press ... containing a Declaration of their Principles and a Protest against the late Associations.

[137] ibid., 70. A Fourth Letter to Thomas Paine, in Answer to the Second Part of the Rights of Man. By the Author of Letters to Thomas Painė, in answer to his late Publication on the Rights of Man; shewing his Errors on that Subject, and proving the Fallacy of his Principles as applied to the Government of this Country.

[138] ibid., 73. A Sermon, preached before the University of Cambridge, by James Fawcett.

The reviewer, who considers equality an "obvious absurdity", concludes that "Modern Equality would make men savages; modern Liberty, brutes."[139]

As in the nineteen-thirties, the kind of unthinking conservatism represented by this remark made many writers feel in the seventeen-nineties that there was only one choice open to them; either to commit themselves to a cause or stagnate in the production of mere literature. The structure of a whole society seemed ready for change and no-one's allegiance should be hidden. With Wordsworth the declaration was made in a three part political testament: in the Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff, the letter to William Mathews of June 1794 which outlines to the prospective co-editor of The Philanthropist, a monthly Miscellany Wordsworth's political views, and in A Night on Salisbury Plain.[140] But striking though the force of this

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[139] The Gentleman's Magazine; and Historical Chronicle, LXIII (July, 1793), 633-636 and 648.

[140] See Grosart, I, 3-23 for Wordsworth's letter headed "Apology for the French Revolution" and 24-30 for the appendix to Watson's sermon "The Wisdom and Goodness of God in having made both Rich and Poor." For the letter to William Mathews [8] June [1794] see EY., 123-129.

We are justified in considering these three works together. Only a short time can have separated the writing of the reply to Watson and the conception of A Night on Salisbury Plain. As is shown in Meyer, 118-119, the overtly didactic stanzas IL-LVIII of A Night on Salisbury Plain draw heavily on the letter and one can see Wordsworth's indebtedness in the dramatic presentation of his ideas also. The letter to Mathews is a summary of many of the attitudes presented more fully in the other two works.

testament is in revealing how completely Wordsworth has outgrown the limited vision that could create the vignette of the frozen woman, it is interesting to note its limitations. For whatever genuine passion may have added to the attack in the reply to Watson or the genius of the poet to that in A Night on Salisbury Plain, there is nothing new in the attack itself, either in the range of evidence examined or in the solutions suggested. Wordsworth was not capable yet of original thought on social and political affairs, and when he mentioned A Night on Salisbury Plain to Mathews in June 1794 he was referring his radical friend to a poem which would contain no surprises for him, since it reflected the main trends of radical thought of its day.

It is not a question of the particular influence of one book or one man on another, and this is worth emphasising. It is a question of Wordsworth responding to the main moods of the polemical struggle and finding sustenance in parts of works and theories which might be contradictory if taken as complete philosophical or political systems. For instance, Wordsworth's indebtedness to Paine and Godwin, the two most powerful theoreticians of his day, is clear. As E.N. Hooker and C.W. Roberts have shown, in the Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff Wordsworth borrowed, consciously or not, general propositions and detailed arguments.[141] But the two scholars

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[141] See Edward Niles Hooker, "Wordsworth's Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff", SP, XXVIII (1931), 528-539; Charles W. Roberts, "The Influence of Godwin on Wordsworth's Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff", SP, XXIX (1932), 588-606. Roberts shows convincingly that Wordsworth was really familiar only with the second volume of Political Justice.

are unnecessarily partisan. Hooker insisted that the influence of Godwin on the Letter was negligible, whereas Paine's was paramount. He suggests that if we place Paine's views on elective government side by side with Wordsworth's, the evidence will speak for itself:

> Paine:
>
> And, that the elected might never form to themselves an interest separate from the electors, prudence will point out the propriety of having elections often; because, as the elected might by that means return and mix again with the general body of the electors in a few months, their fidelity to the public will be secured by the prudent reflection of not making a rod for themselves. [142]

> Wordsworth:
>
> Sensible that at the moment of election an interest distinct from that of the general body is created, an enlightened legislator will endeavour by every possible method to diminish the operation of such interest . . . he will be more sure of the virtue of the legislator by knowing that, in the capacity of private citizen, tomorrow he must either smart under the oppression or bless the justice of the law which he has enacted to-day. [143]

But striking though the resemblance is, can one discount the presence of Godwin here, who also commented on the disadvantages of the "creation of a separate interest" in aristocratical governments? He said:

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[142] Thomas Paine, Common Sense: Addressed to the Inhabitants of America, (Philadelphia 1776, reprint with adds. Edinburgh 1776), 8-9.

[143] Grosart, I, 10. Hooker op.cit., 525-526.

> The benefit of the governed is made to lie on one side, and the benefit of the governors on the other . . . The more the governors are fixed in a sphere distinct and distant from the governed, the more will this error be cherished.[144]

The answer is that it is not necessary to accept or discount either as a specific source. Material for a fiery pamphlet could easily be found in men as far apart essentially as Paine and Godwin. For men were examining the same facts in the society they lived in, seeking the same goals, and, as an analysis of A Night on Salisbury Plain and its analogues will show, were speaking with a remarkable uniformity of voice.

(iv)

The most immediately striking attack in A Night on Salisbury Plain, the emotional centre from which all other propositions radiate, is the attack on the oppression of the poor in eighteenth-century England. The poem opens with the contrast of the savage and the poor man. The savage accepts his lot because it is shared by all his kinsmen, and is, moreover, the only one he has known. But the poor man's

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[144] William Godwin, An Enquiry concerning Political Justice, and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness, 2 vols. (London, 1793), II, 459. Future citations to PJ. Roberts, op.cit., 596.

agonies are aggravated by the knowledge of better days and by the constant reminder of his poverty in the ostentation of the wealthy. The human situation described sharpens our awareness of what is in Godwin a more generalised statement:

> Human beings are capable of encountering with chearfulness considerable hardships, when those hardships are impartially shared with the rest of the society, and they are not insulted with the spectacle of indolence and ease in others, no way deserving of greater advantages then themselves. But it is a bitter aggravation of their own calamity, to have the privileges of others forced on their observation, and, while they are perpetually and vainly endeavouring to secure for themselves and their families the poorest conveniences, to find others revelling in the fruits of their labours.[145]

The basic right of man mentioned here - the right of providing for his family - even this is denied by the war and ironically replaced by the offer of employment in his majesty's forces. The laws protect property, but, Wordsworth claims, "they have unjustly left unprotected that most important part of property, not less real because it has no material existence, that which ought to enable the labourer to provide food for himself and his family."[146] As the Female Vagrant's husband enlisted, so does Robert in The Ruined Cottage and so the starving men, driven as Coleridge relates in "On the Present War", by the strong temptation of a side of beef.[147] For those

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[145] PJ., I, 35-36.

[146] Grosart, I, 16.

[147] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "On the Present War" in Essays on His Own Times: Forming a Second Series of The Friend, ed. by his daughter, 3 vols. (London, 1850), I, 49. Future citations to Essays.

that remain little is left but brutalising toil. What are the riches of a nation when its men "by inhuman toil debased,/ Abject obscure and brute to earth incline/Unrespited forlorn of every spark divine?" (439-441)

For Watson this oppression is not oppression because it is relieved by the charities of the rich; but it is just this further emasculation of the poor that radical thought rejected. Godwin speaks of terrible labours forced on the poor and asks:

> What is the fruit of this disproportioned and unceasing toil? At evening they return to a family, famished with hunger, exposed half naked to the inclemencies of the sky, hardly sheltered, and denied the slenderest instruction, unless in a few instances where it is dispensed by the hands of ostentatious charity, and the first lesson communicated in unprincipled servility. [148]

Wordsworth similarly demands:

> How many at Oppression's portal placed
> Receive the scanty dole she cannot waste,
> And bless, as she has taught, her hand benign?
> (436-438)

and asserts that the legislator, aware that "the extremes of poverty and riches have a necessary tendency to corrupt the human heart . . . must banish from his code all laws such as the unnatural monster of primogeniture . . . whose baleful influence is shown in the depopulation of the country and in the necessity which reduces the sad relicks to owe their very existence to the ostentatious bounty of their oppressors." [149]

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[148] PJ., II, 806-807.

[149] Grosart, I, 15-16.

The poor man cannot hope for redress in the law either. Watson dogmatises: "The poorest man amongst us, the beggar at our door, is governed- not by the uncertain, passionate, arbitrary will of an individual- not by the selfish insolence of an aristocratic faction- not by the madness of democratic violence- but by the fixed, impartial, deliberate voice of the law ...." [150] Wordsworth's answer in the letter to Watson is hot with personal bitterness: "I congratulate your Lordship upon your enthusiastic fondness for the judicial proceedings of this country. I am happy to find you have passed through life without having your fleece torn from your back in the thorny labyrinth of litigation." [151] But the poem attacks more widely, demonstrating that private life is "unblessed by Justice" in the figure of the Female Vagrant's father, once able to maintain his family but denied this dignity by tyranny.[152]

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[150] Grosart, I, 25-26.

[151] ibid., 20.

[152] His own family's experience under Lord Lonsdale would have been the most pressing evidence to Wordsworth of such tyranny, but Z.S. Fink has shown that local legend supplied at least one more example. Christopher Wordsworth entered into his notebook the story of "two poor people who used frequently to go to Call-garth, then the seat of the Philipsons, for broken meat etc. etc., who possessing a little field which the Philipsons could not, as they ardently wished, procure or buy, they resolved to get it by whatever means. The poor woman according to custom going for the meat, they put some spoons amongst it and after she was gone, following her they found [them] upon [her]. Accordingly she and her husband were executed." On the next page Christopher entered an alternative ending, "They were involved in a law suit by which they were entirely impoverished." See Fink, 88-99, and 134-135.

It was no doubt unfair of Wordsworth to condemn Watson for not commenting on the effects of the war on individuals, since the "Appendix", published on 25 January, 1793, appeared shortly before war between England and France was officially declared, but his impetuosity comes from an understandable anguish that the effects of a war which was "giving up to the sword so large a portion of the poor, and consigning the rest to the more slow and painful consumption of want" were unknown or being ignored.[153] A Night on Salisbury Plain tries to pierce the fog created by the apologists for the war and show it for what it is. The strength of the attack stems from the dramatic impact of the story, where generalised phrases are made humanly relevant in the bereavement of the woman and in the description of the horrors of war:

> The mine's dire earthquake, the bomb's thunderstroke;
> Heart sickening Famine's grim despairing look;
> The midnight flames in thundering deluge spread;
> The stormed town's expiring shriek that woke
> Far round the griesly phantoms of the dead,
> And pale with ghastly light the victor's human head.
>
> (364-369)

As the woman recounts her story it is as if Wordsworth is reiterating Godwin's point "We can have no adequate idea of this evil (war), unless we visit, at least in imagination, a field of battle," stressing like him not the glory but the horror as "towns are burned, ships are blown up in the air

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[153] Grosart, I, 22.

while the mangled limbs descend on every side, the fields are laid desolate, the wives of the inhabitants exposed to brutal insult, and their children driven forth to hunger and nakedness."[154] Nor is the common distinction made between the evil authorities and the decent ordinary soldier. Godwin disdains the contract between state and soldier, "One part of the nation pays another part to murder and be murdered in their stead; and the most trivial causes . . . have sufficed to deluge provinces with blood."[155] But the bereaved and destitute woman is capable of no such rational comment. To her death is better than existence among what Fawcett in his Art of War called "ornamented murderers."[156] To her it is:

> Better before proud Fortune's sumptuous car
> Obvious our dying bodies to obtrude,
> Than dog-like wading at the heels of War
> Protract a cursed existence with the brood
> That lap, their very nourishment, their brother's blood.
>
> (311-315)

The attack on War is based on more than just pain for its victims. Wordsworth's target here is the machinery of government itself, on the inhuman arrogance of rulers who believe in war as an instrument of policy. In the letter to

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[154] PJ., II, 516.

[155] ibid., 516.

[156] Joseph Fawcett, The Art of War (London, 1795), 1.1132. See note on the poem p. 381-382.

Mathews he observes: "I see no connection, but what the obstinacy of pride and ignorance renders necessary, between justice and the sword, between reason and bonds."[157] In A Night on Salisbury Plain he denounces that most horrible war of all - the war for empire, which seduces men from their own misery in the contemplation of that of the subjugated race:

> Oh that a slave who on his naked knees
> Weeps tears of fear at Superstition's nod,
> Should rise a monster tyrant and o'er seas
> And mountains stretch so far his cruel rod
> To bruise meek Nature in her lone abode.
>
> (460-464)

In his final appeal to the rulers of nations Wordsworth's attack becomes more universal through its evocation in Milton's line of earlier struggles against tyranny:

> Say rulers of the nations, from the sword
> Can aught but murder, pain and tears proceed,
> Oh! what can war but endless War still breed?
>
> (507-509)

In this the poem side-steps the kind of reproach Dr. Burney was to make over The Female Vagrant when he said: "as it seems to stamp a general stigma on all military transactions, it will perhaps be asked whether the hardships described never happen during revolution, or in a nation subdued."[158]

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[157] EY., 124.

[158] Review of Lyrical Ballads in The Monthly Review; or, Literary Journal, XXIX (June, 1799), 202-210. Comments on Female Vagrant, 206. Smith, 35.

The recollection of Milton gives Wordsworth's plea an application beyond just the war between England and France, embracing the miseries of the individual in all war, in the seventeenth century as well as the eighteenth. And Milton's lines, protesting against public fraud and violence which waste the courage of great men - "In vain doth Valour bleed/While Avarice and Rapine share the land"[159] - are especially appropriate here, for Wordsworth attacks the war itself only as part of a wider condemnation of corruptions in the relationship between the individual and the state.

The flowing source of corruption (to use Wordsworth's own image in his reply to Watson) is the monarchy and the aristocracy. The radical case is put elegantly to Mathews: "I disapprove of monarchical and aristocratical governments, however modified. Hereditary distinctions, and privileged orders of any species, I think must necessarily counteract the progress of human improvement",[160] but the details are argued elsewhere. In the Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff Wordsworth follows Godwin and Paine. Monarchy is absurd in that it requires the greatest human judgement and removes the monarchy from all sources of common experience on which to base it. The system of dispensing honours for services

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[159] "On the Lord General Fairfax at the siege of Colchester", ll. 13-14.

[160] EY., 123.

rendered - absurd, degrading sinecures - means that men serve for reward and not from duty and must be obsequious to a man they might despise: "To obtain honour it will be thought necessary to merit disgrace. The whole scene consists in hollowness, duplicity and falshood."[161] The very existence of the wealthy and powerful is a sore in the state. As Godwin explains, the ostentation thought necessary to the dignity of the crown, the attendant "profligacy and extravagance of the men in power" which Wordsworth attacks, is the necessary cover for their own sense of inadequacy, the "secret consciousness that they possess nothing by which they can so securely assert their pre-eminence and keep their inferiors at a distance, as the splendour of their equipage, the magnificence of their retinue and the sumptuousness of their entertainments."[162] Thus, and so the vicious circle is completed, the bitterness of the "inferiors" is increased and with it the need to maintain the gulph. In <u>A Night on Salisbury Plain</u> the one line left of stanza LX: "Who fierce on kingly crowns hurled his own lightning blaze" suggests that in the lost stanzas the attack was repeated.

Another source of corruption is the union of church and state. To Wordsworth the Church had once offered a safe

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[161] <u>PJ</u>., II, 417.

[162] <u>PJ</u>., I, 36.

career. Temporising on his part disguised for a while just how far he had rejected orthodoxy, but by 1794 it is clear to him that the might of the Church of English is opposed to progress and truth. He laments to Mathews that the *Philanthropist* will not sell amongst the clergy and infers that they are among the "selfish alarmists" who support the war and the suspension of *habeas corpus* and are thus enemies of "dispassionate advocates of liberty and discussion."[163] Wordsworth's dilemma - whether to accept security at the cost of integrity - was paralleled exactly by Southey. It is not the commandments of Christ that are to be questioned, but the tyrannic power of a religious Establishment. Counselling Southey against vacillation, Coleridge reminded him that whereas some men approve of the "necessity and moral optimism of our religious Establishment" whatever their doubts about details of faith, "you disapprove of an Establishment altogether - you believe it iniquitous - a mother of Crimes!"[164]
The contrast of the Spirit of Christianity and the structure of the Church is clear enough in Southey's poetry at this time. In *The Soldier's Funeral* he contrasts the Creed of Jesus with that of the clerics. After depicting the Watsons of this world as "Court-moralists/Reverend lip-comforters" that once a

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[163] *EY.*, 126.

[164] STC. to Robert Southey [early August, 1795]. *Griggs*, 158.

week "Proclaim how blessed are the poor", he denounces them for distorting Christ's word:

> These are they, O Lord!
> Who in thy plain and simple Gospel see
> All mysteries, but who find no peace enjoin'd,
> No brotherhood, no wrath denounced on them
> Who shed their brethren's blood. [165]

The fine conclusion deserves to be better known, where Southey "with no Pharisaic pride" thanks God that he is not as these, but that he has a voice "that in these evil days/Amid these evil tongues, exalts itself/And cries aloud against iniquity."[166]

In such a time of war, and in a period when religious controversy was becoming more widespread and violent, the contrast between the Christian war and Christ's real message of peace was pressingly real. Noticing a certain J.T. Rutt's The Sympathy of Priests in 1795, The Analytical Review quotes as especially valuable a passage which condemns warring priests, but praises Religion itself:

> A lenient balm amidst the mortal strife,
> A hope beyond the vanities of life:
> Such were thy triumphs! such thy antient praise!
> But ah! how fallen in these degenerate days!
> Why yonder plain with christian carnage strew'd?
> Yon cross, why waves it o'er the scene of blood?
> 'Tis plum'd ambition mocks thy hallow'd name,
> Shouts thy Te Deum on the field of fame,
> And with such rites invokes the god of love,
> As pagans scarce had offer'd to their Jove. [167]

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[165] The Soldier's Funeral, The Minor Poems of Robert Southey, 3 vols. (London, 1823), I, 247-248. Future citations from this edition cited as Southey Poems.

[166] ibid., 248.

[167] Analytical Review, XXII (November, 1795), 529.

In Religious Musings Coleridge makes the same contrast between the spirit of Religion and the deeds it actually countenances:

> Mistrust and Enmity have burst the bands
> Of social peace: and listening Treachery lurks
> With pious fraud to snare a brother's life;
> And childless widows o'er the groaning land
> Wail numberless; and orphans weep for bread!
> Thee to defend, dear Saviour of Mankind!
> Thee, Lamb of God! Thee blameless Prince of Peace!
> From all sides rush the thirsty brood of War! [168]

He yokes warriors, lords, priests as "sore ills that vex and desolate our mortal life," and defines "priest" in a footnote, a name "after which any other term of abhorrence would appear an anti-climax", as a man "who holding the scourge of power in his right hand and a bible (translated by authority) in his left, doth necessarily cause the bible and the scourge to be associated ideas, and so produce that temper of mind which leads to Infidelity - Infidelity which judging of Revelation by the doctrines and practices of established Churches honors God by rejecting Christ." [169]

Wordsworth's views are, however, much less surely grasped. In 1793 the corrupted power of the Church was conveniently symbolised in the Bishop of Llandaff. An "Appendix" to a sermon on the "Wisdom and Goodness of God in Creating Both Rich and Poor" was just the kind of self-seeking distorted message that

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[168] Religious Musings, ll. 163-170. The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1912, reprint 1962), I, 115. Future quotations from this edition cited as Coleridge:Poems.

[169] ibid., I, 117.

could be expected from the Church. But whereas with Coleridge and Southey the religion of Jesus is used as a contrast to the creeds of the clerics, it is difficult to see that with Wordsworth the distinction is so clear. By incorporating the Druids in A Night on Salisbury Plain Wordsworth seems to be drawing on the tradition that saw them as the original British priest class, the forerunner of all repressive clerical systems that have followed. It could be argued that Wordsworth allows them to have potentialities for good as well as evil in that their music and ceremony charms the hoary desert, but what is most memorable about them is that they sacrifice living men and exercise their domination over the masses. [170] There is, moreover, no equivocation in the peroration that ends the poem:

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[170] In his attitude here Wordsworth is combining two attitudes of eighteenth century writers on the Druids. John Toland, History of the Druids (1726) was writing to expose the age-old corruptions of priest-craft. William Stukeley, Stonehenge: A Temple Restor'd to the British Druids (1740) was a Christian apologising for the Druids as custodians of ancient lore, similar to the patriarchs. Stukeley saw the Druids as in touch with the divine mystery in a way that did not clash with Christianity. A.L. Owen, The Famous Druids (Oxford, 1962) suggests (115) that Wordsworth found the wands that the Druids point to the sky in The Prelude, XII. 349-350 (1805) from Toland and the idea that the form of the Stonehenge pillars was significant from Stukeley. He also shows that it was a common charge against the Druids that they sacrificed human beings. Mary Moorman suggests (Moorman, I, 235-236) that Wordsworth may have come to Stukeley from a reference in William Hutchinson, History and Antiquities of Cumberland (1794), though this would be too late to have influenced A Night on Salisbury Plain where the general pattern of Stukeley's ideas is represented. See also notes to ANSP., ll. 424-425.

> Heroes of Truth pursue your march, uptear
> Th' Oppressor's dungeon from its deepest base;
> High o'er the towers of Pride undaunted rear
> Resistless in your might the herculean mace
> Of Reason; let foul Error's monster race
> Dragged from their dens start at the light with pain
> And die; pursue your toils till not a trace
> Be left on earth of Superstition's reign,
> Save that eternal pile which frowns on Sarum's plain.
>
> (541-549)

The Druids and all their descendants must be swept away before the resistless march of Reason.

Though the logic of the poem's structure, however, the contrast of ancient and modern barbarism, is clear, the actual terms - Reason, Superstition, Error - are slippery. Coleridge celebrated Horne Tooke in 1796 as the patriot and sage:

> whose breeze-like Spirit first
> The lazy mists of Pedantry dispers'd
> (Mists in which Superstition's <u>pigmy</u> band
> Seem'd Giant Forms, the Genii of the Land!) [171]

But though he, like Wordsworth, hails the advance of Truth and Freedom, it could be argued that Coleridge's attack is limited to clerics and ecclesiastical establishments and does not include Religion itself. A letter of William Mathews, however, though written a little after the period under consideration, will serve to show how the same terms could be used more inclusively. Accepting that "Religion in some

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[171] <u>Verses: Addressed to J. Horne Tooke and the Company who met on June 28th, 1796, to celebrate his Poll at the Westminster Election</u>, ll. 13-16. <u>Coleridge: Poems</u>, I, 150-151.

shape seems necessary to political existence" he nonetheless attacks its manifestations so widely that this remark seems only a concession to popular error: "The whole history of mankind is but a relation of the fatal and mischievous effects of this diabolical tyrant, who has uniformly preyed upon the enlightened few that have dared to lift up their heads against the oppressor of their afflicted brethren." His real conclusion is that a "freedom from superstition is the first blessing we can enjoy." [172] Godwin refers to views on the "great principles of the system of the universe" held by the "dogmas of superstition"[173] and advocating freedom of meeting comments on the contemporary situation where "twenty people cannot be collected together, unless for the purposes of superstition, but it is immediately suspected that they may be conferring about their rights.[174] Like many present day terms, "superstition" is here being used so cheaply that its usefulness in argument is lost. The writer does not define exactly what he wants the word to mean, relying on an accumulated charge of associations to carry enough of his meaning. Such thrusts, only fleetingly but often made, must have extinguished more zeal than the fuller arguments in Political Justice on religious establishments.

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[172] William Mathews to Mrs. Charles Mathews, June 5, 1801. Memoirs of Charles Mathews, comedian, by Mrs. Mathews, 4 vols. (1839), I, 321-322. Quoted Legouis, 328.

[173] PJ., I, 20.

[174] ibid., II, 421.

If Wordsworth is following Godwin in his use of "superstition", then he has clearly reacted to orthodoxy much more strongly than Southey or Coleridge. Further evidence from Wordsworth's own writing in 17 94 suggests how far this is true. H.W. Piper's The Active Universe drew attention to the revisions in An Evening Walk in which Wordsworth seems to perceive the possibility of the "one life."[175] But other revisions, also made in 1794, the year in which A Night on Salisbury Plain was copied out, are less well known.[176] Additions to line 436 (1793) repeat the now familiar contrast of the present and past, though not now to emphasise the barbarousness of the present but its sanity. Wordsworth considers:

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[175] Piper, 72-74.

[176] The relation between these revisions and A Night on Salisbury Plain is interesting. Whereas the lines on the sympathy which "sees not any line where being ends" (PW., I, 12-13) foreshadows the later Wordsworth, other factors tie them firmly to the earliest version of Salisbury Plain. These are (a) the repetition of imagery in (i) "Spirit who guid'st that orb . . . Roll to Peruvian vales" (PW., I, 20) and "Lo! where the Sun . . . flings . . . down to the sea through long Peruvian vales" (ANSP., 451-454); and (ii) "Their sensible warm motion was allied" (PW., I, 7) and "Their sensible warm motions transport swayed" (alt. ANSP., 212-216. See ANSP., II, 215-216, app.crit. (b) the reliance on crude personification such as "Mute Havoc smiling grimly backward slink/Low muttering o'er the earth that gaped beneath/Hung the grim shapes of Solitude and Death" (PW., I, 21).
The echo of Measure for Measure was pointed out by E. De Selincourt, The Early Wordsworth, The English Association Presidential Address (1936), 28, note 16.

> the once monastic dell,
> And think, while turning thence, my eyes survey
> The huts which glisten in the moon's pale ray,
> That here Sleep sheds a more refreshing dew
> Than yon dark Abbey's tenants ever drew
> From the soft streamlet idly murmuring near
> At will. 177

The darkness of the Abbey is more than evening gloom, it is the lowering of superstition. The poor man, chained to his work, is freer nonetheless than the Abbey's past tenants. The contrast is conceived in the same simple terms as the contrast of the herculean mace of reason and the dungeons of error at the end of A Night on Salisbury Plain.

Another passage, however, is much less clear and, it seems less innocuous. In revisions to lines 168-174 (1793) Wordsworth picks up his earlier description of the declining sun and apostrophises:

> Spirit who guid'st that orb and view'st from high
> Thrones, towers and fanes in blended ruin lie,
> Roll to Peruvian vales they gorgeous way
> See thine own temples mouldering in decay,
> Roll on till hurled from thy bright car sublime
> Thyself confess the mighty arm of Time.
> Thy star must perish, but triumphant Truth
> Shall tend a brightening flame in endless youth. 178

The image of the sun, gorgeous but inevitably sinking, conveys the same sense of resistless motion found in the last stanza of A Night on Salisbury Plain. But the terms in the Evening Walk revisions are clearer. Whereas in A Night on Salisbury Plain the images suggest some final cataclysm, here Wordsworth

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[177] PW., I, 37.

[178] PW., I, 20.

is envisaging the slow decay of superstition. He is addressing a God who will have to admit himself defeated not by force but by the "mighty arm of Time" and "triumphant Truth." In the light of this passage Coleridge's description of Wordsworth in 1796 as "at least a semi-atheist" may not seem only hyperbole erupting in the heat of the argument against the atheist Thelwall.[179]

The strength of the attack in The Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff and A Night on Salisbury Plain on individual misery and national corruption lies, as can be seen from the lines just discussed, in the strength of Wordsworth's positive ideals. The anger at the oppression of the poor man and at the extravagance of the monarchy comes from a conviction that such things need not be. Many still clung from a deep-rooted need to believe in an ordered universe to the conviction that God had once for all ordered man's estate. The reviewer of The Female Vagrant for The British Critic (thought by Miss Smith to be Wordsworth's earlier collaborator the Reverend Francis Wrangham) regretted the drift of the author in composing such a poem:

> which is to show the worst side of civilised society, and thus to form a satire against it. But let fanciful men rail as they will at the evils which no care can always prevent, they can have no dream more wild than the supposition, that any human wisdom can possibly exclude from a state which divine Providence has decreed, for reasons the most wise, to be a state of suffering and trial. The sufferers may be

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[179] Griggs, I, 216.

> changed, by infinite revolutions, but sufferers there will be, till Heaven shall interfere to change the nature of our tenure upon earth. [180]

Against such conservatism the end of A Night on Salisbury Plain calls for violence: "Let foul Error's monster race/Dragged from their dens start at the light with pain/And die", but the poetry, though effective, misrepresents Wordsworth, who believed with Godwin that education and free discussion, not violence, would slowly sift error from truth and bring in the millenium. Watson feared theoreticians of political justice and argued that it could not be the part "either of a good man or of a good citizen, to be zealous in recommending such matters to the discussion of ignorant and uneducated men." [181] But this craven argument was answered in A Night on Salisbury Plain:

> Oh! what can war but endless war still breed?
> Or where but from the labours of the sage
> Can poor benighted mortals gain the meed
> Of happiness and virtue, how assuage
> But by his gentle words their self-consuming rage?
>
> (509-513)

It was answered in the letter to Mathews in detail. Watson's good man and good citizen is countered by Wordsworth's "enlightened friend of mankind", whose duty is to "let slip no opportunity of explaining and enforcing those general principles of social order which are applicable to all times and to all places." [182]

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[180] Review of Lyrical Ballads in The British Critic, XIV (Oct., 1799), 364-369. Comments on Female Vagrant, 366-367 Smith, 40.

[181] Grosart, I, 28.

[182] EY., 124.

Watson, the man of God, wants to restrict the truth from men who cannot understand it, but Wordsworth declares his faith in their power to use what they so badly need in light and darkness images that recall the Bible message: "I know that the multitude walk in darkness. I would put into each man's hand a lantern to guide him, and not have him to set out upon his journey depending for illumination on abortive flashes of lightning, or the corruscations of transitory meteors."[183]

(v)

"A Night on Salisbury Plain: The Critical Problems"

Drawing on analogies with other important contemporary writers, I have attempted to show how central A Night on Salisbury Plain was as a statement of the radical case. It is much less simple, however, to show that it is good or even interesting as a work of art and not just as a propaganda statement. It has usually been felt, for instance, that the

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[183] ibid., 125. In "The Borderers: Wordsworth on the Moral Frontier", Durham University Journal, LVI (1964), 170-183, Roger Sharrock quotes Godwin (172): "Mind will frequently burst forth, but its appearance will be like the coruscations of the meteor, not like the mild and equable illuminations of the sun" (PJ., II, 368) in connection with the meteor image in Carlyle's French Revolution, but does not mention its appearance here. The echo is further evidence that Wordsworth knew volume two of Political Justice well.

poems lack structural and tonal unity. F.W. Bateson finds the conflict of objective and subjective interpretations of experience unresolved in the poem. Supernatural horror is yoked with "sober eye-on-the-object realism" but no connection whatever is established. For Mr. Bateson A Night on Salisbury Plain is, like The Vale of Esthwaite, an attempt by Wordsworth to escape his neurosis, but it fails as poetry "because the opposite and discordant qualities have neither been balanced nor reconciled. And the literary failure is only explicable . . . in extra-literary terms."[184] G.W. Meyer hints at the same idea of psychological pressures disrupting the poem's unity of atmosphere, when he declares that the idyllic stanzas "in the lazy descriptive vein of his early poems" are offensive in Salisbury Plain. Meyer stresses Wordsworth's longing for an idyllic rural life with Dorothy and believes that in the female vagrant's account of her early life and in the description of the welcoming valley Wordsworth is indulging in compensatory fantasy: "Wordsworth's reversion in these passages to the cataloguing of agreeable rural sights and sounds shows clearly that one of the causes of his failure . . . was his lack of artistic control, his inability to keep materials of which he was fond out of a poem in which they were only incongruities."[185]

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[184] Bateson, 111.

[185] Meyer, 148.

Each of these criticisms, however, misses the strengths and, interestingly, also the sources of weaknesses in the poem. Wordsworth wanted to attack the abuses in contemporary society as powerfully as possible. Demonstration in the dramatically created story of an actual sufferer was to be supported by peroration, widening the scope and intensity of the attack. But there obviously had to be a fusion and not merely a juxtaposition of these two didactic modes. The virtues of the poem arise from the fact that in a simple structure perfectly adequate to his straightforward polemic design Wordsworth has come very near to this successful fusion.

The story of the two vagrants is framed by the poet's declamation in stanzas I-IV and XLVII-LXI and is an illustration of his main points. The poem opens with the contrast of savage and modern man. Though the life of the savage is harsher, his miseries are less keenly felt, for he knows no other state and is supported by kinsmen who share the same lot. But to the modern man, reminded of his penury daily by the ostentation of the wealthy, divided by artificial barriers from fellow men, misery is not so alleviated. At once the poem introduces the solitary, destitute traveller, wearily travelling away from comfort and civilisation. What the poet has declared to be the case, in the abstract, is now proved by the dramatic figure. At the end of the poem this artistic unfolding is reversed, as the concluding declaration generalises on the basis of the story already told. There is no justice and

oppression rules; the poor are brutalised but not helped; war waged by ambitious tyrants destroys the already pauperised nations - these are Wordsworth's accusations and the female vagrant's story justifies them. Even Stonehenge is seen to have a function, as an illustration not only of the parallels between ancient and modern barbarities but also of the monumental strength of the institutionalised errors which Reason must destroy before civilisation can come and,

> not a trace
> Be left on earth of Superstition's reign,
> Save that eternal pile which frowns on Sarum's plain.
>
> (547-549)

It was not enough, however, to place demonstration and peroration in this just but static relation to each other. Some sense of development had to be given to the poem which would otherwise have suffered, as so much didactic poetry does, from the inertia caused when numerous points are made in the same way. Wordsworth's solution was to capitalise on the experience already gained in An Evening Walk of conveying changes of mood and place by creating a different kind of progress poem. Whereas An Evening Walk embodies the consciousness of the author only, A Night on Salisbury Plain was to work through created figures. But the strategy of the poem is the same in that it requires the reader to follow a progress and to learn not by understanding the human but by observing what happens to him, either physically or as reflected in the response of his mind. It is, moreover, worked out through

a complex system of parallels and contrasts which guides our response to the events and people in the poem and which gives the sense that this is a densely textured poetic world.

The narrative of the traveller's progress simply but strikingly suggests a sense of movement in space and time through such repeated motifs and patterns of contrast. The narrative opens with the man painfully mounting Salisbury plain. He is hungry and thirsty and the plain denies even the usual solaces:

> No shade was there, no meads of pleasant green,
> No brook to wet his lips or soothe his ear. (46-47)

Many details emphasise his isolation. To him the fields of corn, normally, as in the Epistle to Burlington, a symbol of man's fruitful co-operation with nature, seem "wastes ... that stretched without a bound" (44). He does see a shepherd going home and hails him, only to hear his voice mocked by the wind and the "wasted" song of the lark. A rather obvious contrast places the domestic affections of the crows, eddying homewards in waves, against the homeless solitude of the traveller who only sees, as he marches, the plain becoming "more wild and more forlorn" (61). His journey is taking him away from man and shelter.

The section that follows, though static in place, does not seem out of place in a progress poem, since it too records a progress that underlines what the poem has revealed so far. The female vagrant tells of an idyllic childhood irrevocably lost.

She has been degraded to the same desolation as the traveller, is wandering like him over the vacant plain, vacant except for the "dead house of the plain" which has to serve as their lodging. From idyllic childhood she has come to wretched maturity and in this shift, from the trust of the child in her father's world to the despair of the woman who cries "And now across this waste my steps I bend/Oh! tell me whither for no earthly friend/Have I . . ." (389-391), she has touched the extremes of human emotion. She has moved from England to America and like the traveller on the heath has experienced at sea the peculiar atmosphere of great natural wastes. In telling her story, an abstract of all human sufferings, she provides the wider context for the poem which the traveller's story, having no past and no future, lacks.

Finally the progress is resumed and the sense of movement beautifully fulfilled as Wordsworth presents again, in a new context now, all the earlier details which emphasised the traveller's desolation. At stanza XLVI the traveller, instead of mounting slopes which always deceitfully promise some cottage just over the brow, now looks down from a hill summit over a valley's pleasant scene. The shade and water that were denied are now promised in the "winding brook/Babbling through groves and lawns and meads of green" (408-409). Earlier the crows mocked his homelessness, and the lark the feebleness of his voice, but now the linnet's voice is friendly. The endless, blank cornfields revealing no human care have

given way to pastures of scattered herds, tended by the milk-maid. Most important of all, isolation has been banished by human kindliness. Though the pair are still friendless:

> For you yon milkmaid bears her brimming load,
> For you the board is piled with homely bread.
>
> (419-420)

The poem is also a progress in time and this too is suggested by a most careful ordering of detail. The narrative opens with a statement of time and atmosphere, "The troubled West was red with stormy fire" (37). As the traveller journeys the plain seems to become more and more threatening as the sun drops and the storm threatened by the opening line breaks. As he stands astonished at the "marks of mighty arms of former days" (76), the day sinks and, unbroken by a star or a light from a house, night envelopes the plain. By stanza XIV time has passed - three hours the man has blindly stumbled on - and now the moon rises. The woman tells her story as the night passes away unnoticed, and as she pauses:

> he looked and saw the smiling morn
> All unconcerned with their unrest resume
> Her progress through the brightening eastern gloom.
>
> (327-329)

As the pair drop into the valley they hear the cock crow, and the woman refers to "this immeasurable plain/By these extended beams of dawn impressed" (352-353). The poem ends with another day fully begun; the sun up, the milkmaid in the fields, the cottagers preparing food. The pattern that began with the

sun darkening in the west has been completed.

