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CHAPTER FIVE

‘Urania I Shall Need Thy Guidance’: The Case of William Wordsworth**I**

The year 1800 saw Coleridge in a state of high excitement. He believed the search for the modern Milton was finally over: he had found the right man for the job at last. A few years earlier he and Southey had tried to take on the role by writing their sub-Milonic, pro-revolutionary epic *Joan of Arc*; but rather than rousing the revolutionary fervour of a new generation, *Joan* had sunk largely without trace. Now he had found someone better qualified for the role, as he explained in two letters to Thomas Poole:

I do not hesitate in saying that since Milton no man has *manifested* himself equal to Wordsworth ....

Have I affirmed anything miraculous of W[ordsworth]? Is it impossible that a greater poet than any since Milton may appear in our days?¹

Coleridge and Wordsworth first met in 1795.² At that time, Coleridge had finished his contribution to *Joan* and was making plans for a second epic, to which he had given an overtly Milonic working title: ‘The Origin of Evil, an Epic Poem’.³ By 1798, however, Coleridge had become convinced that Wordsworth rather than himself was the man to pen this new *Paradise Lost*, and was bombarding him with plans for the grand philosophical poem that he now insisted Wordsworth was to write.⁴ Wordsworth, he was sure, was to be the new Milton. All he needed to do was to write his epic.

Wordsworth himself was hardly averse to the idea of taking up Milton’s mantle. Like most educated men of his generation, he had grown up venerating Milton as one of the greatest of poets: his father encouraged him to memorise ‘large portions’ of Milton at the age of five, and he may well have studied Milton’s works at school.⁵ At Cambridge his idolatry of Milton

appears to have reached embarrassing heights, as he later recalled in *The Prelude*:

Yea, our blind Poet, who, in his later day,
Stood almost single, uttering odious truth,
Darkness before, and danger's voice behind;
Soul awful! if the earth hath ever lodg'd
An awful Soul, I seemed to see him here
Familiarly, and in his Scholar's dress ...
(1805 *Prelude*, book 3, ll. 284–9: P 1:142)

Wordsworth did not just 'see' Milton wandering around Cambridge; he also went to visit him, going to the room where Milton was said to have lived as a student and drinking so many toasts to his memory that he became (by his account) more deeply drunk than at any other point in his life. Looking back on his youthful failings in *The Prelude*, he framed his account of these events as an admission of weakness to Milton's spirit, opening with his address to Milton as a 'temperate Bard' and ending with 'Ye will forgive the weakness of that hour'.⁶ These passages are a classic example of eighteenth-century Milton-worship: Milton is imagined as a uniquely powerful and holy figure, a 'Soul awful! if the earth has ever lodged/An awful Soul', who acts as a moral role model, his own status as a 'temperate Bard' implicitly rebuking Wordsworth's drunken intemperance. He is a figure to be worshipped: Wordsworth describes his drinking to Milton's memory as a pouring out of 'libations', as if he were sacrificing to some pagan spirit or god. And when, like Wordsworth, we fail to live up to the standards that Milton sets for us, the proper response, it seems, is to confess our sins to Milton's spirit and pray that he 'will forgive the weakness of that hour'. Wordsworth's Milton, in other words, bears a strong resemblance to Jesus Christ; and like Jesus, his presence lives on long after death, especially in those places sanctified by his actions during life.

Such Miltonolatry was not unusual among the literary men of the period, especially among those on the Whiggish side of the political spectrum. What set Wordsworth apart was not the depth of his devotion to Milton, but the height of his poetic ambition, which led him to believe that he had the potential to become Milton's successor. We have his later testimony that as a young man he feared poetic comparison only with 'Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare,

and Milton', and in his poetry he was comparing himself to Milton as early as 1794, in lines added to his earlier poem, *An Evening Walk*:

In dangerous night so Milton worked alone,
Cheared by a secret lustre all his own,
That with the deepening darkness clearer shone.⁷

The 'dangerous night' here must be an allusion to Milton's description of himself as being 'with darkness and with dangers compassed round' while he wrote *Paradise Lost*, a reference both to his blindness and his precarious political situation after the Restoration. Wordsworth, obviously, was not blind, but in 1794 he was still a self-identified republican, opposed to the war with France and, according to Nicholas Roe, part of 'the mainstream of contemporary protest'; and these lines suggest that he saw himself as being, like Milton, a revolutionary poet who had to somehow continue his work even in a time of anti-revolutionary reaction.⁸ When he met Coleridge the following year, the younger poet fully accepted this comparison. Wordsworth was to be Milton's second coming; and just as Milton's epic had illuminated his own dark time, so Wordsworth's epic would bring light to the troubled years at the end of the eighteenth century.

In about 1800 Wordsworth wrote (but did not publish) a verse 'Prospectus' for his forthcoming epic, which he had named *The Recluse*. It would not be an epic of arms and the man, like *Joan of Arc* and the other epics of the 1790s; instead it would be an epic of a new, philosophical kind, as innovative as Milton's had been in its day. Just as Milton had declared his intentions to surpass Homer and Virgil, writing 'things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme', so Wordsworth's Prospectus declared his intention to surpass Milton in turn:

'Fit audience find though few!' Thus prayd the Bard
Holiest of men. Urania I shall need
Thy guidance, or a greater Muse, if such
Desend to earth, or dwell in highest heaven.
For I must tread on Shadowy ground, must sink
Deep, and ascend aloft, and worlds
To which the Heaven of heavens is but a veil.
All strength, all terror, single, or in bands
That ever was put forth by personal Form

Jehovah, with his thunder, and the choir
Of shouting Angels, and Th'empyreal Thrones
I pass them unalarm'd. The darkest pit
Of the profoundest hell, night, chaos, death
Nor aught of blinder vacancy scoop'd out
By help of dreams, can breed such fear and awe
As fall upon me often when I look
Into my soul, into the soul of man
My haunt, and the main region of my song.⁹

Harold Bloom has cited this 'Prospectus' as evidence of 'Wordsworth's deepest obsession as a monstrously strong poet ... to be an influence, and not to be influenced'.¹⁰ Wordsworth proposes to achieve so much that he, not Milton, shall henceforth be looked up to as the poet who went highest, deepest and furthest; he will not be content for people to say that he is almost as sublime as Milton, looking forward instead to the day when it shall be said that Milton was almost as sublime as he is. If Milton had gone beyond the pagan heaven and hell of Homer and Virgil, so Wordsworth will go beyond the Christian heaven and hell of Milton. Milton required a greater muse than Homer's, namely Urania, the Holy Spirit; Wordsworth claims to need an even greater muse than her. When he declares that 'the main region of my song' is more fearsome and awesome than 'aught of blinder vacancy scoop'd out/By help of dreams', Wordsworth is clearly referring, rather uncharitably, to Milton: Milton, though blind, claimed to have written *Paradise Lost* with the help of inspiration brought in dreams, but Wordsworth declares that whatever Milton's imagination managed to 'scoop' out of his 'blinder vacancy', he will be able to go one better. And he promises to achieve all this even though Milton (and not, as one might expect, Jesus) was the 'holiest of men', the man in whom divine inspiration was stronger than in anyone else who has ever lived. Perhaps it was displays of awesome self-confidence such as this that convinced Coleridge 'that since Milton no man has *manifested* himself equal to Wordsworth'; or perhaps they were for Coleridge's benefit, attempts on Wordsworth's part to live up to his friend's exalted opinion of him. For the truth was that, in spite of all his bluster, Wordsworth had not finished *The Recluse*; in fact he never finished it, and after wrestling with it for more than half a century he died in 1850 leaving it incomplete.

In 1802, having made little progress with *The Recluse*, Wordsworth had another encounter with Milton's spirit; perhaps his first since he saw him 'familiarily' at Cambridge. Lee M. Johnson writes:

The figure of Milton ... benevolently haunted Wordsworth throughout his career. More precisely, one might say that the Miltonian haunting took definitive form in May, 1802, when, after listening to Dorothy read Milton's sonnets, William 'took fire' from their character and ultimately became the most prolific sonneteer of all the major English poets. What happened to Wordsworth on that occasion was probably something akin to a conversion experience based, in this case, on the intuiting of the presence of Milton's sensibility in the very form of his sonnets.¹¹

Wordsworth's 'conversion experience' – which must have happened within a few months of Blake's vision of Milton falling from heaven to awaken Albion – had an immediate effect upon him, and he began to compose sonnets almost at once. One of them expressed his frustration at the failure of the French Revolution to produce any great leader or theorist, let alone an epic poet or a prophet:

Great Men have been among us; hands that penn'd
And tongues that utter'd wisdom, better none:
The later Sydney, Marvel, Harrington,
Young Vane, and others who call'd Milton Friend.
These Moralists could act and comprehend:
They knew how genuine glory was put on;
Taught us how rightfully a nation shone
In splendor: what strength was, that would not bend
But in magnanimous meekness. France, 'tis strange,
Hath brought forth no such souls as we had then.
Perpetual emptiness! unceasing change!
No single Volume paramount, no code,
No master spirit, no determined road;
But equally a want of Books and Men!¹²

Sidney, Marvell, Harrington and Vane was a very politically charged list of 'great men' for Wordsworth to have come up with, for they were the

republican heroes of the English Commonwealthman tradition. By 1802 – the year in which Napoleon was declared ‘first consul for life’ – France only notionally remained a republic; but as Todd’s 1801 ‘Life of Milton’ makes clear, conservative opinion in England still saw ‘republicanism’ as its enemy, and could only be reconciled to historical republicans once suitably reassured that they had nothing in common with their modern counterparts.¹³ This is not a reassurance that Wordsworth’s sonnet offers, for his references to contemporary France explicitly frame Milton and his friends as ideal revolutionary leaders, the sort of men the French Revolution should have produced, and had not. The central figure in Wordsworth’s sonnet is Milton, not only because it follows Milton’s example in applying the sonnet form to a political subject, but also because he is imagined as the very hub of this constellation of the English Commonwealth’s ‘Great Men’, who are linked together by having ‘call’d Milton friend’; but this, clearly, is a version of Milton who keeps rather dangerous company, quite unlike the safe, republican-but-not-*that*-kind-of-republican Milton presented by Todd the year before. France, in its ‘perpetual emptiness’ and ‘unceasing change’, recalls Milton’s Chaos, awaiting the hand of some ‘master spirit’ or God to shape it into worlds, while Wordsworth’s closing lines, ‘No master spirit, no determined road;/But equally a want of Books and Men!’ recall Milton’s *Areopagitica*, which he had read in revolutionary France:

Many a man lives a burden to the Earth; but a good Booke is the pretious life-blood of a master spirit, imbalm’d and treasur’d up on purpose to a life beyond life. ’Tis true, no age can restore a life, whereof perhaps there is no great losse; and revolutions of ages doe not oft recover the losse of a rejected truth, for the want of which whole Nations fare the worse. (*Areopagitica*: MP 2:492–3)

An age without master spirits will thus also be an age without good books, which is exactly what Wordsworth claims that France is now experiencing. As Milton predicted, its ‘revolutions of ages’ have failed to ‘recover the loss of a rejected truth’, and accordingly ‘whole nations fare the worse’. As the political situation in France spirals out of control, Wordsworth laments the age’s lack of Sidneys, Vanes, Marvells and Harringtons, patriots, philosophers and political theorists wise and brave enough to steer their way through the tumult of events; but he strongly implies that it also needs a new Milton, a master

spirit for the new, revolutionary era. The fact that Wordsworth's republican heroes are historically distanced – a group of long-dead Englishmen rather than a group of contemporary Frenchmen – makes this poem less obviously radical in tone, but it does not alter the fact that what Wordsworth mourns here is specifically the failure of the French Revolution to produce, not just adequate leaders, but adequate *republican* leaders. A new Milton, it is implied, would not just write epic poetry; through the power of his 'master spirit', he also would impose order on France's chaos, getting the Revolution back on track and fulfilling the glorious hopes that had been raised at its outset a decade before. In putting himself forward as a potential modern Milton, then, Wordsworth was setting himself a very high, and very radical, target; one might even say that he was offering himself up as an alternative to Napoleon, a 'master spirit' whose 'determined road' this sonnet implicitly rejects. But it demonstrates, again, why the Milton-worship of men like Wordsworth made them at once desperate for a new Milton and totally unable to produce one. If Milton truly was the God-like figure this poem suggests, at once bard, prophet, revolutionary leader and political redeemer, then it is unsurprising that the age would have been better off with a Milton than without one. But how could anyone, even Wordsworth – perhaps *especially* Wordsworth – possibly take on such an ambitious role?

It was not just France that needed a new Milton, as Wordsworth made clear in another of his sonnets of the same year, *London, 1802*:

Milton! thou should'st be living at this hour;
England hath need of thee: she is a fen
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
Have forfeited their ancient English dower
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.
Thy soul was like a Star and dwelt apart:
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea;
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
So didst thou travel on life's common way,
In chearful godliness; and yet thy heart
The lowliest duties on itself did lay.¹⁴

The language here is that of the Second Coming. The returning Milton is credited with almost god-like powers, able to single-handedly 'raise [England] up' and restore her 'manners, virtue, freedom, power'. He is angelic, 'pure as the naked heavens'; he is 'like a Star', long identified with angels, and like God Himself he 'dwelt apart' from other men; yet, Christ-like, he condescended to 'travel on life's common way/In cheerful godliness', and take on 'the lowliest duties' of life. Clearly, Wordsworth had lost none of his undergraduate reverence for Milton in the eleven years since he left Cambridge. Indeed, F. M. Todd has suggested that the intervening years of revolutionary hope and failure may have heightened it:

A revived interest in Milton the English republican was common among the disillusioned supporters of the French Revolution at the turn of the century. ... Now that France had failed the liberals, they turned perforce to England, though, naturally enough, to England's past rather than her present. So with Wordsworth; he looked back, not to the eighteenth century, not to the 'fair Albion' of the 'Glorious Revolution', but to the English republic of the seventeenth century, and to its champions, Milton, Sidney, Marvell, and Vane.¹⁵

Todd could also have cited Coleridge's marginalia to his copy of Milton's prose works, purchased in 1808, in which he expressed the hope that by studying Milton's prose the English would be able to avoid degenerating into Frenchmen (Coleridge's annotations to Birch's *Milton*, C 12:3:884). Men like Coleridge and Wordsworth had seen so many champions of the French Revolution metamorphose into tyrants or traitors that it is easy to see how they might have come to prefer their revolutionary heroes to be safely dead: at least they could rely on Vane or Milton not to suddenly change sides. From this position of security, they could look down on the French for their failure to produce any equivalent 'master spirit'. This sneering tone, obvious in Coleridge, is also present in Wordsworth's 'Great Men Have Been among Us': if its first line is read with the stress upon the word *us*, meaning the British, as opposed to *them*, the French, then it becomes a poem that mocks as well as laments France's inability to match the greatness of the Commonwealthmen. But such a tone was less the result of deep-seated hostility than profound disappointment. 'When we had *our* revolution', these erstwhile Jacobins might have said, '*our* heroes remained heroic. Why couldn't yours have done the same?'

The trouble was that dead men, even those as great as Milton, exercised only very limited power over current affairs. Milton should have been living at that hour, but he wasn't, and the need for him was growing by the year; for while France might not have been able to produce a Milton, under Napoleon it rapidly developed a military machine that would have put Cromwell's New Model Army to shame. Fears of French invasion ran high, especially after the breakdown of the Peace of Amiens in 1803.¹⁶ Seeking to reassure himself and his countrymen that Britain could weather the coming storm, Wordsworth wrote:

In our Halls is hung
Armoury of the invincible Knights of old:
We must be free or die, who speak the tongue
That Shakespeare spake; the faith and morals hold
Which Milton held ...¹⁷

Here, Shakespeare's tongue and Milton's faith and morals stand alongside the 'armoury of the invincible Knights of old' as so many guarantees that the British 'must be free or die' – an echo of the old revolutionary slogan, 'liberty or death!'¹⁸ The language is that of inheritance; for Wordsworth, Shakespeare and Milton *are* two of the 'invincible Knights of old', and their language, faith and morals *are* part of the 'armoury' that they have left to their successors. But inherited weapons, be they ever so fine, are valueless without a worthy wielder, and Wordsworth's readers might have been forgiven for wondering whether any such worthy successor to Milton really existed. Were the British of 1802 any more capable of using Milton's 'faith and morals' effectively than they were of wielding the 'armoury' of their ancestors? Read alongside the many clumsy contemporary attempts to adapt Milton to nationalistic ends, Wordsworth's lines unavoidably conjure up images of Pye, Ogden and the rest stumbling out in their rusty and oversized Miltonic armour to be mown down by Napoleon's guns.

So where was Milton's successor – the 'master spirit' able to write the 'single volume paramount' which both France and England required – to come from? Where was the man in whom Milton, who should be living at that hour, could live again, demonstrating to the faithless French the true meaning of revolutionary heroism? A few years earlier Wordsworth had felt that he might fulfil such a role; that he could become both epic

poet and revolutionary leader, as he imagined Milton would have done, writing the poem that would usher in the millennium. But now, with the bold, supposedly Milton-surpassing *Recluse* still no more than a mass of fragments, he was no longer so sure of his poetic destiny; and even after he 'took fire' from the touch of Milton's spirit, he was able to write Miltonic sonnets but not Miltonic epics. Doubtless there were many reasons for this, both personal and poetic, but I wish to suggest that one explanation may lie in an earlier phase of Wordsworth's relationship with Milton: in his brush with the aesthetics of revolutionary sublimity during the traumatic years of the Terror.

II

On 26 December 1792, Louis XVI was carried to the National Convention to be tried for treason. In Paris, Jacobin booksellers were translating and publishing Milton's defence of the trial and execution of Charles I to justify the proceedings about to ensue.¹⁹ From a high window in a rented house, Wollstonecraft watched the king being led through the streets under military guard. That afternoon, she wrote to Joseph Johnson, her publisher and friend in London:

An association of ideas made the tears flow insensibly from my eyes, when I saw Louis sitting, with more dignity than I expected from his character, in a hackney coach, going to meet death, where so many of his race have triumphed. My fancy instantly brought Louis XIV before me, entering the capital with all his pomp, after one of the victories most flattering to his pride, only to see the sunshine of prosperity overshadowed by the sublime gloom of misery. I have been alone ever since; and, though my mind is calm, I cannot dismiss the lively images that have filled my imagination all the day. – Nay, do not smile, but pity me; for, once or twice, lifting my eyes from the paper, I have seen eyes glare through a glass-door opposite my chair, and bloody hands shook at me. Not the distant sound of a footstep can I hear. – My apartments are remote from those of the servants, the only persons who sleep with me in an immense hotel, one folding door opening after another. – I wish I had even kept the cat with me! – I want to see something alive; death in so many frightful shapes has taken hold of my fancy. – I am going to bed – and, for the first time in my life, I cannot put out the candle.²⁰

Wollstonecraft was not a woman to suffer from weak nerves. By 1792 she had seen and suffered much, without succumbing to these kinds of terrors; but now, alone in a Paris hotel, she was tormented by nightmares that could have come straight from the canvases of her one-time idol, Henry Fuseli. Her letter emphasises how uncharacteristic of herself she felt her fears to be: 'for the first time in my life, I cannot put out the candle'. But France, in those years, was nothing if not a place of fear. In 1789 the nation had been swept by the Great Fear, a wave of mass panic that had sent countless people fleeing for their lives, convinced that imaginary armies of brigands or invaders were about to descend upon them.²¹ The year 1793 would witness the beginning of the Reign of Terror, in which anyone suspected of opposing the Jacobin Republic of Virtue could be arrested, tried and guillotined, without once being allowed to speak in their own defence.²² Between the two lay years of paranoia and simmering hysteria, with foreign armies on the borders and conspiracies and plots at home. Revolutionary France could be an extremely frightening place to live.

Sitting in her room that December, watching the king pass beneath her windows, Wollstonecraft came too close to the revolutionary sublime for comfort. For all her rationalisation of the Revolution, its sublime was still 'the sublime gloom of misery', and when exposed to it, even someone as level-headed as herself began seeing Burkean spectres: ghostly kings, bloody hands and staring eyes. Perhaps they were phantoms of guilt, for Wollstonecraft had written in support of the Revolution, and thus played a part in making it possible for Louis XVI to be led to his death. But first and foremost, they were phantoms of fear: the fear that was everywhere in those revolutionary years. 'Nay, do not smile, but pity me ... Death in so many frightful shapes has taken hold of my fancy ...'