I have tried to show how successful the simply but boldly plotted structure is in suggesting a sense of movement and changes of mood which support and project the didactic in the poem. But it also needs to be urged that Wordsworth's imaginative control of the poem's world extends to the smallest detail. There is a variety of machinery - Gothic, sentimental, pastoral - echoes of a variety of influences, but in the poem this variety comes together in locally suggestive patterns to reinforce the truth of the poet's vision of man's place in a corrupt society and a hostile world. The Gothic machinery, the most dubious part of the poem, might serve as one example. The traveller crosses the heath which is bare of human habitation. The timelessness of the place is emphasised by the absence of the usual transient signs of man. Suddenly he does see man's marks, but they are "Strange marks of mighty arms of former days" (76) and lead him only to the monument raised, as the warning voice tells him, by the power of "hell's most cursed sprites" (84). Here he thought to find shelter but finds none. In contrast, however, when he does discover a hut, ominously called the "dead house of the plain" (126), he finds its terrible past, focussed in the story of the discovered corpse, is redeemed in the present by a <u>human</u> voice and ordinary sympathies. That this is a poem about human beings and not about the superstitions of the past is suddenly made clear.

Again we can see the purpose shaping the local texture of the poem in the treatment of the interplay of man and nature. The poem opens with the traveller leaving civilisation behind, the "distant spire/That fixed at every turn his backward eye/ Was lost . . ." (39-40). The vast corn-fields do not speak of man. The plain offers no shade, no refreshment; not even beauty, and yet when the storm breaks it looks as if the naked plain itself must be his shelter. Wordsworth emphasises the traveller's despairing longing for some human contact, but in a spot where the "bustard" is the real "tenant" he cannot find a shepherd's hovel, nor see the light of a lonely toll-gate lodge. Even the night itself seems hostile, starless, hiding the moon in clouds. But after the woman's story has, as it were, redeemed the heath by bringing into the poem human emotions and sympathies, the hostility of nature is softened. The sun rises indifferent to their sufferings, but its indifferent beauty _is_ beauty, the idyllic valley is more welcome than the heath. Though the pair are still friendless, nature for the moment is not active in their distress.

The framework of the poem is a simple but strong one. By the use of parallel and contrast and by the functional use of discord between artistic modes Wordsworth projects his vision of English society with clarity and force. But however much his art has gained from his commitment to the radical cause, and however strongly _A Night on Salisbury Plain_ breathes

a life not felt in <u>An Evening Walk</u>, it does seem to me that the treatment of human figures in the poem, and thus of the didactic argument itself is still weak in ways that recall the limitations of the frozen woman passage from the earlier work.

The source of the weakness is to be found in the relationship between Wordsworth the propagandist and the world he has chosen to create. The whole poem, of course, is didactic in intent. The problem is that at moments the urgency of the need to convey the message in the peroration overwhelms the need to create convincing human beings for the demonstration. The end of the poem is an example. The poem has worked from the opening contrast of the savage and modern man through the story of the travellers to the end of their journey. As Wordsworth takes leave of the pair he bids them think that

> life is like this desart broad,
> Where all the happiest find is but a shed
> And a green spot 'mid wastes interminable spread.
>
> (421-423)

Wordsworth is attempting to enlarge the significance of the desert journey we have seen, but he actually diminishes it. Just as in the passage from <u>An Evening Walk</u> the very vividness of the conceit "Thy breast their death-bed, coffin'd in thine arms" makes it seem that the description of the woman's sufferings has been angled solely to arrive at this conceit, so here the conclusion affects our response to the whole story that has gone before. The progress of the travellers is suddenly

reduced in interest when it is made no more than the illustration of a trite moralitas.

The same is true of other elements in the narrative. As has been shown the setting and rising of the sun is used to plot the passing of time in the poem. It is a detail, unobtrusively contributing to the evocation of place and time, unobtrusively that is until Wordsworth includes it in the declamation and draws the moral:

> Lo! where the Sun exulting in his might
> In haste the fiery top of Andes scales
> And flings deep silent floods of purple light
> Down to the sea through long Peruvian vales,
> At once a thousand streams and gentle gales
> Start from their slumbers breathing scent and song;
> But now no joy of man or Woman hails
> That star as once, ere with him came the throng
> Of Furies and grim Death by Avarice lashed along.
>
> (451-459)

The traveller stumbles on the haunt of demon-gods - and this too has its place in the final didactic scheme, as Wordsworth draws the contrast between the brutalities of savage and supposedly civilised man (stanza XLVIII). Even the lightning's "pale abortive gleam" (106), which flashes on a guide-post for a moment, returns in the question,

> still, reason's ray,
> What does it more than while the tempests rise,
> With starless glooms and sounds of loud dismay,
> Reveal with still-born glimpse the terrors of our way?
>
> (429-432)

It is probable that the relationship between unaccommodated man and nature, harshly illustrated in the poem, was pillaged for its

moral in the stanza which is now half-lost, beginning:

> How changed that paradise, those happy bounds
> Where once through his own groves the Hindoo strayed.
> No more the voice of jocund toil resounds
> Along the crowded banyan's high arcade.
>
> (469-472)

Such a moral docketing of the stories is only acceptable at all because the poem exists, and is seen to exist, solely within Wordsworth's consciousness. It opens and closes with his apostrophe, and at the one moment when the narrative could gain some independent life, when the woman is about to tell her story, Wordsworth destroys the allusion with a sententious interruption:

> And are ye spread ye glittering dews of youth
> For this- that frost may gall the tender flower
> In Joy's fair breast with more untimely tooth?
> Unhappy Man! thy sole delightful hour
> Flies first: it is thy miserable dower
> Only to taste of joy that thou may'st pine
> A loss, which rolling suns shall ne'er restore.
>
> (217-223)

The reader is never allowed to see the figures toiling across the plain just as human figures, whose lives might or might not be significant, because he is always directed what to see by the ever-present poet. But though this helps the poem as propaganda it also limits it in two important ways. One is that the relationship between man and the world in which he moves seems only an imposed relationship. We are aware of the landscape and the human being arranged to a didactic plan, so that the world of the poem will match in every detail the real

world invoked in the declamations. The other is that controlled by this inclusive narrator consciousness the figures created in the poem dwindle as independent and convincing human beings. Wordsworth cannot have it both ways. He cannot use the female vagrant as evidence of the oppression of society merely, and expect her to move one as anything more, as just a suffering human being. If he does sum up the traveller's journey across the plain with the moral tag that the "desert broad" is like life, then man and nature will seem in a schematic relation only, impoverishing rather than enriching the interest of each other.

CHAPTER FOUR

ADVENTURES ON SALISBURY PLAIN

(i)

"The Poem in its Time"

On 20 November, 1795, Wordsworth confidently urged his new poem Adventures on Salisbury Plain on his friend Francis Wrangham, declaring that compared with A Night on Salisbury Plain it could be considered "almost as another work."[186] What he had in mind, as his comments on its purpose to "expose the vices of the penal law and the calamities of war" make clear, was the newness of the sailor's story and the supporting narrative concerning his wife and the cottagers. But the poem was new in another way also. Considered as a didactic work, the product of the stresses of the England at war of 1795, it is really very similar to the earlier poem. It is didactic, though the attack is formulated in a different way, and, as in A Night on Salisbury Plain, the objects of the attack are commonplace in the radical and humanitarian literature of the time. What is new is that Wordsworth has widened the scope of the attack. That he has done so, valuably maintaining the

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[186] WW. to the Reverend Francis Wrangham, 20 November [1795]. EY., 159.

polemical and committed basis of the poem while moving into quite different areas of psychological analysis, was due partially to three factors.

The first was simply that the idealistic vision of the end of A Night on Salisbury Plain was no nearer fulfillment. Wordsworth had called on the "Heroes of Truth":

> pursue your march, uptear
> Th' Oppressor's dungeon from its deepest base;
> High o'er the towers of Pride undaunted rear
> Resistless in your might the herculean mace
> Of Reason.
>
> (541-545)

What had actually happened was that the liberties of Englishmen had been further eroded and that (from a radical point of view) "foul Error's monster race" had not died before the light of Truth. There was, for instance, no sign of any end to the war. At the first session of Parliament in 1795 considerable support was shown for an amendment to the Adress from the Throne urging negotiations with France. At once Wordsworth declared to Mathews that "things are beginning to turn with respect to the war."[187] But he was wrong and as the year progressed events in the war served only to reinforce the prophetic truth of his feelings in 1793 that the struggle "which was beginning, and which many thought would be brought to a speedy close by the irrestible arms of Great Britain being added to those of the Allies . . . would be of long continuation

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[187] WW. to William Mathews, 7 January, 1795. EY., 139.

and productive of distress and misery beyond all possible calculation."[188]

The continuance of the war meant that the condition of the people worsened. There was a steady erosion of liberty. The verdict of the 1794 treason trials seemed to vindicate the name of British Justice and the authority of a British jury and Wordsworth rejoiced fulsomely:

> The late occurrences in every point of view are interesting to humanity. They will abate the insolence and presumption of the aristocracy by shewing it that neither the violence, nor the art, of power can crush even an unfriended individual, though engaged in the propagation of doctrines confessedly unpalatable to privilege; and they will force upon the most prejudiced this conclusion that there is some reason in the language of reformers.[189]

But such rejoicing was premature. Even as Wordsworth was writing a postscript to this letter in the first week of January 1795, a debate on the liberties of Englishmen began in the Commons. Sheridan moved that habeas corpus be restored. He represented the suspension of this-safe guard as in reality a suspension of the whole constitution in favour of rule through fear engendered by an army of spies and informers. He made great play with the fact that the verdict in the treason trials had been described as meaning no more than that the

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[188]Advertisement to Guilt and Sorrow. See above, p. 222-225.

[189]WW. to William Mathews [c. 24 December, 1794]. EY., 137.

accused could not be tried for the same offence again. He had always thought, he said, that acquittal established a man's innocence, but now it seemed only to reinforce the description already current of Tooke and the others as "acquitted felons." Such a state of affairs made him hesitate to invoke the authority of a British Jury or a British judge.[190] His motion was heavily defeated.

The war also meant an increase in social distress, something touching the ordinary man much more nearly than the suspension of his largely illusory liberties. New taxes were levied to support the ever mounting cost of the war. Bad harvests in 1794 and 1795 meant that the cost of bread soared. In 1797 Sir Frederick Morton Eden presented in his great work, The State of the Poor, the results of a survey carried out at his guidance by numerous amateur sociologists and explained that what had impelled him to begin this study was the "difficulties, which the labouring classes experienced, from the high price of grain, and of provisions in general, as well as of clothing and fuel, during the years 1794 and 1795."[191] During the coldest part of the year the cost of coal put it beyond the reach of the labouring poor. Sheridan mentioned it as a debating flourish;

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[190] The Parliamentary History of England, From the Earliest Period to the Year 1803 (London, 1818), Vol. XXXI, 14 March, 1794 - 22 May 1795, p. 1063. Future citations to Parliamentary History.

[191] Sir Frederick Morton Eden, Bart., The State of the Poor; or a History of the Labouring Classes in England, 3 vols. (London, 1797), I, i.

Dorothy Wordsworth knew it as someone who had to pay twenty-three shillings and more for a small cart of coals.[192] The poverty of the Dorset peasantry must have reinforced in Wordsworth the compassion and anger that led to the depiction of the destitute woman in A Night on Salisbury Plain. Both Dorothy and William commented on it, Wordsworth in a letter to Mathews: "The country people here are wretchedly poor; ignorant and overwhelmed with every vice that usually attends ignorance in that class, viz. lying and picking and stealing, etc. etc.", and Dorothy in a letter to Jane Marshall: "the peasants are miserably poor; their cottages are shapeless structures (I may almost say) of wood and clay- indeed they are not at all beyond what might be expected in savage life."[193] It is clear from the letter of 7 January already quoted, that Wordsworth, possibly through the agency of parliamentary reporter Mathews, was in touch with the main features of debate in the Commons. If so, the contrast between the opulence he has seen in London and the poverty of Racedown must have struck him as forcibly as it did Sheridan and have presented itself to him in the same terms. For Sheridan drew the contrast already sounded in A Night on Salisbury Plain between the poor and the enormously wealthy ministers who, "while all Europe is aflame ... seem to

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[192] DW. to Mrs. John Marshall [7 March, 1796]. EY., 166.

[193] WW. to William Mathews [20] October [1795]. EY., 154.
DW. to Mrs. John Marshall, 30 November [1795]. EY., 162.

be engaged at boy's play; to be scrambling for places and pensions, for ribbands and titles, and amusing themselves with puss in the corner of the cabinet room." [194]

The result of such poverty coupled with despotism from above was inevitable. On 26 October, 1795 a vast meeting of the London Corresponding Society in Copenhagen Fields adopted a "remonstrance" to the king. On the 29th the king was hissed on his way to open parliament and a missile shattered his carriage window. At once two acts revealed the panic such a demonstration induced in the government. One, the treasonable practices bill, extended the definition of treason to cover written and spoken words and created a new crime by subjecting to heavy penalties anyone convicted of inciting others to hatred of the government or sovereign. The other, the seditious meetings bill, forbade all political meetings without prior notice and gave magistrates the power to dissolve even legally constituted meetings by use of the riot act. Nothing had changed since the optimistic conclusion to A Night on Salisbury Plain. It was legitimate to continue the attack.

The second factor which must have contributed to Wordsworth widening the scope of his new poem was that he was quarrying and exhausting the stock themes of A Night on Salisbury Plain for use elsewhere. The Imitation of Juvenal's Eighth Satire was begun in London in 1795, and though it straggled on into 1797, [195]

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[194] Parliamentary History, 1070-1071.

[195] See Reed, 340-341, Appendix XIV, "Date of Juvenal."

is essentially of this period, for it is no more than an elegant re-working of themes already formulated in the earlier poem.[196] The attack on the monarchy, for instance, is powerful but not new. It builds up through examination of past crimes to the question:

> But why for scoundrels rake a distant age,
> Or spend upon the dead the muse's rage?
> The nation's hope shall shew the present time
> As rich in folly as the past in crime. [197]

The occupatio links the present and future monarchs with the whole degenerate line, emphasising the question with which the passage began:

> Were Kings a free-born work, a people's choice,
> Would More or Henry boast the general voice?
> What fool, besotted as we are by names,
> Could pause between a Raleigh and a James? [198]

Wordsworth attacks the "Pharoah-plague" of petty tyrants and argues that since common sense cannot cleanse the land:

> Then to our bishops *reverent* let us fall,
> *Worship* Mayors, Tipstaffs, Aldermen and all. [199]

His italics suggest the connection between false reverence for secular authority and false reverence for the Church, a pointer to Wordsworth's attitude to the union of Church and State later

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[196] The backward look of the Imitation (as it will be cited in future) is strikingly demonstrated by the repetition of the image "Even hewho yoked the living to the dead/Rivall'd by you, hides the diminish'd head" (Imitation, 5-6, PW., I, 302), which Wordsworth had used before in the Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff: "Burke roused the indignation of all ranks of men when, by a refinement in cruelty superior to that which in the East yokes the living to the dead . . ." (Grosart, 1, 21).

[197] Imitation, 117-120, PW., I, 305.

[198] ibid., 101-104. PW., I, 304.

[199] ibid., 17-18. PW., I, 302.

found in:

> Religion hailed her creeds by war restored,
> And Truth had blest the logic of his sword. 200

In just one area is the attack extended. Wordsworth condemns the corruption flowing in public and private life not just from the profligacy of the men in power, but from the secret activities of the army of government informers. In 1794 Thelwall had published as a shilling pamphlet his first political lecture On the Moral Tendency of a System of Spies and Informers, and the Conduct to be observed by the Friends of Liberty, during the Continuance of such a System, and the Analytical Review had commented that it presented a "melancholy but we are afraid, a true picture, of municipal intrigue and official despotism." [201] In the debate on the suspension of habeas corpus Sheridan had attacked the system of paid informers, when he said:

> I will not say that there is no government in Europe which does not stand in need of the assistance of spies; but I will affirm that the government which avails itself of such support does not exist for the happiness of the people. It is a system which is calculated to engender suspicion, and to beget hostility; it not only destroys all confidence between man and man, but between the governors and the governed. Where it does not find sedition, it creates it. It resembles in its operations the conduct of the father of all spies and informers, the devil, who introduced himself into Paradise not only to inform his own Pandemonium of the state of that region, but to deceive and betray the inhabitants. 202

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[200] ibid., 43-44. PW., I, 303.

[201] Analytical Review, XVIII (April, 1794), 485.

[202] Parliamentary History, 1067.

Now developing Lear's theme "Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. Plate sin with Gold/And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks", Wordsworth too examines the working of this army:

> My Lord can muster (all but honour spent)
> From his wife's Faro-bank a decent rent,
> The glittering rabble, housed to cheat and swear,
> Swindle and rob: is no informer there?
> Or is the painted staff's avenging host
> By sixpenny sedition-shops engrossed,
> Or rather skulking for the common weal
> Round fire-side treason parties en famille? [203]

This is a brilliant vignette. The language of public denunciation and actual fact, "sixpenny sedition-shops", "fireside treason parties", yoked in this way, emphasises the invasion of private liberties that has taken place. The poet's instinct for the telling words, "glittering rabble", skulking for the common weal" lends the denunciation a force lacking in Sheridan's more measured though no less angry address. But despite this local quality there is no new source of strength in the poem, no discovery of themes or techniques to be exploited in later work. Adventures on Salisbury Plain had to enlarge the vision of the earlier poems or stagnate.

It is much more difficult to be certain about the third factor, namely the effect on Wordsworth of new influences both personal and literary. The extent to which one man is indebted to the personality and writing of another is always difficult to ascertain honestly, especially if they share the

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[203] Imitation, 59-66. PW., I, 303. My emended punctuation.

same views. But some suggestions may reasonably be made. From February 1795 Coleridge delivered a series of political lectures in Bristol. Two of them were printed as "On the Present War" in Conciones ad Populum in November 1795. [204] Now Wordsworth may not have owned a copy of this until later than the revision of A Night on Salisbury Plain. [205] But he must have been familiar with Coleridge's views both from their first meeting possibly from letters and from the report of mutual friends. And what an inspiration could be found in the work of this most eloquent of the government's opponents. [206] What Coleridge later called his "squeaking baby-trumpet of Sedition" [207] is full-toned in this reference, for instance, to the suspension of habeas corpus:

> We are no longer freemen, and if we be more secure here than in Morocco or at Constantinople, we owe this superiority to the mildness of our masters, not to the protection of our laws. [208]

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[204] Essays, 29-55. This volume also contains, 56-98, the only other Bristol lecture to be published, "The Plot Discovered", which is Coleridge's protest against the "gagging" bills. For details see, John Colmer, Coleridge: Critic of Society (Oxford, 1959), 9-10 and 11-30 passim.

[205] Losh sent Wordsworth a copy in March 1797. See EY., footnote, p. 186. Coleridge's influence had, of course, been felt for a year and a half by this time.

[206] A connection with Conciones ad Populum is noted by Colmer when he speaks of a section as "filled with genuine compassion for the sufferings of the poor and a strong vein of pacifism reminiscent of passages in Wordsworth's Female Vagrant" (17).

[207] STC. to George Coleridge [c. 10 March, 1798]. Griggs, I, 397.

[208] Essays, I, 41-42.

Wordsworth had met and talked with Southey. He would have been familiar with the 1795 edition of Poems by Southey and Lovell and possibly, to judge from later practice, with other poems still in MS. And, just as with Conciones ad Populum, as we read Southey's work, analogies with Wordsworth's repeatedly strike us, reminding us how closely men of quite different temperaments agreed for a short period on what targets should be attacked.

To the influence of these well-known radicals, may most probably be added the influence of a less-known, Joseph Fawcett. His The Art of War, an onslaught on "murder methodiz'd" in modern warfare, was published early in 1795 by Wordsworth's first publisher, the radical Joseph Johnson.[209] During his stay in London Wordsworth heard Fawcett preach at the Old Jewry meeting house and this must have urged him to obtain a poem he later remembered as

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[209] The connection between Fawcett's poem and Wordsworth was pointed out by Arthur Beatty, "Joseph Fawcett: The Art of War", University of Wisconsin Studies in Language and Literature, II (1918), 224-269. In "Joseph Fawcett and Wordsworth's Solitary", PMLA., XLVIII (1933), 508-528, reprinted in Studies in the Literary Backgrounds of English Radicalism, Franklin and Marshall College Studies, V (Lancaster, Penn., 1947), 190-226, M. Ray Adams stressed the importance of the whole of Fawcett's work. As his title suggests, however, Adam's main concern is with rectifying misconceptions about Fawcett's biography which Wordsworth's portrait of the Solitary in The Excursion and the later Fenwick note helped to spread.

having a "good deal of merit." [210] Possibly similarities with his own A Night on Salisbury Plain recommended the poem to Wordsworth more than it deserves, since its rhetorical structure is akin to that in Wordsworth's own poem. Fawcett too moves from rhetorical question, to declamation and example, and finally to an address to Reason that strongly recalls Wordsworth's challenge to the "Heroes of Truth":

> How long shall it be thus?- Say, Reason, say,
> When shall thy long minority expire?
> When shall thy dilatory kingdom come?
> Haste, royal infant, to thy manhood spring!
> Almighty, when mature to rule mankind.
> . . .
> to thee
> All might belongs: haste, reach thy ripen'd years!
> Mount thine immortal throne, and sway the world. [211]

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[210] For Wordsworth's comments on Fawcett see the Fenwick Note to The Excursion, PW., V, 374-375.
It is usually argued that Fawcett's preaching must have influenced Wordsworth as much as his poem. Beatty (234) comments on the impact Fawcett must have made on a young poet already a disciple of Godwin and Adams (199) speaks of Fawcett as winning converts for Political Justice. F.M. Todd, Politics and the Poet: A Study of Wordsworth (London, 1957) (56), points out that the importance of sermons which stressed the social and political aspects of Christianity would have been felt by Wordsworth. If the two volume collection of sermons published in 1795, however, Sermons Delivered at the Sunday Evening Lecture, for the Winter Season, the Old Jewry, are representative of Fawcett's themes, then the influence on Wordsworth's radicalism can only have been slight. Fawcett does advocate reasoned treatment of fellow men, concern for those who injure us, compassion and mercy for the destitute, but only within the familiar Christian framework. No greater contrast can be imagined than that between the violently anti-government sentiments of The Art of War and the solid non-controversial tone of sermons such as "The Consolations attendant on the conclusion of a virtuous Life" (I, 103-138) and "On Fortitude" (II, 241-261).

[211] Joseph Fawcett, The Art of War (London, 1795), pp. 51-52, ll. 1242-1257. There are no line numbers in the original. I refer to the pages of the 1795 ed. and to the line numbers in Beatty, op.cit.

The connection implied throughout A Night on Salisbury Plain between savage and civilised, ancient and modern babarities, is paralleled by Fawcett. He points out that the brutalities of the Indian cause no amazement. His savageness is taken for granted. But man has come to take for granted also brutality on "lib'ral Europ's lucid stage" and this marks the final irrationality of a supposedly rational being.[212]

As propaganda the poem now seems unsuccessful. Its tone is over strident, its one theme that war is murder methodised over emphasised. Relying heavily on personification it lacks even the rudimentary involvement with human beings found in A Night on Salisbury Plain. But to contemporary reviewers the poem looked very different. Here was a work that seemed potent for good or evil, despite certain easily spotted technical faults. To the liberal Analytical Review and The Annual Register The Art of War was a return to truth after the falsehoods of past poetry glorifying war. To the conservative Gentleman's Magazine, on the other hand, it was one more perverted attack on the established order, to be answered not by reasoned criticism but by its own type of poetic eloquence:

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[212] ibid., pp. 19-24, ll. 414-549.

> if the Demon of Discord ever raged with unremitting fury and horrors, it is now that the councils of the French Pandemonium have let him loose on the world. It becomes the duty of every man to wage unremitting war till he is overpowered, and re-committed to that bottomless pit whence he has been called forth.[213]

Though inspired and in part moulded by such influences as these, the poem was the outcome of Wordsworth's extensive revision of A Night on Salisbury Plain is a more powerful presentation of the radical humanitarian case than any achieved by Coleridge, Southey or Fawcett. Whereas their work has the strengths but also the damaging weaknesses of the address, the satire or the thinly disguised dramatic monologue, Wordsworth's rests on the strengths of the fully developed dramatic story. To the story of the woman Wordsworth has now added the story of the murderer sailor, concentrating especially on the last days of his life. How far Wordsworth was drawing on fact is not known. It seems likely that he recollected something of the crime and execution of the notorious Jarvis Matcham, who hung in chains by the road from the North to Cambridge and who was feted in broadsheet and remembered story long after his body had rotted away.[214] It is possible too that some of Wordsworth's childhood emotion at being isolated at the gibbet spot, recorded

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[213] See Analytical Review, XXI (April, 1795), 388-391; The New Annual Register for 1795, Section "Domestic Literature", 279-280; The Gentleman's Magazine, LXV (June, 1795), 502.

[214] See Appendix II below.

in The Prelude, Bk. XI, 279-316, flooded back to colour his imagination.[215] Whatever the provenance of the story its addition to the bare story of A Night on Salisbury Plain gives Wordsworth more substantial evidence and a more flexible plot in which to answer still more of Watson's case point by point.

"If your personal liberty be unjustly restrained, though but for an hour, and that by the highest servants of the crown, the crown cannot screen them."[216] Coleridge gave

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[215] We should, I think, avoid any suggestion of certainty on such a point. For this reason I feel that Miss Welsford goes too far in her account of the genesis of Salisbury Plain. She suggests that Wordsworth's imagination was haunted by the figure of the Hanged Man. She builds up her case firstly with the Prelude account of the child seeing the spot where the gibbet hung and the murderer's name in the turf. She reinforces the narrative with interpretative comment such as "It was a terrifying experience" and "the frightened child fled" and concludes that in this sight and the sight of the woman with her garments tossed in the wind, "as is generally recognised, is the first spring of Guilt and Sorrow." Far from being generally recognised the point has not, I think, been made before. Miss Welsford later discusses the Druids in The Vale of Esthwaite and asks, "Is Wordsworth - perhaps subconsciously - connecting the 'Druid Stones' with the murderer's memorial that caused his earlier boyish terror?" There is no sure answer, but Miss Welsford goes on to suggest that Wordsworth read the 1786 New Annual Register story of the guilt-ridden sailor and that "it can hardly be doubted that when Wordsworth read the bare record of crime and self-sought punishment, he informed it with some of the terror he had felt when, as a little boy lost, he saw the site of the gallows; and that the Druids' victims, the murderer whose name was cut into the grass, the sailor who confesses his crime during a thunderstorm, were gradually fused together by the creative imagination into the figure of The Hanged Man, a tragic symbol of human guilt and sorrow." Finally Miss Welsford uses the Prelude 1798 account of a 1788 event, the meeting with the discharged soldier, to modify this established figure of "The Hanged Man." The genesis of Salisbury Plain is established here by mixing fact, interpretation and hypothesis. See Welsford, 6-11.

[216] Grosart, I, 26.

the answer to this in "On the Present War" where he attacks the growing use of "crimping". To judge from the poems of Southey and Wordsworth many innocent men knew the answer too. Wordsworth's sailor is pressed after already giving "two full years of labour hard". The fact that he has already served seems an added twist, but in fact the figure appears often enough to show that "crimping" of discharged men was sufficiently common to make such a man a popular image of distress and just rare enough to excite interest in the poem. In the third of the Botany Bay Eclogues, "John, Samuel, Richard" for instance, John tells his story from the time of his discharge and return to his wife:

> At midnight they seized me, they dragg'd me away,
> They wounded me sore when I would not obey,
> And because for my country I'd ventur'd my life,
> I was dragg'd like a thief from my home and my wife.[217]

That there was an enlightened concern on this topic is also shown by an interesting notice in The Analytical Review of a one shilling pamphlet by a "British Seaman" called Suggestions . . . respecting the present Admiralty, and the Mode of constituting . . . With loose Hints for a Plan for manning the Fleet without Pressing.[218] The reviewer urges the attention of all concerned with the state of the navy and lists

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[217] Southey: Poems, I, 84.

[218] Analytical Review, XVIII (1794), 90-92.

the pamphlet's main proposals, which include support for the families of serving men, Greenwich pensions for unemployed sailors in peace-time, and a properly established register of seamen to remove the need for pressing.

Watson's panegyric on British law also asserts that the "courts of British justice are impartial and incorrupt . . . with inflexible integrity they adjudge to every man his own."[219] But this was not the experience of Humphrey in the second of the Botany Bay Eclogues who, after being seduced into the army, returned to England not to reward but poverty:

> At last discharged, to England's shores I came
> Paid for my wound with want instead of fame;
> Found my fair friends, and plunder'd as they bade me;
> They kist me, coax'd me, robb'd me, and betray'd me.[220]

Nor does Watson's claim hold for Wordsworth's sailor. During his long service as "Death's minister" what supports him is the thought of his wife's joy when he lays before her "the bloody prize of victory" which should repay them with security. But his reward is never granted:

> He urged his claim: the slaves of Office spurn'd
> The unfriended claimant: at their door he stood
> In vain. (91-93)

As with Southey's Humphrey and John, Wordsworth's sailor becomes a criminal only when defrauded of his just reward.

The sufferings of the sailor's wife, added now to those of the Female Vagrant herself, are the final answer to Watson's

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[219] Grosart, I, 26.

[220] Southey: Poems, I, 77.

casuistry in the "Appendix" where he proves that the poor are actually richer than they would be were the wealth of the nation equally divided. His assertion that the "provision which is made for the poor in this kingdom is so liberal, as, in the opinion of some, to discourage industry" relies on the evidence not of the poor rate but of the "immense sums annually subscribed by the rich for the support of hospitals, infirmaries, dispensaries . . ."[221] But both statutory and voluntary charity fail. The earlier hint of "noysome hospitals" is elaborated as the Female Vagrant tells how, borne to an hospital, she lay in a coma, unaware of the world, but hearing her neighbours complain,

> Of looks where common kindness had no part,
> Of service done with careless cruelty,
> Fretting the fever round the languid heart,
> And groans, which, as they said, would make a dead man start.
>
> (492-495)

Turned out to beg she was taken in by gipsies, but the gap between the life they painted for her, communal toil and communal revelry, and their actual life as thieves, is too much for her "brought up in nothing ill." And it may be that, as Meyer claims, her lament:

> But, what afflicts my peace with keenest ruth
> Is, that I have my inner self abused,
> Foregone the home delight of constant truth,
>
> (546-548)

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[221] Grosart, I, 27.

is the lament of a woman driven to prostitution.[222] The rest of the stanza tells how she has slept in the fields and begged. Prostitution would have been one way out. Wordsworth has already linked poverty and prostitution in the Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff [223] and the prostitute was a common figure for poetic sympathy.[224] In Southey's "Elinor", written in 1794, the deported woman contrasts the joy of earning her living, however poor, by collecting shells, with the shame of her past life:

> condemned the mercenary tool
> Of brutal lust, while heaves the indignant heart
> With Virtue's stifled sigh, to fold my arms
> Round the rank felon, and for daily bread
> To hug contagion to my poison'd breast! [225]

Southey is direct and Wordsworth veiled, but this is no reason for rejecting out of hand an interpretation that fits so well a poem so exact in all other details.

The experiences of the sailor's wife add to the exposure of the provisions made for the poor. Like many others she has discovered the weakness of the outdoor relief system, which is that local officials, following the letter of the law, can deny

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[222] Meyer, 130-132.

[223] Grosart, I, 18.

[224] See for example, Female Ruin: A Poem, no author cited, reviewed in The Analytical Review, XII (March, 1792), 275-276; On a Celebrated Prostitute, by "N.B." in The Gentleman's Magazine, LXV (May, 1795), 421; The Prostitute, by "L" in The Monthly Magazine, I (April, 1796), 225.

[225] Southey: Poems, I, 69.

relief and move the vagrant on. The barbarity of this had been attacked by Langhorne in The Country Justice. He contrasts the conduct of the robber, who finds and cares for an orphaned baby, with that of the overseer who drove its mother to her death:

> Worn with long Toil on many a painful Road,
> That Toil increas'd by Nature's growing Load,
> When Evening brought the friendly Hour of Rest,
> And all the Mother throng'd about her Breast,
> The Ruffian Officer oppos'd her stay,
> And, cruel, bore her in her Pangs away:
> So far beyond the Town's last Limits drove,
> That to return were hopeless, had She strove.
> Abandon'd there-with Famine, Pain, and Cold,
> And Anguish, She expir'd-. [226]

Similarly in Wordsworth's poem the sailor's wife falls sick on her journey to her father, but no-one will help her:

> The overseers placed me in this wain,
> Thus to be carried back from stage to stage,
> Unwilling that I should with them remain;
> And I had hopes that I my home might yet regain.
>
> (735-738)

In such episodes as these Wordsworth is doing no more than enlarge an attack already well made in A Night on Salisbury Plain. The focus is the same, the oppression of the individual by the state, and the implied remedy is the same, alleviation of conditions which will bring about a corresponding advance on all fronts of human life. It is, perhaps, an over-simple view, one that with a change of temper easily moves into that settled gloom which believes, with Coleridge in 1798, that corrupt

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[226] John Langhorne, The Country Justice (1774-1777). Part Two (1775), no line numbers, pp. 25-26.

government and corrupt people are linked indissolubly: "shall a nation of Drunkards presume to babble against sickness and the head-ach?"[227] But in one area Adventures on Salisbury Plain does show a marked deepening and maturing of Wordsworth's thought on man's inhumanity to man, which far from looking back to the themes of two years past looks forward to those of some of Wordsworth's greatest work. And it is this which is the real centre of the power of Adventures on Salisbury Plain and which gives it its continuing claim on our attention.

The groundwork of the consideration of the sailor's relationship to the authorities who have destroyed him and the society which has rejected him is conventional. In 1794 Wordsworth's attitude to the English penal code was simple: it was unjust and barbaric. Hopelessly conflicting statutes, multiplication of capital offences, packed juries and festering prisons - this was the world of Justice and it is against such a background that Wordsworth's denunciation in the Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff must be read:

> I have spoken of laws partial and oppressive; our penal code is so overcrowded with disproportionate penalties and indiscriminate severity that a conscientious man would sacrifice, in many instances, his respect for the laws of the common feelings of humanity; and there must be a strange vice in that legislation from which proceed laws in whose execution a man cannot be instrumental without forfeiting his self-esteem and incurring the contempt of his fellow-citizens. [228]

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[227] STC. to George Coleridge [c. 10 March, 1798]. Griggs, I, 396.

[228] Grosart, I, 12-13.

In A Night on Salisbury Plain it is with a "gory hand" that Justice weighs her unequal scales and the poet questions:

> Must Law with iron scourge
> Still torture crimes that grew a monstrous band
> Formed by his care, and still his victims urge,
> With voice that breathes despair, to death's
> tremendous verge?
>
> (519-522)

Wordsworth could have found reinforcement for this bitter attack, as one might expect, in Godwin. His consideration of punishments in Political Justice assumes that the object should be to humanise and not brutalise the criminal and for this reason he opposes Howard's proposals on solitary confinement. Caleb Williams (1794) depicts the squalor and corruption of the prisons (with details taken as a footnote shows from Howard) and answers the Englishman's exclamation "Thank God we have no Bastille" with:

> Unthinking wretch! Is that a country of liberty, where thousands languish in dungeons and fetters? Go, go, ignorant fool! and visit the scenes of our prisons! witness their unwholesomeness, their filth, the tyranny of their governors, the misery of their inmates! After that, show me the man shameless enough to triumph, and say, England has no Bastille! [229]

Adventures on Salisbury Plain, however, goes far beyond the simple case Wordsworth made in 1793-1794. Enlarging his own hint that the law itself nurtures crime, and drawing on Godwin's much more sophisticated treatment of penal reform,

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[229] William Godwin, Caleb Williams: or Things as They Are 3 vols. (London, 1794), Vol. II, Chap. XI, p. 250. The novel was issued "revised and corrected" in Bentley's "Standard Novels" series in 1831, 3 vols. in 1. I refer to this edition, but give book and chapter reference for convenience with modern texts.

Wordsworth considers now the causes of crime and its effect not only on the victim but on the criminal himself. Causes were not far to seek in a society where, as Godwin pointed out:

> A numerous class of mankind are held down in a state of abject penury, and are continually prompted by disappointment and distress to commit violence upon their more fortunate neighbours. The only mode which is employed to repress this violence, and to maintain the order and peace of society, is punishment. Whips, axes and gibbets, dungeons, chains and racks are the most approved and established methods of persuading men to obedience, and impressing upon their minds the lessons of reason. [230]

In his chapter "Of the Application of Coercion" Godwin argues that it is absurd to classify crimes and punishments when no two crimes or criminals are alike. He dismisses the judgements of authority, asking: "Who is it that in his sober reason will pretend to assign the motives that influenced me in any article of my conduct, and upon them found a grave, perhaps a capital, penalty against me?". [231] Justices ought to stay the easy judgement and considering "what a vast train of actual and possible motives enter into the history of a man, who has been incited to destroy the life of another" [232] ask themselves before pronouncing sentence "Was this an habitual state of his mind, or was it a crisis in his history likely to

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[230] PJ., I, 9.

[231] PJ., II, 720.

[232] ibid., 721.

remain an unique. What effect has experience produced on him, or what likelihood is there that the uneasiness and suffering that attend the perpetration of eminent wrong may have worked a salutary change in his mind?"[233] A year later Godwin dramatised his belief that individuals are conditioned to criminal acts by their circumstances in Caleb Williams, where Caleb reflecting on the paradox that his revered Falkland is a murderer, concludes: "If he have been criminal, that is owing to circumstances; the same qualities under other circumstances would have been, or rather were, sublimely beneficent."[234]

In 1795 in Conciones ad Populum Coleridge related the idea specifically to war-time England. The state, he declared, brutalises the poor man, but "if in the bitter cravings of hunger the dark tide of passions should swell, and the poor wretch rush from despair into guilt, then the government indeed assumes the right of punishment though it had neglected the duty of instruction, and hangs the victim for crimes, to which its own wide-wasting follies . . . had supplied the cause and the temptation."[235] The thief and the murderer has now

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[233]ibid., 723.

[234]Caleb Williams, Vol. II, Chap. VI, p. 189.

[235]Essays, I, 49-50.

become the "victim" of a greater criminal - the government. This anger at futile and unjust punishment is echoed in The Convict, where Wordsworth depicts the convict suffering doubly, from the prison and from his own remorse, and declares:

> At thy name though compassion her nature resign,
> Though in virtue's proud mouth thy report be a stain,
> My care, if the arm of the mighty were mine,
> Would plant thee where yet thou might'st blossom again.[236]

Southey's Botany Bay Eclogues too suggest the possibility of reform for convicts once removed from the corruption of English society and the barbarism of a law which, for instance, would transport William, whose "crime" was that he protected his grain against the squire's birds.

Based on this groundwork of common radical humanitarian ideas as it is, Wordsworth's analysis of the sailor's situation deepens beyond anything touched in the analogies mentioned so far. In an attempt to shake off the restrictions of conventional thought on crime and punishment, Wordsworth formulates his discussion so as to by-pass the kind of stock responses found, for instance, in the distorting satire of the Anti-Jacobin. Believing that humanitarian feeling was reversing traditional priorities and was thus subverting good order, the Anti-Jacobin suggested that the reformers

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[236] The Convict, 49-52. PW., I, 314.

believed that in "all cases of the administration of _Criminal Justice_, the truly benevolent mind will consider only the _severity of the punishment_ without any reference to the _malignity of the crime_."[237] But one feels at once that however true this may be of some reformers, its restricted terms and emotional bias misses what is really searching in the analysis of crime and punishment in _Adventures on Salisbury Plain_. Blinkers of this kind have to be put away if we are to follow where Wordsworth leads, not to judgement but to understanding.

The analysis centres on the two ideas that the sailor's crime was an irrevocable but isolated event in the life of an otherwise mild and good man, which distorts but not destroys his real nature and that this crime has also deepened in some way the man's own humanity. The tentative formulations of these ideas troubled Wordsworth into repeated drafts in MS.A, only some of which were eventually incorporated into _Adventures on Salisbury Plain_. The most interesting draft, on 38^v, reads:

> Yet oft as Fear her withering grasp forbears
> Such tendency to pleasures loved before
> Does Nature (show?) [ ] common cares
> Might to his breast a second spring restore. [238]

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[237] _The Anti-Jacobin; or, Weekly Examiner_, 27 November, 1797, p. 15.

[238] See _app.crit._ to _Adventures on Salisbury Plain_, stanzas XI-XII, above.

The suggestion here in this admittedly difficult passage is the cornerstone of Wordsworth's thought about the sailor. He has just drafted the stanza explaining that before the crime he was mild and good. Now he shows that his response to the wretchedness of others is the result of an instinctive drive this way, a "tendency to pleasures loved before", when by pleasure is meant the good deeds of a truly benevolent man. Whatever the horror of the crime, nothing can blot this out, that the sailor is fundamentally a benevolent man. It is as if Wordsworth were repudiating the slur of the Anti-Jacobin by asking us to look not at the malignity of the crime but at the tendency of the man.[239]

The draft continues with work on the lines which emerged as:

> Affliction's least complaints his heart explore
> Even yet, though danger round his path be sown,
> And fear defend the weak the best not more.
> And wert not so, the hardest might bemoan
> The pangs in sleepless nights, the miseries he has known.
> (104-108)

But the clumsiness of this makes a return to the original draft worthwhile, for here Wordsworth expressed his main idea more simply, in the image of the heart as a wind-harp trembling

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[239] In The Convict Wordsworth originally ended by asking the reader to look not at a convict but at a man, in the question:

> To us who remain-is there one but may die
> By the murders which men to their fellows allow,
> Or one who, self questioned, can truly reply
> That he is more worthy of being than thou?
>
> (app. crit. PW., I, 314)

in the lightest breeze and in a clearly stated conclusion:

> The least complaint of wretchedness explore
> His heartstrings trembled with responsive grief
> Trembling the best of hearts not more
> From each excess of pain his days have known
> Well has he learned to make all others ills his own,
> alt.
> He nor revenge nor hate has ever known. [240]

What is clearer here than in the final text is that the crime and the intensity of suffering that ensued have served to widen the sailor's innate sympathy with the suffering of others. The paradoxical result of the crime that shuts the man off from humankind is that his sensitivity to humanity is increased.

The poem itself embodies this perception in numerous incidents. The first encounter is between the old soldier cast off by the state he has served, left to wander across the waste in search of a daughter's help, and the sailor whose response to the old man is the opposite one of compassion and help. Nor is this a passing mood only. Even though his own course is different and his encounter with other people always dangerous, the sailor takes it for granted that he cannot leave the old man when their ways differ, nor does he do so until he has found him a protector (st. IV-V). His response to the story of the female vagrant is well summed up in her simple phrase, "Your heart is kind" (420). With the broken family he acts as a man appalled by their folly, as

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[240] See _app. crit._ to _Adventures on Salisbury Plain_, stanza XII, above.

one who has known agonies they will never know and who understands the value of human kindness. The murder is dismissed in a stanza because Wordsworth wants to focus the poem elsewhere. It is not that the crime is extenuated in sentimental humanitarianism. Wordsworth makes it clear that whatever the circumstances the murder was wrong, partly by showing us the good man's response to his own act and partly by a subtle juxtaposition of scenes. At the end of the poem we see the sailor sitting with the cottage children clustering round his knee. It is an ideal family scene in a poem full of references to the bonds of parent and child. But it recalls, just before the beginning of the denouement which is to lead to the condemnation of the murderer by society, the moment when he,

> Bearing to those he loved nor warmth nor food,
> In sight of his own house, in such a mood
> *That from his view his children might have run*,
> He met a traveller, robb'd him, shed his blood.
>
> (94-97; my italics)

The murder is not extenuated, but Wordsworth wants us to see it in perspective.

The demonstration of the sailor's compassion and mutuality of feeling, reveals Wordsworth's conviction that human fellowship is the theatre for human love, the stage on which it can act but also its greatest test. It is difficult to state it coldly without sounding sentimental or banal, but there is

nothing of this in the poem. One reason is that Wordsworth's attitudes are so solidly based on thought and observation. Underpinning his conviction of the vital importance of human love, for instance, is an understanding that it cannot be looked for in the wider processes of society. An interesting draft on MS.A, 27^{v}, unused in the final version in MS.B, makes this clear. The sailor is seeking to cheer the female vagrant:

> Of social orders all protecting plan
> Delusion fond he spoke in tender (style?)
> And of the general care man pays to man
> Joy's second spring and hope's long treasured smile.[241]

The waste on which the couple toil is the waste of society where each man is alone, where love and the "care man pays to man" must be created by individuals and not looked for as part of the ordering of society.

The theme is emphasised too in the encounters of the poem. The sailor and the female vagrant create a relationship out of the most unpromising materials. But there is a readiness to give on both sides, what Wordsworth describes as "natural sympathy" (259) and this is enough. As the poem continues Wordsworth hints too at the woman's growing feeling for the sailor:

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[241] See app. crit. to A Night on Salisbury Plain, stanza XLV, above In 1842 these ideas re-appear but now endorsed by the poet. At Guilt and Sorrow, LI, the poet speaks of the sailor's comfort for the woman:

> Of social Order's care for wretchedness,
> Of Time's sure help to calm and reconcile,
> Joy's second spring and Hope's long-treasured smile,
> 'Twas not for him to speak - a man so tried.
> Yet, to relieve her heart, in friendly style
> Proverbial words of comfort he applied,
> And not in vain, while they went pacing side by side.
>
> (453-459)

"Come let us be," she said, "of better heart."
Thus oftentimes the Woman did implore,
And still the more she griev'd, she loved him still the more.

(592-594)

The need for love and mutual support is the theme of the sailor's homily to the brutal father and his family, where again the isolation and fragility of the family unit within the larger world is stressed:

"'Tis a bad world, and hard is the world's law;
Each prowls to strip his brother of his fleece;
Much need have ye that time more closely draw
The bond of nature, all unkindness cease,
And that among so few there still be peace:
Else can ye hope but with such numerous foes
Your pains shall ever with your years increase."

(658-664)

Here too we see the power of selfless love in the father's reaction to the sailor's compassion for the boy. The homily is supported by the revelation to the father of how deeply the sailor feels what he declares. Finally love and compassion are displayed as the female vagrant leads the dying woman to the cottage. The overseer's cruelty in casting out the sick woman is annulled in the cottagers' willingness to take her in. Here again we see the power of love to create human relationships in a world where, officially, love seems not to exist.

The corollary of this, of course, is that solitude, not the chosen solitude of the hermit but the solitude of the man rejected by society, is shown to be the real punishment for the

sailor's crime. In the drafts in MS.A, 37^v and 39^v, Wordsworth tries to suggest in variations on the line, "Yet when cold fear her withering power forbears", that fear of fellow men is stunting all that is best in the sailor. As the mail comes rattling across the plain the woman is cheerful, but the "sailor's face was pale with momentary fear" (603). The plain itself is more than a desolate waste, it is an image of the man's world, where he is alone with his fears and recurrent nightmare. Wordsworth emphasises the absence of even the meanest of men:

> No gypsy cowr'd o'er fire of furze or broom;
> No labourer watched his red kiln glaring bright,
> Nor taper glimmered dim from sick man's room;
> Along the heath no line of mournful light
> From lamp of lonely toll-gate streamed athwart the night.
>
> (176-180)

Again there is a powerful sense of the man's solitude in the following stanza where, expressing a feeling he later developed so well in draft material for Michael,[242] Wordsworth suggests the man's pleasure when he sees some record of man's activities amongst the great forms of nature:

> Though he had little cause to love the abode
> Of man, or covet sight of mortal face,
> Yet when the ambiguous gloom that ruin shew'd,
> How glad he was at length to find a place
> That bore of human hands the chearing trace.
>
> (190-194)

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[242] See PW., II, 479-480.

At the end of the poem, when the warmth of the hospitality of the cottagers has been chilled for all by the revelation of the sailor's past, he has no alternative but to return to the open fields from which he came. For this, we see, is to be his role, to be a Cain figure until death after what is in the eyes of society his one irrevocable deed.

Such are the main themes of the poem. They are not complex and it would be absurd to claim too much for Adventures on Salisbury Plain on the strength of them. As the following section will suggest, also, flaws in Wordsworth's expository technique weaken the poem even as a statement of themes. But I would claim that if we compare analogous, possibly even source material we can see the greater range and interest of Wordsworth's work. Compared with a part of The Art of War, Adventures on Salisbury Plain shows a much more important grasp of the situation of the guilty man. The Fawcett passage reads:

> when there's near
> Nought hostile to him save himself, he fears;
> Flees unpursued; and unsuspected, reads
> In every eye discernment of his deed.
> His life an heavy load upon him lies
> He can no longer bear; all wan and worn,
> The conscience-wither'd wretch a witness comes
> Against himself; and gloomy refuge seeks,
> In the dire executioner, from one
> More dire within; before his country's bar
> When pale he stands, a crowd of curious eyes
> The hall of justice choak, with hungry gaze
> And gloomy eagerness to mark the case
> Of such a monstrous mind! each line to trace,
> Where Penetration seeks to track the tread
> Of aspect-printing soul; and every look

> And motion, with unwearied watchfulness
> Of the prodigious culprit to devour! [243]

Fawcett has marvelled that civilised man can make a practice of Cain's act. At line 970 he begins to show that war is murder collectively done and that murder is simply an act so abhorrent to man that the guilty man always hates life and the people always flock to see him leave it. Much of the passage reads like a rearrangement of details of the story of Adventures on Salisbury Plain, but Fawcett's interest is very simple and certainly less humane than Wordsworth's. Fawcett's murderer longs to leave life because he has transgressed a moral as well as a social law, just as does the sailor. But there is no sense that Fawcett condemns the crowd at the court, for their judgement is the one that he accepts, making no distinction between the authorities who condemn and the ordinary people, whereas Wordsworth constantly implies the invalidity of the judgements of the "violated name" of Justice and the value of the compassion of the ordinary people such as the cottagers and the female vagrant. Fawcett's crowd is repulsive with its "hungry gaze" and "gloomy eagerness", but it is reacting in a way that must be felt as instinctively right if the rest of Fawcett's case against the "ornamented murderers" of paid armies is to be accepted. Again Fawcett's interest in the

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[243] The Art of War, pp. 44-45, ll. 1058-1075.

dire sufferings of the man centres on what makes him seem now inhuman and dwindling, whereas Wordsworth is interested in what links even such a man to humankind. The character in _The Art of War_ is shaped by a larger didactic structure. Wordsworth's guilty man is created by an understanding which has burst the restrictions at last of polemic.

Godwin's _Caleb Williams_ is also similar to _Adventures on Salisbury Plain_ in many ways. The novel appeared twelve months before Wordsworth reshaped his early peom and during the time Wordsworth spent in London in this year the friendship between Wordsworth and Godwin flowered. It would be surprising if Wordsworth were not to have read the novel, especially in view of the celebrity of _Political Justice_, and surprising too if it did not help to shape Wordsworth's conception of his main themes. At the very least a comparison of aspects of the novel and the poem reveals what two minds, influenced by similar stresses and often moving in similar ways of thought, made of one problem central to the establishment of a truly just society. The incidental similarities are striking: Falkland is a benevolent murderer; Caleb is saved by the ministry of a gang of thieves just as the female vagrant is sheltered by the thieving gipsies; Caleb suffers extreme distress on a heath in a storm just as does the sailor and like the sailor he is cheered throughout the book by encounters with unexpectedly compassionate human beings; at the

end of the novel as at the end of the poem death is longed for as a release from the torture of living now that the full extent and enormity of the hero's crime is clear. But these are incidentals and unimportant. What really yokes the works is that Wordsworth and Godwin have both moved, in different ways, towards expressing two truths, truths which remain with the reader as the essence of the poem and the novel long after incidents of the plot have been forgotten.

Like Wordsworth Godwin demonstrates that the integrity of human relationships is man's real solace and his only strength and that these must exist independent of all sanctions of law, authority and the state. With "things as they are", (the sub-title of the novel), a man like Caleb can hope for no redress from the law or even escape from the malignity of his fellow men. What this means at one level is that if life is to be tolerable at all men must make it so by creating oases in the "desert broad" in loving, compassionate human relationships as between Caleb and his London landlady Mrs. Marney. She does not pry into his past or quibble at his curious behaviour. She accepts Caleb for what he is in his relationship to her and accepts him solely in these terms. At another level it means that a man like Mr. Raymond, the leader of the thieves, must create in his own life a system of rules, an integrity outside the laws of society. He is wrong (or Caleb thinks he is) but given that he sees the hollowness of "social order's all protecting plan", this is his only way of

maintaining self-respect. Finally, at the deepest level, it means that human relationships can exist at a level where the normal codes of law and the formulations of the statutes, even of conventional morality itself, are irrelevant and even dangerous. The connections of Falkland and Caleb is much more complex than any simple formula such as innocence versus guilt, or honour versus truth can possibly express. Falkland is bound by inscrutable codes which allow him to hound but not destroy Caleb; he for his part loves and honours Falkland to his own destruction. For this reason the upright but unimaginative Mr. Forester cannot understand the complexity of the situation. He thinks that the due processes of law can sift all that is relevant and would have been dumbfounded by the last court scene of the novel where Caleb repudiates the sanctions of the law, repudiates all that he has fought for and turns back to his master, acknowledging a relationship in a dimension beyond the reach of the understanding of any one else. Like Wordsworth Godwin avoids the cliches of the debates on crime and punishment to examine what can be valuable and true in human life in such a world.

With Wordsworth he also shares one conviction: that the real punishment for any criminal is not prison or the rack but exclusion from human society. Repeated in the most intensely written passages of the novel, this theme becomes more insistent as the book nears the end. At first Caleb is

shunned because of his imagined crime and the thieves, outcasts from society, seem a fitting refuge. But even when his innocence is, by implication, established, nothing changes. He is put on trial and when no-one comes to accuse him he is freed. But the freedom means nothing, for no-one believes him anything but guilty. Caleb realises the terrible truth that his fight against unfair exclusion is to be much more complicated than he had imagined and only now begins to understand man's real nature, when he declares:

> The pride of philosophy has taught us to treat man as an individual. He is no such thing. He holds necessarily, indispensably, to his species. He is like those twin-births, that have two heads indeed, and four hands; but if you attempt to detach them from each other, they are inevitably subjected to miserable and lingering destruction.[244]

Before a much desired meeting with Mr. Collins, his mentor, Caleb identifies himself with Cain and explains with sober despair:

> I can safely affirm, that poverty and hunger, that endless wanderings, that a blasted character and the curses that clung to my name, were all of them slight misfortunes compared to this. I endeavoured to sustain myself by the sense of my integrity, but the voice of no man upon earth echoed to the voice of my conscience. "I called aloud; but there was none to answer; there was none that regarded." To me the whole world was unhearing as the tempest, and as cold as the torpedo. Sympathy, the magnetic virtue, the hidden essence of our life, was extinct.[245]

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[244] Caleb Williams, Vol. III, Chap. XIV, p. 420.

[245] ibid., Vol. III, Chap. XIV, p. 427.

But even Collins shuns him and completes his isolation.

In their conception of so many aspects of the human condition Wordsworth and Godwin the novelist are alike. But it could be argued that in Adventures on Salisbury Plain Wordsworth is confronting the problems more boldly and, given the inevitable limitations of the narrative poem compared with the novel, has produced a more striking work. For whereas Godwin has stated his problem in extremely artificial terms, Wordsworth relies on a much simpler and thus more universal situation. From the same instinct for the outrageously challenging proposition that found such freedom in Political Justice, Godwin has created in Caleb Williams a plot which centres on extreme propositions. To understand the relationship of Falkland and Caleb we have to believe that a sense of outraged honour could drive an otherwise benevolent man to tyranny. By its very intensity Falkland's situation passes beyond the normal experience of the reader. As a story the novel gains from a larger than life hero, it skirts the genre of Gothic horror, but as a statement of human dilemmas it loses the universality which makes the common reader respond to an easily imagined and shared situation. When Wordsworth counters The Ancient Mariner with Peter Bell the result is a lesser poem, but here his instinct is right. The sailor, the circumstances of his crime, the situation of the cottagers at the end have enough of that probability

required by all fiction. The result is that Wordsworth's challenging demonstration of how to regard such a man and such a crime is felt to be true to the real world. Whereas there is a sense that Godwin is fictionalising philosophic propositions, we recognise that Wordsworth is moving amongst the real passions of men.

(ii)

"Adventures on Salisbury Plain: The Critical Problems"

It is possible to see the advance in structure and in content made in Adventures on Salisbury Plain in two ways. One can argue that because Wordsworth had discovered a new interest in the psychology of such a man as the sailor a new form was needed to contain what he had to say. Or one could say that the discovery of the flexibility and range of a new form enabled Wordsworth to make advances in thought. In fact the two go together. It is clear from MS.A revisions that Wordsworth first thought merely of tinkering with the poem as it stood. Drafts show work on an alternative opening which was to combine the main points of the original opening and closing stanzas. The picture of the savage round his watchfire on the naked plain and the declaration that his lot

was less hard than that of many men, was to lead at once to the demonstration that the brutalities of savage life are repeated in a new way in modern civilisation, the point previously made at the end of the poem. Then the lonely vagrant would enter, toiling up onto Salisbury plain.[246] But this way led to no advance. The new structure might have given greater conviction to the world of the poem in that declamation and story are now more easily separable, but the total control of the author's voice would still be felt. Before any conviction could be given to a portrait of the haunted man a much more flexible form had to be found. The search begins in MS.A, where Wordsworth sketched in the main features of the sailor's situation together with passages where he is experimenting with the technique of creating dramatic interplay between the characters. Whatever the real answer to the conundrum that always presents itself in any consideration of form and content, the facts are not in dispute: the final revision of A Night on Salisbury Plain created a quite new poem, of greater power and interest than its parent.

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[246] In this new opening stanzas I-VI would have been made up thus:

I: the original MS.A, stanza I, slightly modified.
II: the original MS.A, stanza XXI, slightly modified.
III: the original MS.A, stanza II.
IV: the original MS.A, stanza III.
V: the original MS.A, stanza IV.
VI: the original MS.A, stanza XLVIII, slightly modified.

See app. crit. to A Night on Salisbury Plain, stanza I, above.

The most important change in structure is that the poet's intrusive voice had disappeared. The poem opens at once with the "traveller on the skirt of Sarum's plain", and ends with the corpse swinging in the wind. The story is left to speak for itself. Not restricted now by the poet's interpretative introduction and conclusion, the world of the poem comes alive with convincing human beings, who interest as much for what they are as individuals as for what their plight says about the social health of England. The withdrawal of the poet means too that the landscape in which these characters move can be more subtly treated, not now as further illustration of moral points, but simply as a setting for incident or as a device for controlling the mood of the poem and the revelation of character. The fusion has taken place, which is missed so badly in the earlier poem. One cannot speak of the elements of the poem separately. The changing moods of the plain help to reveal character; the characters alone give interest to the plain. And the poet's voice is muted. Wordsworth speaks now through his characters, through their actions and through the description of the world in which they live.

Although most readers have agreed, however, that Wordsworth's interest in the psychology of the sailor represents a major advance in the poet who was soon to declare the mind of man as his main theme, few have endorsed the high estimate of the

poem's structure suggested above. According to Payne Collier, Wordsworth himself declared it to have "little or no imagination about it, nor invention as to story." [247] One of the few reviews of the 1842 volume attacked from the same quarter when it refused to exempt Guilt and Sorrow from general remarks on Wordsworth as a narrative poet: "His machinery is usually of the absurdest and meanest kind; the incidents are so few, meagre, and unconnected, that the only regret is, that the whole is not narrated in the poet's own person, as is the case in the 'Task'." [248] Oscar James Campbell and Paul Mueschke argued that the poem disintegrated because Wordsworth was attempting to satisfy different aesthetic demands. In the sailor's story he was invoking terror, but in the story of the woman was playing on the pity aroused by undeserved suffering. The "aesthetic of terror" faces "sentimental morality". [249] Even the two modern critics who have dealt with the poem most fully have agreed with the drift of these criticisms.
G.W. Meyer objects to various episodes as unnecessary or unmotivated and believes that the presence of both idyllic and harsh

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[247] Seven Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton. By the Late S.T. Coleridge, ed. J. Payne Collier (London, 1856), li. Future citations to Collier.

[248] The Eclectic Review, NS. XII (November, 1842), 573.

[249] Oscar James Campbell and Paul Mueschke, "Guilt and Sorrow: A Study in the Genesis of Wordsworth's Aesthetic", MP., XXIII (1925-1926), 293-306. This was answered briefly by R.D. Havens, "Wordsworth's Guilt and Sorrow", RES., III(1927), 71-73.

landscape in the poem reveals tensions within Wordsworth and contradictions in his vision of the state of England. [250] Miss Welsford finds that there is a "clumsy duplication of persons and incidents" which weaken the poem's impact on the imagination and that the "description of the background . . . contributes little to the meaning of a poem which is concerned, not with vagrancy, but with guilt and retribution." [251] There is some disagreement here. Wordsworth criticised the lack of invention "as to story"; the Eclectic Review found the incidents few and meagre; but G.W. Meyer and Miss Welsford seem to be objecting rather to the weight of incident, to the overwhelming effect of too much story. But the disagreements are unimportant since all agree that the conduct of the narrative is inadequate. There is, of course, substance in such criticisms. Wordsworth's work on the poem in 1799 to tie the plot more neatly together reveals his own sense that the structure could be tighter. But nonetheless it seems to me that the arguments will not stand up to examination.

The first objection does carry considerable weight. Coleridge praised Wordsworth's "original gift of spreading the tone, the atmosphere, and with it the depth and height of the ideal world around forms, incidents and situations, of which,

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[250] See esp. Meyer, 145-151.

[251] Welsford, 28.

for the common view, custom had bedimmed all the lustre, had dried up the sparkle and the dew drops."[252] This strange but surely not ill-considered praise, however, has not been echoed. It has been felt that in Adventures on Salisbury Plain the division of interest between the sailor's story and the woman's story is too strong and that the poem betrays its origins in the simpler original. For Campbell and Mueschke this can be explained in terms of eighteenth century aesthetic theories. For Meyer the explanation is tension in Wordsworth and inept joinery on earlier and later work. But it does seem to me that these critics have overemphasised the difference felt between the stories of the poem largely to fit their own interpretative schemes and that Wordsworth gave a pointer to a fairer reading of the poem when he said:

> though the incidents of this attempt do only in a small degree produce each other, and it deviates accordingly from the general rule by which narrative pieces ought to be governed, it is not therefore wanting in continuous hold upon the mind, or in unity, which is effected by the identity of moral interest that places the two personages upon the same footing in the reader's sympathies.[253]

Wordsworth's perception is surely true to the poem. Its two parts are united for the reader not by an Aristotelian plot sequence but by a common plight, a common past and a common demand upon the present sympathies of the reader.

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[252] BL., I, 59.

[253] Fenwick Note to Guilt and Sorrow. PW., I, 330.

Whereas Monk Lewis might have emphasised the differences between the innocent woman and the guilty man in order to highlight the first encounter, for instance, in the deserted Spital, Wordsworth underplays such differences, concentrating on the natural sympathies that bind two of the world's outcasts. The poem _is_ full of contrasts; between past and present, the desolate heath and the idyllic valley, but these do not reveal tensions in Wordsworth or make conflicting demands on the reader's sense of aesthetic propriety. On the contrary, they direct him subtly but firmly to the present sufferings of the pair. They direct him to see the resemblances between the two who began in happiness, were desolated in the service of their country and are now wandering without friends or aim.

The second objection can be more surely answered. The _Eclectic Review_ suggests that Wordsworth has no gifts as a narrative or dramatic poet and points to Cowper as a model. But Wordsworth's earlier poems, as have been shown, have been narrated wholly in the "poet's own person" and the restrictions of such a poetic stance are clear. Cowper's achievement is sure, but it is limited. Wordsworth has chosen the new form of _Adventures on Salisbury Plain_ over _A Night on Salisbury Plain_ advisedly, to infuse his poem with dramatic life. The uniform flow of the narrative is now broken into a series of dramatic incidents. The soldier and the sailor, the woman and the sailor,

the beaten boy, such are the encounters through which the poem works. But advisedly chosen or not, does the structure stand together as a unity? This is the question asked by Meyer and Miss Welsford. The answer, I think, is that it can be seen to, once one realises that the purpose of the incidents is not the creation of a plot in the Aristotelian sense, but the illumination of one man. The poem is concerned, as Miss Welsford says, with guilt and retribution, but only as figured in one man. The sailor is the focus of the poem, because he both discloses the evils of the society Wordsworth wants to attack and also calls for sympathy as a suffering human being. Wordsworth thus does not declaim, as in A Night on Salisbury Plain, he retires, concerned only to reveal his sailor in as many ways as possible through the encounters and the changing features of the landscape in which they take place. It is a very simple structure, but not a crude or disconnected one.

The first encounter begins the characterisation of the sailor by revealing the essence of the man, his benevolence. The two men who meet on the edge of the plain are both poor, solitary vagrants. But the sailor does have strength to support the infirm old man, nor will his instinctive generosity allow him to leave him "where thus the bare white roads their dreary line extend" (36). This is the unforced kindness of the individual; it is the kindness of the friend who

has given a house to the old man; and it makes a contrast at the beginning of the poem with the impersonal cruelty of the authorities of society, implied in the old man's story of "how he with the Soldier's life had striven/And Soldier's wrongs" (20-21). The broken soldier rides off in the post-boy's chariot and the sailor "self-satisfied" that he has done all he could, faces "And yet the sun was high, the far extended waste" (44-45).

The mention of the sun is important for the bridge passage that follows. Unlike A Night on Salisbury Plain, this poem has opened in the daylight, both literally and figuratively in the sailor's kind act. But now, as the sun drops, the man's growing isolation is stressed. He sees a shepherd but cannot make him hear; he seeks a hut knowing that the shepherd must have one near, but cannot find it. The plain offers no shelter and the "wet cold ground must be his only bed" (72). The change in the poem's atmosphere prepares us for quite another vision of the sailor. It is a shock to learn that the sailor once violated just such an encounter as the one with the soldier, and we realise that it is just, after all, that he should be alone, facing the ordeal of the waste, since he has cut himself off from humanity by murder. The cruelty of the authorities is again stressed:

> He urged his claim: the slaves of Office spurn'd
> The unfriended claimant: at their door he stood
> In vain.
>
> (91-93)

But it is the individual responsibility for such a crime that is emphasised. Far from forgetting his crime, the sailor has endured mental torment, surging at intervals ever since. His isolation on the plain is thus mental as well as physical.

The extent of his torment is only revealed, however, in the next encounter. As he plods across the waste, described repeatedly as a desert, the sailor, hearing chains clank, looks up to see a gibbeted corpse swinging in the wind. The only human contact he can make here, it seems, is with the dead. The effect of such a sight is to renew all the fears and torments that earlier "self-satisfied" the man had controlled:

> Nor only did for him at once renew
> All he had feared from man, but raised a train
> Of the mind's phantoms, horrible as vain.
>
> (120-123)

The gibbet reminds him (and the reader) of what he is and what his likely end will be. More than this, it renews his mental conflicts, by forcing him to dwell on murder. He has cut himself off from his fellow men and even the bare heath seems to reject him:

> The stones, as if to sweep him from the day,
> Roll'd at his back along the living plain;
> He fell and without sense or motion lay.
>
> (123-125)

The incident may have come from Wordsworth's source story where the murderer is haunted by spectres which as he approaches

change into stones and dash against his feet,[254] but Wordsworth has transformed it to suggest the sailor's alienation from nature and from man. For the sailor this is the lowest moment, but it is also the necessary pre-condition for his growth. His breakdown precedes his meeting with the woman and prepares him for the beginning of their redemptive relationship. For the reader the poem is now ready to advance, as we know the sailor's story and have seen the contradictions in his character.

The next section, stanzas XV to XX, is confused. Wordsworth has incorporated most of the Gothic machinery of MS.A, but in toning it down has merely made it silly. Whereas in MS.A the introduction of Stonehenge underlined the opening discussion of ancient and modern barbarities, here it only fills out the sense of the sailor's isolation which is already established. With stanza XXI, however, the really important encounter begins. Many of the stanzas are taken from MS.A, yet the introduction to the ruined spital is revised, apparently unnecessarily. In A Night on Salisbury Plain, the situation of the ruin is barely mentioned:

> he came where antient vows fulfilled,
> Kind pious hands did to the Virgin build
> A lonely Spital, the belated swain
> From the night terrors of that waste to shield.

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[254] See Appendix II, "A Possible Source for the Murder Story" below.

> But there no human being could remain
> And now the walls are named the dead house of the plain.
>
> (121-126)

But in Adventures on Salisbury Plain more detail is given:

> At length, though hid in clouds, the moon arose,
> The downs were visible: and now revealed
> A structure stands which two bare slopes enclose.
> It was a spot where, ancient vows fulfill'd,
> Kind pious hands . . .
>
> (181-185)

The detail is significant. The ruin is enclosed by slopes, it is thus a little valley, and in this poem a valley is always an oasis, where the vagrants not only find shelter, but human kindliness. At once the sailor feels cheered and looks forward to sleep in this spot withdrawn from the plain.

That the spot is an oasis where human relationship can develop to help both the vagrants soon becomes clear. The vignette of the old man tottering down the slope (226-234) can hardly be justified, but the other stanzas introducing the woman's story do have a function. As the sailor wakes her she is momentarily afraid, but his soothing words soon calm her. The interest of the situation lies, of course, in how close it is, as the reader knows, to a much more terrifying one. The woman has heard of the discovery of a corpse at this ruin - but she does not know she is talking to a murderer nor that any mention of the discovery might unbalance her new companion. She chatters on "delighted that her fears are vain" (248) and only the reader knows how delicate the

situation really is. By suggesting how the vagrants _might_ react on each other Wordsworth begins the dramatic effect which gives such life to their relationship.

The female vagrant now begins to tell her story, just as in MS.A. The story itself obviously satisfied Wordsworth, for, though he added material, its structure is unchanged through 1794-1798. But the function of her narrative is now quite different. The poem's focus has shifted from the details of her story to its impact upon the sailor, who sees in the tale so innocently told an image of himself and a fresh reason for self-reproach. The woman tells of an idyllic past, of marriage and children, shattered by war and death. Her descent to wretchedness must remind the sailor (and the reader) of his own family left hungry, for it stirs anguished thoughts in him and his mind, as before at the gibbet, gives way:

> Once more a horrid trance his limbs did lock.
> Him through the gloom she could not then discern
> And after a short while again she spoke;
> But he was stretch'd upon the withered fern,
> Not to her friendly summons answer could return.
>
> (401-405)

At this dramatic moment Part One ends.

Part Two opens with a description of the plain in almost ludicrously heightened terms. The ghosts are out, the frightened earthworms slink to their holes, the moon, her lustre spent, sinks. The sailor regains consciousness and the woman begins to tell her story again. For some reason Wordsworth has chosen to break into the narrative with the sailor's swoon,

to emphasise the break by dividing the poem here, and then to indulge in this elaborate scene setting. There is a similar moment later on, and the two are best considered together. At stanza LXIII the woman breaks off her story again, and, going to the door of the ruin, hails the morning:

> She ended, of all present thought forlorn,
> Nor voice nor sound that moment's pang oppress'd
> Till nature, with excess of grief o'erborne,
> From her full eyes their wat'ry load released.
> He sate and spake not. Ere her weeping ceased,
> She rose and to the ruin's portal went,
> And saw the dawn salute the silvering east.
> Meanwhile her sorrow failed not to relent,
> And now with crimson fire kindled the firmament.
>
> "But come," she cried, "come after weary night
> Of such rough storm the breaking day to view."
> So forth he came and eastward looked: the sight
> Into his heart a [ ] anguish threw;
> His withered cheek was tinged with ashy hue.
> He stood and trembled both with grief and fear,
> But she felt new delight and solace new,
> And, from the opening cast, a pensive chear
> Came to her weary thought while the lark warbled near.
>
> (559-576)

G.W. Meyer, ostensibly speaking of this moment in the first version of the poem, declares that it is a bad break in interest and in mood. He comments: "Just after she has informed us that her husband and children were carried off by sword and plague 'in one remorseless year,' she is seized with a fit of weeping that delays the business of the poem for three stanzas. The sailor takes advantage of her momentary indisposition and moves to the portal of the ruin, where he discovers that there

has been a marked change in the weather." [255]

It is worth noting that Professor Meyer has been misled here by the inadequate apparatus of the Oxford text. In MS.A it is the sailor who goes to the portal and cheers the vagrant with the news that day has come (334-351), but for the second version of the poem Wordsworth reversed their roles in considerable revision of the stanzas just quoted, not mentioned in the Oxford text. The copyist, Dorothy, herself was confused, writing "But come," he cried, "come after weary night", for line 568, but to make sense of the scene we must emend to "she cried." This is clear from LXIII where we read:

> Ere her weeping ceased,
> She rose and to the ruin's portal went,
> And saw the dawn salute the silvering east.
>
> (563-565)

It is the woman who feels "new delight and solace new" (574), while the sailor is afraid of what the day will bring, "His withered cheek was tinged with ashy hue./He stood and trembled both with grief and fear" (572-573). He has to be coaxed by her words, and this idea was so important to Wordsworth that he considered making it more obvious in an alternative draft which reads:

> But come she cried the sky is clear and bright
> And safely we our journey may pursue
> So forth he came into the open light

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[255] Meyer, 147.