The other shape,
If shape it might be call'd that shape had none
Distinguishable in member, joint, or limb,
Or substance might be call'd that shadow seem'd,
For each seem'd either – black it stood as Night,
Fierce as ten Furies, terrible as Hell,
And shook a dreadful Dart; what seem'd his head
The likeness of a Kingly Crown had on.

(Paradise Lost, book 2, ll. 666–73; M 43)

Behind Wollstonecraft's phrase, whether she was aware of it or not, lay another phantom king: the King of Terrors, Milton's frightful, many-shaped and yet shapeless Death, the embodiment of Burke's terrible sublime. In the same letter, Wollstonecraft writes that 'For the first time since I entered France, I bowed to the majesty of the people'. The Revolution had made the people of France its king; now, they would play the part of King Death for the hapless Louis XVI. The sublime of terror stalked the streets of Paris; and from the bookstalls its greatest master, Milton, proclaimed its grim necessity.

Two months earlier Wordsworth had arrived in Paris, on his way back to England.²³ When he had first arrived in France he, like Williams and Wollstonecraft, had enthusiastically embraced the Revolution: looking ruefully back from 1805, he wrote that he had 'approach'd, like other Youth, the Shield/Of human nature from the golden side', believing instinctively in 'What there is best in individual man/Of wise in passion and sublime in power' (1805 *Prelude*, book 10, ll. 662–3, 666–7: P 1:284). But in October 1792, having missed the September Massacres by just a few weeks, he took a more fearful view of the revolutionary sublime. Describing the scene in the 1805 *Prelude*, he wrote:

With unextinguish'd taper I kept watch,
Reading at intervals; the fear gone by
Press'd on me almost like a fear to come.
I thought of those September Massacres,
Divided from me by a little month,
And felt and touch'd them, a substantial dread ...
(1805 *Prelude*, book 10, ll. 61–6: P 1:269)

Sitting up at night in revolutionary Paris, Wordsworth, like Wollstonecraft, was too afraid to put out his candle. What he feared was fear itself, 'a substantial dread' that 'pressed' against him like a premonition of the 'fear to come', the revolutionary Terror waiting just around the corner of history. Wordsworth in Paris was the very epitome of the man who had come too close to the sublime. 'When danger or pain press too nearly', Burke had written back in 1757, 'they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible'. Wordsworth may have had those words in mind when he wrote of how the fear 'press'd on me', close enough for it to be 'felt and touch'd', leaving him unable to place any aesthetic distance between himself and it, just as Burke's distinction between the tiger behind bars – which

is sublime – and the escaped tiger roaming the streets – which is merely terrible – may have inspired Wordsworth's famous description of his room in Paris as being 'defenceless as a wood where tigers roam' (1805 *Prelude*, book 10, l. 82: P 1:270). The phrase 'the fear gone by/Press'd on' suggests the breathless momentum of the fear as well as its suffocating closeness; it presses on inexorably, its ceaseless progress underlined by the enjambment of these lines, which enact the same pauseless onward motion which Wordsworth attributes to his fear. It presses against him, even as it presses on towards its own horrible objectives; he has neither the time nor the space required to put any kind of safe distance between himself and his fear, and as a result, his fear is not delightful or sublime, but 'simply terrible'.

As critics have frequently noted, Wordsworth always preferred to keep objects and events at a distance, where they could more easily be seen, appreciated and understood. John Ogden writes:

Distance serves this purpose for Wordsworth: it simplifies objects and events, and grants him fuller perception and truer evaluation. Distance enables him to see real life as poetry, and to find the basis for esthetics in the act of perception.²⁴

Lack of distance, conversely, prevented true perception and evaluation, forcing reasoned thought to give way to unreasoning dread. Worst of all was lack of distance from other people. Even in London, Wordsworth had been uncomfortable with 'the press and danger of the crowd', which he had described in terms of Milton's chaos and hell:

... what a hell
For eyes and ears! what anarchy and din
Barbarian and infernal! 'tis a dream
Monstrous in colour, motion, shape, sight, sound ...
(1805 *Prelude*, book 7, ll. 659–62: P 1:209)

Radical republican though he was at the time of his stay in London, Wordsworth, like Milton and the other classic republican authors he admired, was sceptical and fearful of the mob. Now, in Paris, there was no possibility of distance: just as the dangerous, 'infernal' crowd had pressed on him in London, so now the fear of another dangerous crowd 'press'd' against him like

'a substantial dread'. For Wordsworth as for Wollstonecraft, the Burkean/Miltonic 'terrible sublime' suffused the progress of the Revolution, to which it was unwise to come too close. Faced with the proximity of revolutionary violence they reached out, knowingly or instinctively, for the language of the sublime of fear.

According to the account given in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's terror lasted much longer than his stay in Paris – much longer, indeed, than the Terror itself. His reaction to it was so extreme that many critics and biographers have conjectured that Wordsworth must have seen or done something in France of which he later suppressed all trace: something even more traumatic than his abandonment of Annette Vallon and their daughter, Caroline.²⁵ For decades it was believed, based on Carlyle's report of a conversation with Wordsworth many years later, that he had secretly visited France in 1793 and witnessed the Terror in full swing; however, Juliet Barker has shown this to be extremely improbable.²⁶ Noting the sense of inexpressible guilt that fills Wordsworth's 1797 tragedy *The Borderers*, Bromwich speculates that Wordsworth may have 'once been in the thick of a conspiracy and seen someone badly hurt or killed on information from himself'.²⁷ But such biographical fantasies seem to me unnecessary: even if Wordsworth was never directly exposed to revolutionary violence, he came close enough to it to feel it and fear it, and that fear – coupled with the shock of separation from Annette and Caroline, the wreck of his hopes for the Revolution and the deaths of his Girondin friends – seems enough to explain the psychological turmoil which Wordsworth evidently suffered in the mid-1790s. Of his state of mind after his return to England, he wrote:

Most melancholy at that time, O Friend!
Were my day thoughts, my dreams were miserable;
Through months, through years, long after the last beat
Of those atrocities (I speak bare truth
As if to thee alone in private talk)
I scarcely had one night of quiet sleep,
Such ghastly visions had I of despair,
And tyranny and implements of death,
And long orations which in dreams I pleaded
Before unjust Tribunals ...

(1805 *Prelude*, book 10, ll. 368–77: P 1:277)

The Terror in France ended after Thermidor, but the Terror in Wordsworth's mind just would not stop, filling his thoughts by day and his dreams by night. 'Long after the last beat/Of those atrocities' died away in history, they continued to live on in the 'beat' of his poetry, where the long litany of horrors – despair, tyranny, implements of death, unjust tribunals – echoes the apparently endless series of 'ghastly visions' from which he suffered. Even after separating himself from it in time and space the Terror still seemed to be 'press'd' against him, a horror too close for any kind of aesthetic distancing to take place. Perhaps most horrible of all for a poet, Wordsworth's Terror appeared to be immune to language, for its 'unjust Tribunals' simply ignored the 'long orations' in which he pleaded with them in his nightmares, and there seemed to be nothing he could say that would make it relent, step back and grant him the breathing space which he so desperately required. This, again according to the *Prelude*, was the second time in his life that Wordsworth suffered from recurring nightmares: the first had occurred in childhood, after the famous episode in which he stole a boat and rowed across Ullswater, only to look up and see with terror that the mountain called Black Crag appeared to be chasing him across it. For days afterwards, he wrote:

... huge and mighty forms that do not live
Like living men moved slowly through my mind
By day and were the trouble of my dreams.
(1805 *Prelude*, book 1, ll. 426–8: P 1:117)

In the *Prelude*, Wordsworth described his Lakeland home as a region of 'mountain liberty' – perhaps with Milton's famous line about 'The Mountain Nymph, sweet Liberty' in mind (1805 *Prelude*, book 9, l. 242: P 1:238, 'L'Allegro' l. 36: M 421). Mountains, then, should stand for the republican sublime, the sublime of liberty, rather than the sublime of fear; but in these two scenes the mountain/republic turns threatening, becoming a Burkean destroyer, not to be approached without risking terror and even madness. As a child, Wordsworth had been terrified by the idea that the mountain was pursuing him; did Robespierre, architect of the Terror and leader of the *Montaine* faction in the National Assembly, stalk after him like Black Crag through his nightmares as an adult?

The Jacobins were very fond of mountains, having – like Wordsworth – inherited from Rousseau the idea that the simple, rugged lives of the Swiss

mountaineers made them natural republicans. In the National Assembly they called themselves the *Montaine*, and at the Festival of the Supreme Being in 1794, Robespierre had David construct an immense artificial mountain in the middle of Paris for the climax of the festivities.²⁸ From up on their mountain-top, Williams argued, the Jacobins could order any atrocity, having entirely separated themselves from the rest of mankind:

The faction of the anarchists desired that the French king should be put to death without the tedious forms of a trial. This opinion, however, was confined to the summit of the Mountain, that elevated region, where, aloof from all the ordinary feelings of our nature, no-one is diverted from his purpose by the weakness of humanity, or the compunctions of remorse; where urbanity is considered as an aristocratical infringement of *les grandes principes*, and mercy as a *crime de leze-nation*. (HMW I:4:1–2)

For Williams, the division between *Gironde* and the *Montaine* mirrors the division between sentiment and rationality; the Girondins, down among the people, were able to feel for them and empathise with them, while the Montagnards, up on their chilly heights, felt nothing for their victims, having emotionally distanced themselves from normal human life. The Girondins embodied her ideal of the republican sublime, in which sublimity and beauty, reason and sentiment, went hand in hand, while the Montagnards stood for that harder, more aggressive version of the revolutionary sublime that was forever verging on the Burkean sublime of terror.