> And look'd one look towards the east but do
> Whateer he will he must the woman view
> He stood and trembled both with grief and fear. [256]

It is, however, less important critically that Professor Meyer should have mistaken the poem as it was in MS.B, than that he should have misinterpreted the function of the scene. The flippancy of his tone suggests that he finds the break here (and by implication the transition from Part One to Two) gauche bungling, an example of Wordsworth retaining what is labelled elsewhere "evidence of youthful/ineptitude." [257] But the two scenes are more important than this and more interesting for the study of Wordsworth's development. What he is trying to do in each of these breaks in the woman's narrative is demonstrate the impact the woman is having on the sailor. It is a cumbersome attempt to achieve a dramatic effect. At the end of Part One the sailor swoons, for reasons understood by the reader but not the female vagrant. The violence of his reaction suggests itself how deeply he is disturbed. The dawn breaks and the woman's story is again interrupted so that we can see how much further the sailor has been affected, and their contrasting reactions to the daylight show us what we need to know. The innocent woman longs to be on her way and begs her companion to come to the

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[256] See app. crit. to Adventures on Salisbury Plain, stanza LXIV, above.

[257] Meyer, 149.

doorway. He, the criminal, nearer to self condemnation now than at the beginning of the poem, fears the light and (in the draft) cannot bear to see the woman herself. The episode is handled semi-dramatically, making the explanatory opening to stanza LXVI superfluous and introducing further dramatic interplay as the pair set off. The female vagrant finds in the sailor a human being to love, a substitute for those she has lost. But she does not realise that with her "affectionate and homely art" she is refining his anguish, especially by suggesting to him, a murderer, that he should not grieve, for "a little while/And we shall meet in heaven" (599-600). By trying to extend the ordinary sympathy of humanity, she is making his self-knowledge ever clearer and the reader, though not the woman, can understand why "When the coach man gave the morning cheer/The sailor's face was pale with momentary fear" (602-603).

Innocent of all guile, the woman has acted on the sailor like the encounter with the gibbet. She has moved him deeply, revealing his compassion as well as his fear. The last encounters of the poem thus play upon a man newly sensitive to himself. The first (LXVIII-LXXIV) is prepared for by another contrast of man and nature. The pair see the early morning mist rising, tinted by the sunlight and are soothed. But man is a sore on nature, for against this idyllic background Wordsworth sets the episode of the beaten boy. Professor Meyer could see no justification for this incident,

because no motivation is provided for the father's brutality, who has neither gone to war nor suffered at the hands of another Lord Lonsdale. But the poem is not trying to say anything about the father; its focus is the sailor. As he bends over the boy he is stabbed again by recollection of his crimes:

> as the boy turn'd round
> His battered head, a groan the sailor fetch'd.
> The head with streaming blood had dyed the ground,
> Flow'd from the spot where he that deadly wound
> Had fixed on him he murder'd. Through his brain
> At once the griding iron passage found;
> Deluge of tender thoughts then rush'd amain
> Nor could his aged eyes from very tears abstain.
>
> (641-648)

This is one more reminder both for sailor and reader of the ugliness of the murder. But the goodness of the man is revealed too in a scene that is vividly dramatic. By chance the father has touched the sailor's own fear when he tells him that the "gallows would one day of him be glad" (637). But the sailor remains calm, inly-troubled as Wordsworth earlier described it (134), for he is acknowledging the relevance of the scene for himself:

> Yet happy thou, poor boy, compared with me,
> Suffering not doing ill, fate far more mild.
>
> (651-652)

Only when he has thus acknowledged his own unworthiness does the sailor counsel the father, who is already moved by the sight of the sailor's tears.

As the vagrants move on, the role of the landscape in changing or supporting the mood of the poem is again important. The sailor's homily has soothed not only the family group but also himself, "While his pale lips these homely truths disclose,/A correspondent calm stole gently on his woes" (665-666). The new mood is embodied in an idyllic landscape, as the pair leave the plain and drop into the fertile valley to receive food from the cottagers. This is another oasis, the first real comfort the vagrants have felt, and, as Professor Hartman has pointed out, is one more example of Wordsworth grouping characters and incidents in this poem round a particular spot, as if the very place has significance in the nature of the encounter. The scene outside the cottage after breakfast is finely done, emphasising what has been revealed so far and serving as an ironical introduction to the last encounter between the sailor and his wife. The poem has paused as if coming to an end. The sailor has "resolved to turn towards the seas/Since he that tale had heard" (686-687), and this seems a fitting conclusion. The poem has depicted the sailor's mental ordeal on the great waste of the plain which has re-awakened his fears and his self-knowledge. He accepts that the murder has divorced him from humanity. Inevitably he turns back to the other great waste, the sea, to lose himself in its anonymity. The dramatic interplay between the woman and the sailor is developed, as we see her struggling with her love for

him as she sets off on her aimless journey. And for a moment the sailor sits with the children playing with his staff at his knees, the image of a happy father. It is as if he has been rewarded for restoring harmony to the broken family a few hours earlier.

But this poem denies the sentimental conclusion. The moment of apparent fulfillment and the end of suffering is the moment when the sailor's real suffering has to begin. The dramatic effect of the scene is achieved with great economy, suggesting the growing sophistication of Wordsworth's art. The woman leaves the cottage, fed and strengthened, only to find her earlier distress repeated in another woman. She is immediately compassionate as are the cottagers, and their lively bustle and shouts compared with the woman's silent gaze beautifully underline their strength. As elsewhere in the poem the mention of detail turns a sentimental vignette into a fully realised scene. For example:

> So in they bear her to the chimney-seat,
> And busily, though yet with fear, untie
> Her garments, and, to warm her icy feet
> With death's numb waters swoln, their hands apply,
> And chafe her pulseless temples cold and dry.
>
> (721-725)

The scene itself is enough to move the onlookers. She is a traveller and to travel in this poem is to be distressed. She is an outcast, without husband or children, unwanted by the authorities who might have cared for her. But with growing horror the sailor realises the full irony of the

moment. The woman is to die no longer on the move, in a family, back with her husband in whose innocence she believes, as he stands listening to the proof that his crime actually destroyed his family, for whose sake it was committed. The gibbet, the broken family, the female vagrant - all have affected the sailor and now he is moved for the last time. The encounter ends with his wife, after a lifetime of disquiet, at peace, and with the sailor moved at last with a grief he cannot suppress. After his trance in front of the gibbet he recovered apparently:

> As doth befall to them whom frenzy fires,
> His soul, which in such anguish had been toss'd,
> Sank into deepest calm; for now retires
> Fear; a terrific dream in darkness lost
> The dire phantasma which his sense had cross'd.
> The mind was still as a deep evening stream;
> Nor, if accosted now, in thought engross'd,
> Moody, or inly-troubled, would he seem
> To traveller who might talk of any casual theme.
>
> (127-135)

But now his passion is uncontrollable. He cannot assume a place among ordinary people denied him by his act. At the table he cannot perform the traditional family sacrament of breaking the bread, because he knows his hands are not fit. After a restless night he flees back to the wastes, just as before the female vagrant fled, her one desire to "shun the spot where man might come" (459). The development of the sailor is concluded, and, with fine tact, Wordsworth draws together some of the threads of the poem. Again the waste

receives the guilty outcast and exhibits him on a gibbet, possibly to begin the whole grim cycle again, when,

> some kindred sufferer driven, perchance,
> That way when into storm the sky is wrought,
> Upon his swinging corpse his eye may glance
> And drop, as he once dropp'd, in miserable trance.
>
> (825-828)

One episode only remains to be discussed. After the sailor has left the cottage to confess his crime, the cottagers think over what they have scene:

> But they, alone and tranquil, call'd to mind
> Events so various; recollection ran
> Through each occurrence and the links combin'd,
> And while his silence, looks and voice they scan,
> And trembling hands, they cried, "He is the man!"
> Nought did those looks of silent woe avail.
> "Though we deplore it much as any can,
> The law," they cried, "must weigh him in her scale;
> Most fit it is that we unfold this woful tale."
>
> (802-810)

Miss Welsford thinks that Wordsworth is anxious to declare here that evil is a condition of the human heart and is not confined to "wealthy landowners and government officials". She describes it as "most ominous of all [that] the kindly cottagers thought it their duty to betray the Sailor to the authorities." On the stanza just quoted she comments that since it "contributes nothing at all to the action, Wordsworth must surely have inserted it in order to lower the cottagers in our esteem and to suggest that, after all, there was not so very much to choose between them and the judges in the

law court."[258] But this seems to me quite mistaken. There is no suggestion that the cottagers are to be condemned. They do not betray the sailor, he is already on his way to confess. Before this their generosity has been shown to be as instinctive as their delicacy, which is untainted by city ways (see 793-797). What Wordsworth is doing here is suggesting the tension between duty and natural feeling in the ordinary man. The cottagers are obviously in good enough circumstances and sufficiently unacquainted with the cruelty of the law to think that it is the guardian of society. At the same time they feel for the man they have taken in and fed. Their conflict, moreover, is our conflict. In assessing the sailor we have to balance the poem's declaration that he is wholly sympathetic with the fact that he is murderer. Society does have some claim, as the sailor who confesses "not without pleasure" (812), realises. The poet who sees more than the cottagers may declare Justice a "violated name" (819), but in creating this tension he shows that he does understand their feeling. In a small way it is an attempt to accommodate different shades of opinion within the statement of the poem.

This analysis of Adventures on Salisbury Plain has tried to suggest that though it is broken up into episodes, the

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[258] Welsford, 25-26.

unity of its structure is not disturbed. It has tried to show too, that though much of the poem is crude, there has been an advance over A Night on Salisbury Plain in that Wordsworth has been able to create convincing human figures with a subtlety that eluded him before. But two weaknesses remain which suggest how far advances in technique were needed if Wordsworth's developing understanding of man and his world was to be made the material of poetry. The first is inherent in the episodic dramatic structure itself. Each incident, by parallel and contrast, reveals the human beings and their plight in a new way, but they do not add up with the growing force that makes one feel the rightness of the poem's design, that inevitably these incidents, no more no less must be included. There is no sense as in good drama of an inevitable move from situation through involvement to resolution, rather one feels that Wordsworth could have spun out more incidents without damaging the essential structure. It is no surprise that in February 1799 Wordsworth explained to Coleridge that he wanted to "bind together in palpable knots the story of the piece",[259] nor that in revision for the 1842 volume he dropped the opening episode of the soldier and the sailor in an attempt to tighten up the poem. What the structure lacks is simply the solidity which only the

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[259] DW. and WW. to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 27 February, [1799]. EY., 256.

greatest works achieve, where every detail is vital both as in individual element and as part of the whole.

More serious is that the episodic structure, bare of narrator intervention, and weak in that dramatic power to show how scene _must_ emerge from scene, leaves too much of the artist's work to the reader. The control that should still all questioning of the poem's design has retreated so far that on occasions the reader is in doubt as to the interpretation of Wordsworth's intention. As has been shown, I disagree with G.W. Meyer over the episode of the beaten boy and with Miss Welsford on the character of the cottagers. The question raised is simply whether Wordsworth can afford this varying interpretation. _A Night on Salisbury Plain_ left one in no doubt because the poet was present, insisting on his interpretation. In _Adventures on Salisbury Plain_ the poet has retired, and the result is both greater dramatic conviction and a possible range of response dangerous to the intention of a didactic poem. Wordsworth still had to find some way of dominating a poem without destroying the freedom of his created world.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE TRANSITION: VERSE AND THEME

(i)

In the previous chapters I have considered A Night on Salisbury Plain and Adventures on Salisbury Plain as works of art having a value independent of their own time; as representative expressions of certain common modes of thought which interest us legitimately from the historical point of view; and as points of achievement in the development of a major poet. In the next two chapters I want to enlarge the scope of the discussion beyond the work of 1793-1795 to consider how the problems raised by the early poems were solved and how the technical achievements made were exploited. In the first chapter I shall examine Wordsworth's development of a new verse form and of new themes in the transitional period between the completion of Adventures on Salisbury Plain and the completion of one version of The Ruined Cottage in 1798. In the second I shall attempt to show in what way the technical mastery of The Ruined Cottage, Wordsworth's first great work, is the culmination of a search for a particular kind of form which began with A Night on Salisbury Plain. Since the really creative period for Salisbury Plain

was 1793-1795, even though Wordsworth continued to tinker with the poem until 1798, this means going beyond discussion limited strictly to A Night on Salisbury Plain and Adventures on Salisbury Plain. But the particular points of interest raised in discussion of them will continue to dominate the view taken of Wordsworth's development. It must be a partial view - it would be presumptuous to attempt anything else in view of the major re-organisation of our view of Wordsworth's work already achieved by present-day scholars - but will not, I hope, be false because partial. Our understanding of the whole picture of Wordsworth's development may be enhanced by the enlargement for a moment of one area of detail. This is my aim. I want to investigate how far Wordsworth developed interests which began in the Salisbury Plain poems and in what directions he moved technically after the considerable achievement of Adventures on Salisbury Plain. The result is not a comprehensive view of the Wordsworth of this period, but, it is hoped, a just assessment of the importance of Salisbury Plain in the development of Wordsworth's thought and technical skill.

(ii)

The completion of Adventures on Salisbury Plain fulfilled an idea that beginning two years before expanded to contain much of Wordsworth's growing interests and knowledge, and it seems to have left him temporarily at an impasse. While the MS circulated to Coleridge and Lamb and hopes for publication remained buoyant, Wordsworth wrote little. On 21 March 1796 Wordsworth prophesied to Mathews that he and Dorothy would turn into cabbages and declared that "as to writing it is out of the question." [260] It was the autumn before the next major work, The Borderers, really began to take shape. But despite this lack of evidence, of finished poems, Wordsworth was not barren during this time. For in the fragments printed by De Selincourt as fragments XV and XVI, short and inconclusive as they are, Wordsworth was seeking and finding a way out of the impasse. [261]

The direction of this search can be conveniently plotted for us, who seek to understand the development of his work, in two of the books in Wordsworth's mind at this time. After

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[260] WW. to William Mathews, 21 March [1796] . EY., 169.

[261] PW., I, 287-292, XV Fragment of a "Gothic" Tale; 292-295, XVI (a) and (b). Notes 370-371. The Oxford text of both of these pieces is not entirely accurate. An edition of XV is being prepared by Mr. Robert Osborne towards an Oxford B. Litt. thesis on The Borderers and he has kindly allowed me to see it. A text of XVI (a) (b) is presented below in Appendix I, where they are called Fragments One and Two. I shall refer to my own text of these latter, but to De Selincourt's text of XV, checked against the corrected text, and cited as "Gothic" Tale.

settling in at Racedown Wordsworth made extensive revision to A Night on Salisbury Plain. Perhaps something in the architecture of the poem troubled him or perhaps it was no more than an urge to refresh his mind on an old favourite; whatever the cause Wordsworth made a peremptory demand to Mathews in October that he should accept an edition of Letters of Cato in exchange for the tenth volume of Bell's Fugitive Poetry, "Poems in the Stanza of Spenser", which includes Beattie's The Minstrel.[262] Mathews seems not to have complied with this enforced choice, for in March 1796 Wordsworth was remarking testily that he was "surprized you [Mathews] omitted so good an opportunity of sending me the Vol: of fugitive poetry",[263] but whether Wordsworth received the book or not at some future date, the request shows his anxiety to have the poem. The second book arrived at Racedown a month after Wordsworth's request to Mathews, sent by Azariah Pinney.[264] It was the Reverend William Crowe's Lewesdon Hill.[265]

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[262] WW. to William Mathews [20] and 24 October [1795]. EY., 155. For details of the editions see footnote p. 154 and Reed, 173.

[263] WW. to William Mathews, 21 March [1796]. EY., 169.

[264] AP. to William Wordsworth, 20 November, 1795. EY., 166, footnote. The letter is also printed in C.M. Maclean, "Lewesdon Hill and its Poet", E&S, XXVII (1941), 30-40.

[265] Published in 1788 Lewesdon Hill was "considerably enlarged" for a third edition of 1804. I refer to the first edition. Coleridge mentions the influence of the poem on him in BL., I, 10-11.

Interest in its subject matter, a neighbouring Dorset hill, may have led Wordsworth to the poem, but only its genuine merits can have made him later speak so highly of it.[266] In October Adventures on Salisbury Plain had still to be finished. By 20 November Wordsworth was announcing its completion to Wrangham. The request for Beattie and the presentation of Crowe straddle these dates, pointing as opposing signposts in Wordsworth's search for an ideal form of verse with which to consolidate interests already touched on in the new poem. They point to the change from the Spenserian stanza to blank verse.

Wordsworth's debt to Beattie was very great.[267] It was not that he needed him to direct him to the Spenserian stanza, for as his nephew revealed the young Wordsworth had to learn much Spenser by heart as a matter of course,[268] but that in The Minstrel Wordsworth discovered how the stanza that seemed moulded for ever by Spenser himself might be used with freedom to different ends. Despite a great interest in Spenser, eighteenth century poets approached

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[266] For Wordsworth's opinion, see Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers, ed. Edith J. Morley, 3 vols. (London, 1938), I, 16. Under 1810, "Lewesdon Hill, a poem Wordsworth speaks highly of."

[267] See Fink, 46-47 for evidence of Beattie's importance to writers on the Lakes and of how early Wordsworth knew him.

[268] Christopher Wordsworth, Memoirs of William Wordsworth, 2 vols. (London, 1851), I, 34.

him tentatively, often with the feeling that the form had to be excused.[269] The Dream in the Manner of Spenser which William Wilkie added to the second edition of his Epigoniad shows this unsure stance. In the Dream the poet strays by the "pleasant Forth" and finding and entering a cave he dreams that Homer demands to know why Wilkie's epic is related so barely. Wilkie answers that he has bowed to the narrow rules of the critics, but Homer spurns this cowardly answer and outlines the necessary relationship between Art and Nature with reference to other, greater poets. He comments on Spenser:

> Colin, I wot, was rich in Nature's store;
> More rich than you, had more than he could use:
> But mad Orlando taught him had his lore;
> Whose flights, at random, oft misled his muse:
> To follow such a guide few prudent men would chuse.[270]

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[269] For the fullest treatment of this subject see Earl R. Wasserman, Elizabethan Poetry in the Eighteenth Century, Illinois Studies in Language and Literature, Vol. XXXII, Nos. 2-3 (Univ. of Illinois Press, 1947). His bibliography, "Poems Influenced by Spenser's Faerie Queene", pp. 260-268 suggests the extent of eighteenth century interest. In an unpublished doctoral thesis entitled Brother, Englishman and Friend; A Study of the Poetic Relationship Between Edmund Spenser and William Wordsworth (Univ. of Edinburgh, 1966), William Holmes Holland Jnr. examines Wordsworth's knowledge of and debt to Spenser in considerable detail. Future citations to Wasserman, Holland.

[270] William Wilkie, A Dream in the Manner of Spenser, added to the 2nd ed. of The Epigoniad (London, 1769), 225. Quoted in part, Wasserman, 98.

What is interesting here is that Wilkie, wanting to extend the range of his poem into the dream world, has returned to Spenser, breaking through the narrow tastes he condemns; but at the same time he attacks Spenser for building up his poem too casually and for studding it too richly with description.

The tension of attraction and repulsion was typical. It was resolved in various ways. Some poets imitated Spenser slavishly. Such a poem, for example, as Gilbert West's Education; A Poem: in Two Cantos, Written in Imitation of the Style and Manner of Spenser's Fairy Queen (1751), is full of archaisms explained in a glossary, has the explanatory headlink, and conveys its message through elaborate allegory. This is not imitation in the strict sense of the genre; it is rather mimicry. It gains nothing by employing an old form, save the moral approval that even Dr. Johnson could not withold from Spenser: "to imitate the fictions and sentiments of Spenser can incur no reproach, for allegory is perhaps one of the most pleasing vehicles of instruction. But I am very far from extending the same respect to his diction or his stanza." [271]

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[271] The Rambler, No. 121. Tuesday, 14 May, 1751.

Another way of solving the tension was to declare that one's interest in Spenser was only in a model to parody. Shenstone's The Schoolmistress[272] is ostensibly a Spenserian burlesque, yet as his letters show Shenstone was fascinated by Spenser. Burlesque was a way out, a way to take Spenser at once seriously and lightly. The problem was admitted: ". . . there are some particulars in him that charm one. Those which afford the greatest scope for a ludicrous imitation are, his simplicity and obsolete phrase; and yet these are what give one a very singular pleasure in the perusal."[273] Eventually, once The Castle of Indolence (1748) had established the serious Spenserian imitation, Shenstone felt the tension less keenly. But the original impulse is clear enough, and was so to Wordsworth when he condemned Shenstone's timidity, and pointed out that once the burlesqueing commentary was dropped from The Schoolmistress, people were able to continue to "read in seriousness, doing for the Author

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[272]Published in Shenstone's Poems Upon Various Occasions (London, 1737) as a poem of 12 stanzas, and in 28 stanzas in 1742 as The Schoolmistress, a Poem. By the Author of the judgement of Hercules. Stanzas were added after this also for later publications.

[273]WS. to [Rev. Richard Jago?], 24 December [1741]. The Letters of William Shenstone, ed. Marjorie Williams (Oxford; Basil Blackwell, 1939), 37.

what he had not courage openly to venture upon for himself."[274]

Beattie felt none of this tension, and this is why he was so valuable to Wordsworth. Jettisoning all that encumbered contemporaries, archaisms, head-link, moral allegory, Beattie retained only what he could use, the stanza form itself, and in the "Advertisement" to The Minstrel gave a fine apology for doing so:

> To those who may be disposed to ask, what could induce me to write in so difficult a measure, I can only answer, that it pleases my ear, and seems, from its Gothic structure and original, to bear some relation to the subject and spirit of the poem. It admits both simplicity and magnificence of sound and language, beyond any other stanza that I am acquainted with. It allows the sententiousness of the couplet and something too of the diversified cadence and complicated modulation of blank verse. What some of our critics have remarked of its

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[274] Essay Supplementary to the Preface [to Lyrical Ballads] (1815), footnote of 1827. PW., II, 422. Professor Wasserman's summary of eighteenth century attitudes should be quoted here: "It was, then, the painter and the allegorist, not the narrative poet or the poetic technician, that the eighteenth century admired. The matter and spirit of the Faerie Queene were considered to constitute the raw materials of great poetry, since they had been formed by a powerful imagination, but Spenser had neglected to fashion them artistically. In other words, Spenser differed from many of his minor contemporaries and immediate successors in the extent of his popularity, not in the kind of criticism he received from the Augustans. Consequently his poetry was subjected to the same kind of refurbishment and was 'versified' in conformity with a more 'refined' set of artistic principles", Wasserman, 100.

> uniformity growing at last tiresome to the ear will be found to hold true only when the Poetry is faulty in other respects. [275]

Beattie's belief in the stanza resulted in a poem of fine self-assurance, whose influence on Wordsworth, and especially on Salisbury Plain, was enormous. No doubt the cause of the first attraction was the inevitable one, as the adolescent sought a persona in the melancholy, solitary Edwin.[276]

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[275] "Advertisement" to The Minstrel; or, The Progress of Genius. A Poem. Book the First (London, 1771), p. vii. Wasserman plays down the influence of Beattie on eighteenth century Spenseriansim, and for his purposes is right to do so. It is interesting, however, to see that his summary of Beattie's position describes exactly why he was so important to Wordsworth: "Beattie's Minstrel (1771) conveniently marks the transition from the largely allegorical and didactic imitations of the Faerie Queene to those that exploit primarily its narrative and descriptive qualities, the melodic versatility of the stanza, the rich tonality, and the medievalism or, at least, the suggestion of the romantic past and exotic lands. It would be wrong, however, to exaggerate, as many have, the significance of The Minstrel in the history of Spenserianism. Beattie borrowed from Spenser only the stanza form and praised its flexibility; his use of the simple style, which he considered typical of Spenser, is in keeping with the earlier eighteenth century interpretation; the hint of medievalism in the poem and the occasional tinge of archaic diction are very slight and superficial; and the great success of the poem owed almost nothing to its being an imitation of the Faerie Queene." Wasserman, 121. My italics.

[276] See DW. to Jane Pollard [10 and 12 July, 1793], EY., 100, where Dorothy claims that the 17 years old Wordsworth was like Edwin, described as:

> In truth he was a strange and wayward wight,
> Fond of each gentle, and each dreadful scene.
> In darkness, and in storm, he found delight:
> Nor less, than when on ocean-wave serene
> The southern sun diffused his dazzling shene.
> Even sad vicissitude amused his soul:
> And if a sigh would sometimes intervene,
> And down his cheek a tear of pity roll,
> A sigh, a tear, so sweet, he wish'd not to control.

James Beattie, The Minstrel; or, The Progress of Genius. A Poem. Book the First (London, 1771), The Second Book (London, 1774), I, stanza XXIV, p. 13 (Not XXII as in EY., 100). No line numbers. Future citations to this edition as Minstrel.

But the importance of the poem outlived this, for here too Wordsworth found many themes which were cherished and developed by his mature self. Beattie does dwell on his hero's fashionable melancholy, but he also stresses the delights of solitude and sources of real strength it provides. On her disciples Nature showers real rewards and she cannot forgive those who renounce her to grovel for ambition. Speaking of rustic characters Beattie declares:

> Nor let it faith exceed,
> That Nature forms a rustic taste so nice. -
> Ah! had they been of court or city breed,
> Such delicacy were right marvellous indeed.

This anticipates Wordsworth's emphasis at the end of Adventures on Salisbury Plain that the very rusticity of the cottagers was the source of their virtue:

> Nor, bred in solitude, unus'd to haunt
> The throngs of men, did this good cottage pair
> Repine mortality's last claim to grant;
> And in due time with due observance bear
> Her body to the distant church.
>
> (793-797)

The fervour of the concluding apostrophe to A Night on Salisbury Plain, looking to the future for the restoration of man's majesty, comes from a pessimism about the here and now felt equally in The Minstrel:

> O man! creation's pride, heaven's darling child,
> Whom nature's best divinest gifts adorn,
> Why from thy home are truth and joy exiled
> And all thy favourite haunts with blood and tears defiled! [277]

[277] Minstrel, II, XIX, p. 10.

There is muchhere that is second-hand or merely fashionable, but much also that is deeply felt, and it influenced Wordsworth throughout his youth. Direct echoes can be traced. Z.S. Fink has shown how early Wordsworth absorbed Beattie, and that he fell back on him for _Descriptive Sketches_.[278] In his analysis of the finest passage of _An Evening Walk_ F.W. Bateson remarks on the details taken from _The Minstrel_.[279] Beattie's "embattled clouds" (_Minstrel_, II, XII) re-appear not only in _An Evening Walk_, (1.55) but in _The Ruined Cottage_ of 1798 (_PW_., V, 379, _app. crit_. ll. 5-7). Again, when using the same stanza Wordsworth could not escape echoing Beattie's mannerisms or his diction. He incorporates the descriptive set piece in _A Night on Salisbury Plain_, which was felt to be peculiarly the forte of the Spenserian stanza, and could have turned to _The Minstrel_ for many a successful example, e.g. I.XXXIX. Beattie's "rattling thunder" ending stanza I.LVI becomes the opening of _A Night on Salisbury Plain_ VIII, "Hurtle the rattling clouds." Two passages from _The Minstrel_, "Soon shall the orient with new lustre burn/And Spring shall soon her influence shed" (I.XXVIII) and "While on the kindling soul her vital beams are shed" (II.XLIV), are teased through revisions to: "The sun in beauty lifts his

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[278] _Fink_, 46-47.

[279] _Bateson_, 79.

orient head/He feels his friendly beam a vital influence shed."[280]

More significant, however, than verbal parallels, is the evidence that Beattie helped to determine Wordsworth's relationship with his material and his readers. Reading Salisbury Plain one is constantly teased by a similarity of tone with The Minstrel, yet so completely has Wordsworth absorbed Beattie that it is difficult to point to details. In Adventures on Salisbury Plain XXXVII Wordsworth follows Beattie in the use of sudden exclamation to extend the vision of the narrative momentarily:

> And now he faintly kens the bounding fawn,
> And villager abroad at early toil. -
> But, lo! the sun appears! and heaven, earth, ocean, smile.[281]

Moments of moralising are very similar. Beattie's:

> O when shall that Eternal Morn appear,
> These dreadful forms to chase, this chaos dark to clear![282]

parallels Wordsworth's:

> Oh when shall such fair hours their gleams bestow
> To bid the grave its opening clouds illume?
>
> (ANSP., 330-331)

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[280] See app. crit. to A Night on Salisbury Plain, st. XXXVII, above.

[281] Minstrel, I, XXII, p. 12.

[282] Minstrel, II, XX, p. 11.

Perhaps most striking is the way both poets rely on the obvious and often crude analogue to bring the world of the poem and the real world into relationship. In the lines quoted above, for example, the sun, the real sun, is seized by both poets as an analogue of reason, dispelling with its powerful beam all mist and darkness. Again, when the woman begins to tell her story in *A Night on Salisbury Plain* Wordsworth moralises on her beauty and the transience of earthly joy:

> Unhappy Man! thy sole delightful hour
> Flies first: it is thy miserable dower
> Only to taste of joy that thou may'st pine
> A loss, which rolling suns shall ne'er restore.
>
> (220-223)

Wordsworth the homilist here is matched exactly by Beattie, who uses the action he has created for moral exhortation. He laments the boy chasing the rainbow and immediately extends the lament to life itself:

> Fond fool, that deem'st the streaming glory nigh,
> How vain the chace thine ardour has begun!
> 'Tis fled afar, ere half thy purposed race be run.

Yet couldst thou learn, that thus it fares with age, [283]
. . . . . .

Saturated in Beattie as he was, it is not surprising that when Wordsworth was seeking a more ambitious form after the completion of _An Evening Walk_ and _Descriptive Sketches_ he should turn to the Spenserian stanza and to Beattie whom he later praised for the "skilful manner in which he had employed the nine-line stanza." [284] But it was predictable that after

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[283] _Minstrel_ I, XXXII-XXXIII, p. 17.
It is difficult to suggest reasons why Wordsworth should have turned to the Spenserian stanza beyond the general ones that it was a major form he had not yet tried, that it was a popular form already and that, as Holland has shown Wordsworth early on felt great affinity with Spenser himself. It does seem to me, however, that Wasserman misplaces the emphasis when he tries to find the genesis of Wordsworth's Spenserians in the Shenstone tradition. He rightly discounts De Selincourt's suggestion that the Spenserian was a popular _narrative_ stanza, and remarks of _The Female Vagrant_ that it is likely that "the quiet simplicity and common-folk atmosphere of the poems in the Shenstone tradition, and the languorously melancholy manner that Beattie's poem added to the tradition suggested the Spenserian stanza as the appropriate vehicle for a melancholy tale of misfortune among the peasant folk." _Wasserman_, 134. But Wordsworth's first poem in Spenserians, _A Night on Salisbury Plain_, does not impress _primarily_ as a simple tale of humble life. What stands out is the didactic, sententious element. I suggest that this element, very firmly present in the _Faerie Queene_, is generally understressed and that, as the above quotation shows, it is for this kind of effect that Wordsworth especially valued the stanza for this poem. The nine-line stanza can stand as a sententious whole, a little argument or a little warning itself, that does not need to build up and up as does blank verse. It is noticeable that once this kind of effect is unnecessary, as in _Adventures on Salisbury Plain_, the limitations of the stanza are increasingly felt by poet and reader.

[284] _Seven Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton. By the Late S.T. Coleridge_, ed. J. Payne Collier (London, 1856), li.

the major achievement of Adventures on Salisbury Plain he should have abandoned it as incapable of advance. Giving advice to an admirer over thirty years later Wordsworth showed how closely he had examined the failures of his achievement in the stanza when he wrote:

> The fault of your blank verse is, that it is not sufficiently broken. You are aware that it is infinitely the most difficult metre to manage, as is clear from so few having succeeded in it. The Spenserian stanza is a fine structure of verse; but that is also almost insurmountably difficult. You have succeeded in the broken and more impassioned movement- of which Lord Byron has given good instances- but it is a form of verse ill adapted to conflicting passion; and it is not injustice to say that the stanza is spoiled in Lord Byron's hands; his own strong and ungovernable passions blinded him to its character. It is equally unfit for narrative. Circumstances aredifficult to manage in any kind of verse, except the dramatic, where the warmth of the action makes the reader indifferent to those delicacies of phrase and sound upon which so much of the charm of other poetry depends. If you write more in this stanza, leave Lord Byron for Spenser. In him the stanza is seen in perfection. It is exquisitely harmonious also in Thomson's hands, and fine in Beattie's "Minstrel"; but these two latter poems are merely descriptive and sentimental; and you will observe that Spenser never gives way to violent and conflicting passion, and that his narrative is bare of circumstances, slow in movement, and (for modern relish) too much clogged with description. Excuse my dwelling so much on this dry subject; but as you have succeeded so well in the arrangement of this metre, perhaps you will not be sorry to hear my opinion of its character. One great objection to it (an insurmountable one, I think, for circumstantial narrative) is the poverty of our language in rhymes. [285]

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[285] WW. to Catherine Grace Godwin, [1829]. LY., I, 439.

This is a good account of the stanza and can only have come from Wordsworth's brooding on the failure of his own Spenserian narrative, but his strictures must not be applied uncritically to Salisbury Plain. Wordsworth is right when, following most of the eighteenth-century apologists, he implies that the Spenserian is best seen at pictorial moments. When the poet suspends the narration and elaborates the setting, then the self-contained shape of the stanza is an advantage. For example:

> But now from a hill summit down they look
> Where through a narrow valley's pleasant scene
> A wreath of vapour tracked a winding brook
> Babbling through groves and lawns and meads of green.
> A smoking cottage peeped the trees between,
> The woods resound the linnet's amorous lays,
> And melancholy lowings intervene
> Of scattered herds that in the meadow graze,
> While through the furrowed grass the merry milk-maid strays.
>
> (ANSP., 406-414)

This is not naturalistic, of course, nor is it unobtrusive. But in the symbolic landscape terms of the poem, the non-naturalistic setting of the whole, this nugget of scene-setting works well.

Wordsworth is less than fair, however, in his other comments on the stanza, if Salisbury Plain is taken as a model of what could be achieved. The rhymes of Salisbury Plain are often bad. Frequently the rhymes alone determine much of the stanza, as, for example, in:

A cart and horse beside the rivulet stood;
Chequering the canvas roof the sunbeams shone.
She saw the carman bend to scoop the flood,
And now approach'd the wain, wherein was one,
A single woman, lying spent and gone;
The carman wet her lips as well behoved;
Bed under her lean (shadow?) there was none,
Though even to die near one she most had loved
She could not of herself those wasted limbs have moved.

(AdSP., 694-702)

The runnel becomes a "flood", the less precise "poetic" word is allowed, just to serve the rhyme. "As well behoved" is a mere tag, just where a strong phrase is needed to introduce the new set of rhymes. But this poverty of rhymes was not in 1795 the insurmountable difficulty it later seemed to Wordsworth. A good narrative works through more than rhymes; it needs a firm structure and a useful alternation between compression and elaboration of incident. Adventures on Salisbury Plain amply compensates for its rhymes with both of these.

The story obeys the unities of time and place - and this is vital. The heath, with its endless wastes and cruel inhospitality, represents both the world which has rejected the vagrants and their own mental isolation. Their chance meeting lasts a short while only, but no more is needed to precipitate the end of the sailor's adventures. Time and place are, of course, filled out, but even this is carefully ordered. This is a poem about an adventure on Salisbury plain, just that. The woman's plight reveals the brutality of modern civilisation,

but her experiences are past, and as she tells her story in flashback, it has only the secondary interest of events already over. It does not interfere with the poems real focus which is on the sailor now, and on his behaviour after he meets the vagrant. It is his story that develops as the poem progresses, and thus his past, however vital in getting him to the plain, is only of slight importance. Wordsworth sketches it in, therefore, in brilliantly economical stanzas, which exploit the limitations of the Spenserian stanza. It cannot provide uninterrupted narrative - the alexandrine marks the pause too definitely - but it can provide a strong structure as one self-bounded stanza is added to another, each dealing in detail with a different part of the narrative. Thus here, stanza IX begins with the sailor's service and re-pressing, the alexandrine closing the stanza as he is hurried away; stanza X outlines his service and his fantasies about homecoming, which are the ironic background for stanza XI which describes the murder he commits:

> He urged his claim: the slaves of Office spurn'd
> The unfriended claimant: at their door he stood
> In vain, and now towards his home return'd,
> Bearing to those he loved nor warmth nor food,
> In sight of his own house, in such a mood
> That from his view his children might have run,
> He met a traveller, robb'd him, shed his blood:
> And when the miserable work was done
> He fled, a vagrant since, the murderer's fate to shun.
>
> (91-99)

The astonishing amount of information conveyed in this one stanza testifies to the assurance of the narrator who is changing and compressing his narrative as best serves the narrative design discussed in the previous chapter.

Salisbury Plain can thus be exempted from some of Wordsworth's attack on the Spenserian stanza, but it must be admitted that much of his comment is accurate, even that his criticisms need to be extended if some of the poem's failures are to be accounted for. In the one puzzling passage of the letter to Grace Godwin Wordsworth declares that the Spenserian is a "form of verse ill adapted to conflicting passion; and it is not injustice to say that the stanza is spoiled in Lord Byron's hands; his own strong and ungovernable passions blinded him to its character." It is difficult to be sure of Wordsworth's meaning here. The discussion that follows concerning narrative and the treatment of circumstances suggests that he is referring to the dramatic interplay of passion in conflicting characters; but the reference to Byron suggests rather that Wordsworth is thinking of the conflicting passions of the poet. The stanza is thus inadequate not for dramatic interplay but for the full expression of the poet's emotion. Both interpretations afford just criticism of Salisbury Plain. Throughout the eighteenth century the Spenserian was praised for the sweetness of its music. But Dr. Johnson was equally just when he declared the

form difficult and unpleasing, "tiresome to the ear by its uniformity, and to the attention by its length."[286] The prominent rhymes do become monotonous and the need to fulfill the rhyme pattern restricts what the poet can achieve in each stanza. A wide range of tone or of dramatic effect is ruled out by the strictly ordered verse. The result is a sense a frustrated energy. In A Night on Salisbury Plain the conflicting passions of the poet are channelled into the framing stanzas of moral declamation, which are uniform in structure and monotonously strident. As has been shown, the rest of the poem justifies the homiletic tone, but it is a weakness nonetheless that the declamatory stanzas should be so inflexible. In Adventures on Salisbury Plain the poet's voice is merged in the fuller dramatic situation, but there is still only a limited achievement. The stanza demands the neat vignette, such as:

> "But come," she cried, "come after weary night
> Of such rough storm the breaking day to view."
> So forth he came and eastward look'd: the sight
> Into his heart a [ ] anguish threw;
> His withered cheek was ting'd with ashy hue.
> He stood and trembled both with grief and fear,
> But she felt new delight and solace new,
> And, from the opening cast, a pensive chear
> Came to her weary thought while the lark warbled near.
>
> (568-576)

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[286] The Rambler, No. 121. Tuesday, 14 May, 1751.

The contrast is effective, but it is only the simplest illustration of their conflicting passion and the stanza can do little more.

Such criticisms do no more than follow Wordsworth's own comments. But Salisbury Plain is weak in a way Wordsworth does not mention, and the weakness is inseparable from the limitations of the stanza form. Both early versions of Salisbury Plain are didactic, yet in neither has Wordsworth been able to use the full range of his voice. The discursive, even jesuitical voice of later philosophic passages is here limited to crude effects. In A Night on Salisbury Plain not only is much of the declamation over insistent, "Insensate they who think at Wisdom's porch . . .", but also at crucial points of the poem the social, political and moral message is carried through crude personification, which obliterates in its pictorial effects all nicety of definition. For example:

> The thoughts which bow the kindly spirits down
> And break the springs of joy, their deadly weight
> Derive from memory of pleasures flown
> Which haunts us in some sad reverse of fate,
> Or from reflection on the state
> Of those who on the couch of Affluence rest
> By laughing Fortune's sparkling cup elate,
> While we of comfort reft, by pain depressed,
> No other pillow know than Penury's iron breast.
>
> Hence where Refinements genial influence calls
> The soft affections from their wintry sleep,
> And the sweet tear of Love and Friendship falls
> The willing heart in tender joy to steep,
> When men in various vessels roam the deep

Of social life and turns of chance prevail
Various and sad, how many thousands weep
Beset with foes more fierce than e'er assail
The savage without home in winter's keenest gale.

(19-36)

These important introductory stanzas rely heavily, possibly cloyingly, on personification. But what matters is not the cloying but the unbalanced figure, where the unhelpful associations of the image when fully visualised outweigh the helpful. The opening figure, for instance, of the springs of joy seems to be invoking the stock idea of the fountain of joy, as in Coleridge's "passion and the life, whose fountains are within." But "break" and "deadly weight" make it clear that Wordsworth is thinking of springs, such as cart-springs, which support. The terms of the image suddenly seem much too cumbersome to illuminate its subject, joy. Again the opening image of stanza IV, spring sunshine stirring dormant life, justly, though not originally, illustrates the effect of refinement upon uncultivated lives. But the second image is absurd. The tears of love are said to steep the heart, that is to saturate it. The word completes the rhyme, but only at the cost of a ludicrous notion, which is emphasised when the water develops into the sea of social life. In 1791 Erasmus Darwin had declared that poets had a special freedom to use the figure: "In poetry the personification . . . is generally indistinct, and therefore does not strike us so

forcibly as to make us attend to its improbability; but in painting, the figures being all much more distinct, their improbability becomes apparent, and seizes our attention to it."[287] It is doubtful whether an attack on details of an established social and moral order dare rely so heavily on a figure whose virtue is that it is indistinct.

In Adventures on Salisbury Plain the inadequacy of the medium is more glaring. Whenever Wordsworth in his own voice or through one of his characters attempts to make a generalised point, he is cramped by the limitations of the stanza. The sailor's homily in stanza LXXIV, for example, is clumsy compared with the spacious moralising of the later Pedlar:

> "'Tis a bad world, and hard is the world's law;
> Each prowls to strip his brother of his fleece;
> Much need have ye that time more closely draw
> The bond of nature, all unkindness cease,
> And that among so few there still be peace:
> Else can ye hope that with such numerous foes
> Your pains shall ever with your years increase."
> While his pale lips these homely truths disclose,
> A correspondent calm stole gently on his woes.
>
> (658-666)

Wordsworth's outline of the subtleties of the sailor's character is much too complex for the stanza, and the result is obscurity:

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[287] Erasmus Darwin, The Botanic Garden: A Poem in Two Parts (London, 1791), Part II, "The Loves of the Plants", 49.

> Yet oft when Fear her withering grasp forbears,
> Such tendency to pleasure loved before
> Do life and nature show, that common cares
> Might to his bosom hours of joy restore.
> Affliction's least complaints his heart explore
> Even yet, though danger round his path be sown,
> And fear defend the weak the best not more.
> And wert not so, the hardest might bemoan
> The pangs in sleepless nights, the miseries he has known.
>
> (100-108)

Too limited to deal with more complex interplay of character, too limited to express the subtlety and seriousness of the poet's voice, the Spenserian stanza was inadequate for the needs of the developing poet. Wordsworth needed to find a new medium.

(iii)

"Blank Verse"

It cannot be shown with any certainty that Wordsworth took anything at all from Crowe, but his significance as a symbol remains. For the most important discovery Wordsworth made in the work on fragments XV and XVI was that the blank verse Crowe used so briskly was the more flexible medium he needed.

The fragments are more complex than this statement suggests. The work of Autumn 1795 to Autumn 1796 they reveal Wordsworth groping for sources of strength amongst old ideas as well as new ones.[288] Fragment XVI, for instance, the "Gothic Tale" looks forward to The Borderers, where it was eventually incorporated, and marks an advance on Wordsworth's previous achievements. Whereas Adventures on Salisbury Plain is a series of briefly sketched encounters, this fragment is an enlargement of one such episode. There is no attempt to analyse the youth's oscillation between determination and fear, but the evidence of it is presented spaciously. The episode is, moreover, handled more dramatically than anything in Adventures on Salisbury Plain. Not only is the conflict of passions in the youth convincingly elaborated, but the amount the detail in the limited setting itself, the bridge, the storm, the castle, provides a solid reality lacking in some of the encounters on Salisbury plain, and looks forward to the attempted naturalism of scene in The Borderers. But the fragment also looks backward. Wordsworth had earlier used the notebook in which it appears

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[288] See Carol Landon, "Wordsworth's Racedown Period; Some Uncertainties Resolved," BNYPL., LXVIII (1964), 100-109 and the discussion of these fragments in Appendix I, below. Future citations to Landon.

for exercises in prevailing literary fashions, and it may be that the memory of earlier enthusiasms prompted Wordsworth to return to the gratuitous horrors of spectral appearances and subterranean rumblings. Certainly much earlier work was incorporated in XV. The description of the castle in stanza II is taken from an early fragment, which reads:

> Now gleam'd the Moon; and on a [high] rock he view'd
> A castle perch'd- on either side a wood
> Wav'd solemn to the hollow wind. It seem'd
> Like some grim Eagle on a naked rock
> Clapping its wings and wailing to the storm. [289]

A pathetic story also noted down earlier provided material

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[289] Dove Cottage MS.IV, p. 114.

for early work on The Borderers.[290] Most important of all, Wordsworth has not advanced from the Spenserian stanza. The slightly altered form gives no more flexibility than the correct.

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[290]Unpublished: A Tale (Dove Cottage MS.IV, pp. 40 and 42-44). This is linked to the old Pilgrim scene from the early version of The Borderers (PW., I, 352-356) and may have been in Wordsworth's mind when he created the extreme distress of the mother in fragment II.

God bless you said a voice to me in a tone so pathetic that my heart melted at the sound God bless you and may he that maketh his Sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust may he give you as much happiness in this as I trust he will give me in the next. It was at the very Village and I was passing by the very churchyard from which on a Sunday noon about twenty years ago the congregation were issuing when Gray returned from his visit to the vale of Elysium. My astonishment at being thus unusually accosted did not prevent me from observing that the object which addressed me was surrounded by a group of eight or ten Villagers. The voice proceeded from a woman somewhat above the middle size. Her dress if you except a black [bonnet?] which bore no other marks than that of being drench'd in rain tied by a dark green riband which knotted under the chin was not so much warm or becoming than that of such of those numerous wretches the poor the lame and the blind, who have no fire but the light of a Window seen at a distance and whose candle is the little glow-worm. Her eyes were large and blue and from the wrinkles of her face which from the fineness seemed rather the wrinkles of Sorrow than of Years it was easy to see that they had been acquainted with weeping, yet had not perpetual tears been able to extinguish a certain wild brightness which at the first view might have been mistaken for the wildness of great joy. But it was far different it was too plainly indicated she was not in her true and perfect mind.

Fragment XVI, called from now on Fragments One and Two, however, looks forward only. De Selincourt believed that the blank verse II was written before the Spenserian I. It seems more likely that this order should be reversed.[291] Either way, it is clear that in the work on these fragments Wordsworth established new strengths on which his greatest poetry was to draw.

In _A Night on Salisbury Plain_ and _Adventures on Salisbury Plain_ Wordsworth hovered between poetic self-projection and self-effacement. Now, in the change from I to II he moves to the complete anonymity of the dramatic mode. Fragment I follows the structure of _Salisbury Plain_, with the omniscient narrator describing the encounter of two people, one of whom tells her story in her own voice. Such a structure is clumsy, working as it must through the machinery of chance meeting and introductory stanzas ending: "So willing seemed her ear, she gan her tale repeat." The dramatic monologue, Fragment II, cuts this out, giving instant verisimilitude. The narrator obviously manipulating events retires into the single voice of the suffering woman, and every word she speaks is verified because she alone is speaking and because the world of the poem is created only through her consciousness. There are

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[291] See Appendix I, below.

losses. No character is ever a real copy of life, of course - Wordsworth's pedlars notoriously do not speak like pedlars - but the most glaring falsities must go in the shift from third to first person. Some fine lines from I, "Only a blossomed slope of dazzling gorse/Gave back the deep light of the setting sun", are lost in II, possibly because they were felt to be too fine, too "poetic" for the mouth of a vagrant woman. But the gain outweighs the loss.

The greatest gain is the change to blank verse. As I have shown there would be a neatness about suggesting that it was Crowe's Lewesdon Hill which prompted the change. Its brisk blank verse is not without literary touches, but these do not disguise Crowe's determination to exploit the flexibility of the form in which he can pass without awkwardness from giving detailed information about local lore to philosophising about the doctrine of necessity. In October 1795 Wordsworth asked for Beattie, the model of his youth; in November he read Crowe the guide for the future. But the neatness, though accurately representing the change, probably falsifies its cause. Wordsworth had written major work in octosyllabics, couplets and Spenserians - blank verse was a major form still untouched save in odd fragments. There was possibly too the influence of Coleridge. The Eolian Harp was composed from August to October 1795.[292] Wordsworth met

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[292] See Henry J.W. Milley, "Some Notes on Coleridge's Eolian Harp", MP., XXXVI (1938-1939), 359-375.

Coleridge and Southey in September and established such cordial relations that by November Wordsworth was incorporating lines by Southey in the Juvenal.[293] The interrelations of the later conversation poems is clear: Lines Left on a Seat in a Yew-Tree influences This Lime Tree Bower; Frost at Midnight influences Tintern Abbey. In The Eolian Harp Coleridge broke free from the inflexibility of his early blank verse to create a form which, however much it may owe to Cowper's divine chit-chat, was unique.[294] It is possible that in September 1795 and after, through conversation or through seeing work in progress, Wordsworth was directed by the advance Coleridge had made to the possibilities of blank verse. And outweighing all incidental influences there were, of course, the great influences of Shakespeare and Milton. But what needs to be stressed is that from the beginning, in Fragment II, Wordsworth had a control over these influences which Cowper and Akenside, for example, two of the poets who transmitted much of Shakespeare and Milton to him, lacked. Whereas Milton dominates Cowper, reminding one constantly of the greater poet, he provides an inspiration for Wordsworth's verse, but not a strait jacket.

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[293] See WW. to Francis Wrangham, 20 November [1795]. EY., 158.

[294] STC. to John Thelwall, 17 December [1796]. Griggs, I, 279: "the solemn Lordliness of Milton, and the divine Chit chat of Cowper."

Whatever the cause, the gain in the change of verse form was considerable and can be felt in comparison of passages in blank verse with similar passages in other forms. The gain is clear in the changes in the fragments under discussion. Compare, for example, the opening lines:

Fragment II

> No spade for leagues had won a rood of earth
> From that bleak common, of all covert bare;
> From traveller's half-way house no genial hearth
> Scented with its turf smoke the desart air,
> Through which the plover wings his lonely course,
> Nor aught that might detain the sight was there,
> Only a blossomed slope of dazzling gorse
> Gave back the deep light of the setting sun,
> All else was dreary dark-sad course her feet must run.
>
> (1-9)

Fragment I

> The road extended o'er a heath
> Weary and bleak: no cottager had there
> Won from the waste a rood of earth, no hearth
> Of Traveller's half-way house with its turf smoke
> Scented the air through which the plover wings
> His solitary flight. The sun was sunk
> And fresh-indented, the white road proclaimed
> The self-provided waggoner gone by.
>
> (1-8)

Because the restrictions of rhyme are unfelt in II the verse is much more spare and precise. "All of covert bare" limply ending the line becomes the strong opening "Weary and bleak." The dead line "Nor aught that might detain the sight was there", and the rhythmicpadding in "genial hearth", are dropped. Nor does the blank verse lack its own kind of

music, in internal rhymes, "heath"/"Weary"/"bleak"; in near rhyme, "hearth"/"half"; in alliteration over enjambement, "smoke"/"Scented" and in successive line openings, "Weary"/"Won." At once Wordsworth is writing good blank verse which is more than the sum of its debts to other writers.

A second example compares the opening of <u>The Ruined Cottage</u>, written in 1797, with the passage in couplets from which it stems, written in 1794 for the additions to <u>An Evening Walk</u>:

(a) When he who long with languid steps had toiled
Across the slippery moor, oppressed and foiled
Sinks down and finds no rest, while as he turns
The fervid earth his languid body burns,
Nor can his weak arm faintly lifted chase
The insect host that gather round his face
And join their murmurs to the tedious sound
Of seeds of bursting furze that crackle round.[295]

(b) Across a bare wide Common I had toiled
With languid feet which by the slippery ground
Were baffled still; and when I stretched myself
On the brown earth, my limbs from very heat
Could find no rest, nor my weak arm disperse
The insect host which gathered round my face
And joined their murmurs to the tedious noise
Of seeds of bursting gorse which crackled round.[296]

It is amazing how close these passages are still, but there is no question that (b) is superior. Some of the changes are not due to the change of verse form, simply to the greater skill

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[295] <u>PW</u>., I, 8.

[296] <u>The Ruined Cottage</u>, MS.B, 19-26. <u>PW</u>., V, 379.

of the poet. Thus the repetition of "languid" is avoided in (b). The overpoetic "fervid" which merely doubles with "burns" is changed to the usefully descriptive "brown" earth and the hyperbolic "burns" lost in the reference to the "heat." Adjectives are used much more carefully in (b) than in (a). But many of the changes are attributable to the change from couplet to blank verse. (a) has to alter normal word order to ensure the play on "toiled"/"foiled", whereas (b) can begin the description with prosaic naturalness, "Across a bare wide Common (a) had toiled/With languid feet . . ." Because of the needs of the rhyme scheme (a) works through repeated subordinate clauses which can be contained within the couplet but extended in sequence indefinitely. The result of this is a sense that (a) does not give weight to what is really important, and in analysis this proves to be right. The syntax does not match the meaning. The first clause beginning "When he who" ends in "sinks down and finds no rest", only to move off again in an explanation in a dependent clause of why he finds no rest. The sequence of actions is that the man sinks down, he is burned, he finds no rest. The sequence of clauses alters this. In (b) this is changed to a structure where two strong verbs "toiled" and "could find" carry the weight of a sentence whose subordinate clauses follow the correct sequence of events. The reason for this is simple. In <u>An Evening Walk</u> Wordsworth is building a paragraph through repeated clauses beginning

"When schoolboys . . ., When horses . . .", etc., which culminates "— Then Quiet led me up the huddling rill/Bright'ning with water- breaks the sombrous gill." [297] But this kind of paragraph which must work through couplet units can be avoided by the superior structural flexibility of blank verse, where suspension of the completion of the sense until the end of the whole series of statements always provides a strong conclusion.

The verse which Wordsworth began to see as the result of the experiments on Fragments I and II he soon made completely his own. At Alfoxden, when planning the theme and structure of the great philosophic poem, he might enter in his notebook: "Dr Johnson observed, that in blank verse, the language suffered more distortion to keep it out of prose that any inconvenience to be apprehended from the shackles and circumspection of rhyme. This kind of distortion is the worst fault that poetry can have; for if once the natural order and connection of the words is broken, and the idiom of the language violated, the lines appear manufactured, and lose all that character of enthusiasm and inspiration, without which they become cold and insipid, how sublime soever the ideas and

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[297] An Evening Walk, 61-72. PW., I, 8.

the images may be which they express.[298] But his practice from now on bears out his later declaration that "nothing, especially for a poem of any continuance [is] equal to blank verse."[299]

Although the truth of this last remark is obvious and although it is indisputable that Wordsworth is one of the three or four great blank verse writers in the language, it is extremely difficult to say anything helpful about the verse itself. Very little has been written about Wordsworth's blank verse. What there is, is mainly local comment which rarely extends to generalisation. There is nothing comparable to the book length studies of Milton's or Shakespeare's verse techniques. And when the profoundest interpretative critic of our time gracefully avoids tackling the verse frontally, then one may feel that this is the only way to follow.[300]

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[298] Published in Prelude, xlii, footnote 2. Johnson's to us peculiar view that blank verse was frequently hyper-artificial was shared by at least one other. Charles James Fox said of Michael and The Brothers, only: "I am no great friend to blank verse for subjects which are to be treated of with simplicity." See Griggs, II, 676, footnote.

[299] Collier, liii. The exception to this statement is A Somersetshire Tragedy, composed between Spring and Autumn 1797 in the nine line stanzas. The poem, according to Knight and Gordon Wordsworth a crude unlovely work, must be considered a curious reversal to an outgrown mode. Possibly the plot reminded Wordsworth of his earlier poem in Spenserians. See Jonathan Wordsworth, "A Wordsworth Tragedy", TLS., 21 July 1966, 643 and the letter of Carol Landon, TLS., 22 September, 1966, 884. For dating see Reed, 196.

[300] See Hartman, 382-383.

Yet Wordsworth's verse is individual and instantly recognisable. Faced with:

> that uncertain Heaven, receiv'd
> Into the bosom of the steady Lake.

we too would echo Coleridge and say: "I should have recognised [them] anywhere; and had I met these lines running wild in the deserts of Arabia, I should instantly have screamed out 'Wordsworth'!"[301] It seems paradoxical that one cannot isolate characteristic features for identification. But as soon as we do focus on an inversion, a double negative, a suspension of the verse, we realise that we are closer to isolating what Wordsworth owed to Milton rather than to establishing what is entirely his own.

It was this paradox that John Bayley was trying to express when he said that Wordsworth has no style. But his formulation of the paradox is, I think, not a gesture of despair but a brilliantly suggestive critical intuition, when he says that the "lucidity of the great passages does not come home to us in terms of style: we hardly think of them as involved in a poetic medium."[302] For this exactly states one's feeling on reading Wordsworth's blank verse. It is an highly artificial medium

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[301] STC., to William Wordsworth, 10 December, 1798 on Prelude, Bk. V, 412-413. Griggs, I, 452-453.

[302] John Bayley, The Romantic Survival: A Study in Poetic Evolution (London, 1957), 27.

that exerts itself to seem not to exist. Wordsworth returns to blank verse for narrative or reflective passages because he had discovered a medium which points attention not to itself but to the object or to the feeling evoked. Adventures on Salisbury Plain is a literary artefact. It asks us to admire the skill with which the stanza is handled or the narrative shaped. But at the finest moments in The Prelude it seems an irrelevance to comment on words or metre. One feels always the urge of the poet to get beyond such restrictions as expressed in the cry:

> but I should need
> Colours and words that are unknown to man
> To paint the visionary dreariness . . . . [303]

Unlike Milton or Shakespeare Wordsworth is not an image making writer. With him the verse seems to ask that one should look beyond the colours and the words to the essence.

This is, of course, an illusion. De Selincourt's text of The Prelude alone reveals how much work went into revision and how little the very quotable phrase "spontaneous overflow" represents Wordsworth's habits of composition. Wordsworth's blank verse is, at its best, never shoddy and it never despises technical effects. But the most striking feature of it is, that it seems to. To conclude this section I want to examine certain kinds of poem developed by Wordsworth in the months

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[303] Prelude, Bk. XI, 309-311.

following the experiments on Fragments XV and I and II and to suggest why this characteristic of the verse should have appealed to him so much. The examination will not form an essay on Wordsworth's blank verse. It will, I hope, through concentrating on certain kinds of poetry in detail help to reveal why the medium to which Wordsworth turned after the Spenserians of _Salisbury Plain_ proved such a liberating discovery.

(iv)

Early in 1797 Wordsworth returned to an Inscription in octosyllabics and reshaped it in blank verse as _Inscription for a Seat by a Road-Side_.[304] About the same time he completed the little already composed for _Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree_.[305] In July 1798 he wrote _Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey_.[306] The inscription and the conversation poem shade into one another and form a continuing stratum in Wordsworth's work, emerging, for instance, in

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[304] _Inscription For a Seat by the Road-Side Halfway up a steep Hill Facing South_. _PW_., I, 300-302. Future citations to _Inscription for a Seat_.

[305] _Lines Left Upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree, which stands near the lake of Esthwaite, on a desolate part of the shore, commanding a beautiful prospect_. _PW_., I, 92-94. Future citations to _Yew-tree Lines_.

[306] _PW_., II, 259-263. Future citations to _Tintern Abbey_.

Poems on the Naming of Places. For this genre blank verse was the ideal form exactly because it seems to have no form at all. The inscription itself was, as Mayo has shown, an accepted tradition and Tintern Abbey too masqueraded as one more example of the contemporary form, the extempore effusion.[307] The shape of the poem was thus in some ways pre-ordained by the genre to which it belonged. But within this outer shell Wordsworth's poems seem to have no form. They follow the movement of thought and shift through considerable changes of tone. Wordsworth seems to want to find a way of exploiting maximum freedom within the stiff outlines of a form for which he cares little. Thus Yew-Tree Lines is a correct inscription. But the life of the poem is in the shifts of tone, the rhetorical changes within the imposed order. The following lines are an example:

> Fixing his downcast eye, he many an hour
> A morbid pleasure nourished, tracing here
> An emblem of his own unfruitful life:
> And, lifting up his head, he then would gaze
> On the more distant scene, -how lovely 'tis
> Thou seest, -and he would gaze till it became
> Far lovelier, and his heart could not sustain
> The beauty, still more beauteous! [308]

This is a series of apparently simple statements culminating in an obvious attempt at emphasis in the repetitions of "lovely"/

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[307] See Robert Mayo, "The Contemporaneity of Lyrical Ballads", PMLA., LXIX (1954), 486-522.

[308] Yew-tree Lines, ll. 30-37. PW., I, 93.

"lovelier" and "beauty"/"beauteous." In the middle of the piece, however, there is actually a development of tension through a major repetition of the key statement "would gaze", which is obscured by the drop onto the more relaxed "how lovely 'tis/ Thou seest." What is so skilful is that the drop, far from damaging the build up of force, actually allows Wordsworth to repeat his main ideas without creating the impression that the verse is hectoring.

The manipulation of this kind of tonal shift, which is at the centre of Wordsworth's achievement in blank verse, is perfected in Tintern Abbey. The poem opens at a very low pitch. It has been five years since Wordsworth was last there - this is repeated three times. The Wye at this point is not affected by the tides - so the phrase "soft inland murmur" is explained in a footnote. A few details of the scene are presented and even a touch of jocularity creeps in in the description of the "hedgerows, hardly-hedgerows, little lines/Of sportive wood run wild." This is very slack, but as we shall see, the low pitched opening is not unintentional, since it is only by contrast with this that we can sense at once the growing seriousness of the next section. This is announced in a paradox "landscape to a blind man's eye" and in slightly more elevated diction "purer mind", "tranquil restoration" - but nothing happens. It is a false climax. So the verse begins

to build up again from:

Nor less, I trust,
To them I may have owed another gift
Of aspect more sublime . . . 309

through the statement that the gift is "that blessed mood",

through the quasi-liturgical repetitions of

In which the buthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened: 310

through to the final great statement which makes its impact by suspending the completion of the sense until the last line:

that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on, -
Until the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things. 311

The bridge passage that follows uses a device very common in Wordsworth. He has just made a statement of belief, the verse has reached a climax, and now suddenly he deflates it all by admitting doubt: "If this/Be but a vain belief . . ." What is so subtle, of course, is that Wordsworth does not want to impress us with doubt at all. On the contrary, doubt has

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[309] Tintern Abbey, ll. 35-37. PW., II, 260.

[310] ibid., ll. 38-41. PW., II, 260.

[311] ibid., ll. 41-49. PW., II, 260.

only been suggested so that the poem may explain the facts and then re-affirm the belief even more intensely than before. This then is the lead in to the second climax, the details of the development of Wordsworth's relationship with Nature from the glad abandonment of the boy to the more balanced but less rapturous love of the man. And again the climax begins with a slightly raised tone in "the joy/Of elevated thoughts" and "a sense sublime/Of something far more deeply interfused" until it concludes with the accumulating weight of the repetition:

> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things. [312]

The end of the poem is not a deflation this time but a gentle lessening of intensity. The poet makes his statement that he is happy that Nature should be "The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul/Of all my moral being", and then, turning to his sister, Wordsworth spells out the explanation. A poem which has been egocentric and elevated now becomes more outgoing, more diffuse and simple, ending on what is little more than a neatly turned compliment:

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[312] Tintern Abbey, ll. 97-102. PW., II, 262.

> Nor wilt thou then forget,
> That after many wanderings, many years
> Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,
> And this green pastoral landscape, were to me
> More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake! [313]

We are back to the gentle personal tone of Coleridge's conversation poems Frost at Midnight and This Lime Tree Bower my Prison.

Hazlitt remarked that "there is a *chaunt* in the recitation both of Coleridge and Wordsworth, which acts as a spell upon the hearer, and disarms the judgement. Perhaps they have deceived themselves by making habitual use of this ambiguous accompaniment. Coleridge's manner is more full, animated, and varied; Wordsworth's more equable, sustained, and internal."[314] But from the evidence of this analysis of Tintern Abbey Hazlitt's remarks must be tempered with the proviso that the sustained nature of Wordsworth's verse does not exclude astonishing variety of tone.

The second genre I want to consider is narrative poetry. After Fragments XV, I and II and The Borderers Wordsworth began a sustained effort towards a narrative poem, which, developing through such fragments as "I have seen the Baker's horse",[315] culminated in March - June 1797 in the basic story of The Ruined

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[313] ibid., ll. 155-159. PW., II, 263.

[314] William Hazlitt, "My First Acquaintance With Poets", The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, ed. P.P. Howe, 21 vols. (London, 1933), XVII, 118.

[315] PW., I, 315-316. See Reed, 27 and 337-339.

Cottage. With Lyrical Ballads 1800 Wordsworth's stature as one of the rare group of really great narrative poets was confirmed. Again we see the suitability of blank verse for a wide range of poetic effect, for Wordsworth's narratives include moments of great emotional intensity as well as moments of quiet plain style. And here the nature of the style which seems to excuse itself to force attention elsewhere, is seen to its best advantage. For in the following passage from the climax to Michael, as in so many of the poignant moments of The Ruined Cottage, there is a flatness of emotion which eschews any of the flamboyance that accompanies literary "style". Wordsworth tells how Michael's life continues even though his heart is broken:

> Among the rocks
> He went, and still looked up to sun and cloud,
> And listened to the wind; and as before,
> Performed all kinds of labour for his sheep,
> And for the land his small inheritance.
> And to that hollow dell from time to time
> Did he repair, to build the Fold of which
> His flock had need. 'Tis not forgotten yet
> The pity which was then in every heart
> For the old man- and 'tis believed by all
> That many and many a day he thither went,
> And never lifted up a single stone. [316]

The weight of the passage rests again on one line:

> And never lifted up a single stone

which tells with the greatest simplicity just how deeply Luke had moved his father, had crushed the fortitude of even this

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[316] Michael: A Pastoral Poem, ll. 455-466. PW., II, 93-94.

old man. But how differently this time the effect is achieved. All the preceding statements are simple clauses, usually connected by "and." There is no suspension of sense and the language itself is as simple as could be. Yet the progression of ideas is as complex as in the other passage and no less perfectly ordered. These are not just random comments about the old man. The poet tells us that life went on. Michael performed his tasks as a shepherd and went to the dell to carry on with the building of the sheepfold. But whether he did add stone to stone is left ambiguous - the narrator merely tells that he went to build and then divorces himself from hard fact by returning to the present: "'Tis not forgotten yet/The pity which was then in every heart/For the old man . . .." Fact has been dissipated in emotion and it is this which determines the form of the final statement "and 'tis believed by all/That many and many a day he thither went/ And never lifted up a single stone." No-one knows this really is so - Michael was alone among the heart of many thousand mists - but it is believed to be so because only thus can his friends adequately imagine the extent of his grief. In the first passage we examined, the clauses add up to a final great line. In this passage from <u>Michael</u> the clauses do not accumulate, each is complete, but each modifies slightly what has gone before and what is to follow. The final line - no less

memorable than "A grandeur in the beatings of the heart" - is subdued because the intensity of the old man's grief puts it beyond displays of emotion.

My third category yokes poems that are apparently dissimilar. Any student of Wordsworth's MSS is struck by the number of fragmentary pieces composed in 1796-1798, many of which were never integrated into larger works. Two strands in the period I am concerned with are the passages of reflection and evocation of past emotion, beginning with the piece, "Yet once again", and the attempts at a description of a beggar.[317] On the one hand these are subjective poems, on the other objective attempts at description. Yet the dissimilarity is apparent only. For underlying the creation of both is a conviction of the value and rightness of the thing in itself. The group discussed by Professor Hartman records Wordsworth's growing conviction that the recall of the past is of redemptive power. But as yet there is no attempt to fit the moments into a frame or a pattern, no attempt to create a poem. All that matters is the record of the moment. Similarly with the descriptive passages there is a premium on the record of exact truth. In its beginning The Old Cumberland Beggar was a description only of the beggar. The statement of his

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[317]See PW., V, 340-347; PW., IV, 234-240, 445-447. Hartman discusses the fragments, Hartman, 163-168 and Reed the textual history of the description of the beggar, Reed, 342-343.

place in the English social structure is a later accretion. And in this description the emphasis is on the facts, not on the poetry:

> Thus, from day to day,
> Bow-bent, his eyes for ever on the ground,
> He plies his weary journey; seeing still,
> And seldom knowing that he sees, some straw,
> Some scattered leaf, or marks which, in one track,
> The nails of cart or chariot-wheel have left
> Impressed on the white road, -in the same line,
> At distance still the same. [318]

Here more than in any other passage, we see the truth of John Bayley's remarks and appreciate its relevance to the poetry. For Wordsworth is trying to make the reader (and thus the Statesmen anxious to sweep away the old man) look at the beggar. The poem is concerned to make us see what the facts really are. And for this a medium is needed which can be made to seem of no importance in itself. The difficulty felt in An Evening Walk is solved. There the description of the vagrant offends because the shape of the passage directs attention to the poet and his art and not to the dying woman. Here the self-effacing verse gives the right priority to the human figure. The result is that now Wordsworth can begin to write wholly convincing humanitarian, compassionate poetry in a way denied him before, in part by the limitations of his verse forms.

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[318] The Old Cumberland Beggar, ll. 51-58. PW., IV, 235-236. My punctuation.

(v)

"Development of Themes"

Fragments XV and I and II mark both a change and a development in the themes begun in Adventures on Salisbury Plain. The change comes in the shift they accomplish from a humanitarian poetry whose motive is firmly social protest, and a poetry whose main concern is to analyse the plight of human beings and to establish evidence about their behaviour. Whereas Adventures on Salisbury Plain is still committed to social protest, despite the seminal movements of psychological acuteness, fragments I and II look towards the sick woman of "Incipient Madness"[319] or Margaret of The Ruined Cottage rather than towards the female vagrant of A Night on Salisbury Plain, and in the much more developed fragment XV the emphasis on psychological analysis is quite clear. The change, however, is not a break with what has gone before, but a development of certain aspects of it. For the poems that followed Adventures on Salisbury Plain enlarged themes tentatively expressed there. Wordsworth has challenged common assumptions about guilt and about the nature of the criminal. Now he extends his question-

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[319] PW., I, 314-315.

ing in a much more sophisticated analysis of what are the real certainties in life. What, he asks, can man cling to? What are the moral laws, the sanctions that do apply to human life? The answers follow three patterns of thought, all of which have their beginning in the queries of Adventures on Salisbury Plain.

The first stresses the importance of instinctive natural ties and has its first embodiment in fragment XV. Whereas Adventures on Salisbury Plain is concerned with the aftermath of the sailor's one, very nearly excusable crime, here Wordsworth focusses on a youth continually prompted to commit an indefensible murder. Nature itself seems to urge him to the crime, for "Up as they climbed, the precipices ridge/Lessons of death at every step had given", but this in turn is neutralised by seemingly supernatural warning. The blind man's gratitude to the youth underlines the horror of the plot, which is, and Wordsworth stresses this, unnatural:

> His hopes the youth to fatal dreams had lent
> And from that hour had laboured with the curse
> Of evil thoughts, nor had the least event
> Not owned a meaning monstrous and perverse;
> And now these latter words of blood
> And all the man had said but served to nurse
> Purpose most foul with most unnatural food;
> And every kindred object which had braced
> His mind that dismal night he busily retraced. [320]

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[320] "Gothic" Tale, ll. 134-142. PW., I, 288, emended.

The deepest meaning of "unnatural", as it is used for example in King Lear, is underlined by the action of nature herself, which rages in storm at the moment of greatest peril and retires when, for a moment, the old man is safe.

In The Borderers this brief hint is developed in a fully worked out dramatic action. At the outset it is stressed that Mortimer feels and acknowledges the ties that bind him to Herbert:

> Though I have never seen his face, methinks
> There cannot be a time when I shall cease
> To love him. I remember when a Boy
> . . .
> It was my joy to sit and hear Matilda
> Repeat her father's terrible adventures,
> Till all the band of play mates wept together
> And that was the beginning of my love. [321]

This is what Mortimer clings to, a conviction that natural ties and instincts of love towards Herbert cannot be wrong. But they are proved so, and it is important, I think, to feel the full weight of this. Mortimer is not persuaded by argument; he sees proof. Rivers arranges evidence as palpable as any of the memories of natural bonds which Mortimer can recall

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[321] The Borderers, I, 87-95, reading of MS.B. I refer for convenience to the text of The Borderers in PW., I, 128-225. This is a revised text, however, and does not represent the play as it was in the period under discussion. My reading of the play is thus of a transcript of MS.B. which represents most probably the latest revised version of 1797. I shall refer to De Selincourt's text as a guide. Where quotations differ it may be assumed that the reading given is that of MS.B.

in counteraction. He <u>has</u> to doubt what before he steadfastly believed in. The result is that his world collapses because he no longer has a principle of life. In a later essay Wordsworth declared that "our attention ought principally to be fixed upon that part of our conduct and actions which is the result of our habits" and defined habits, by implication, as arising from whatever has "sufficient power to melt into our affections, to incorporate itself with the blood and vital juices of our mind."[322] But Mortimer has discovered that what seemed most inviolable is corrupt and that what was most entwined with his heart cannot be relied on. At the end of Act I Mortimer is a sinking man:

> The firm foundation of my life appears
> To sink from under me. This business, Rivers,
> Will be my ruin.[323]

The moment of most vivid tension falls in Act III when Mortimer voices all his perplexities. He has wanted to murder but something prevailed against him. Now, removed from the sight of Herbert, he mocks himself for having "let a creed built in the heart of things/Dissolve before a twinkling atom's eye",[324] and goes on to declare in overwrought imagery that he

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[322] See Geoffrey Little, "An Incomplete Wordsworth Essay upon Moral Habits", <u>REL</u>., II, (1961), 12.