Quite possibly some of the Jacobins did believe in the importance of lifting themselves above ordinary concerns, distancing themselves from the horrors they inflicted. But for Robespierre, this mountainous elevation served a different purpose. His version of the revolutionary sublime did not depend on distancing; instead, it was entirely predicated on the *lack* of distance. In Burke's eyes, the whole edifice of civilisation was based upon things keeping their proper distance from one another: it was right and proper that a certain distance should exist between ruler and ruled, public and private, sacred and profane, and if civilisation were to endure those distances had to be maintained, by force if necessary. The sublime Burkean king stands a distance from his subjects; the sublime Burkean priest ensures that his religion remains mysterious to the multitude. But in Robespierre's sublime

republic of virtue, no such distances were to exist. There were to be no barriers or secrets between citizen and citizen, between crime and judgment, between representatives and those they represented; all would be light, truth and perfect transparency. No-one would need to maintain their distance from anyone else; indeed, no-one would be *able* to maintain their distance from anyone else, and anyone who tried would be viewed with profound suspicion, for who but a traitor could wish to hide anything from their fellow citizens, or object to their patriotic investigations of one's affairs? Burke had made much of the value of secrecy:

Those despotic governments, which are founded on the passions of men, and principally upon the passion of fear, keep their chief as much as possible from the public eye. The policy has been the same in many cases of religion. Almost all the heathen temples were dark. (*Enquiry*, part 2, section 3: EB 1:231)

Robespierre, however, sought a mountain-top perspective, not because he wished to distance himself from his people like some Burkean monarch, but because he wished to see and be seen: to gain a position of maximum visibility. Dart writes:

[Robespierre] sometimes made it seem as if he alone was capable of commanding a general prospect of the Revolution, as if he alone could trace its true trajectory ... In the eyes of his political enemies this detachment from the blood and strife of the main revolutionary struggles was indicative of a suspicious and cowardly nature. For his supporters, however, it bespoke an enabling detachment, a perspective which allowed him to see the Revolution with far greater clarity, and with a sympathy that was all the more pure.²⁹

Like the Masonic eye at the top of the pyramid, which stared down from so many Revolutionary paintings and icons, he would see all: he could watch everyone's every move, and they in turn could watch his. For Robespierre, who famously had no private life, the realisation of this ideal was a victory of light and truth over the darkness and deception of the *ancien regime*.³⁰ But for many of those who lived through it, it was a nightmare of totalitarian terror, in which no part of life was safe from the intrusion and inspection of

the state. Robespierre's sublime was not Burke's, but the republican sublime of Wollstonecraft and Godwin, of light and truth as opposed to darkness and obscurity: accordingly he shunned Burke's gothic stage-props, preferring a sublime of complete abstractions such as 'the Supreme Being' and 'the General Will'. Burke's sublime is mysterious because it is dark and shadowy; Robespierre's is mysterious because it is invisible, reaching ultimately – as Marie-Hélène Huet has argued – beyond representation itself.³¹ The social embodiment of Burke's sublime was the English common law: a tangle of precedents, exceptions, loopholes, arcane terminology and ancient privileges, built up piecemeal over the centuries, from which – through some mysterious process, incomprehensible to any individual human intellect – justice emerged. The social embodiment of Robespierre's sublime was the law of 22 Prairial: no lawyers, no formal procedures, just a suspect brought before a jury embodying the General Will of the people, who would instantly evaluate – or intuit – their inherent moral purity or impurity and accordingly pronounce a sentence of either liberty or death.³² If Burke's dark sublime was the sublime of Milton's Satan, Robespierre's was the sublime of Milton's God: omniscient, omnipresent and abstract as light itself.

Wordsworth's visit to Paris occurred before Robespierre's rise to power, and by the time he came to write about it in *The Prelude* Robespierre was long dead, having passed – like so many of his victims – through the hands of Samson, the Revolution's chief executioner.³³ But his time in Paris had given him a glimpse of a sublime which did not keep its distance, but instead pressed right up against him: not a visual spectacle but a tactile one, a 'substantial dread' that is 'felt and touched' as if it filled the very air, like 'the press and danger of the crowd' in London (1805 *Prelude*, book 7, l. 658: P 1:209). It did not stand to be admired like some far-off mountain; instead it stalked forwards to crush and smother, just as Black Crag had advanced vengefully across Ullswater instead of keeping its proper distance. It was an experience that, I believe, altered his attitude towards Miltonic sublimity forever.

Returning from France in a state of emotional turmoil, Wordsworth set out on a walking tour of the West Country: he walked across Salisbury Plain, where he was tormented by terrifying visions of ancient atrocities, and on into Wales, heading up into the Wye Valley.³⁴ Five years later, in a much calmer mood, he revisited the same region, and wrote his famous 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey'. By 1798, Wordsworth was trying hard to

put his experiences in France behind him, and although his poem mentions his previous visit of 1793, it makes no mention of its biographical context: 'I cannot paint/What then I was', he writes of his earlier self.³⁵ (One might be tempted to ask: cannot, or *will not*?) But what he does say about his earlier tour is extremely revealing:

I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides
Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,
Wherever nature led; more like a man
Flying from something that he dreads, than one
Who sought the thing he loved.³⁶

Of Wordsworth's 'self-representation' of his younger self, Stephen Gill writes:

Factually it is not true. It is not surprising that Wordsworth should have erased what he was in 1793 – tormented by his impotent hostility to his own country's policies, by his responsibility to Annette and their child, by lack of direction and of financial independence. But it is surprising that he should present 1793 as the time when Nature was 'all in all' and 1798 as the moment when he felt most at one with the cause of humanity, for in 1793 Wordsworth had been a radical patriot, his heart given to the people and to the French cause, whereas in 1798 he was hymning Nature's power to 'feed this mind of ours,/In a wise passiveness'.³⁷

In other words, Gill sees 'Tintern Abbey' as misrepresenting Wordsworth's five-year journey from humanity to nature as a five-year journey from nature to humanity, precisely inverting the actual trajectory of his intellectual development during the mid-1790s. Such an inversion would indeed be 'surprising'; but it relies upon the idea of 'nature' and 'humanity' as incompatible absolutes, whereas what Wordsworth seems to me to describe in 'Tintern Abbey' is a movement from one concept of nature and humanity to another. I accept that Wordsworth is carefully keeping his radical past hidden in this poem, but I am not sure that we need discount everything he says about his younger self as 'factually not true' because of this, or that the union with nature he claims to have experienced on his first visit to Tintern Abbey is incompatible with the radical political views we know that he held

at the time. Wordsworth may have equated Nature with 'wise passiveness' in 1798; but what did Nature mean to him in 1793?

Marjorie Levinson's famous essay on the hidden historical and biographical context of 'Tintern Abbey', 'Insight and Oversight', has surprisingly little to say about Wordsworth's 1793 visit, being more concerned with reconstructing the circumstances of the 1798 tour during which the poem was supposedly composed. She writes:

Wordsworth's unhappy separation from Nature ended in 1793 but this return, fondly recalled in 'Tintern Abbey' (ll. 66–83) could not have been so renewing nor so unambivalent as he later chose to suggest, given the state of his personal life and of national affairs.³⁸

That Wordsworth conceals a good deal about his past in this poem is not something I would contest. But Levinson seems to assume both that Wordsworth fell away from 'Nature' in 1792/3 and that he claimed in 'Tintern Abbey' to have experienced a 'renewing', 'unambivalent' return to it during his 1793 tour, neither of which seem to me to be the case. I see nothing in 'Tintern Abbey' to suggest that Wordsworth's sense that 'nature .../ To me was all in all' was something he had lost in France and only just regained in 1793; instead, his identification of it with 'the coarser pleasures of my boyish days' (l. 74) suggests that it was a feeling that had been with him since childhood, was still with him in 1793, and fell away from him only in the five years leading up to his second visit to Tintern in 1798. On this reading, rather than being ruptured by his involvement with French radical politics, Wordsworth's union with 'Nature' was coterminous with it; perhaps it was even dependent upon such activities, for it faded only after his turn away from politics in the later 1790s. Furthermore, Wordsworth's union with nature in 1793 does not seem as 'unambivalent' as Levinson suggests; as he wrote, he threw himself into it:

... more like a man
Flying from something that he dreads, than one
Who sought the thing he loved.³⁹

It is here that the biographical context of that earlier visit, which Wordsworth keeps out of view in the poem, comes into play; the reason that Wordsworth

in 1793 was 'like a man/Flying from something that he dreads' is because he *was* one, as if *The Prelude* is to be believed he must have visited the Wye whilst still in the grip of the nightmares and mental disturbances which afflicted him during and after the Terror. For this reason, many critics have expressed scepticism about Wordsworth's claim to have been interested only in nature, not politics, in 1793. 'Nature then', he writes, 'To me was all in all': an assertion that seems demonstrably false when placed alongside either his own writings from the time, such as his politically radical *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*, or his later account of that year in *The Prelude*. Yet it is worth noting the way Wordsworth describes the effect that the Wye landscape had on him in 1793:

The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite: a feeling and a love,
That had no need of a remoter charm,
By thought supplied, or any interest
Unborrowed from the eye.⁴⁰

The Wordsworth of 1793, in other words, was haunted by the sublimity of nature, and especially with sublime mountain scenery – precisely the kind of scenery of which the Jacobins were so fond, and which, in both the (earlier) *Descriptive Sketches* and the (later) *Prelude*, Wordsworth associated with revolutionary politics and 'mountain liberty'. Wordsworth's claim in *The Prelude* to have spent this period in a haze of Terror-induced dread is thus not incompatible with his claim in 'Tintern Abbey' to have spent it absorbed in the sublimity of nature, as on the evidence of his poems they seem at this point in his life to have been profoundly tangled up in his mind.