[323] <u>The Borderers</u>, I, 547-550 <u>app.crit</u>. <u>PW</u>., I, 149.

[324] ibid, III, 1219-1220 and <u>app. crit</u>. <u>PW</u>., I, 176.

can now accomplish all things:

> Now for the corner stone of my philosophy
> I would not give a denier for the man
> Who would not chuck his babe beneath the chin
> And send it with a fillip to its grave. [325]

The very imagery gives the lie to Mortimer's statement. For this play is full of images taken from the family group. Mortimer himself declares "Father! to God himself we cannot give/An holier name",[326] and here the accumulated weight of such images declare the madness of Mortimer's assertion.

There are many ways in which circumstances can be seen as conditioning man. In Adventures on Salisbury Plain the sailor is driven to commit a crime, yet Wordsworth stresses not the impact of the crime but the continuity of his feelings of good. Rivers on the other hand attributes everything to his early experience which grows to dominate his mental development, his relations with the world and ultimately causes the destruction of Mortimer. Coleridge's Osorio attempts to explain all by the argument of necessity:

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[325] ibid., III, 1240-1244. PW., I, 177.

[326] ibid., I, 543-544. PW., I, 148-149.

> What have I done but that which nature destin'd
> Or the blind elements stirr'd up within me?
> If good were meant, why were we made these beings? [327]

But such arguments demean man's stature. Wordsworth is doing the opposite. Far from opposing intellect with blood, or proof with instinct, both of which lessen man as surely as the necessarian argument, he is urging that full weight be given to the deepest instincts of our lives which go back to whatever is most perfectly integrated with the beginnings of our growth. Rivers calls such ties "slavery" (IV, 1857), but they are, as the play reveals, actually a pre-requisite of full humanity.

The second theme developed in the poetry of this period concerns man's need of relationship with fellow men. As has been shown _Adventures on Salisbury Plain_ stresses the value of human contacts and the terrible affliction felt by the outcast. These themes are embodied more dramatically in _The Borderers_ in two ways. One embodiment is the setting of

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[327] _Osorio_, III.i, 114-116. _Coleridge:Poems_, II, 539. Coleridge's views on guilt seem to have developed in this period. In 1796 he could declare to Thelwall, "_Guilt_ is out of the Question- I am a Necessarian, and of course deny the possibility of it" (13 May 1796. _Griggs_, I, 213). But in 1798 the problems of guilt is given a religious and apocalyptic reference in a letter to George Coleridge, where Coleridge says, "of GUILT I say nothing; but I believe most stedfastly in original Sin" (10 March 1798. _Griggs_, I, 395). It is interesting to note that in _Lewesdon Hill_ Crowe attacks the necessarian argument in a long passage beginning:

> They also can discourse
> Wisely, to prove that what must be must be.
>
> (_Lewesdon Hill_ 1798, pp. 9-10)

the play itself. Roger Sharrock has shown how the geographical border in the play corresponds to the moral frontier on which the outlaws roam.[328] Similarly one can see how Wordsworth uses the heath, as Shakespeare does in King Lear, as the setting for extreme states of emotion and as the embodiment of mental isolation. As the characters gather in groups and then disperse one is aware all the time of the heath, as a place they refer to, as somewhere without the relationships and communal strength they value. And it is on the heath that Mortimer ultimately finds himself alone.

It is embodied too in the characters themselves. Rivers is a solitary, even though he lives in community. He has put himself beyond human relationships of the common sort. Lennox senses this and explains that:

> restless minds
> Such minds as find amid their fellow men
> No heart that loves them, none that they can love
> Will turn, perforce, and seek for sympathies
> In dim relations to imagined things.[329]

Forecasting that Mortimer will be shunned by some for his deed, Rivers argues that solitude is a source of strength:

> Bodies are like ropes
> When interwoven, stronger by mutual strength.
> Thanks to our nature! 'tis not so with minds.
> Join twenty tapers of unequal height

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[328] Roger Sharrock, "The Borderers: Wordsworth on the Moral Frontier", Durham University Journal, LVI (1964), 170-183.

[329] ibid., III, 1451-1455. PW., I, 185.

> And light them joined and you will see the less
> How 'twill burn down the taller and they all
> Shall prey upon the tallest-Solitude!
> The eagle lives in solitude. 330

But when Mortimer returns to imagery from the animal or bird kingdom at the end of the play it is for a very different consideration of solitude. Inly-troubled he tries to puzzle out why, whereas the wounded deer retires to die alone, man always wants to die with someone near. After his confession he acknowledges that he has divorced himself from humanity by declaring his intention to imitate the deer and embrace the destiny of Cain:

> I will go forth a wanderer on the earth,
> A shadowy thing and as I wander on
> No human ear shall ever hear my voice,
> No human dwelling ever give me food
> Or sleep or rest. 331

The sailor in Adventures on Salisbury Plain goes out to execution; Mortimer to the lingering death of the wanderer. For both, the poem and the play suggest, the real punishment is their distance from humankind.

The third theme, a corollary of the emphasis in relationship, developed in the poetry 1796-1798 from very simple beginnings in Adventures on Salisbury Plain. In drafts in MS.A, (mentioned above in the discussion of the revisions for the description of the sailor's character), and in the poem

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[330] ibid., III, 1511-1516 and app. crit. PW., I, 187-188.

[331] ibid., V, 2312-2316. PW., I, 225.

itself, Wordsworth emphasises the value of the sailor's instinctive compassion and love. At this stage this is not, as a sentiment, unusual. The feelings enjoined by the Inscription for a Seat (1796-1797) are as simple. The passer by is asked to think of the aged and infirm with love and to meditate on the last things. The poem simply urges human compassion:

> Glance on this turf, here stop, and think on them,
> The weary homeless vagrants of the earth,
> Or that poor man, the rustic artisan,
> Who, laden with his implements of toil,
> Returns at night to his far-distant home. [332]

But elsewhere this simple sentiment is developed to affirm that reverence for all things is a life-giving attitude. It was an early and abiding conviction with Wordsworth and Coleridge and was expressed in many ways. In December 1796 Coleridge wrote to Thelwall: "Contempt must always be evil-and a good man ought to speak contemptuously of nothing." [333] In Osorio and The Borderers Wordsworth and Coleridge dramatised the self-destructive folly of contempt. Rivers is cruel to Herbert's dog and would be as cruel to man for, as he argues, what are most men that they should be revered above the animal:

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[332] Inscription for a Seat, ll. 5-9. PW., I, 301.

[333] STC. to John Thelwall, 17 December [1796]. Griggs, I, 280.

> We kill a toad, a newt
> A rat- I do believe if they who first
> Baptised the deed had called it murder, we
> Had quaked to think of it. [334]

Osorio likewise yokes men and beasts in an attempt to justify his crime, when he asks:

> What if one reptile sting another reptile,
> Where is the crime? The goodly face of Nature
> Hath one trail less of slimy filth upon it. [335]

In the extremely acute analytical essay on The Borderers Wordsworth speaks of the dangerous openness of a "mind fond of nourishing sentiments of contempt" to false combinations of ideas and feelings and goes on to call it a "morbid state of mind."[336] It is, however, not an exceptional state and Swinburne was wrong to declare the play "unparalleled by any serious production of the human intellect for morbid and monstrous extravagance of horrible impossibility."[337] For what Rivers and Osorio feel, cut off in their misanthropy, is but an extreme of what is felt by the man portrayed in Yew-tree Lines who inspires Wordsworth's warning:

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[334] The Borderers, II, 927-935, app. crit. PW., I, 165.

[335] Osorio, III. i, 213-215. Coleridge: Poems, II, 558.

[336] PW., I, 346.

[337] Algernon Charles Swinburne, "Wordsworth and Byron", Miscellanies (London, 1886), 118.

> know that pride,
> Howe'er disguised in its own majesty
> Is littleness; that he who feels contempt
> For any living thing, hath faculties
> Which he has never used; that thought with him
> Is in its infancy. [338]

The old Cumberland beggar is an holy object not because he prompts to acts of kindness merely but because he is a man. Nor is the religious suggestion here too strong, for it is suggested by the diction itself of a variant passage to this poem where Wordsworth declares:

> and blest are they
> Who by whatever process have been taught
> To look with holy reverence and with fear
> Upon this intricate machine of things.
> They touch not rashly neither in contempt
> Nor hatred, for to them a voice hath said
> When ye despise ye know not what ye do. [339]

The biblical overtones of this (invoking Christ himself in "Blest are they") reveal the intensity for Wordsworth of the conviction that inspires the finest of his humanitarian poetry in the years following 1797 with an authentic compassion for human beings as beings of infinite value.

This survey does not pretend to be comprehensive. Both poets treat the subject with a variety that is but suggested here. Again, the source of their growing conviction that reverence for everything is of value is beyond the scope of

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[338] Yew-tree Lines, ll. 50-55. PW., I, 93-94.

[339] The Old Cumberland Beggar, MS. 3. See notes to l. 127, PW., IV, 446-447.

this essay, involving as it does the source in varieties of Christian and non-Christian thinking of their conviction for a brief period in the fact that there is "One Life within us and abroad."[340] What the survey does try to suggest is how certain major aspects of the poetry of 1796-1798 can be found to have a beginning in Adventures on Salisbury Plain. This in turn should help to explain why during these years, when work on The Borderers and The Ruined Cottage was signalling a new phase of his development, Wordsworth should still feel sufficiently close to his earlier work to attempt to publish it. Alien though it was in many ways to the style and tone of his current writings, Adventures on Salisbury Plain still had links with what was most vital in Wordsworth's broadening imaginative vision.

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[340] Piper and Melvin M. Rader, Wordsworth:A Philosophical Approach (Oxford, 1967) suggest many sources. Professor Piper is misled by the Oxford Wordsworth into positing a doubtful relationship chronologically between Wordsworth and Coleridge, but his study is most illuminating in that it shows how far established scientific and religious thought supported the view that there was One Life.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION: THEMES AND FORM

(i)

"Themes"

In some ways The Ruined Cottage seems a complete break with all that has gone before. The Borderers, retaining much of the gothic strain that interested Wordsworth as a youth, and owing much to Shakespeare, seems to look back to Wordsworth's earliest work. The Ruined Cottage, on the other hand, seems to look forward. Largely composed in two periods, April-June 1797 and January-March 1798 [341] it reflects in the greater range of its philosophising and the greater assurance of its verse the stimulation that Wordsworth had derived from Coleridge and his work. It marks too the beginning of the profound self-examination that was to be Wordsworth's life-work, which is embodied in the description of the pedlar's youth, much of which was to be incorporated later in The Prelude.

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[341] I am indebted to Mr. Jonathan Wordsworth who has allowed me to see work on his forthcoming study of The Ruined Cottage and The Pedlar. For the slightly different dating, see also Reed, 27-28 and 337-339, Appendix XIII, "The Date of The Ruined Cottage."

Yet for all this the break is more apparent than real, for in The Ruined Cottage there is much that has links with Adventures on Salisbury Plain and even earlier. It is not just that Margaret's situation recalls that of the female vagrant or that occasional details of landscape remind one that it is Salisbury plain and not the Lake District that is in Wordsworth's mind's eye,[342] but that in The Ruined Cottage certain of the themes which were born in Adventures on Salisbury Plain are matured within the full subtlety of Wordsworth's much widened thought.[343]

Adventures on Salisbury Plain and the poems that followed have examined in various ways aspects of human fellowship and the role of solitude. In The Ruined Cottage Wordsworth develops the examination to show the way in which what has been presented as a largely dangerous force, solitude, can actually be fruitful for the deepest fellowship. The description of the pedlar begins with his earliest years, to establish from the outset the importance of solitude to him. It is while alone that he drinks in his sense of the life of nature in a

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[342] See note to ll. 176-177 of Adventures on Salisbury Plain above, p. 292.

[343] The Oxford text of The Ruined Cottage, PW., V, 379-404 is not entirely accurate and the information it gives about the poem is misleading. Until the publication of the text in Mr. Wordsworth's study, however, it remains the only available one and it is to this that I refer, cited as Ruined Cottage.

communion "not from terror free" and it is this communion or knowledge that determines the personality of the mature man. Wordsworth's argument here is complex but consistent in its own terms. The child:

> perceived the presence and the power
> Of greatness, and deep feelings had impressed
> Great objects on his mind, with portraiture
> And colour so distinct [that on his mind]
> They lay like substances, and almost seemed
> To haunt the bodily sense.[344]

The active power of the child's mind co-operates with nature and together they stimulate an "appetite" for sensations of ear and eye. Feeding such an appetite by prolonged observation the boy seems to penetrate to the principle of life itself:

> in the after day
> Of boyhood, many an hour in caves forlorn
> And in the hollow depth of naked crags
> He sate, and even in their fixed lineaments,
> Or from the power of a peculiar eye,
> Or by creative feeling overborne,
> Or by predominance of thought oppressed,
> Even in their fixed and steady lineaments
> He traced an ebbing and a flowing mind,
> Expression ever varying.[345]

The importance of such experience was that although it did not teach him to love it prepared the way:

> By his intense conceptions to receive
> Deeply the lesson deep of love, which he
> Whom Nature, by whatever means, has taught
> To feel intensely, cannot but receive.[346]

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[344] Ruined Cottage, ll. 80-85. PW., V, 381.

[345] ibid., ll. 99-108. PW., V, 381-382.

[346] ibid., ll. 115-118. PW., V, 382.

Shaped by such an influence the mature man carries with him a strength that enables him to exist in solitude and in the world together. The disappointed suitor for the world's affections in the Yew-tree Lines returned to brood. Rivers is described as one who has "quarrelled with the world."[347] But the pedlar's solitude is but a counter-part to his involvement with man:

> there he kept
> In solitude, and solitary thought,
> So pleasant were those comprehensive views,
> His mind in a just equipoise of love.[348]

The serenity of his mind and the strength of the man nurtured in solitude enables him to share the sorrows of mankind, not because he was tortured himself but (and here Wordsworth's understanding is at its most acute) because:

> He had no painful pressure from within
> Which made him turn away from wretchedness
> With coward fears. He could afford to suffer
> With those whom he saw suffer.[349]

And the story of the poem validates this assertion. As the narrative begins to focus on the desolate scene we are impressed by the pedlar's deep response to what remains of human life. He looks at the spring waters not as a lover of nature merely but as a lover of man and declares:

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[347] PW., I, 346.

[348] PW., V, 386, app. crit.

[349] PW., V, 387, app. crit.

> They are not as they were, the bond
> Of brotherhood is broken; time has been
> When every day the touch of human hand
> Disturbed their stillness, and they ministered
> To human comfort. [350]

As the story develops it becomes clear that this feeling is the continuation of an intense love for Margaret and her family while she was alive.

A second factor in the pedlar's growth emphasised in The Ruined Cottage also links the poem with the others we have considered. From his earliest days he has learnt to "look with holy reverence and with fear/Upon this intricate machine of things",[351] simply because he has sensed himself a vital part of it. Wordsworth describes the youth, solitary in the mountains, gazing on the suntouched clouds and declares:

> Sound needed none
> Nor any voice of joy: his spirit drank
> The spectacle. Sensation, soul and form
> All melted into him. They swallowed up
> His animal being; in them did he live
> And by them did he live. They were his life.
> In such access of mind, in such high hour
> Of visitation from the living God,
> He did not feel the God; he felt his works. [352]

The astonishing verbs here, "drank", "melted into", "swallowed up", convey with great power how intimately bound in with his

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[350] Ruined Cottage, ll. 332-336. PW., V, 389.

[351] The Old Cumberland Beggar, MS.B. PW., IV, 446-447.

[352] Ruined Cottage, ll. 128-136. PW., V, 382.

own life the youth felt the life of the world to be. As John Jones has brilliantly shown in his analysis of lines 208-217, the boy does not learn of a world of physical realities and mental realities.[353] He combines the two in a physical geometry that includes the stars and the mountain crags. The result is a totally integrated mind, described in the brilliant image, "all his thoughts/Were steeped in feeling." Whereas Rivers glories in a consciousness of self that makes him contemptuous of the world outside himself, the youthful pedlar glories in his connection with the world outside. He delights in the extension and magnitude of the created world not because it reveals still further subject matter for his power but because it speaks still more widely of life. This joy in the variety of life, his reverence for all of created nature is captured moreover in the poetry in one of the passages which breaks out from the limitations of so much narrative and philosophic verse:

> He was only then
> Contented, when, with bliss ineffable
> He felt the sentiment of being, spread
> O'er all that moves, and all that seemeth still,
> O'er all which, lost beyond the reach of thought,
> And human knowledge, to the human eye
> Invisible, yet liveth to the heart,
> O'er all that leaps, and runs, and shouts, and sings,
> Or beats the gladsome air, o'er all that glides
> Beneath the wave, yea in the wave itself
> And mighty depth of waters. Wonder not

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[353] _Jones_, 80-81.

> If such his transports were; for in all things
> He saw one life, and felt that it was joy. [354]

The result of such a conviction that the active principle of life binds all things is, with the pedlar, a concern and reverence for life in all its forms. "To every natural form, rock, fruit and flower/Even the loose stones that cover the highway/He gave as moral life" and it is this connection with a world of living and thus moral elements which determines all the pedlar's attitudes to his fellow human beings.

It is when the pedlar begins to explain his attitude to life to the poet in The Ruined Cottage that the two themes I have treated separately so far become indistinguishable. In the poetry from Adventures on Salisbury Plain onwards Wordsworth has clarified his conviction that human relationships, the love of man for man, are supremely valuable. With this has developed a belief in the value of reverence for life as opposed to contempt. Now, in 1798, Wordsworth can define and explain this conviction with an assurance lacking before, the assurance of a man who has found language and formulations to express what were before no more than intuitions.

After he has heard the story of Margaret's death, the poet turns back to the ruin and retraces the events in his mind. His grief is obvious to the pedlar who begins to explain how

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[354] Ruined Cottage, ll. 240-252. PW., V, 385.

there can be another reaction to the story. He begins with a declaration of faith that love of natural objects is of value to man:

> Not useless do I deem
> These quiet sympathies with things that hold
> An inarticulate language; for the man
> Once taught to love such objects as excite
> No morbid passions no disquietude
> No vengeance, and no hatred needs must feel
> The joy of that pure principle of love
> So deeply that unsatisfied with aught
> Less pure and exquisite he cannot choose
> But seek for objects of a kindred love
> In fellow natures and a kindred joy. [355]

This pressure towards the good purifies the man. As a truth of human life this was testified by Coleridge, when in a letter to George Coleridge he prefaced these lines from The Ruined Cottage with the prose gloss:

> I devote myself to such works as encroach not on the antisocial passions-in poetry, to elevate the imagination and set the affection in right tune by the beauty of the inanimate impregnated, as with a

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[355] Addendum to MS.B, ll. 1-11. PW., V, 400-401. Compare the fragment in the Alfoxden notebook which expresses this idea more explicitly:

> Why is it we feel
> So little for each other, but for this,
> That we with nature have no sympathy,
> Or with such things as have no power to hold
> Articulate language?
> And never for each other shall we feel
> As we may feel, till we have sympathy
> With nature in her forms inanimate,
> With objects such as have no power to hold
> Articulate language. In all forms of things
> There is a mind.
>
> (PW., V, 340. Appendix B, ii)

> living soul, by the presence of Life . . .
> I love fields and woods and mounta[ins] with almost a visionary fondness-and because I have found benevolence and quietness growing within me as that fondness [has] increased, therefore I should wish to be the means of implanting it in others-and to destroy the bad passions not by combating them, but by keeping them in inaction. 356

The importance of this love for the "inanimate impregnated . . . by the presence of Life" is that it directs one to man. Sense is not a passive recorder, but is made "Subservient still to moral purposes/A vital essence and a saving power." Everything must direct the mind to man, "All things shall speak of Man." The explanation is concluded as the pedlar details the exact meaning of this love for man, how it vitalises life and man's sense of his world. Most of all he stresses the inevitable softening of evil in man and our movement,

> From strict necessity along the path
> Of order and of good. Whate'er we see
> Whate'er we feel, by agency direct
> Or indirect, shall tend to feed and nurse
> Our faculties, and raise to loftier heights
> Our intellectual soul. 357

There is a sense in which the pedlar's eloquent words record Wordsworth's discovery of his theme: Man. The greatest of his poetry from now on is to explore the main themes of this discourse, as outlined in the Prospectus to The Recluse,[358]

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[356] STC. to George Coleridge [circa 10 March, 1798]. Griggs, I, 397.

[357] Addendum to MS.B, ll. 94-99. PW., V, 403.

[358] See PW., V, 3-6, esp. ll. 35-42 and ll. 56-71.

namely the Mind of Man and his relation to the external world. But there is a sense too in which they represent the culmination of themes already tentatively expressed. In *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* and the poems that followed before *The Ruined Cottage* there is little concern with phenomenonology, but there is a concern with man as a social and thus a moral being. Before he began to explore the relationship of man to the external world, Wordsworth had already begun to explore man in relation to his fellows, that is man in the environment which, for most people, constitutes the real world outside.[359]

(ii)

"The Discovery of Form"

The Ruined Cottage is connected with the earlier poems also by its structure, which represents Wordsworth's answer to

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[359] In a recent article on Wordsworth's attitudes to suffering Cleanth Brooks remarks: ". . . it would not be easy to give a systematic account of the 'theology' that underlies the Wanderer's religious experience. I am not sure that Wordsworth could have done so himself." (Cleanth Brooks, "Wordsworth and Human Suffering", *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (NY., OUP, 1965), 387). I would suggest, however, at the conclusion of this examination of the pedlar's discourse, that it is clear from the philosophic passages in MS.B that Wordsworth had an extremely detailed answer to any questioning of the Wanderer's 'theology'.

a certain kind of technical problem that has dogged him from his earliest work. All of Wordsworth's poetry after An Evening Walk is didactic and its structure is conditioned by this fact. But, as an analysis of Salisbury Plain has tried to show, Wordsworth did not easily find a satisfactory solution to the kind of demands a didactic work can make. In A Night on Salisbury Plain the relationship between the poet, the audience and his created world is faulty. The poet dominates the work and weakens the possibility that his reader will become involved in the demonstration as well as in the poet's declamation. Anxious to spell out the doctrines of radical and humanitarian thought, Wordsworth omits no pointer to the correct reading of the poem. The result is that the human beings in the poem dwindle. In Adventures on Salisbury Plain the problem was slightly different. The growing subtlety of the poet's thought was matched in part by an advance in technique. But the episodic dramatic structure, while immeasurably more compelling that the simple structure of the earlier poem, had inherent weaknesses. The large number events is not shaped with that assurance that suggests they form the exactly right structure for the poem. More important Wordsworth is attempting to hide like the dramatist behind his created world while actually writing not a dramatic but a narrative work. The result is rather too little intervention by the poet and too great a possibility of differing interpretations, a problem

exacerbated in the genuinely dramatic form of The Borderers.

A Night on Salisbury Plain, Adventures on Salisbury Plain and The Borderers, however, make only slight demands on the relationship of reader, poet and the fictional world compared with those made by The Ruined Cottage. For although each of these poems is didactic, the substance of their message is quite different in what it asks the reader to accept. In A Night on Salisbury Plain Wordsworth makes certain propositions about the social conditions of England. In Adventures on Salisbury Plain these propositions are overshadowed by suggestions about how man should regard a fellow man. With both poems the substance of the poet's message is easily verifiable from the everyday facts of life. Wordsworth declares that there is no freedom from the informer or the press-gang: the reader knows how to evaluate this in the light of his own experience. If Wordsworth asks us to call Justice a violated name in view of what it does to a man like the sailor, the answer may require more thought, but it is within the scope of the experience of any educated man. But in The Ruined Cottage the didactic point is no longer sociological or even, primarily, psychological: it is philosophical. The pedlar has a story to tell of the destitution and death of innocent people. His conclusion after the story has been told is that we should not grieve. He buttresses this conclusion by a long philosophical argument in one version of the poem (MS.B) and by a poetically

more exciting but philosophically less exhaustive peroration in another (MS.D). In both cases the reader is presented with a proposition by an initiate of a set of beliefs which seem to have little relation to what men commonly believe and how they would normally act. As in Salisbury Plain Wordsworth has to find some way of dominating the poem and of persuading the reader without lessening the immediate conviction of the world created in the poem.

The existence of the problem and something of its nature was revealed by the reviews of The Excursion in 1814. The reviewers had an unenviable task. They were faced with a bulky philosophical work which was apparently only part of a bigger whole. Inevitably they were forced to consider fundamentals, what they expected of a philosophic poet, how far they were prepared to take seriously outlandish views because they were expressed in the form of art. For some the content of the poem was the problem. To Jeffrey the whole "tissue of moral and devotional ravings, in which innumerable changes are rung upon a few very simple and familiar ideas"[360] was an affront, a violation of common sense and self-control. Lamb had anticipated such criticism, and had rebuked it as making writers "timidly coast the shore of prescribed sentiment and sympathy",[361] but he too was afraid that the novelty of the

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[360] The Edinburgh Review, XXIV (November, 1814), 4.

[361] The Quarterly Review, XII (October, 1814), 110.

doctrine would damage the poem's reception. That the doctrine was life-giving Lamb had no doubt, but it was in advance of generally accepted opinion and this, he felt, would blind readers to even the best parts of the poem. For this reason he wished that the story of Margaret "had been postponed, till the reader had been strengthened by some previous acquaintance with the author's theory, and not placed in the front of the poem, with a kind of ominous aspect, beautifully tender as it is."[362]

Hazlitt, on the other hand, objected to the form of the poem. He was prepared to adventure some of the way with the poet in new ways of thought, but he considered the attempt to make the poem a philosophical debate a failure. He wanted the poem to be a "philosophical poem altogether, with only occasional digressions or allusions to particular instances",[363] not because he believed that the doctrine could not bear illustration by particular instances, but because he saw that Wordsworth's power was best exercised in his formulations of personally known experience not in the creation of independent, dramatic beings. This, he asserts in a brilliant sentence, is the weakness of Wordsworth's "intense intellectual egotism", that it feels a "repugnance to admit anything that tells for

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[362]ibid., 105.

[363]The Examiner, August 28, 1814, p. 555.

itself, without the interpretation of the poet, - a fastidious antipathy to immediate effect, - a systematic unwillingness to share the palm with his subject."[364]

Lamb and Jeffrey were concerned with content, Hazlitt with form. The reviewer in The British Critic very interestingly reveals through the cliches of his largely pedestrian review that he is uneasy about the relation between form and content in the poem. He writes:

> Since his poetry is the shadow of his philosophy, the result of intense reflection and a peculiar way of combining and abstracting, its interest depends in a great measure on a right understanding of the process which formed it. But there are few who have music enough in their souls to unravel for themselves his abstruser harmonies: only let him sound the key-note, and the apparent confusion will vanish: let him make his tones well understood, and they will be to every ear delightful, to every soul elevating: till then they can delight and improve those only, who have fancy enough to transport themselves into the poet's circumstances and mood of mind, and leisure enough to work out with him the speculations and feelings consequent thereupon.[365]

The confusion in this poetry which is the shadow of a philosophy is only apparent. The writer seems not to doubt that if understood it would elevate and please. But, as phrase after phrase makes clear, he is asking for more work by Wordsworth not as a thinker but as a poet. Elsewhere he accuses Wordsworth of leaving out links in the chain, of expecting his

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[364] ibid., 556.

[365] The British Critic, NS. III (May, 1815), 450.

readers to feel at once as he does. Here he is asking the poet to complete the chain, to show in the poem not only conclusions but the way to them.

Each of these critics is reacting to the didactic design of the poem - with The Excursion as a whole, no doubt justly - and their doubts all centre on the same problem: the status and tone of the poet's voice itself. Jeffrey does not believe in the characters, in philosophic button-selling pedlars. Lamb believes but wants to be instructed more fully. Hazlitt slights dramatic presentation altogether. In their different ways each is asking, what is the relationship of the poet to his reader and to his created world; how best can poetry teach as well as please?

Had Lamb, Jeffrey and Hazlitt read only Book One of The Excursion perhaps their doubts would have been less strong, for it is with The Ruined Cottage that Wordsworth did achieve the ideal didactic form that had eluded him before. As analysis of the poem will show, there is at last a persuasive relationship between the poet, his audience and the created world which, he hopes, will serve to propagate his beliefs. Wordsworth has found a place for his own voice in the poem and thus satisfied the reader's need for (apparent) freedom of mind with his own need for a presence in the poem as interpreter and guide.

The success may have emerged, ironically, from failure in another medium. In June 1797 The Borderers was read to

Coleridge together with Wordsworth's "new poem" The Ruined Cottage.[366] By December the play had been rejected as a commercial proposition. On 14 December "Monk" Lewis's Castle Spectre began its London run and in three months, it is said, earned eighteen thousand pounds. It would be surprising had chagrin not coloured the feelings of Wordsworth and Coleridge, not only for this piece but for the commercial stage altogether. But despite this, and the fact that Wordsworth can have wanted nothing to do with drama at the time, Coleridge's thoughtful comments on Lewis's play, written in January 1798, cannot but have interested him. Coleridge analysed the play for Wordsworth under five heads. Four of these list faults, but under the heading "Conduct" Coleridge is interestingly charitable: "The Conduct of the Piece is, I think, good- . . . This Play proves how accurately you conjectured concerning theatric merit. The merit of the Castle Spectre consists wholly in its situations. These are all borrowed and absolutely pantomimical; but they are admirably managed for stage effect. . . . The whole plot, machinery, and incident are borrowed- . . . but they are very well worked up, and for stage effect make an excellent whole."[367]

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[366] DW. to Mary Hutchinson (?) [June, 1797]. EY., 189.

[367] STC. to William Wordsworth, [23] January, 1798. Griggs, I, 379. In his forthcoming book Mr. Wordsworth shows that The Ruined Cottage was composed in two periods, April-June 1797 and January-March 1798. Coleridge's views on theatric merit come thus at the beginning of the second period, when most of the interplay of poet and pedlar was elaborated.

This is a revealing letter and for Wordsworth it must have been a most illuminating one. Coleridge knows that Lewis's play is a piece of bombastic plagiarism, yet he finds the working up of shabby materials compelling. He is held in the theatre by what he can outside analyse and reject. It is this lesson that the poet of The Ruined Cottage has learnt. Wordsworth was never prepared to be so charitable to Lewis (though he made a point of seeing the play in Bristol) [368] but he was prepared to adopt something of the form he now condemned. For what distinguishes The Ruined Cottage not only from Wordsworth's earlier work but also from the rest of The Excursion is not the profundity of its ideas but the care with which Wordsworth has "worked up" his materials. Avoiding the extreme stimulation of gothic machinery, murder or execution and the other extreme of over-simplification of his subject, Wordsworth manipulates the reader through the juxtaposition of event and interpretative comment so that he, like Coleridge, is convinced while reading the poem of a view of life from which normally he might want to dissent.

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[368] See WW. to James Webbe Tobin, 6 March [1798]. EY., 210: "I am perfectly easy about the theatre, if I had no other method of employing myself Mr. Lewis's success would have thrown me into despair. The Castle Spectre is a Spectre indeed." WW. most probably saw the play circa 21 May 1798. See Reed, 318 and EY., 210-211, footnote 4.

The most sophisticated form of the poem is that found in MS.D, copied in 1799. In this Wordsworth has cut out most of the description of the pedlar's upbringing and most of his philosophic conclusions. It opens with brilliant scene setting, where the narrowing vision leads the eye from the vague and broad to the particular, "'Twas summer and the sun was mounted high." The introduction is general and without evaluative comment. The downs, dappled with shadows, extend "far as the sight/Could reach", and with the trope the human is introduced and human evaluation. The sunshine is clear and pleasant, pleasant to the man in the shade. The senses of touch and sight, already appealed to in the opening description and the "soft cool moss", are mingled now in the image of the branches which make a "twilight of their own, a dewy shade", and this in turn leads to the sound of the wren warbling to the half-conscious man. Everything is vague and sweet as the "dreaming man/Half conscious of that dreaming melody", looks on a scene through the filter of the branches, by them "made more soft/More soft and distant."

The introduction is one of Wordsworth's triumphs; not, however, because it is a fine piece of description, but because it tricks the reader so completely. For its function is more complicated than that of the opening scene setting of Adventures on Salisbury Plain. Wordsworth has presented an idyllic scene with nature and man in drowsy harmony. Now he breaks the

illusion by intruding himself and his own discomfort. His description is sharp and disenchanted. It is a "bare wide common"; the heat and the "brown earth" baffle his limbs; the warbling of the wren has given way to the humming of the insect hordes. In fragment II the gorse is a blaze of beauty, but now that is past and the poet thinks only of the tedious noise of the bursting pods. This intrusion is a surprise. As the poem opens we assume that the poet is speaking of an idyllic situation he had shared, but now we see this is not so. Rather, as the introduction of the pedlar makes clear, the poet enters the poem cut off from the contentment he recognises in the other man. The poet is glad to see his friend, and what his eye at once takes in, that he is in the shade, his eyes shut, his hat wet from a nearby stream, suggests how keenly he feels the difference between them. In _An Evening Walk_ every detail is interpreted from within the poet's consciousness; in _A Night on Salisbury Plain_ the poet's is the admonitory voice interpreting the meaning of the poem; in _Adventures on Salisbury Plain_ the poet is largely hidden, but in the outburst on the violated name of justice reveals his guiding point of view. But here, at the beginning of _The Ruined Cottage_, the poet enters as a character in his own poem not as the guiding figure, but as one out of harmony with the ideal situation. A dramatic tension is thus created with the poet not, as before, the infallible voice, but as one of the characters needing to be directed to fuller understanding.

The next section treats the differences between the poet and the pedlar in more detail. Just as the opening section, the description of the garden leads the eye from broad statement to focus on a single spot, from the inclusive "It was a plot/Of garden ground now wild", to the detail that the well was in the damp nook formed by the meeting of the alder hedgerows. Again the divergence of the two men is revealed in their reactions to the natural scene. The poet reports the scene neutrally. For him the well performs its function just as efficiently as if it had not been covered over with flowers and grass. But to the pedlar the scene is rich with human association and his feeling for <u>human</u> life is the strength behind his account of what the poet described so casually:

> a bond
> Of brotherhood is broken; time has been
> When every day the touch of human hand
> Disturbed their stillness, and they ministered
> To human comfort. When I stooped to drink
> At that deserted well a spider's web
> Across its mouth hung to the water's edge
> And on the wet and slimy footstone lay
> The useless fragment of a wooden bowl.
> It moved my very heart. [369]

The well has "ministered", but now the bowl is "useless" and, as the spider's web testifies, long since abandoned. What is interesting, however, is that for both reader and poet the Pedlar now becomes an enigmatic figure. He has suggested that

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[369] <u>Ruined Cottage</u>, ll. 332-342. <u>PW</u>., V, 389. Emended.

when the poets in their elegies call on the groves and streams to mourn they are fulfilling a deep human need. Man longs to believe that he is not just a transitory visitant on an unfeeling earth. But after declaring that he too has felt this, has "seemed to feel/One sadness" with the well, he goes on to describe the ruined cottage scene in a way that suggests that this _is_ no more than a poetic fancy. Detail after detail emphasises nature's unconcern at Margaret's death. The cycle of anonymous creature and plant life seems the real permanence compared with man's short life:

> She is dead,
> The worm is on her cheek, and this poor hut,
> Stripped of its outward garb of household flowers,
> Of rose and sweetbriar, offers to the wind
> A cold bare wall whose earthy top is tricked
> With weeds and the rank spear-grass; she is dead
> And nettles rot and adders sun themselves
> Where we have sate together while she nursed
> Her infant at her breast. [370]

But even as he admits his own overpowering grief, he suggests that there must be consolation. Grief, he says, is foolishness, only felt when his "wiser mind" succumbs. For the reader and the poet, however, the sources of this consolation are hidden. His wiser mind, it would seem, is justified in grieving at the garden scene and the memories it evokes of a happy life now destroyed and so as the Pedlar begins the tale we expect that

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[370] ibid., ll. 353-361. _PW._, V, 390. Emended.

he will also explain his faith. The semi-dramatic situation of the opening of Adventures on Salisbury Plain, where the woman does not know all the facts about the sailor, is repeated now, but with the crucial difference that the poet himself is as ignorant as the reader.