When it is recalled that Wordsworth initially considered the Revolution to be part of 'nature's certain course', it becomes possible to see how he could truthfully have said in 1793 that, to him, nature was 'all in all'. What seems improbable is that his interest in nature could have lacked 'any interest/Unborrowed from the eye': that the mountain could not have reminded him of the Montagnards, and that the cataract should have 'haunted' him on a purely aesthetic level. As Alan Liu and others have argued, Wordsworth's imagery and ideology of nature often conceal displaced political and historical

concerns, concerns which haunt his works by the conspicuousness of their absence in the very places where one might most expect them to appear: 'Adequate reading of Wordsworth's texts in their historical context', Liu writes, 'requires not so much positivistic method as a deflected or denied positivism able to discriminate absence'.⁴¹ Thus Liu claims that Wordsworth's account of crossing the Simplon Pass in *The Prelude* is a displacement of Napoleon's recent march along the same route, in which Wordsworth attempted to suppress the historical trauma of Napoleon's crossing of the Alps and all it stood for – the betrayal of the French Revolution represented by Napoleon's military expansionism, the threat to Britain represented by his continued military success – by refusing to mention it, even though his first readers would have thought of it the moment the Simplon Pass was named.⁴² Just as Liu sees Napoleon being written out of *The Prelude* – and creeping back in through possibly unintentional verbal echoes – so I think Wordsworth deliberately writes his revolutionary sympathies of 1793 out of 'Tintern Abbey', only to have them resurface in the form of the (terribly) sublime natural scenery with which they were so relentlessly associated. In the 1793 edition of *Descriptive Sketches*, in lines he cut from later versions of the poem, Wordsworth described the Revolution as a flood:

Oh give, great God, to Freedom's waves to ride
 Sublime o'er Conquest, Avarice, and Pride,
 To break, the vales where Death with Famine scow'rs,
 And dark Oppression builds her thick-ribb'd tow'rs ...⁴³

As Theresa Kelley has pointed out, describing the Revolution as a sublime flood or deluge was a commonplace in the 1790s, used by everyone from Burke to Napoleon.⁴⁴ In 'Tintern Abbey', Wordsworth disclaims any connection between the poetry of nature and the poetry of politics. But given that he later claimed to have been Terror-stricken at the time, could 'Freedom's waves ... sublime' – waves that could easily have drowned him had he remained in France, and actually were drowning his Girondin friends while he rambled around the West Country – really have been entirely absent from his mind when he was 'haunted' by the cataracts of the Wye? It is in his assertions that in youth nature meant nothing more than hills and rivers to him – and that even hills and rivers appealed to him on an entirely non-intellectual level – that Wordsworth appears to me to protest too much. I would suggest that

Wordsworth's elemental union with Nature in 1793 need not be written off as an invention of his later self, eager to conceal his radical past; instead, it can be seen as both a symptom and a displacement of his historically documented immersion in the politics of terror, which at this point filled his writings (such as his *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*, which defended the use of violence in the defence of the Revolution), his visions (such as his Salisbury Plain 'reverie') and, as we know from *The Prelude*, his 'day-thoughts' and dreams.⁴⁵ In his 1793 *Descriptive Sketches*, Wordsworth equated union with Nature with union with the Revolution, and the directness with which he claimed in 'Tintern Abbey' to have experienced the sublime mountain scenery of the Wye is reminiscent of the directness with which, in *The Prelude*, he claims to have experienced the proximity of the revolutionary sublime in Paris. Both loving and hating the mountain/*Montaine* which towered over him, preaching the necessity of revolutionary violence even while having nightmares about its effects, it is no wonder that he flung himself into Wales 'more like a man/ Flying from something that he dreads, than one/Who sought the thing he loved'. (l. 73)

Some insight into Wordsworth's shifting attitudes towards natural and revolutionary sublimity can be gained from his tragedy *The Borderers*, composed in 1796–7. In it, the villain Rivers explains how he broke away from ordinary morality to arrive at a higher revolutionary rationalism, in which the glory of one's ends could easily justify the deaths of innocents along the way. He declares:

Oft I left the camp
When all that multitude of hearts was still
And followed on through woods of gloomy cedar
Into deep chasms troubled by roaring streams,
Or from the top of Lebanon surveyed
The moonlight desert, and the moonlight sea;
In these my lonely wanderings I perceived
What mighty objects do impress their forms
To build up this our intellectual being,
And felt if aught on earth deserves a curse,
'Twas that worst principle of ill which dooms
A thing so great to perish self-consumed.
– So much for my remorse.

'Oh, my poor friend!' Mortimer interrupts, but Rivers plunges on:

When from these forms I turned to contemplate
The opinions and the uses of the world,
I seemed a being who had passed alone
Beyond the visible barriers of the world
And travelled into things to come.⁴⁶

Rivers, it seems, learned his Jacobinical creed by exposing himself to the sublime of nature in its most awesome and terrifying aspects: 'deep chasms', 'roaring streams', 'the moonlight desert and the moonlight sea' and literally above all 'the top of Lebanon', a mountaintop locale made doubly sublime by its Biblical associations. Traditional theorists of the sublime had argued that such 'mighty objects' should teach us to fear and obey God, by reminding us of His power and our own smallness; but Rivers seems to have learned an entirely different lesson, namely that men like him are too important to be allowed to 'perish self-consumed' in agonies of regret for their actions, and thus that remorse is unnecessary and useless. Having concluded this, he considers himself free of the normal moral and social obligations that bind other men, and now believes any judgment they may pass upon him is simply irrelevant: 'to be truly the world's friend/We must become the object of its hate', because:

Benevolence that has not heart to use
The wholesome ministry of pain and evil
Is powerless and contemptible.⁴⁷

The extent to which he has internalised this sublimity is suggested by his name, Rivers: he has become an elemental being, rushing remorselessly on, like 'Freedom's waves to ride sublime' – or like the waters of the Loire, in which the Jacobins carried out mass drownings of suspected counter-revolutionaries in 1794.⁴⁸ He embodies the terrible sublime of the *Montaine*, and his promise is that, by following his example, Mortimer can make himself 'more awful and sublime': after all, he says, 'it is/In darkness and in tempest that we seek/The majesty of the Almighty'.⁴⁹ Mortimer ultimately rejects him, just as Wordsworth rejected Robespierre; but in rejecting Rivers, Mortimer also abandons his career as a fighter against injustice, devoting himself to penance and solitude instead. Unlike Mortimer, Wordsworth did not (so far

as we know) have the deaths of any innocent men on his conscience, and thus does not seem to have felt any need to devote himself to a life of penance. But he did turn away from active engagement in revolutionary politics; and in doing so, he also turned away from the grand sublime of force and terror with which, for Rivers and Robespierre, such politics went hand in hand.

In 'Tintern Abbey', Wordsworth insists that he – the Wordsworth of 1798, the author of the poem – is very different to the Wordsworth of 1793. 'That time is past', he writes, 'And all its aching joys are now no more':

For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Not harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
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 ...

In a passage of *The Prelude* addressed to his sister Dorothy, Wordsworth makes much the same claim:

Even to the very going out of youth,
The period which our Story now hath reach'd,
I too exclusively esteem'd that love,
And sought that beauty, which, as Milton sings,
Hath terror in it. Thou didst soften down
This over sternness: but for thee, sweet Friend,
My soul, too reckless of mild grace, had been
Far longer what by Nature it was framed,
Longer retain'd its countenance severe,
A rock with torrents roaring, with the clouds
Familiar, and a favorite of the Stars.
(1805 *Prelude*, book 13, ll. 222–32: P 1:318–19)

In both passages, Wordsworth describes his abandonment of the grand sublime of terror: the sublime of the *Descriptive Sketches*, but also, crucially, the sublime of Rivers, Robespierre and the French Revolution. 'Wordsworth's 1798 poem celebrating a return to the Wye', Kelley writes, 'surreptitiously uncelebrates the revolutionary sublime'.⁵¹ I do not mean to imply anything so crude as 'when Wordsworth writes about renouncing the grand sublime, he's really writing about renouncing revolutionary politics'; but I do not think it coincidental that Wordsworth rejected the politics of terror in the very years in which he also turned away from the terrible sublime. In youth, he wrote, he was devoted to 'that beauty which, as Milton sings,/Hath terror in it', and his surviving early poetry bears out his claim: his juvenile poem 'The Vale of Esthwaite', written in 1785–8, is a compendium of sublime gothic terrors, the work of one who could justly claim that 'the world of shades is all my own'.⁵² But later in life he turned to a softer, gentler version of the sublime, a 'sense sublime/Of something far more deeply interfused', embodied not by stars and crags but by water, sunlight and air. Wordsworth's soul had been 'a rock with torrents roaring', until Dorothy 'didst plant its crevices with flowers'; imagery that recalls Williams's description of her ideal revolutionary sublime as being 'not only sublime in a general view, but often beautiful when considered in detail' (HMW I:2:22). As Dart puts it, 'The false and bloody sublime of the Montagnards ... has been replaced by the true and healthful sublime of the Lakeland mountains, which represents its softer and yet more lasting embodiment'.⁵³ According to 'Tintern Abbey', this change took place between 1793 and 1798 – the very years in which, according to *The Prelude*, Wordsworth was suffering from the 'ghastly visions' induced by the Terror. I believe that these two facts are connected; that Wordsworth's encounter in Paris with a revolutionary sublime of terror that refused to keep its distance led him to abandon it for a gentler sublime, one that could be appreciated at close range without going insane. Not coincidentally, these were also the years in which Wordsworth increasingly abandoned revolutionary politics in favour of nature mysticism and local concerns. In Burkean terms, he turned from the sublime to the beautiful.

In the process he also turned his back on one aspect of Milton. It was not accidental that, in *The Prelude*, he described the sublime he rejected as 'that beauty which, as Milton sings,/Hath terror in it': thanks to Burke, the sublime of terror was inevitably also *Milton's* sublime. Wordsworth's 'as' can be read in two ways: the obvious reading is 'Milton sings that this beauty has terror

in it', as indeed he does in *Paradise Lost*, book 9, but it could also be read as meaning 'this beauty has terror in it *while (or because) Milton sings*'; Milton, like Robespierre, sings sublime terrors into being. The comparison is not too far-fetched; as Fink has speculated, Wordsworth may well have first come across Milton's prose works in revolutionary France, which – if true – must have powerfully cemented his identification of Milton with the unfolding Revolution.⁵⁴ Like many other contemporary writers, Wordsworth employed Miltonic language to describe the French Revolution: his description of the Jacobins as 'the atheist crew' is a quotation from Milton (who applies it to the fallen angels), his description of them as 'the foul tribe of Moloch' alludes to *Paradise Lost*, book 2, and when he heard of the death of Robespierre he rejoiced 'in vengeance and eternal justice' in language straight out of *Paradise Lost* (1805 *Prelude*, book 10, ll. 457, 468, 540: P 1:279, 1:281; *Paradise Lost*, book 1, l. 70: M 7). The Revolution, and especially the Terror, were bound up with Milton's poetry and prose; the Miltonic sublime was the sublime of the Revolution, the sublime of terror embodied by Black Crag, the *Montaine* and the September Massacres, and by rejecting one he inevitably rejected the other. Milton's 'soul was like a star', but Wordsworth no longer wished to be 'a favourite of the stars', a being of incarnate sublimity: he wanted to come back down to earth. By the time Coleridge met Wordsworth in 1795, and began enthusing about the possibility of his becoming a modern Milton, it was, in a sense, already too late: and for all his boasts in his 'Prospectus' about his mastery of 'all strength, all terror', 'fear and awe', 'hell, night, chaos, death' and the rest of the Miltonic arsenal, Wordsworth had taken a decisive step away from the Miltonic sublime and all that went with it. Over the course of his long poetic career he would go on to write innumerable poems of great power and beauty, including many Miltonic sonnets almost the equals of Milton's own. But he would never write his planned Miltonic epic.