The tale begins within an orthodox religious framework. The two babes are the best hope of Margaret and Robert "next to the God in Heaven." The pedlar casually uses the phrase, "It pleased heaven to add/A worse affliction . . ." But the pedlar's vital faith seems not to be Christian at all. When he has told of the early misery of the little family, he pauses and reminds the poet/reader of the idyllic landscape with which the poem opened. The enormous elms give shade from the sun, now at its highest. All of nature is resting, or else, as even the buzzing insects, is happy and unconcerned with the tale being told. But now the pedlar as well as the poet is out of harmony with nature, grieving for Margaret's distress. The difference is that the pedlar knows his grief is wrong. Declaring that their minds are untoward, he asks:

> Why should a tear be in an old Man's eye?
> Why should we thus with an untoward mind,
> And in the weakness of humanity,
> From natural wisdom turn our hearts away,
> To natural comfort shut our eyes and ears,
> And, feeding on disquiet, thus disturb
> [The calm] of nature with our restless thoughts? [371]

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[371] ibid., ll. 446-452. PW., V, 392.

But this is a baffling question, suggesting that the pedlar holds to a faith that transcends orthodox belief. Why should tears be called a weakness? In what sense can their disquiet be said to disturb the calm of nature, especially when the pedlar has shown that nature is in repose? Most of all, what is this "natural wisdom" which they, in the weakness of humanity, are neglecting? At the end of <u>Simon Lee</u> the poet grieves for the old man and there is no hint that this is weakness, so why is it so here? All these questions challenge the reader and disturb the poet. The pedlar ends the first part of the story with "easy cheerfulness", but not so the poet. He feels chilled and has to go out into the sun, but the sight of the ruin reminds him of how little he knows and urges him to discover more. The pedlar's reaction to his request is most unexpected, again showing the poet/reader that he is a figure of authority, a man speaking from within a deep personal faith. The problem is that for the moment the faith is still obscure. He began the tale uninvited, but now declares that he would not continue were the poet seeking merely a cheap thrill. He will continue, however, becuase "we have known that there is often found/In mournful thoughts, and always might be found/A power to virtue friendly." This is puzzling: despite ceaseless commentary on Aristotle's note on catharsis no-one has convincingly shown that the tragic pleasure has any connection with virtue. It is puzzling too that the older man

should so confidently declare himself a seer, when he says, "were't not so/I am a dreamer among men, indeed/An idle dreamer!" One does not have to worry with Jeffrey that the pedlar was a man "accustomed to higgle about tape, or brass sleeve-buttons"[372] to ask how such a man could declare with such confidence the morality of telling the tale and, by implication, his own special fitness to tell it in the words:

> 'Tis a common tale
> By moving accidents uncharactered,
> A tale of silent suffering, hardly clothed
> In bodily form, and to the grosser sense
> But ill adapted, scarcely palpable
> To him who does not think. [373]

The demands imposed by the Pedlar's didacticism increase as he complete's Margaret's story. What, the reader has to ask, is this "natural wisdom"? The questioning arises partly because it is clear that whatever its power to wipe the tear from an old man's eye, it had no power to confort Margaret while she was alive. Indeed the pedlar was happy on occasions to take comfort from her:

> when she ended I had little power
> To give her comfort, and was glad to take
> Such words of hope from her own mouth as served
> To chear us both. [374]

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[372]The Edinburgh Review, XXIV (November, 1814), 30.

[373]Ruined Cottage, ll. 486-491. PW., V, 393.

[374]ibid., ll. 530-533. PW., V, 394.

Again, after a later visit, the pedlar leaves her with words of comfort and hope, but the destitute woman is beyond comfort: "She thanked me for my will, but for my hope/It seemed she did not thank me." Partly too it is because the pedlar implies that he is not thinking in terms of orthodox religious consolation. He declares that he feels Margaret's sufferings so deeply that at moments he transcends the grief:

> so deeply do I feel
> Her goodness, that a vision of the mind,
> A momentary trance comes over me
> And to myself I seem to muse on one
> By sorrow laid asleep or borne away,
> A human being destined to awake
> To human life, or something very near
> To human life, when he shall come again
> For whom she suffered. [375]

But the vagueness of this, its distance from orthodox hopes of heaven, and the fact that the consolation is for the pedlar no more than the musing of a momentary trance, suggest how far the pedlar is from the overt Christianity imputed to him and to Margaret in 1845, where the consolation comes from the might of prayer, the sacrifice of the Cross and "sources deeper far than deepest pain,/For the meek Sufferer."[376] And partly it arises from the details of the story the pedlar has to tell, in which nature as a force and nature as a philosophical concept seem at war.

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[375] ibid., ll. 617-625. PW., V, 396-397.

[376] The Excursion, Bk. I, ll. 938-939. PW., V, 39.

"Natural wisdom" has been invoked but for the poet and the reader this is, at the moment, only an empty phrase. As the story continues, however, a definition seems likely to emerge, since Margaret's grief and decline and the pedlar's insight into her sufferings are all conveyed in images of the relationship between man and nature. The pedlar first sees Margaret in the early spring after Robert's desperate act, and as he leaves her with words of hope she is "busy with her garden tools", and leans to wish him good-bye over the fence that divides the wild common from the cultivated plot. When he returns in summer, however, the fruitful relationship is breaking down. The bindweed drags down the rose, the flowers which once bordered the path now straggle across it. Most disturbing of all to the pedlar, Margaret's infant cries alone in the house, deprived of the comfort the encroaching sheep now claim from its walls. An autumn and winter pass, but from the cycle of decay and death there is this time no rebirth, since Margaret has neglected her side of the compact with nature:

> The earth was hard,
> With weeds defaced and knots of withered grass;
> No ridges there appeared of clear black mould,
> No winter greenness. Of her herbs and flowers
> It seemed the better part were gnawed away
> Or trampled on the earth. [377]

The sheep nibble the fruit trees and in their destructiveness take over when Margaret dies, "last human tenant of these ruined walls."

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[377] Ruined Cottage, ll. 664-669. PW., V, 398.

It is at this poignant moment that the semi-dramatic framework of the poem functions most persuasively. The poet knows only the story of misery and death and as he turns back to the cottage the reader shares his grief. But it is a grief which tries to interpret the scene with which the poem began in the terms the pedlar has been using. The poet blesses Margaret "in the _impotence_ of grief," and yet the distance between the serene pedlar and the frustrated poet is caught in the word. In an attempt to understand his reaction to the tale he turns to the ruin and traces:

> That secret spirit of humanity
> Which 'mid the calm oblivious tendencies
> Of Nature, 'mid her plants, her weeds and flowers,
> And silent overgrowings, still survived. [378]

The poet is asking for some resolution of the tensions he feels between the misery of the story and the serenity of the pedlar, between the "oblivious tendencies" of nature and "natural wisdom", and seeing his unrest the pedlar makes the concluding statement:

> My Friend, enough to sorrow have you given,
> The purposes of Wisdom ask no more,
> Be wise and chearful, and no longer read
> The forms of things with an unworthy eye.
> She sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here.
> I well remember that those very plumes,
> Those weeds, and that high spear-grass on that wall,
> By mist and silent raindrops silvered o'er,
> As once I passed, did to my mind convey
> So still an image of tranquility,

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[378] Addendum to MS.B, ll. 112-116. _PW_., V, 403.

> 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. [379]

The unity of the poem's world and the purposeful development of its argument are brilliantly concluded here. The pedlar refers poet and reader to the details of the natural surroundings in order to re-interpret them, to replace the apparent chaos the poet sees in the "garden ground now wild" with an ideal order. And it is with this ideal order that the poem concludes. The sun loses its burning heat, the birds sing, the air becomes milder. The idyllic scene of the opening of the poem has returned, only now the poet shares in its harmony with the pedlar and, having come to share in his knowledge, can leave the ruined cottage with him for the outside world.

It is this harmony, this renewal of the idyllic landscape that testifies to the success of the dramatic framework. The possibilities of such a structure were seen in Adventures on Salisbury Plain, in the relationship of the woman and the sailor, but now Wordsworth has made the crucial advance by adopting a role himself in the poem. The reader sees the poet in perplexity at the world he has created and shares with him his growing understanding under the pedlar's guidance. Compared

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[379] ibid., ll. 118-134. PW., V, 403.

with the relationship of the poet and the reader in A Night on Salisbury Plain this is a great improvement. The Olympian interpreter, seeing and condemning all with the voice of a god, has been replaced by a human being who has to struggle from ignorance to understanding just like the untutored reader. Of course the poet is the pedlar, who understands all before the poem can be written, but there is no sense that this is a mechanical debate, or that Hazlitt was right to demand, for this part of The Excursion at least, that it should be non-dramatic philosophic pronouncement.[380] The distinction between the poet who queries and the pedlar who answers is so well maintained that Lamb had to ask after a first reading of The Excursion, "are you a Christian? or is it the Pedlar and the Priest that are?"[381] The question is penetrating, but it misunderstands Wordsworth's art. He is both poet and pedlar, seeking not the completely convincing pronouncement, but for a satisfactory way of leading the reader to see the complexity of the questions which must be answered. In the review of The Excursion quoted earlier, The British Critic put the case of the slow-witted reader and asked for more work by the poet to convince those who could not make the imaginative leap to Wordsworth's faith.[382]

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[380] The Examiner, 28 August, 1814, p. 555.

[381] CL. to William Wordsworth [19 September, 1814]. Lamb: Letters, II, 137.

[382] The British Critic, NS. III (May 1815), 449-467. See esp. 450.

One suspects that the writer was asking Wordsworth for proof and was incapable of seeing in the first book, and in the poem as a whole, that Wordsworth had provided something much more substantial - a human encounter where the wise man persuades the weaker of his authority and asks him to rest his faith in an interpretation of life emerging from a wider experience. To risk an analogy: the semi-dramatic form of the poem is, as it were, opposing the doctrines of Paley and Wesley. The listener is not asked to believe in the "evidence" but in the truth of a personal experience.

The pattern of the form is paralleled in some ways in The Ancient Mariner. Whereas in Religious Musings Coleridge had declaimed, in The Ancient Mariner he retires as the narrator and presents his own feelings only through the wedding guest. He is both Mariner and Wedding Guest, at once the man who knows all and the man who has to be educated. From his first impatient "Hold off! unhand me, grey-beard loon!" to his final turning away "like one that hath been stunned", we follow the same progress in The Ruined Cottage. We share the wedding guest's emotions and like him we end the poem "A sadder and a wiser man." [383] Compared with a poem like The Three Graves this is a very flexible narrative structure. In The Three Graves there

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[383] The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, l. 624. Coleridge: Poems, I, 209. Cf. Ruined Cottage, Addendum to MS.B (i), PW., V, 400, "I seemed a better and a wiser man."

is a narrator but no listener. The terror and emotion of the story is heightened but we never see the emotions registered in a wedding-guest or a wandering poet. We have to take this narrator entirely on trust. But despite such an advance *The Ancient Mariner* is still a less sophisticated poem than *The Ruined Cottage* because Coleridge has preserved this narrator's anonymity. The voice which concludes:

> He went like one that hath been stunned,
> And is of sense forlorn:
> A sadder and a wiser man
> He rose the morrow morn [384]

is still the voice of one not as intimately affected by the experience of the poem as he who concludes:

> Together casting then a farewell look
> Upon those silent walls we left the shade [385]
> And chearfully pursued our evening way.

What in *A Night on Salisbury Plain* is a weakness, the poet's involvement in his own poem, is here at last, a strength.

I have stressed the success of the dramatic structure of *The Ruined Cottage* because the poem does seem to me one of Wordsworth's really great achievements, the culmination of a long search. But inevitably even here there are weaknesses and these illuminate Wordsworth's own concern that even yet the ideal didactic form had not been found. The success of the dramatic framework is precarious. The poem rests so completely on the pedlar, one might say on his last speech, that the slightest

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[384] *Ancient Mariner*, ll. 622-625. *Coleridge: Poems*, I, 209.

[385] Addendum to MS.B, ll. 145-147. *PW.*, V, 404.

scepticism, or tendency to read the events in another way, can upset it completely, turning a solemn and compassionate poem into a heartless one. For the pedlar is apparently supremely egocentric. His interpretative speech begins with a declaration that the poet has grieved enough and that he is reading the forms of things "with an unworthy eye", but as proof offers no argument or evidence, just an account of how he took satisfaction once from the very needs that now disturb the poet. As the personal "filled my mind" gives way to the general, "That what we feel . . .", it sounds like proof but is really only assertion. And it is an assertion that includes all the intensest feelings of human life," all the grief/The passing shews if being leave behind." One needs only a little of Jeffrey's scepticism as to the philosophy of tape-sellers to query this, the concluding pronouncement of a poem that has moved from one disturbing assertion to another. One asks how can a pedlar transmute the suffering he knows; what is his power that he can counsel the poet with such authority.[386]

It is clear from the different forms of the poem extant, that this questioning troubled Wordsworth. One answer was to establish the authority of the pedlar partly by a long exposition

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[386] See pp. 214-218, of the article "Wordsworth's Never Failing Principle of Joy", <u>ELH</u>, XXXIV (1967), 208-224 in which I carry this line of thought further than is strictly relevant to this study.

of his growth and education as a "chosen son" of Nature and partly by allowing him to explain in detail the philosophic position underlying his counselling wisdom. This is the MS.B form for the poem in 1798. But this is not entirely satisfactory. It is not a question of poetic quality - and this, I think, needs emphasising. Compared with Akenside, for example, Wordsworth _is_ a philosophic poet, one who can formulate doctrines with all the life of poetry. Any of the passages quoted earlier, such as the description of how "sensation, soul and form/All melted into him", or the description of the youth's sense of life spread "O'er all that moves and all that seemeth still", will show how brilliantly Wordsworth underpins the diction of thought with the images of feeling. It is not the poetic quality of the philosophic passages that is in doubt, but their place in the poem's narrative structure. For with them _The Ruined Cottage_ seems quite clearly what it always is, two poems. One stands with _Tintern Abbey_ and _The Prelude_ as an attempt to understand personal strengths and formulate philosophic positions. The other stands with _Michael_ as a moving account of human suffering. The two cannot, of course, be separated. Wordsworth is only telling Margaret's story because he has the pedlar's strength and wants the reader to share it. But in MS.B the philosophy outweighs the suffering _too obviously_. Margaret's sorrows too easily seem the exemplum to a homily. The answer is to cut out

these passages and to rely on the dramatic framework of the poem to convince the reader. This is the MS.D poem of 1799. The question here is simply whether the poem so truncated can provide sufficient authority for the reader to accept that the poet is right to continue his journey "in happiness."

This kind of questioning does not affect the stature of the poem, nor is it meant to. To me, as to Coleridge, the poem is "one of the most beautiful poems in the language."[387] What is interesting, however, is that even here Wordsworth is still trying to solve the major problems of the didactic writer which has affected him since A Night on Salisbury Plain. Is it better to bludgeon the reader with an overt statement of principle or to persuade from behind the scenes? With the first method the reader may reject poetry with such a "palpable design",[388] in the second he may miss the meaning altogether.

(iii)

Wordsworth went on trying to find an answer to the difficulties of the didactic form no doubt simply in order to complete

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[387] Specimens of the Table Talk of the Late Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 2 vols. (London, 1835), II, 69, under 21 July, 1832.

[388] See Keats's assertions in the letter to J.H. Reynolds, 3 February, 1818. Keats: Letters, I, 224.

The Ruined Cottage to his own satisfaction. But it is possible to see the much wider significance of the search. Wordsworth believed in his mission as a teacher. In the lines eventually printed as a Preface to The Excursion he opposed himself in a near parody of the Miltonic invocation to the greatest didactic writer in the language. In The Recluse Bk. I, "Home at Grasmere", he again dwells on the task imposed on him by his knowledge and experience, when he says:

> Possessions have I that are solely mine,
> Something within which yet is shared by none,
> Not even the nearest to me and most dear,
> Something which power and effort may impart,
> I would impart it, I would spread it wide,
> Immortal the world which is to come. [389]

At the end of The Prelude he declares that he and Coleridge, "Prophets of Nature," will teach the nations, and "what we have loved/Others will love; and we may teach them how." [390]
But the problem was that Wordsworth's particular theme was at once too common and too new for this teaching to be easy. He was opposing himself, with breathtaking pretension, to the conventional, half-understood ideas on the relation of man and his world to which most men cling. As a poet and philosopher he intended to re-shape man's consciousness by first rejecting the old ways of thought. But as a poet he could only work through

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[389] "Home at Grasmere", ll. 686-691. PW., V, 336.

[390] Prelude, Bk. XIII, ll. 444-445.

the debased coinage of the language of the old systems of thought. Words like "sensation", "form", even "life" had to be re-minted if they were to have the value Wordsworth wanted. "What oft was Thought, but ne'er so well Exprest", may be over-neat, but it does suggest Pope's vision of an ideal relation between a poet, his subject and the audience. But such a relationship would be disaster for Wordsworth, who needed continually to shock the reader into seeing the freshness of what was being said, to make him see the new life in the no longer valid formulations of the Augustan age.[391]

Wordsworth's characteristic method of solving the problem is to emphasise the intensity of the experience as a verification of the meditation arising from it. The reader is, for example, persuaded to absorb himself in the episode of the stolen boat in The Prelude before he is faced with the passage that interprets, beginning "Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe!"[392] But it is doubtful whether this structure is ever wholly successful. The discrepancy is often too striking between the precision and concreteness of the dramatic scene and the

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[391] See the brilliantly suggestive article by Earl R. Wasserman, "The English Romantics: The Grounds of Knowledge", SIR, IV (1964-1965), 17-34 and Edward E. Bostetter, The Romantic Ventriloquists (Univ. of Washington Press, Seattle, 1963) for considerations of how the Romantic poets had to re-shape previously accepted philosophic formulations.

[392] Prelude, I, 428.

abstraction of the philosophic passage. Often also the experience itself is too private. Consider, for instance, the scene where Wordsworth looks for the horses to take him home from school. During the holidays his father dies. The meaning of the blow for the impatient boy is deeply felt and all the details of the wintry scene are forever etched on his mind:

> And afterwards the wind and sleety rain
> And all the business of the elements,
> The single sheep, and the one blasted tree,
> And the bleak music of that old stone wall,
> The noise of wood and water, and the mist
> ...
> All these were spectacles and sounds to which
> I often would repair and thence would drink,
> As at a fountain; and I do not doubt
> That in this later time, when storm and rain
> Beat on my roof at midnight, or by day
> When I am in the woods, unknown to me
> The workings of my spirit thence are brought. [393]

But for the reader who has not experienced the intensity of Wordsworth's emotion the exact relationship between the boy's experience at the crossroads, his father's death, and the chastisement of God is not clear. For once the intensely private nature of the experience defies Wordsworth's attempt to give it a more public relevance. Again, there is the problem that often the reader is conscious of a discrepancy between the boy who experienced and the man who interprets. In the stolen boat

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[393] ibid., XI, 376-389.

episode we respond to the poetry and feel the energy of the scene and the fear of the boy. But we are conscious too that the interpretation that follows is that of the mature man.

The Ruined Cottage has none of these weaknesses. The poet of *The Prelude* is a lonely figure, attesting both with humility and arrogance the universal validity of his private experience. Inevitably at moments the reader questions why such self revelation should be important, and in doing so asks the major critical question concerning so much Romantic poetry. But in *The Ruined Cottage* a relationship develops in which poet and reader are educated together through a shared experience. The importance of this is not just that Wordsworth had discovered a form which would incorporate the strengths and avoid the weaknesses of his poems so far. It is that at the beginning of what we recognise as the Romantic revolution in poetry, one poem at least showed that the alienation of poet and reader, felt so keenly ever since, was not a necessary feature of Romantic poetry. Wordsworth, the most egotistical of poets, had discovered a way to include the reader in otherwise private experience and to convey to him in the everyday terms of persuasion a near mystical apprehension of man's relation to the world.

APPENDIX ONE

FRAGMENTS RELATING TO SALISBURY PLAIN IN DOVE COTTAGE MS. VERSE 4

Dove Cottage MS. Verse 4 is a large notebook of 72 leaves extant, which is filled with drafts and fair copies of Wordsworth's poems from his schooldays to 1796. Its contents have been listed, discussed and selectively edited by Miss Carol Landon in her unpublished London University Ph.D. thesis, "A Survey of an Early Manuscript of Wordsworth" (short title) and so a full description of the contents which is unnecessary for my purpose will not be given here. What concerns *Salisbury Plain* are the three fragments published in *PW*., I, 287-295, and not edited by Miss Landon, which De Selincourt entitled XV, "Fragment of a 'Gothic' Tale" and XVI (a) (b). In the notebook the fragments are unnumbered and untitled. XV runs with frequent gaps from p. 5 to p. 142 and possibly on p. 144. Since this fragment is most closely connected with *The Borderers* no edition of it is presented here, though the Oxford text is defective. XVI (a) runs on p. 76 to p. 81 and XVI (b) runs on p. 75 to p. 108 and p. 143 to p. 144. Since these fragments are so closely connected with *Salisbury Plain* an edition is presented below, entitled fragments One and Two.

As will be immediately obvious, a full edition of these pieces sheds a new light on them. Whereas the Oxford text suggests that they are compact fragments, representing not very substantial work, the full text reveals that they are in fact struggling half-worked out drafts and no more. For instance, a version of stanza I of Fragment II and a version of the opening lines of Fragment I face each other on pp. 75 and 76. Fragment I then dominates until the fair copy version of stanza I of Fragment II on p. 82. This page also contains the fair copy of stanza II, but a substantial variant to this is also found on as late a page as 91. De Selincourt's text (particularly with XV) is a brilliant piece of detection, but in compiling the materials without comment and by adding a title to XV De Selincourt misrepresented the lines by suggesting that they are much more formed than they are.

This unfinished work is obviously related in some way to The Borderers and Salisbury Plain, but our judgement of in what way must be affected by the date to which we assign its composition. The notebook contains much early work and since in the Fenwick note to Guilt and Sorrow Wordsworth ascribes the story of the Female Vagrant to 1791-92, De Selincourt accepted that fragments XV and XVI belonged to this period. His reasons were:

(a) XV must pre-date The Borderers since the episode is incorporated in a more developed form in Act II, Scene ii.

(b) Both XV and XVI (I & II) are written in debased Spenserian

stanzas and Wordsworth was not likely to write debased after genuine, that is after A Night on Salisbury Plain 1793-94.

(c) Since XVI (I & II) is a first draft of a tale of a female vagrant it must pre-date the female vagrant's tale in MS.A, 1793-94.

De Selincourt was clearly right about (a), which dates XV as pre-October 1796. (b) is less convincing. The emotive word "debased" suggests that the true Spenserian stanza is sacrosanct and that once a mature poet had mastered it it was his duty to remain faithful. But the fact that Dodsley's Collection, for instance, contains eighteen nine-line variations on the Spenserian shows that the stanza was not regarded in this way. Moreover, as Southey was quick to point out, "The Tale of The Female Vagrant is written in the stanza, not the style of Spenser",[394] which suggests that the debt[s] ofthe original poem to Spenser were not so close as to rule out experiment. The debased Spenserians might be dated before or after Salisbury Plain, MS.A. The final argument (c) cannot be so conclusive. The fragment could be an early version of the woman's story, but nothing in the evidence prevents us seeing it as a later version - both arguments are conjecture.

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[394] The Critical Review, XXIV (October 1798), 201.

De Selincourt's dating stood until convincingly challenged in Miss Landon's thesis and in an article which published her findings.[395] Miss Landon argued that though XV and XVI (I & II) admittedly pre-date The Borderers, the MS itself rules out a very early date. Parts of XV and XVI (b) (II) are in the hand of Dorothy Wordsworth. This is largely draft work and there can be no suggestion that she was making fair copies at a later date. Dorothy was thus working with William and so the fragments must date from one of their rare periods together. The fragments are unlikely to pre-date An Evening Walk or Descriptive Sketches, since they represent such an advance in style. Salisbury Plain was revised a little at Windy Brow, but Wordsworth and Dorothy were busy during that period at copying the poem only just completed and were unlikely to conceive at once the major changes suggested by these fragments. The only remaining period is from late 1795 - late 1796 when the two were together at Racedown, but before The Borderers was begun. Since some of the descriptions of the cart and the whitened road suggest immediate impressions of life at Racedown, Miss Landon concludes that these fragments must have been composed during this period, that is after the Salisbury Plain poems of 1793-94 and 1795.

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[395] Carol Landon, "Wordsworth's Racedown Period: Some Uncertainties Resolved", BNYPL., LXVIII (1964), 100-109. Future citations to Landon.

The question that remains is, if the fragments post-date the two main versions of Salisbury Plain what is their relation to that poem? XV must look forward to The Borderers. The subject in general with the blind man entrusting himself to the youth, and in detail with the horseman and the plank bridge, is reworked in Act II Scene ii. Much of the verse so imitates Shakespearian profundity, as in,

> But whether work it were whose after-fear
> Must sleep upon the proof of sure dispatch
>
> (49-50)

that it is not surprising that some of the lines were incorporated in to the play. But some connection with Salisbury Plain is also clear. The fragment is in the Spenserian variant and thus belongs to the period when Wordsworth was still occupied with the narrative possibilities of the medium of Salisbury Plain. Some of the lines composed now:

> Only the crimson moon, her lustre spent,
> With orb half-visible was seen to sink,
> Leading the storm's remains along th'horizon's brink.
>
> (200-202)

are repeated with slight alteration at the beginning of Adventures on Salisbury Plain, Part Second, MS.B, 40^r, ll. 412-414. The situation where the old man entrusts himself to a chance companion parallels the situation of the sailor and the old traveller at the beginning of Adventures on Salisbury Plain. In XV the youth contemplates murder, just as the sailor had

earlier murdered the traveller met by chance. The poems create the sense of tension in the characters in the same way. The last lines of XV hint at psychological pressures:

> And all which he, that night, had seen or felt
> Showed like the shapes delusion loves to deem
> Sights that obey the dead or phantoms of a dream.
>
> (218-220)

in a way which recalls the mysterious phantoms, real or imagined, of <u>A Night on Salisbury Plain</u>. Both XV and <u>Salisbury Plain</u> intensify our sense of the drama of the relationships of the characters by paralleling the fluctuations of their emotions with the fluctuation of the storm.

Fragments One and Two, presented below, are more interesting in themselves as experiments in verse form. Although De Selincourt speaks of One as earlier than Two, it is not possible to say with certainty which of the fragments was composed first. The way in which stanza I of the Spenserian fragment Two stares across at a version of the opening of fragment One on the opposite page suggests that this is simultaneous composition and that Wordsworth is as much concerned with experimenting with verse form as with creating a new story. Just as it is a shock to see lines from <u>A Night on Salisbury Plain</u> incorporated into <u>The Prelude</u>, so it is here to see how skilfully Wordsworth can juggle with lines for the Spenserian variant stanza and the blank verse, so that, for example, the following lines can appear unchanged in both:

And from the rainy east a bellying cloud
Met the first star and hurried on the night.

(I: 17-18) (II: 21-22)

There is a link here too with <u>The Borderers</u> and other contemporaneous work. In MS.B of <u>The Borderers</u> the beggar addresses Mortimer and Rivers in words which follow very closely some parts of fragment One:

you gentlefolks have got
Warm chambers to your wish - I'd rather be
A Stone than what I am - but two nights gone
The darkness overtook me, wind and rain
Beat hard upon my head - and yet I saw
A glow-worm through the covert of the furze
Shine[ ] as if nothing ailed the sky
At which I half-accused the God in heaven -
You must forgive me Sirs --- [396]

Echoes can be heard in the fragment "Incipient Madness", which Reed redates as early summer 1797, of the woman driven across the heath by the storm, of the glow-worm, even of the baby at the breast.

The real interest of the fragments I think, however, is in their relationship to <u>Salisbury Plain</u> and this is less clear than their relationship to each other. As with fragment XV some lines are to be found also in <u>Salisbury Plain</u> MS.B. This time, however, the lines:

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[396] <u>The Borderers</u>, I, iii, 420-428. <u>PW</u>., I, 144. I am not aware that this connection has been pointed out before. It shows very strikingly how from 1793 through to <u>The Ruined Cottage</u> of 1797-1798 Wordsworth's imaginative creations were linked by one persistent image, that of the female vagrant.

> Our farm was sheltered like a little nest,
> No greener fields than ours could eye survey,
> Pleasant the fields without and all within as gay.
>
> (II: 80-90)

are found not in Dorothy Wordsworth's fair copy text but in a stanza added by Wordsworth when he was attempting a fresh opening for the woman's story. The end of the stanza reads:

> Our farm was sheltered like a little nest
> No greener fields than ours could eye survey
> And happily indeed we liv'd from day to day.
>
> (AdSP., 262, app. crit.)

The fact that this was added by Wordsworth in a blank space left by Dorothy suggests that it is late composition, possibly a result of the two days work on Salisbury Plain mentioned to Coleridge in February 1799. Wordsworth knew he had to develop a new story for the woman; where better to look for material than in the fragments in MS. 4 already worked up.

This suggests that the fragments had some connection in Wordsworth's mind with Salisbury Plain and odd details support the feeling that in this fragment we are still on that boundless heath. In one version of the opening to fragment Two the traveller looks backward in hope of seeing a "coal team or night going wain." When she reaches the brow of the hill she hears (again in a variant) the clock toll out "from the minster tower." The description of the poor mother recalls the description of the female vagrant in MS.A. But now overwrought images have been condensed to much finer poetry. As Miss Landon notes,

the over-extended:

> Might Beauty charm the canker worm of pain
> The rose on her sweet cheek had ne'er declined
> . . .
> And are ye spread ye glittering dews of youth
> . . .
>
> (ANSP., 204-5, 218)

becomes:

> Her cheek, the beauty of whose doubtful hues
> Showed like a rose, its time of blowing past [397]
> Wet with the morning's ineffectual dews.
>
> (II: 77-79)

Narrative details echo MSS. A and B. The lines in fragment Two:

> The desart opening in the moon's pale light,
> And marked at last a taper's twinkling ray
> Then little hoped for . . .
>
> (24-26)

recall MS.A:

> Nor taper glimmered dim from sick man's room.
> . . .
> At length, deep hid in clouds, the moon arose
> And spread a sickly glare.
>
> (ANSP., 115, 118-119)

In fragment One the woman emphasises her hard lot, "Though I had seen/Worse storm, no stranger to such nights as these" (23-24) in lines which look forward to the description in MS.B of how the sailor suffered, ". . . for to the chill night shower/ And the sharp wind his head he oft has bared" (73-74).

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[397] Landon, 103.

There is a relationship too of situation. Fragment One describes how the destitute, homeless woman sees the glow-worm shining through the rain and how:

> such strange comparison
> Of Envy linked with pity touched my heart
> And such reproach of heavenly ordonnance
> As shall not need forgiveness.
>
> (32-35)

This, the main statement of the piece, is a reshaping of the striking moment in the female vagrant's story in MS.A when she too reproached heavenly ordonnance:

> Bidding me trust in God he stood and prayed:
> I could not pray, by human grief oppressed,
> Viewing our glimmering cot through tears that never ceased.
>
> (268-270)

Fragment Two telescopes much of the second version of Salisbury Plain. The situation of the woman offers hospitality to the vagrant is a fusion of the details in MS.B from the episodes where the female vagrant tells her story to the sailor and where they meet the poor woman whose husband maltreats his child. The narrative strategy is repeated where the traveller's sympathy draws out the mother to tell her story, just as in MS.B the sailor's sympathy encourages the female vagrant to continue. The situation is the same but the bond of sympathy is now felt between the two women rather than between the sailor and the woman.

There is undoubtedly a relationship between these fragments and Salisbury Plain. The question is, what is their place in

the compositional history of the poem? Though dating them differently, De Selincourt and Miss Landon seem to assume that the fragments are just alternative drafts for versions of Salisbury Plain, like the additional Prelude material in MS.Y or the additions to Michael, that is like material written during the main period of composition of the poem but not ultimately included in the finished work.[398] Consideration of the Prelude or Michael additions, however, suggests that the assumption cannot hold. The tone and narrative structure in the Michael passages are exactly the same as in the published poem. The lines could be added without doing violence to the poem. But this is not true of the fragments in MS. 4. In Fragment One, for instance, the speaker could be the Female Vagrant telling of her wandering and suffering, but the verse form is blank verse and not Spenserian stanza. In Fragment Two the similarities to Salisbury Plain are still greater, but the complete change in narrative strategy suggests a new conception of the poem's structure. A third person narrative tells the story, but he speaks now of a woman crossing the plain and of meeting the poor family. The traveller/sailor of the Racedown Notebook has disappeared, and the Female Vagrant's account of past happiness is told not by the vagrant woman but by the mother of the child whom she meets.

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[398] See The Prelude, pp. 569-578; PW., II, 479-484.

In no extant version of Salisbury Plain can one find a place for these fragments as additional material. But their place can be understood as fresh attempts to develop certain points in the poem. In November 1795 Wordsworth spoke of publishing the greatly altered poem. Up to June 1796 a completed manuscript was being circulated. But by October 1796 Wordsworth was, according to Dorothy, "ardent in the composition of a tragedy."[399] Sometime during this interval Salisbury Plain had been left and The Borderers, Wordsworth's most ambitious work so far had engrossed him. The fragments, in my hypothesis, belong to this change. Either because he failed to get it published, or because the themes and treatment no longer satisfied him, Wordsworth began to develop certain aspects of the poem. In XV a situation embryonic only in Adventures on Salisbury Plain was filled out. The motives of the murderer and the feelings of guilt and doubt that possess him, (the future moral centre of The Borderers), are now high-lighted. In fragments One and Two a new emphasis was placed on the sympathy between the two women, developing the earlier idea of an emotional bond between the sailor and his chance companion the woman. Most important of all a new verse form was used, which was to become Wordsworth's usual medium for sustained poetry. Emerging from this work, The Borderers focussed Wordsworth's development: technical development in the verse and moral and intellectual development in his understanding of his themes.

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[399] DW. to ? 24 October, 1796. EY., 172.

THE TEXT

The following texts present the earliest complete version of each fragment. Fragment One exists in a number of small drafts and two fair copies. My text is taken from the more advanced of the two, which, I take it, represents Wordsworth's wishes for the fragment as far as he had composed. Fragment Two is not so clearly defined in fair copies throughout. My text prints the most advanced state of complete stanzas and gives all interlinear variants and separate drafts in the _apparatus criticus_. Textual convention follows that outlined for the main texts above. Commentary in the_apparatus_ is meant to give the reader some idea of how the drafts are spaced in this straggling MS. As Miss Landon discovered in her work on MS.4, the ink numbering of the pages is faulty and the pencil numbering added later included some pages from MS.B. She thus renumbered the MS 1-144, included the front and rear inside covers and in my account of the fragments I have followed her pagination.

FRAGMENT ONE

Text from Dove Cottage MS. Verse 4, pp. 80-81; variants pp. 76-81. Published PW., I, 292-293

The road extended o'er a heath
Weary and bleak: no cottager had there
Won from the waste a rood of earth, no hearth
Of Traveller's half-way house with its turf smoke
Scented the air through which the plover wings 5
His solitary flight. The sun was sunk
And, fresh-indented, the white road proclaimed
The self-provided waggoner gone by.

Fair copy begins p. 80

1: road alt. public way del. (p. 76); alt. It was a heath/ Weary and bleak (p. 76)

3: earth del. to ground

3-4: no hearth . . . alt. rood of earth, or fixed/His hearth del. (p. 76); alt. no smoke/From hearth of any dwelling del. (p. 76). These corrections are copied fairly on p. 77, as

The public way extended oer a heath
Weary and bleak no cottager had there

then as text but with following variants

6: solitary alt. lonely

7: sunk alt. setting del. to sinking low

7-8: And . . . gone by alt. on the indented road the recent track proclaimed/The self-provided waggoner gone by del. to text (p. 77)

Me from the public way the [common] hope
Of shorter path seduced and led me on 10
Where smooth-green sheep-tracks thridded the sharp furze
And kept the choice suspended, having chosen.
The time exacted haste and steps secure
From such perplexity, so to regain
The road now more than a long mile remote 15
I turned, when all at once winds rose
And from the rainy east a bellying cloud
Met the first star and hurried on the night.

9: [common] supplied from draft p. 77

10: shorter alt. nearer (p. 77)

11: smooth-green alt. numerous; tracks alt. walks del. to text; furze alt. gorse (p. 77)

13-17: The transition was to have begun But such perplexity endured not long but this is deleted in favour of text. These lines 13-17 are not in the draft on p. 77. The transition there was originally abrupt as

kept the choice suspended having chosen
When from the rainy east . . .

An alternative transition was:

And yet not [?long] for from the rainy east del. and alt. And long it was not so for from the east

16: turned del. to changed; all del.; alt. My course I slanted

And now against my face and whistling ears
My loose wet hair and tattered bonnet flapped 20
With thought-perplexing noise, that seemed to make
The universal darkness that ensued
More dark and desolate. Though I had seen

---

l. 24 heads p. 81

19: And now against alt. Now fast against; face alt. cheek

21: that ensued . . . , afterthought, original read thought-perplexing noise/Though I had seen

21-22: seemed . . . ensued alt. to give the total darkness that ensued (p. 78)

19-23: Extensive variants in drafts p. 77

(a)
[Lost del.] in the total darkness that ensued winds [raged] [alt. largely indecipherable [?] I and [?] and wild [?there]]
And whistled round my ears and my loose hair
And tattered bonnet flapped with deafening sound
And my legs struggled with the wind [del. to storm alt. blast] new weight [alt. a load]
Of garments heavy with the battering [del. to soaking] shower And with [del. to against] the blast my legs
Struggled and with a weight of garments soak'd
With [del. to In] hard shower. Though I had seen

Very rough draft p. 78

(b)
winds sound[s] against my face and whistling ears
My loose wet hair and tattered bonnet flapped
With deafening [alt. thought-perplexing del. alt. [?deep] and thought-perplexing] noise against the blast my legs
[Again struggled del.]

Worse storm, no stranger to such nights as these
Yet I had fears from which a life like mine 25
Might long have rested, and remember well
That as I floundered on, disheartened sore
With the rough element and pelting shower
And saw the lowliest child of earth
The glowworm sheltered by the viewless furze 30
From his green lodge with undiminished light
Shine through the rain, such strange comparison
Of Envy linked with pity touched my heart
And such reproach of heavenly ordonnance
As shall not need forgiveness. 35

31: From his . . ., originally shine through the rain following drafts on p. 81 see below

29-32: And saw . . . through the rain alt.

I saw safe sheltered by the viewless furze
The tiny glowworm lowliest child of earth
From his green lodge with undiminished light
Shine through the rain (p. 81)

33: such strange del. to and strange

Extensive variants in drafts (a) pp. 77-78 and (b) p. 79

(a)

Though I had seen
Worse storm no stranger to a night like this
[alt. such nights as this]
Yet I had fears [about me del.] such as a life
like mine

Might [[? ?] del. to well be spared] Nor had
I strength to [[?view] del.] And remember
At such a time
Floundering through [del. to oer] that dark heath nor
have
In view [del. to nor have del.] The glowworm
sheltered by the unseen furze
Shine through the rains [? ?] with undiminished
light
And such [del. to strange] comparison rose in my heart
Of envy mixed with [del. to lit by] pity and such reproach
of
As will not need forgiveness

(b)

from which a life like mine
Might long have rested and I remember well
That as I [del. to As on I] floundered o'er that [ ]
heath
No house [del. to bed] in view that strange comparison
[alt. [?] as I was/Of man that night that strange
comparison]
Of pity [del. to Envy] linked with pity wracked my heart
And such reproach of heavenly ordonnance
As shall not need forgiveness when I marked
The glowworm sheltered by the viewless furze
Shine through the shower with undiminished light

This draft, p. 79, also includes the lines not included in the fair copy pp. 80-81

The cotters ponies pastured near
Mute as the ground nor other living thing
Appeared through all the waste; only the geese
Were heard to send from far a dreary cry
[And something del.]

FRAGMENT TWO

Text from Dove Cottage MS. Verse 4, pp. 82-104;
variants from p. 75 and pp. 82-108, 143-144.
Published PW., I, 293-295.

I

No spade for leagues had won a rood of earth
From that bleak common, of all covert bare;
From traveller's half-way house no genial hearth
Scented with its turf smoke the desart air,
Through which the plover wings his lonely course, 5

Stanza begins p. 82

5: wings alt. wheels del.; lonely alt. screaming del.

1-5: Half-worked out openings on p. 75

no cottager had won a rood of earth
From that dark common of all verdure [del. to [?]] bare
From travellers half-way house no genial hearth
Did scent [del. to scented] with its turf smoke the vacant air
[The [?plover][?wings] del.] the sun had left the sky
And fresh indented did the road declare
The self-provided waggoner gone by

p. 75 also contains three lines for the third person narrative

And I can well conceive
That wandering after sunset oer some heath
The self-provided waggoner gone by

Nor aught that might detain the sight was there,
Only a blossomed slope of dazzling gorse
Gave back the deep light of the setting sun,
All else was dreary dark - sad course her feet must run.

II

Oft looked she backward for night-going wain 10
Nor coal-team or night-going wain could spy;
And the white road declared, indented plain,
The self-provided waggoner gone by;
Then turned aside for nearer path and strayed
Onward, where numerous sheep tracks green and dry 15
Thrid the sharp furze and after choice is made
Keep choice suspended-so, again she sought
With slanted course the road, a long mile now remote.

7-8: Only . . . sun alt.

Where a full-blossomed slope of dazzling furze
Gives back the rich [del. to deep] light of the setting sun (p. 144)

9: run alt. [?]

10-13: looked she backward, nor, could del. and alt.

Oft did her eye retrace the backward road
Some coal-team or night going wain to spy
The roads white surface fresh indented showed
The self-provided waggoner gone by

14-15: Then <u>alt</u>. She; where <u>del. to</u> but <u>del</u>.

10-18: <u>At the foot of p. 82 an alternative order for the new opening to the stanza was tried, with the variant lines in reverse order, 12 13, 10 11. This was then incorporated in another variant of the stanza on p. 83</u>

The roads white surface fresh indented showed
The self provided waggoner gone by
Yet oft her eye retraced the backward road
Some coal-team of night going wain to spy
In hope of [<u>alt</u>. At last for] nearer path she turned aside
And strayed where numerous sheep tracks green and dry
The sharp furze thridding did all choice divide
At last with [<u>alt</u>. And with] slanted course again she sought
The stretching road a long mile now remote
The road whose winding reach was now a mile remote

<u>p. 91 contains another version</u>

Backward she often looked and might have spared
The backward look for nothing met her eye
And fresh indented the white road declared
The self-provided waggoner gone by
So from the public way she turned and strayed
For nearer path [?where] sheep tracks smooth and dry
Thrid the sharp furze and after choice was made
Still kept the choice suspended; [turning <u>del</u>.] back she sought
With slanted [?] the road now more

<u>p. 94 contains yet another version</u>

The [white <u>del</u>.] road told [<u>del. to</u> declared] indented fresh and plain
The self provided waggoner gone by
For coal team or night going limestone wain
Backward she looked nor man or team could spy
And the white road declared indented plain
The self-provided waggoner gone by

---

pp. 91 and 94 contain repeated efforts at ll. 14-18

For nearer path from [public path del. to public way
    del.] she strayed [alt. [?out] the [?road]]
Led on where numerous sheep tracks green and dry
Thrid
Then from the road for nearer [   ] she turned and
    sought
With slanted course the road a lo[ng]

(p. 91)

[?] for a In lack of nearer path
She turned aside for nearer path and [?]

(p. 94)

III

Her heart recovered but the time allowed
No further search and less her late affright, 20
And from the rainy east a bellying cloud
Met the first star and hurried on the night;
The shower o'erblown she urged her lonely way
The desart opening in the moon's pale light,
And marked at last a taper's twinkling ray 25
Then little hoped for in the moon's pale light,
The distant clock tolled out the morning's second hour.

Stanza begins p. 83

20: search del. to stay

23-27: she urged . . . del.; And marked . . . light del.;
A tentative alternative, to have begun at l. 25 with Long was her course was replaced by alternative

The shower oerblown the air was cold and clear
The desart opening in the moon's pale light
Nor sound but her own steps she seemed to hear
For ten long miles from the minster tower
The distant clock tolled out the mornings second hour

Continuing the drafting on p. 94 mentioned above, p. 95 contains

(a) When [del. to And] soon could she regain the public way
[alt. To that [? del.] she soon should]
For now all colour was extinguished quite

(b) When long she travelled on exhausted quite
And [lost she saw del. to saw at last] a taper's twinkling ray
And [?gain'd] [del. to thither gone] the spot when from the minster tower
The distant clock toll'd [out del. to twice] the morning's second hour

IV

It was a lofty hill that to the ear
Gave large command and now from wicker hole
Of hut beneath, that taper twinkled clear 30
And thence a sound of singing upward stole
So plaintive-sad, the tones might well agree
With one who sang from very grief of soul;
More likely at such hour the lullaby
Of some poor mother o'er a sleepless child; 35
The house was soon attained-it was a dwelling wild.

Stanza heads p. 84; l. 36 found only on p. 96

30: beneath alt. below

32: tones del. to cadence

28-32: p. 79 has the following variants

When [?strait] a sound [alt. rueful sound] that seemed
the [rueful del.] [?voice/?sound]
Of [?heart] in sorrow pining smote her ear
Follow [?]
Erelong succeeded by a groan

p. 84 has the following variants

(a) And then along the night air clear and still

(b) And from the facing of a hill [alt. a hills impending
brow] she view'd
A taper twinkling through a wicker hole
Whence through the still depth of the air subdued
Forthwith a sound of singing upward stole
So plaintive sad the cadence might agree

36: dwelling wild alt. crazy hut

V

Gently she knocked and prayed they would not blame
A Traveller weary-worn and needing rest;
Strait to the door a ragged woman came
Who, with arms linked and huddling elbows press'd 40
By either hand, a tattered jacket drew
With modest care across her hollow breast,
That showed a skin of sickly yellow hue.
"With travel spent," she cried, "you needs must be
If from the heath arrived; come in and rest with me. 45

VI

How could I fear that I, whose winter nights
Won many a merry festival from sleep,

Whole stanza p. 96 deleted

pp. 84 and 85 have the following drafts for the description of the woman

(a) Who with arms linkt and huddling elbows [?drew]
a [?jacket] round her body stiff and bent (p. 84)

(b) [And del.] an [?woman] might be seen
And strait a ragged woman might
Clad in a jacket half sleeveless
Whose [?frail] [?half] jacket
That showed an arm of sickly yellow hue
All from the shoulder to the elbow bare
In jacket [?clad] which [?but] [?mask'd] repair
Half-sleeveless shewed an arm of yellow hue
All [?fr[om]] (p. 85)

47: Won many a alt. Once stole such

Must pine, in youth outliving youth's delights,
Here in the eye of hunger doomed to weep?
Here of my better days no trace is seen, 50
Yet in my breast the shadow still I keep
Of happiness gone by, with years between,
And but that Nature feels these corporal aches
My life might seem a dream, the thing a vision makes."

VII

Praying the stranger to approach she threw 55
A knot of heath upon the embers cold,
Which with her breath [ ] anon she blew
And talked between of that unfriendly wold.
Then from a mat of straw a boy she raised
Who seemed, though weak in growth, three winters old; 60
Then with a fruitless look of fondness gazed
On his pale face and placed him at her breast,

48: Must del. to should

l. 55 begins p. 97

55: Praying . . . del. and alt. So praying her to come more near

61: Then del. to And; fondness alt. love del.

62: placed del. to held

59-62: alt.

And [del. to Then del.] [?] from a bed adjoined she
took [alt. from a mat of straw a boy she took]
That seemed but little less than three yeard old
And placed him in her breast; with piteous look

If nourishment thence drawn might lead at length to rest.

VIII

The stranger, whom such sight not failed to touch,
Tenderly said, "In truth you are to blame, 65
For you are feeble and 'twill waste you much,
Such service asks indeed a stronger frame."
At this meek proof of sympathy so given
In to the mother's eye a big tear came.
"To wean the boy," she said, "I long have striven, 70
But we are poor and when no bread is nigh
It is a piteous thing to hear an infant's cry."

63: Original line, del., read

Sight which with [?] grief del. to [? ?]
the strangers heart oppressed

Later reading preferred because of the opening of the next stanza

67: Such service del. to That office

70: First thought del. in transcription was

She said to wean the boy I long have striven

foot of p. 97 are two lines connected with the fragment

To this [?] hut a [?] for every blast
To blow wild music in the [?] of [?cold/?wold]

IX

At this a thousand Dreams through memory rushed
And from her heart the present sorrow chased;
While down her cheek by feverish watching flushed 75
Th' o'erflow of inmost weakness trickled fast,
Her cheek, the beauty of whose doubtful hues
Showed like a rose, its time of blowing past,
Wet with the morning's ineffectual dews.
Then while the stranger sat to warm her feet 80
So willing seemed her ear, she gan her tale repeat.

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l. 73 begins p. 104

73: At this del. to At once

74: her heart the present alt. the heart its present

75-76: While . . . fast alt.

And tears [del. to The tears] from weakness inmost del. to inmost weakness trickled fast
Down [alt. And down] her [worn del.] cheek by feverish watching flushed (p. 99)

80: Then alt. And (p. 99); sat to del. to warmed her torpid feet

81: her tale del. to her grief the whole line in which this appears was tentative and was replaced by immediate fair copy as text

X

"A little farm, my husband's own domain,
Beheld the promise of my bridal day,
And when the dancing eddy of the brain
Was past, through many months that rolled away   85
Their calmer progress, sober reason blest
Each hope that Youth can feed or years betray.
Our farm was sheltered like a little nest,
No greener fields than ours could eye survey,
Pleasant the fields without, and all within as gay.   90

---

l. 82 begins p. 102

82: domain del. to demesne

82-87: p. 101 and pp. 107-108 have the following

(a) [And del. to While] For homely labour and appearance plain
Preserved the conscious heart [alt. mostly made all within] serene and gay
For many a month while sober reason blest
Each hope . . .
(p. 101)

(b) A little farm my husbands own domain
With feast received me on my bridal [alt. wedding] day
And homely [alt. sober alt. steady] labour and "appearance plain"
Preserved the conscious heart serene and gay
Through
Can [?Youth] can [?] or years betray
(p. 107-108)

p. 107 also has the following line, possibly as the last of a partially worked out stanza. It was not used, but belongs to the spirit of this stanza

Or stole from household prudence one [?]

XI

From homely labour and appearance plain
Round the light heart such steady pleasure shone,
Thankful I lived nor tongue pronounced me vain.
I bore my fortunes meekly and was one
Whom softened envy might have learned to bless, 95
Nor needed that these joys should all be gone
To teach my heart the claims of wretchedness,
But [ ]
Nor may it well be said by one so fallen as I."

92: light alt. bright

93: I lived nor alt. Yet never tongue

96: Nor needed . . . gone alt. did I need del. my store del. to summer should be flown

p. 101 has the following draft

From homely labour and appearance plain
Such [[?] del. to certain] pleasure with [del. to on]
[?his] [? ? shone]
Yet none [ ] pronounced me vain
I bore my fortune meekly and I was one
One whom softened envy might have learned to bless

pp. 102 and 143 contain the following lines, possibly for this part of the poem

(a) Oh I could brood on their [alt. wish and brooding wish]
Till Memory owned the [?yearning] of Desire
(p. 102)

(b) My happiness gone by with years

APPENDIX TWO

A POSSIBLE SOURCE FOR THE SAILOR'S STORY

In a note on Guilt and Sorrow in his edition Wordsworth: Representative Poems (1937) Arthur Beatty records the opinion which was repeated by Ernest de Selincourt (PW., I, 334) that the story of one Jarvis Matchem, reported in the New Annual Register for 1786, was the source for the story of Wordsworth's sailor.

I have followed up this hint in the following sources and present below a composite account of what could be the inspiration for Wordsworth's plot.

Sources:

(i) The New Annual Register for 1786, 27-28; 37.

(ii) The Gentleman's Magazine, LVI (June 1786), 521.

(iii) R.H. Dalton Barham, The Life and Letters of the Rev. Richard Harris Barham, 2 vols. (London, 1870), II, 3-4, and his edition of The Ingoldsby Legends: or, Mirth and Marvels, 2 vols. (London, 1870), 237-255.

(iv) Charles G. Harper, _The Ingoldsby Country_ (London, 1904), 264-269.

(v) Philip G.M. Dickinson, "Drummerboy Murdered at Alconbury", _Hunts. County Magazine_, I, ii (1946), 65-66.

A basic source for all accounts must be the pamphlet, _A Narrative of the Life, Confession and Dying Speech of Jarvis Matchan_, signed by the Rev. J. Nicholson who attended him as Minister. This is mentioned by R.H. Dalton Barham in his discussion of his father's version of the story in "The Dead Drummer" of _The Ingoldsby Legends_ (1840-1847) and quoted in his edition, pp. 253-255. I have been unable to trace the pamphlet but Mr. Philip Dickinson, the Huntingdon County Archivist has told me by letter that he has seen but cannot now locate it, and thus can vouch for its existence. The accounts in the _New Annual Register_ and the _Gentleman's Magazine_ differ much in detail, but remarkable similarities in phrasing in their accounts of the sailor's tortured state of mind point to a common source. The sailor's name is spelt variously as Jarvis (Gervase) Matcham (Matchan, Matchem). I shall refer to him as Gervas Matchan, following the first record of his name in the register of the Church where he was baptised.

The Story

Gervas, son of David Matchan of Frodingham was baptised and entered in the register of Owthorne Parish Church, East Riding on 29 September 1756.[400] At the age of twelve he ran away from home and became a stable boy with a family named Bethell at Rise also in the East Riding. At seventeen he was sent in charge of horses, presented by the Duke of Northumberland to the Empress of Russia (Mr. Dickinson has Emperor). On his return he enlisted on the Medway man-of-war but he deserted. He was then pressed into the crew of the Ariadne. While the ship was anchored off Yarmouth Matchan escaped and enlisted in the 13th Regiment of Foot. Near Chatham he deserted and spent some time as a vagrant before being arrested at Huntingdon races. He talked his way out of this and (perhaps as a condition of his release) enlisted in the 49th Regiment of Foot, then recruiting in the country town.

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[400] I am most grateful to Mr. N. Higson, County Archivist for the East Riding of Yorkshire and to the Reverend Harry Eastwood, Vicar of Withernsea with Owthorne, for their help in tracing this record. Mr. Dickinson says (p. 63) that Huntingdon tradition has it that Matchan was born at Fradlingham, a village he could not identify. Harper rightly suggests Frodingham, but does not distinguish between North and South Frodingham. The records of North Frodingham show no trace of the name Matchan. South Frodingham (population in 1801 only 50) is in the East Riding, 2 ½ miles N.N.W. of Patrington.

On 18 August 1780 (19th in all accounts save Dickinson) Matchan went with Benjamin Jones, the drummer-boy son of a quartermaster (recruiting-sergeant) to fetch subsistence money from a Major Reynolds at Diddington Hall, about five miles from Huntingdon. On the return journey carrying £6-7 in gold, they lost their way at the junction of the Huntingdon road with the Great North Road, half a mile north of Buckden, and arrived eventually at Alconbury where they stayed the night (this is Dickinson only). As they set off next morning Matchan cut Jones's throat and made his way to Stamford where he picked up the north-bound coach. Having visited his mother (Harper says he went to London only) Matchan enlisted again in the navy and was paid off finally at Plymouth from HMS. Sampson on 15 June 1786.

Together with a friend named John Shepherd (Sheppard, Shepperd) Matchan set off to tramp along the old coach road from Plymouth to London. They had only reached the stretch between Blandford and Salisbury, however, passing "Woodyates Inn", when they were overtaken by a fierce storm.[401] Accounts of what actually happened now differ, but as this

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[401] It is interesting that William Stukeley, Stonehenge: A Temple Restor'd to the British Druids (1740), which, as I have suggested Wordsworth may have known, illustrates (fig. opp. p. 6) a section of Salisbury Plain "a little beyond Woodyates."

is the only section of the Narrative quoted by R.H. Dalton Barham and since all other versions are diluted versions of this, I quote it in full:

> Matchan being a little way apart from Shepherd, the latter called to the former, and said, 'Jarvis, what is that about a hundred yards on our right hand from the road, which moves backwards and forwards?' Matchan desired his companion to go with him and see what it was, but he refused, and Matchan went alone till he came within a dozen yards of it, when it appeared like the upper part of the body of a woman, much deformed, having large features, and seemed to shake its head at him; on which he returned to Shepherd, and exclaimed, 'It is the most frightful thing I ever saw! Lord have mercy upon us! what can it be?' Shepherd replied, 'You fool, it is nothing but the shepherd in the hut endeavouring to frighten you.' Matchan then said, 'Will you go with me to see it?' And they went together, and it appeared as before mentioned; on which Shepherd took up a stone and offered to throw at it, saying, if it was a human being it would move. The spectre immediately sunk into the earth, and there appeared something in the form of a milestone in its place, which Matchan went round, and then touched it with his stick, foot, and hand. Walking on they wondered at the appearance, and began to examine each other, saying something particular would happen to one or both of them. They had not gone far before Matchan perceived a stone in the road, about as big as his fist, to turn over of its own accord, and afterwards they both saw several stones do so. They then agreed to walk, one on each side of the road, that they might see which of them had so particularly offended the Divine Being. And then the stones (one of which appeared with two eyes, like Matchan's) turned over towards Matchan all the way till they came near to an inn, where he imagined he saw his Saviour, on one hand, and the drummer-boy (which he had murdered) in his drummer's dress, with his drum, on the other, and they suddenly dissolved into ashes. Being terrified, he immediately confessed the murder to Shepherd, who told it at the inn, and he was taken from thence and committed to gaol by the Mayor of Salisbury, and afterwards removed to Huntingdon for trial and execution.

According to all accounts Matchan was executed on Wednesday, 2 August, 1786, but this cannot be checked due to the recent spoiling and subsequent destruction of the relevant assize records. His body was hung in chains at Alconbury, the murder spot. Harper claims that the body hung on Alconbury Hill, but Dickinson, with perhaps more certain local knowledge, states that the gibbet stood at the Woolley road junction, half-way between Alconbury and Brampton Hut. Close by stands the bridge still known as "Matchan's bridge."

This is Matchan's story and the links are strong between it and the murder story plot of Adventures on Salisbury Plain. In the poem as in fact, the visitation takes place on the plain but the murder does not. Wordsworth's sailor, like Matchan, has been both an enlisted and a pressed sailor. The New Annual Register stresses that like the sailor Matchan was essentially a good man: "He declared . . . that, excepting this murder, he had at no time of his life done any injury to society" (NAR. 27). It is emphasised too with both men that the remorse they felt for the deed made execution itself a blessing: ". . . from the fatal hour he had been a stranger to all enjoyment of life or peace of mind, the recollection thereof perpetually haunting his imagination, and often rendering his life a burthen almost insupportable" (NAR. 27). The stones which dashed against Matchan's feet appear vestigially in Adventures on Salisbury Plain (123-124), but the circumstances

which move him to confess have been stripped of supernatural horror. Wordsworth's sailor is disturbed progressively by the gibbet, his encounter with the female vagrant and the beaten boy until his spirit is broken by the meeting with his dying wife. The end of Wordsworth's sailor and of Matchan is the same: they hang in chains as a gruesome warning to passers-by.

The story of Adventures on Salisbury Plain takes from Matchan's story only the details of the actual murder which are susceptible to finer treatment, that is, the basic goodness of the man, his remorse and voluntary confession, and the cruel uncertainty of his service life. But it is not out of character that Wordsworth should conceive of using such a violent real-life event. A Somersetshire Tragedy began from an equally horrific source. The real question is whether it is likely that Wordsworth knew the story of Matchan. Professor Beatty pointed to the New Annual Register account, but this consists of three pages only in a large and indigestible volume. It is more likely that Wordsworth heard the account or read the pamphlet of the confession and execution while at Cambridge. Alconbury is about 18 miles as the crow flies north of Cambridge. Wordsworth must have passed near the murder spot many times for the Great North Road through Grantham and Stamford, along which he would have travelled from home and Cambridge, passes Alconbury Hill, where the road

to Huntingdon and Cambridge branches off. The execution took place in August 1786 and Wordsworth went up to Cambridge in October 1787. The gibbetted body would still be mouldering away and the narrative would be in circulation. As Mr. Dickinson says, drawing on his knowledge of the district and of local people: "There must be few people in Alconbury today who have not heard of the murder . . . the event still stands out as the one and only important happening in the history of the village" (Dickinson, 65). He mentions a Mr. Frank Goodes who could remember in 1946 the gibbet post mouldering in his childhood days. It seems not extravagant to guess that news of such an event would have reached Wordsworth in Cambridge if people still pass on the story in the district today.

APPENDIX THREE

THE TEXT OF THE OXFORD WORDSWORTH SALISBURY PLAIN

The present authoritative text of Salisbury Plain is that in The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, 5 vols., edited E. De Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (Oxford, 1940-1949), (I, reprinted 1952), 94-127. This text is inadequate in three ways. The transcription of the previously unpublished MSS is not accurate. The *apparatus criticus* which claims to represent the early stages of the poems is not complete. MS evidence is not accepted or rejected to any consistent plan. My aim is not to detail all the inadequacies of the Oxford text, but to support my claim that it is unreliable with representative examples.

Both MSS.A and B are inaccurately represented. For MS.A, line 19 De Selincourt prints, "load the kindly spirits down", for MS, "bow the . . ." (PW., I, notes p. 335). At line 87 a singular, "thunder", is made plural (PW., I, *app. crit.* p. 100). For line 118 De Selincourt prints, "At length through hideous clouds, the moon arose" (PW., I, *app. crit.* p. 102), where the MS actually reads, "At length deep hid in clouds . . .", corrected to, "At length though hid in clouds . . .." MS.A reads at line 254, "pleasant morn of may", not as printed, "pleasant noon of

may" (PW., app. crit. p. 107). Line 395 reads in MS.A, "Like flames which far and wide the west illume" and not the printed, ". . . which far and wide the crest illume" (PW., I, app. crit. p. 118). Line 432, "Reveal with still-born glimpse the terrors of our way", is printed as, ". . . the terrors of our day" (PW., I, notes p. 339). In the same transcription in the notes pp. 339-340, line 438, "And bless, as she has taught, her hand benign", is misrepresented as, ". . . as she has taught, the hand benign" and line 460, "Oh that a slave who on his naked knees", as, ". . . who on his bended knees".

MS.B is similarly misrepresented. Line 165, "through rain and blinding storm", is printed as, "through rain and blowing storm" (PW., I, app. crit. p. 101). Line 192, "Yet when the ambiguous gloom that ruin shew'd", is printed correctly in the apparatus to MS.A, but wrongly in the apparatus to MS.B as, "ambiguous glow" (PW., I, app. crit. p. 102). MS.II reads at line 638, "Here cold sweat started from the sailor's brow", not, as printed, "The cold sweat" (PW., I, app. crit. p. 120). Line 665, "While his pale lips these homely truths disclose", is misrepresented as, "his wan lips" (PW., I, app. crit. p. 121). "Wan" is an MS correction.

This last example introduces the second kind of error, for what one is objecting to in "pale"/"wan" is that the editor has not made it clear that he has chosen to print the corrected rather than the original text. This is a major failing in the whole of

the "Oxford Wordsworth" text. No valid generalisation can be made about the editorial policy followed, nor can any pattern be traced in Professor De Selincourt's acceptance or rejection of MS corrections. At the opening of MS.A, for example, one might conclude that the original MS text is being followed. In line 3, "forests" was corrected to, "thickets" and at line 15, "peal" to "howl", but these corrections Professor De Selincourt ignores. Butat lines 38-39 he accepts without comment MS correction, printing:

> O'er Sarum's plain a Traveller wearily
> Measured his lonesome way, the distant spire,
>
> (PW., I, notes p. 335)

which is the corrected version of the original, which reads:

> O'er Sarum's plain the traveller with a sigh
> Measured each painful step, the distant spire.

In stanza VI (PW., I, app. crit. p. 96) De Selincourt does not accept the MS.A correction of, "smoke upwreathed" to "farm-smoke curl'd", but he does accept the correction, "peasant" for MS "shepherd." The presentation of MS.I, 82-104 (PW., I, app. crit. p. 100) is a good example of how a substantial section of the original MS reading can be distorted through this inconsistency. De Selincourt follows the original MS text of stanzas X and XI closely. A correction, from:

> "Oh from that mountain pile avert thy face
> Whate'er betide at this tremendous hour"

to:

> "And from that pile," he cried, "avert thy face
> Whate'er betide at this dark night hour"

is rejected. But in stanza XII, a very heavily corrected stanza, he prints correction without comment. Thus instead of the MS:

> The sign was from beneath but face or form
> He saw not mocked as by a hideous dream.
> Three hours he wildered through the watry storm,

the opening lines are printed as:

> He heard no more, for fear oppress'd his form
> In shape more hideous than a madman's dream;
> At last he fled and wildered through the storm.

Of two corrections made at the same time, one is accepted here as preferable to the original, while the other is rejected, and no explanation of the choice is given. What adds to the confusion is that in the apparatus criticus and the notes at the end of the volume, some corrections are singled out for comment. This suggests that between them the notes and apparatus do present all the MS evidence and that one can distinguish in them the original from the corrected reading. The presentation of MS.A, stanza XXIV, shows how misleading this is. The stanza is very heavily corrected. In the apparatus criticus (PW., I, p. 105) De Selincourt prints an inaccurate version of the original text and adds in the notes the correction that echoes Measure for Measure:

> Their sensible warm motions transport swayed
> By day, and Peace at night her cheek between them laid.
>
> (PW., I, notes p. 336)

Since no other correction is mentioned one is justified in thinking that this was the only correction Wordsworth made. In fact he reworked most of the stanza.

Similar inconsistencies can be found in the presentation of MS.B. At line 654 the original reading, "Relenting thoughts and self-reproach awoke", is preferred to the correction, ". . . of his wrath beguil'd/The Father and relenting thoughts awoke" (PW., I, app. crit. p. 120), but in the next line the MS, "the boy", is rejected in favour of the correction, "his son." Stanza LXXXIV is presented in a similar way (PW., I, app. crit. p. 124), with the opening lines following the corrected text, but line 750 following the original. Such inconsistency undermines the persuasiveness of Professor De Selincourt's discussion of the development of the poem. Presenting for the first time the poems I have referred to as A Night on Salisbury Plain and Adventures on Salisbury Plain, he argues that MS.II, dating from 1798 (actually 1799), represented in fact the poem of two and a half years earlier. The text offered in support of this view, however, does not represent the poem at any one stage of its development.

The third weakness of the "Oxford Wordsworth" is that the apparatus criticus is inadequate for its purpose of giving readings of the earlier MSS and information about them. It is impossible to work out accurately from the text and apparatus any stage of the poem's development, not just because this is intrinsically a clumsy way to read a poem, but because the

evidence presented is too limited. Most errors are simply omissions. For example the _apparatus_ p. 101 includes most of the MS.A variants of stanza XVI of the 1842 _Guilt and Sorrow_, but not the lines:

> Where the wold gypsey in her strawbuilt home
> Might warm her wet limbs by fire of fern and broom.

Again the _apparatus_ does not record that for line 181 (1842), "this lone mansion", MS.A reads, "the lone Spital." In the presentation of MS.B, however, the inadequacy is more serious, since Professor De Selincourt frequently tries to use as a basic text not only the text of _Guilt and Sorrow_, but the fragments of MS.A printed in the _apparatus_ below. The problems this produces can be seen if one tries to make a comparative reading of, for example, _Guilt and Sorrow_ stanza IV. The versions read:

(MS.A: VI)

> No shade was there, no meads of pleasant green,
> No brook to wet his lips or soothe his ear,
> Huge piles of corn-stack[s] here and there were seen
> But thence no smoke upwreathed his sight to cheer;
> And see- the homeward shepherd dim appear
> Far off, he stops his feeble voice to strain;
> No sound replies but winds that whistling near
> Sweep the thin grass and passing wildly plain,
> Or desert lark that pours on high a wasted strain.

(MS.B: VII)

> No tree was there, no meadow's pleasant green,
> No brook to meet his lips or soothe his ear.
> Vast piles of cornstacks here and there were seen,
> But thence no smoke upwreathed his sight to cheer.
> He mark'd a homeward shepherd disappear
> Far off, and sent a feeble shout, in vain;
> No sound replies but winds that whistling near
> Sweep the thin grass and passing wildly plain,
> Or desart lark that pours on high a wasted strain.

(<u>Guilt and Sorrow</u>; IV)

> No tree was there, no meadow's pleasant green,
> No brook to wet his lip or soothe his ear;
> Long files of corn-stacks here and there were seen,
> But not one dwelling-place his heart to cheer.
> Some labourer, thought he, may perchance be near;
> And so he sent a feeble shout- in vain;
> No voice made answer, he could only hear
> Winds rustling over plots of unripe grain,
> Or whistling thro' thin grass along the unfurrowed plain.

To make this reading from the Oxford text, one has to read two lines of text, half a line in the *apparatus criticus* and half in the text above, then six lines in the apparatus presenting MS.A, but revise these in the light of the editorial direction, "so MS. 2, but 32 'a homeward shepherd disappear'" (*PW.*, I, *app. crit.* and text p. 96). But even with such detection the reading cannot be accurate, since the *apparatus* does not mention that the MS.B revision of MS.A is really more extensive, as is shown above.

Again one cannot discover the MS.B version of *Guilt and Sorrow* stanza XIX. The *apparatus* gives the variants for lines 168-169 (1842) only and so one assumes that the rest of the MS.B text is the same as printed in 1842. In fact in MS.B the stanza opened:

> When hearing a deep sigh that seem'd forth sent
> From one who mourn'd in sleep, he raised his head,
> And saw a Woman on the pediment
> Outstretched and turning on a restless bed.

The *apparatus* does not give this version, and thus withholds the fact that this stanza too was revised for the 1842 edition.

A final example is the inadequacy of the presentation in the "Oxford Wordsworth" of the transition in MS.B between Parts One and Two. (PW., I, notes pp. 337-338). De Selincourt prints MS.B stanzas XLV to XLVII and then, after the connecting comment, "Here follow asterisks, denoting the rest of the woman's story [334-450], and then MS. 2 goes on . . ." he prints MS.B LXVI to LXVIII. But this misleads in three ways. First, Parts One and Two do not follow consecutively but are separated by five pages and four stubs. Knowledge of what is on these pages helps us to date the composition of the MS and in fact casts doubt on the dating advanced by Professor De Selincourt. Second, there is no evidence for the assumption that the asterisks denote the woman's story as published in lines 334-450. The Female Vagrant had already been published by the time MS.B was copied and it seems likely that a new story for the woman was envisaged. Third, and most important, the stanzas do not appear as printed since three stanzas, LXII-LXV, have been omitted.

Such inaccuracy undermines Professor De Selincourt's intention that his text should make possible the study of manuscripts of "unique value . . . which go back to the poet's formative years, from his school and college days till 1797.[402] As errors in Miss Welsford's study, for instance, show, one cannot use the Oxford text, as its preface claims, as a reliable record of a

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[402] PW., I, viii.

poem's "development from the earliest existing copy, through its successive stages in manuscript and print till it received its final revision."[403] Miss Welsford examines, for example, the growth in Wordsworth's attitudes as he developed A Night on Salisbury Plain, and declares that his indictment of society grows more severe. His attack, she says, is "driven home even more forcibly when the remorseful Sailor, having received his self-sought death sentence, pronounces from the dock his scathing but just verdict on the administration of legal justice:

> "Blest be for once the stroke that ends tho' late
> The pangs, which from they halls of terror came
> Thou who of Justice bear'st the violated name."[404]

But in Adventures on Salisbury Plain these are not the sailor's words. The apparatus criticus of the Oxford text can easily suggest that in that poem the structure of the stanza was the same as in 1842, i.e. with the sailor speaking the closing lines, and, following this, Miss Welsford has added the necessary punctuation to the stanza which is unpunctuated in MS.B. But in fact the shifts of tone and tense in the whole stanza as it appears in the MS make it clear that this is not the verdict of the sailor but of the poet, who now apostrophises authority, and that it should read:

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[403] ibid., I, i.

[404] Welsford, 25.

> Confirm'd of purpose, fearless and prepared,
> Not without pleasure, to the city strait
> He went and all which he had done declar'd:
> "And from your hands," he added, "now I wait,
> Nor let them linger long, the murderer's fate."
> Nor ineffectual was that piteous claim.
> Blest be for once the stroke which ends, tho' late,
> The pangs which from thy halls of terror came,
> Thou who of Justice bear'st the violated name!

The sailor has recognised himself as a murderer and is now prepared to submit to society; the poet sympathises with the individual and will only condemn authority; the distinction is crucial for the rhetorical and dramatic structure of the poem. A second error has resulted from simple inadequacy in the apparatus. Aware that the development of Wordsworth's ideas cannot be separated in critical discussion from the development of his art, Miss Welsford examines some of the changes made in Salisbury Plain for publication in 1842. She compares Guilt and Sorrow stanza XXXV against the version of 1794 and concludes: "Irony and doubt have been omitted from the later version."[405] In fact, however, though the critical conclusion might still stand, it cannot be accepted on Miss Welsford's presentation of the evidence. Stanza XXXV is to be found, essentially the same save for the phrase "with rays of promise", in MS.B of Salisbury Plain which dates from 1799. But De Selincourt omits this and two more stanzas in the note which claims to represent the transition from

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[405] Welsford, 137.

Part One to Part Two in MS.B.[406] It is thus impossible to tell from the authoritative text that most of the changes Miss Welsford discusses were made more than forty years earlier.[407]

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[406] See PW., I, 111-112, and notes pp. 337-338.

[407] The material in the last two paragraphs has already been published in my review of Miss Welsford's book in EIC, XVII (1967), 362-367.

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