III

The freezing winter of 1798 saw Wordsworth pacing the walls of Goslar in a mood of bitter self-reproach. He, Dorothy and Coleridge had travelled to Germany together; but while Coleridge whirled around the university towns, attending lectures and apostrophising his hosts in broken German, Wordsworth was left in Goslar so that he could concentrate on writing his epic.⁵⁵ It was not going well: pace though he might, he seemed further than ever from realising the greatness that he was sure was his poetic destiny.

Was it for this
That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved
To blend his murmurs with my Nurse's song,
And from his alder shades and rocky falls,
And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice
That flowed along my dreams?⁵⁶

Wordsworth seems to have penned these lines in a spirit of self-accusation. Had he enjoyed all nature's blessings in childhood only to end in failure? As usual, it was Milton against whom he was measuring himself, and it was Milton's voice he borrowed to express his fears:

For this did th' Angel twice descend? for this
Ordain'd thy nurture holy, as of a Plant,
Select and Sacred, Glorious for a while,
The miracle of men: then in an hour
Ensnar'd, assaulted, overcome, led bound,
Thy Foes derision, Captive, Poor, and Blind,
Into a Dungeon thrust, to work with Slaves?
(*Samson Agonistes*, ll. 361–7: M 356)

The lines are from *Samson Agonistes*, spoken by Samson's father Manoah when he sees his son defeated and enslaved. Wordsworth believed himself, like Samson, to have been specially chosen, and that his childhood had been 'holy, as of a Plant/Select and Sacred'; but, again like Samson, he had failed to live up to the promise of his birth. Just as Samson had failed to become an epic hero, so Wordsworth seemed to be failing to become an epic poet; and in echoing these lines he may have imagined his poetic father-figure, the Manoah-like John Milton, looking disapprovingly down on his would-be successor's lack of progress.

Then again, perhaps Wordsworth was trying to comfort himself. Milton's Samson was, as I have discussed, often taken to be a self-portrait by Milton of his life after the Restoration, when he too lived 'Captive, Poor, and Blind', questioning the providence of God that had brought him from such noble beginnings to such a lowly end. But while they both lived to see the defeat of their respective causes, neither Milton's nor Samson's life ended in total failure. Samson was not blessed in childhood so that he could die in shame;

he was blessed in childhood so that he could destroy the Temple of Dagon with his last breath. Milton was not favoured as a youth so that he could die in obscurity; he was favoured as a youth so that, as an old man, he could become the greatest epic poet Britain had ever seen. By alluding to these lines Wordsworth may have been signalling his hope that he, too, could still accomplish the great work that Coleridge expected from him, however bleak things currently appeared. If so, it became, in a sense, a self-fulfilling prophecy; for just as Milton, by the very act of writing *Samson Agonistes*, demonstrated that his active life was anything but finished, so Wordsworth used these self-reproaching lines as the kernel of what was to become *The Prelude*, his own great epic and his answer to *Paradise Lost*.

The Prelude was not in itself intended to be the 'single volume paramount' for the new age: that honour was to be reserved for *The Recluse*, the great work that, unfinished and unfinishable, weighed down Wordsworth's mind and desk for more than fifty years. That he wished it to be viewed as an epic in its own right is clear from its division into thirteen (later fourteen) books; however, as the name given to it after Wordsworth's death implies, *The Prelude* was intended to be nothing more than a preface to *The Recluse*, which was to be a macro-epic so huge as to require an entire epic poem as an introduction. *The Prelude* did, however, represent a crucial step in Wordsworth's renegotiation of his epic ambitions, and hence of his relationship with Milton. In it he mapped out a new kind of epic, one that did not rely upon the sublime of awe and terror from which he had turned away in the years following the Terror. The epics of his contemporaries had all kept to the familiar territory of armies, angels and apocalypses, and even Coleridge's *Religious Musings*, which was the closest he ever came to writing his planned philosophical epic, had dealt with large-scale political and spiritual upheavals. But *The Prelude*, like *The Recluse*, was to be a more personal, peaceful, introspective work, charting the mental and spiritual development of an individual man rather than the destinies of nations, and hence better suited to the gentler aesthetic Wordsworth had adopted in the later 1790s. *The Prelude* was the testing-ground for this new form of epic poetry, and it was thus essential for Wordsworth to establish that it was a true epic, a work of Miltonic stature; for if he could claim epic status for such a poem, it would be potentially possible for Wordsworth to take his desired place as Milton's successor without having to return to the terrible sublime.

In Book I, Wordsworth lists all the gifts that an epic poet should possess, and asserts that he has them all; but despite this, the task proves not to be without its difficulties. Like Milton, Wordsworth attests to his epic credentials by claiming prophetic inspiration:

... to the open fields I told
A prophesy; poetic numbers came
Spontaneously, and cloth'd in priestly robe
My spirit, thus singled out, as it might seem,
For holy service.

(1805 *Prelude*, book 1, ll. 59–63; P 1:108).

Here again Wordsworth presents himself as the chosen one, ‘singled out’ for ‘holy service’ as a prophet – although the cautious, deflating clause ‘as it might seem’ suggests his ongoing uncertainty about his own prophetic status, and thus casts doubt on that status itself, for what kind of prophet is unsure whether or not he is inspired? One possible reason for his uncertainty is the form his ‘poetic numbers’ seemed to be taking, for his ‘prophesy’ did not, like Homer’s or Milton’s, take the form of a Classical or Biblical epic. He considered, like so many of his contemporaries, writing a national epic on ‘some British theme, some old/Romantic tale, by Milton left unsung’. He considered writing a radical epic:

I would record
How in tyrannic times some unknown Man,
Unheard of in the Chronicles of Kings,
Suffered in silence for the love of truth.
(1805 *Prelude*, book 1, ll. 202–5; P 1:111–12)

Most of all, he thinks of the ‘philosophic song’ that he promised to Coleridge in 1798, and which he had been attempting to write ever since. But he finds himself unable to produce any of these works:

But from this awful burthen I full soon
Take refuge, and beguile myself with trust
That mellow years will bring a riper mind
And clearer insight. Thus from day to day

I live, a mockery of the brotherhood
Of vice and virtue, with no skill to part
Vague longing that is bred by want of power
From paramount impulse not to be withstood,
A timorous capacity from prudence,
From circumspection infinite delay.
(1805 *Prelude*, book 1, ll. 236–45: P 1:112–13)

These lines, as Simpson notes, show Wordsworth's anxiety at his failure to single-mindedly devote himself to poetic labour, as he imagined Milton to have done.⁵⁷ Frustrated by his 'infinite delay', he returns to the Miltonic question, 'Was it for this ...?', and then on to the scenes of his childhood and youth he had written about in Goslar. The relevance of these childhood episodes to the epic ambitions he has just described remains unclear until the very end of the first book, where he writes:

One end hereby, at least hath been attain'd –
My mind hath been reviv'd, and if this mood
Desert me not, I will forthwith bring down,
Through later years, the story of my life.
The road lies plain before me; 'tis a theme
Single and of determin'd bounds, and hence
I chuse it rather, at this time, than work
Of ampler or more varied argument.
(1805 *Prelude*, book 1, ll. 665–72: P 1:124)

These lines form a defensive apology for the poem that Wordsworth has written, instead, of the 'work/Of ampler or more varied argument', that Coleridge had been expecting from him. 'I chuse it rather at this time', he writes, implying that he might still write the projected epic which Coleridge had demanded at some future date. But for now, he had written *The Prelude* – and what was that? By 1805, 'the story of my life' – or rather, the story of his life up to the mid-1790s – had become a blank verse poem in thirteen books, comparable in length to *Paradise Lost*; but the crucial question was whether the resulting work was a 'real' epic, or just another symptom of the 'infinite delay' that was preventing him from realising his Miltonic destiny. The mere fact of having written a lengthy poem in blank verse, subdivided into books,

did not make one an epic poet. Thompson's *Seasons* was not an epic, and nor was Cowper's *Task*, so why should Wordsworth's *Prelude*, dealing as it did with similarly domestic material, be any different?

One of the ways in which Wordsworth staked out his claim to epic status for *The Prelude* was through the use of Miltonic echoes and allusions. On the very first page, he wrote:

The earth is all before me: with a heart
Joyous, nor scar'd at its own liberty
I look about, and should the guide I chuse
Be nothing better than a wandering cloud
I cannot miss my way.

(1805 *Prelude*, book 1, ll. 15–19: P 1:107)

As almost every reader then and since has noticed, this passage echoes the closing lines of *Paradise Lost*:

The World was all before them, where to choose
Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide:
They hand in hand with wandring steps and slow,
Through *Eden* took thir solitarie way.

(*Paradise Lost*, book 12, ll. 646–9: M 281)

The message could hardly be clearer: Wordsworth intended to take up where Milton had left off. (This commitment is restated at the end of the first book, in the line already quoted: 'the road lies plain before me'.) Just as Milton had claimed that his religious poem was at least as suitable a subject for epic as 'wars, hitherto the only argument/Heroic deemed' (*Paradise Lost*, book 9, ll. 28–9), Wordsworth asserts that to describe the development of his own mind 'is in truth heroic argument' (1805 *Prelude*, book 3, l. 182: P 1:140). In *Paradise Lost*, it is Adam and Eve who ultimately discover that 'the world was all before them'; so accordingly, as Matthew Biberman has pointed out, in *The Prelude* Wordsworth repeatedly positions himself as Milton's Adam, as when he quotes from Adam's morning prayer in order to describe his feelings in the Simplon Pass.⁵⁸ Biberman may well be right in seeing this as a republican gesture on Wordsworth's part – Adam had been used as a symbol of republican equality since at least the seventeenth century – but it

also acts to validate Wordsworth's claim to be as suitable a subject for epic poetry as Milton's Adam, and to grant his account of how his 'imagination' was 'impaired and restored' a suitably epic grandeur through its association with Milton's story of Adam's spiritual fall and regeneration (1805 *Prelude*, book 11, title: P 1:295). Yet Wordsworth must have known that one obvious objection to *The Prelude*, had it ever been published, would have been that it was the story not of a hero but of a nobody, an observer rather than an actor on the stage of history. In France he had, by his own account, briefly considered involving himself in revolutionary politics, but had decided not to: instead of immersing himself in the epic world of war, power and bloodshed, he had returned to England in mental turmoil, while his friend Beaupuy marched for the front and his Girondin acquaintances went to the guillotine. How could so peripheral a figure as William Wordsworth ever be epic material? And how could telling the story of such a life ever mark its author out as the kind of inspired poet-prophet that Wordsworth so desperately desired to be?

'Poets, even as Prophets', Wordsworth writes in the penultimate book of *The Prelude*, are each 'enabled to perceive/Something unseen before'. It is, in other words, the distinguishing mark of the poet/prophet that they are able to perceive and express some new idea or truth, thereby displaying a creative 'power like one of Nature's' (1805 *Prelude*, book 12, ll. 301, 304–5, 312: P 1:311). In the same passage, Wordsworth articulates what he feels his own original insight to be:

Nature through all conditions hath a power
To consecrate, if we have eyes to see,
The outside of her creatures, and to breathe
Grandeur upon the very humblest face
Of human life.

(1805 *Prelude*, book 12, ll. 282–6: P 1:311)

Up on his mountaintop, Milton's Adam was granted the insight to see the sublime plan of God working itself out through the chaos of human history. Wordsworth's insight after his return from France was, he claims, even wider: he saw how Nature had the power to bring sublime blessings, not only out of grand and remarkable events, but also from the ordinary and everyday, 'the very humblest face/Of human life'. This insight serves to justify *The Prelude* on several levels. Firstly, by the very act of articulating this new

vision, Wordsworth demonstrated – at least to his own satisfaction – that he belonged to the 'band' of inspired poet/prophets, and thus had the authority to write a new kind of epic, whilst simultaneously reassuring the reader that his prophetic vision does not, like the radical reading of Milton's, take the form of an alarming revolutionary manifesto. Secondly, Wordsworth's assertion that Nature can 'breathe Grandeur' upon both normal human life and apparently pointless misery reinforced *The Prelude's* claim to epic status; for then even as seemingly unpromising a life story as Wordsworth's own could become epic material, 'if we have eyes to see'. Wordsworth's poem was a sublime epic because it articulated a vision of epic sublimity in which it was itself included; *The Prelude* provided its own justification, and in this at least it was similar to that previous mould-breaking, self-justifying epic, Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Probably the similarity was intentional: for the purpose of the entire exercise had been to demonstrate that Wordsworth was a worthy successor to Milton, and that the *Prelude* had a perfect right to begin where *Paradise Lost* left off.

As I have mentioned, the epic hero to whom Wordsworth most frequently alluded in *The Prelude* was Milton's Adam. As Simpson notes, Wordsworth articulates the events of the French Revolution in terms of the plot of *Paradise Lost*, and works hard to assimilate his own experience of them to Adam's role in that plot: he had entered the Edenic world of France in 1791, but there had been a Fall, precipitated by the Satanic Robespierre and his demonic Jacobins, and he had been cast back to England, where like the exiled Adam outside Eden he had experienced a spiritual crisis culminating in his escape from a 'universe of death' (1805 *Prelude*, book 13, l. 141: P 1:317) – Wordsworth borrows Milton's exact phrase – and the discovery of a paradise within him, happier far.⁵⁹ By describing the French Revolution in Miltonic terms, and casting himself as Milton's Adam, Wordsworth was able to depict himself as standing at the heart of the Revolutionary drama, rather than on its edges. Even if Nature could 'breathe/Grandeur' upon 'the very humblest', rendering everyday things sublime, Wordsworth could still hardly claim to have been an Aeneas or an Achilles; but he could and did claim to have been an Adam, for Adam had long been taken as representative of all men. Attempting to frame the story of his life in appropriately epic terms, he insisted that it had not been a mere succession of false starts and accidents: instead it had been an epic journey which, ultimately, had led him to a kind of enlightenment, a prophetic insight and inspiration similar to that of Milton or of the prophetic

Adam in the last books of *Paradise Lost*. Comparing himself to 'the ancient Prophets', Wordsworth wrote:

So did some portion of that spirit fall
On me, to uphold me through those evil times,
And in their rage and dog-day heat I found
Something to glory in as just and fit,
And in the order of sublimest laws.
(1805 *Prelude*, book 10, ll. 409–13: P 1:278)

Wordsworth's choice of the word 'sublimest' here is significant, for the specific enlightenment that he claimed to have gained was that of enhanced perspective, the ability to look upon the chaotic events of his age as part of a grander scheme in which they were 'just and fit', so that the (terribly) sublime events of his 'evil times' are reconciled with a (morally) sublime scheme of transcendent 'laws':

Wild blasts of music thus did find their way
Into the midst of terrible events,
So that worst tempests might be listen'd to:
Then was the truth received into my heart,
That under heaviest sorrow earth can bring,
Griefs bitterest of ourselves or of our Kind,
If from the affliction somewhere do not grow
Honour which could not else have been, a faith,
An elevation, and a sanctity,
If new strength be not given, or old restored,
The blame is ours not Nature's.
(1805 *Prelude*, book 10, ll. 419–29: P 1:278)

What the prophetic 'spirit' allows Wordsworth to do, then, is to hear the music in the tempest, the hidden patterns and harmonies that govern human history and bring otherwise unachievable opportunities for good out of the worst of evils. His perspective, once more, is Adam's: but if in France he had been the Adam of the Edenic books, here he is the Adam of Book 12, to whom all of history has been revealed, along with the divine plan that guides it towards the ultimate triumph of good over evil. In the 1850 version of

The Prelude, Wordsworth rewrote this passage to make it even more reminiscent of Adam's mountaintop vision; rather than just crediting himself with having achieved 'an elevation', he described himself as 'borne aloft/In vision' and 'uplifted from the vantage-ground/Of pity and sorrow', raised, like Adam, far enough above the chaos of history to be able to appreciate it as sublime.⁶⁰ *The Prelude*, then, is not only the story of the loss and regaining of paradise; it is also the story of the loss and regaining of *distance*, for the elevated Wordsworth of its last books has regained the safe, distanced perspective of which he was deprived in revolutionary Paris, allowing him access once more to the elevated vision proper to the prophet or the epic poet. Having gained this perspective, he is able to see that an epic order lies beneath the apparent chaos of events, and thus that the story of his own life really 'is in truth heroic argument', just as he had asserted it to be back in book 1 (1805 *Prelude*, book 3, l. 182: P 1:140). The epic of Wordsworth's life tells the story of how Wordsworth came to realise that his life was epic material.

Wordsworth's famous statement, 'I felt a kind of sympathy with power', appears in the context of this passage. This line has often been read as a confession of fellow-feeling with Robespierre and the Jacobins, who elsewhere in *The Prelude* are condemned unequivocally, and it is true that the sublime, prophetic stance which Wordsworth attributes to himself here has more than a little in common with Robespierre's *Montaine*-top perspective, or the perspective of Rivers in *The Borderers*, in which human death and suffering are much less important than the sublime possibilities for social and moral regeneration they bring with them.⁶¹ However, the 'power' that the surrounding lines refer to is not mortal political power but the supernatural power of Nature or Heaven, the secret, sacred organising force beneath and behind human history. 'Sympathy', in this case, carries its older, magical meaning of an occult connection between two things: Wordsworth's sympathy with the power of Nature is what allows him to detect and understand its operations, hearing its 'music' through the tempest of events. What sets him apart from Rivers is the fact that, whereas Rivers saw in the sublime of nature a justification for inflicting sublime terrors on his fellow men, Wordsworth is led by Nature to abandon violent political action rather than to embrace it. That Wordsworth understood the danger of the line being misread is clear from the 1850 version, where his 'kind of sympathy with power' became 'daring sympathies with power,/Motions not treacherous or profane': a defensive rewriting aiming to make clear that the

power with which he sympathised was not that of the French (which would have been 'treacherous') nor that of any other earthly political faction (which would have been 'profane'), but something altogether higher, the power of Nature which gives shape and meaning to human affairs.⁶² Such a reading would fit in with Wordsworth's broader claim for his own prophetic status, a claim repeated at intervals throughout *The Prelude*.⁶³

Furthermore, it serves to explain how Wordsworth could be an epic hero or prophet at all. Power – whether the martial power of heroes, the political power of nations or the divine power of gods and angels – is the traditional subject-matter of epic; yet, by his own account, Wordsworth never wielded any real power in his life. Unlike epic heroes, he had not changed the world through his prowess in battle; and unlike the 'ancient prophets' to whom he compares himself – probably thinking of Milton as much as Moses or Jeremiah – he had not led his people to righteousness, or risked his life by speaking sacred truths to kings. Several critics have noted that there is much of the would-be soldier in Wordsworth; Simon Bainbridge writes that he 'always fancied that he had a talent for command, and he at one time thought of military life', and quotes in support some lines from 'Home at Grasmere', written by Wordsworth at much the same time as *The Prelude*:⁶⁴

I heard of danger met
Or sought with courage, enterprize forlorn,
By one, sole keeper of his own intent,
Or by a resolute few, who for the sake
Of glory fronted multitudes in arms.
Yea, to this day I swell with like desire;
I cannot at this moment read a tale
Of two brave Vessels matched in deadly fight
And fighting to the death, but I am pleased
More than a wise Man ought to be; I wish,
I burn, I struggle, and in soul am there.⁶⁵

In soul, perhaps; but in reality Wordsworth had scrupulously avoided his chance to assume the sublime roles he dreams of here, and never came any closer to military service than his decision to join the Grasmere Volunteers in 1803.⁶⁶ He had not stood forth, like a Biblical prophet, as 'one, sole keeper of his own intent'; he had not, like an epic hero, led 'a resolute few' who 'fronted

multitudes in arms'. He claimed that he should have been a great epic poet, that he could have been a great leader of men, that he would have been a martyr of the Revolution – but, in the event, he was none of these things. His republican call-to-arms, the dangerously radical *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*, was never published, and his one brush with revolutionary power, in France, seems to have almost driven him insane. But if it is not God or politics but Nature that shapes human history, then contemplation of and communion with Nature is not a retreat from power, but a connection to it; a connection that may lead ultimately to a 'sympathy with power' capable of granting the sublime insights that, Wordsworth contends, enable him to take his place alongside the 'ancient prophets'. Milton, Adam, Aeneas, Achilles and Moses had all sought epic greatness and 'sympathy with power' in high places, in the affairs of angels, gods and kings; but, with the help of Nature, Wordsworth claimed to have been able to attain it merely by staying home at Grasmere.

The Prelude, then, becomes the story of how one man attained sublime prophetic insight into human history, proving himself in the process to be as suitable an epic protagonist as the sublime, prophetically inspired Adam and as suitable an epic poet as the sublime, prophetically inspired Milton. Yet, as I have discussed above, it is at the same time the story of a retreat from the sublime world of epic action into a gentler, more domestic realm. This rhetorical balancing act was necessitated by the very terms of Wordsworth's project to write a non-epic epic poem, a work that would, like *Paradise Lost*, provide a new kind of 'heroic argument' for a new age. His seemingly paradoxical claim that one can attain sublimity by retreating from the sublime is no more than a restatement of his initial claim that one can write an epic poem even while shunning all normal epic subject matter. Wordsworth's was to be a new kind of epic, leading to a new kind of sublimity: not Milton's sublime of hideous ruin and combustion, but the gentler sublime of something far more deeply interfused, articulated in *The Prelude*, 'Tintern Abbey' and 'Home at Grasmere'.

One problem that Wordsworth faced in doing this was how to disentangle his version of the natural sublime from the terrorist aesthetics of Jacobins like Rivers and Robespierre, who also claimed to draw inspiration from nature. Wordsworth had to demonstrate that his sublime of nature would not, like the revolutionary sublime of terror, lead to madness and disintegration, either of the self or of society. Unfortunately, the sublime of terror was deeply

embedded in the sublime of nature, and always had been; mountains, argued aesthetic theorists from Dennis onwards, were sublime because they were terrifying, so how could an appeal to nature, of all things, allow Wordsworth to escape from the terrible sublime?⁶⁷ Wordsworth did not deny that nature can be terrible, and describing his hike up into the 'narrow chasm' of the Simplon Pass in *The Prelude*, he vividly evoked the natural sublime at its most fearful:

The immeasurable height
Of woods decaying, never to be decay'd,
The stationary blasts of waterfalls,
And every where along the hollow rent
Winds thwarting winds, bewilder'd and forlorn,
The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
The rocks that mutter'd close upon our ears,
Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side
As if a voice were in them – the sick sight
And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
The unfetter'd clouds and region of the heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light
Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
Characters of the great Apocalyps,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first and last, and midst, and without end.

(1805 *Prelude*, book 6, ll. 556–72: P 1:190)

This is physically and psychically dangerous territory. It is sublime because it is 'immeasurable', too huge to comprehend; but rather than standing at a distance, it pushes forwards 'close upon our ears', like the fear that 'press'd' on Wordsworth in revolutionary Paris, or like Black Crag, which chased him across Ullswater, and which surely reappears here in all its uncanny aliveness in the form of the 'black drizzling crags that spake' on the sides of the pass. Insanity seems written into the very landscape: the winds are 'bewildered and forlorn', the 'raving stream' is a 'sick sight' and a 'giddy prospect', the rocks 'mutter'd' in Wordsworth's ears, and the entire effect of the scene reminds him of the 'workings of one mind' lurching between 'tumult and peace'.

Nature and Terrorism seem here to be dangerously alike: huge, fearful and destructive, bringing madness to all who come too close. Yet Wordsworth asserts that there is a higher order behind all this, and that even the 'gloomy straight' of Simplon is in fact part of a greater pattern,

Characters of the great Apocalyps,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first and last, and midst, and without end.
(1805 *Prelude*, book 6, ll. 570–2: P1: 190)

Here, as throughout *The Prelude*, Wordsworth attributes prophetic status to himself, for an apocalypse is a revelation, which is what prophets are granted. But he has a specific prophet in mind, for 'first and last, and midst, and without end' alludes to Adam and Eve's morning prayer in *Paradise Lost*, where they call upon all created beings to praise God, 'Him first, him last, him midst, and without end'; Wordsworth is once more positioning himself as Adam, the prophet-hero of *Paradise Lost*, who was granted a vision of human history from his own day all the way to the great apocalypse at the end of time. Under Wordsworth's inspired gaze, the terrifying sublime chaos of nature resolves itself into 'characters', 'types' and 'symbols of Eternity': the muttering of the rocks, the speaking of the crags and the raving of the stream are not just incipient madness, but a potentially intelligible language speaking divine truths, if one can only understand it. Wordsworth does not specify exactly what pattern he sees behind the chaos of nature, but his allusion to Adam's prayer implies that it is a benevolent one; a reading borne out by the other passages I have discussed, in which Wordsworth claims to hear the music in the tempest and see in even the worst of events 'the order of sublimest laws'. Even at its most terrifying, Wordsworth asserts, Nature 'never did betray/The heart that loved her', and is at heart friendly rather than inimical to humanity.⁶⁸ Rivers and Robespierre saw 'sublimest laws' behind the apparent chaos of nature, and used them to inspire and justify acts of political terrorism; but Wordsworth insists that the order he sees in Nature is not like theirs, and that the 'face' which his prophetically inspired eyes can see behind the crags of Simplon wears the gentle smile of a friend rather than the stern frown of relentless revolutionary virtue.

But as Thomas Weiskel has suggested, these Alpine passes cold remained a site of potential trauma, so charged with Revolutionary and Miltonic echoes

that their sublimity could never be entirely separated from the terrorist aesthetic.⁶⁹ The exorcism of the revolutionary sublime required a final counter-spell, which was best uttered from much safer ground; so, at the very end of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth describes his ascent of Mount Snowdon. Chronologically, it made no sense for this episode to come last, for the excursion it describes took place in 1791, years before the events Wordsworth narrates in the books leading up to it. But thematically, it had to come last: in order to succeed Adam, or contend with Rivers or Robespierre, Wordsworth has to end his epic standing, like them, on a mountaintop, looking down from his prophetic perspective over the world below. Wordsworth ascends Snowdon through the midnight darkness 'as if in opposition set/Against an enemy' (1805 *Prelude*, book 13, ll. 30–1: P 1:314), seemingly conscious that this is to be a struggle of his version of sublimity against the Miltonic and Robespierist sublimines of terror embodied in the dark mountain scenery around him. At last he emerges into the moonlight, and looking down over the illuminated world he has a mountaintop vision of his own:

A meditation rose in me that night
Upon the lonely Mountain when the scene
Had pass'd away, and it appear'd to me
The perfect image of a mighty Mind,
Of one that feeds upon infinity,
That is exalted by an under presence,
The sense of God, or whatsoe'er is dim
Or vast in its own being; above all
One function of such mind had Nature there
Exhibited by putting forth, in midst
Of circumstance most awful and sublime ...
(1805 *Prelude*, book 13, ll. 66–76: P 1:315)

This passage functions as a kind of checklist of sublimity. The mind Wordsworth describes is 'mighty'; it is comparable to a 'lonely mountain'; it 'feeds upon infinity'; it is 'exalted'; it has a 'sense of God, or whatsoe'er is dim/Or vast'; and its function is revealed in 'circumstance most awful and sublime'. It is, in short, the sublime mind of the prophet-hero; the kind of mind that was attributed to Milton and Robespierre by their respective admirers. But the 'function' of such a mind that is 'exhibited' here, in

the 'perfect image' of the moonlit mountaintop, is not republican virtue, heroic power or divine prophetic inspiration, but the power of creative imagination, which Wordsworth specifically defines as the capacity to see the great in the small, to 'build up greatest things/From least suggestions' (1805 *Prelude*, book 13, ll. 98–9: P 1:316), as the flood of moonlight turns random rubble into objects of beauty. Of those who possess such a capacity, he writes:

They need not extraordinary calls
To rouse them, in a world of life they live
By sensible impressions not enthrall'd,
But quicken'd, rous'd, and made thereby more fit
To hold communion with the invisible world.
Such minds are truly from the Deity,
For they are Powers; and hence the highest bliss
That can be known is theirs ...

(1805 *Prelude*, book 13, ll. 101–8: P 1:316)

What Wordsworth realises on his mountaintop is that the truly sublime mind does not need mountains at all, because it can see sublimity in everything, 'every image' and 'every thought'. In order to become sublime 'powers' able to 'hold communion with the invisible world' and attain 'the highest bliss/That can be known', prophets and heroes usually had to pass through extraordinary events; but Wordsworth insists that all these can be obtained without experiencing any such 'extraordinary calls', simply by living in the ordinary, everyday 'world of life'. On their mountaintops, Wordsworth implies, Rivers and Robespierre got the wrong idea, for the ultimate message of the vast and terrible is that vastness and terror are unnecessary for sublimity: in nature, in politics and in life. Instead of seeing the sublime landscapes of Snowdon and Simplon as symbols for some even more sublime landscape – Heaven, or Hell, or the Republic of Virtue – Wordsworth asserts that the revelatory apocalypse that lies behind them is no more or less than the mind of man, a mind that can attain sublime heights even if it never engages in the kind of actions associated with the traditional epic. In this way, even though he had met no angels and led no revolutions, Wordsworth could claim to have achieved the sublime heights required to mark him out as Milton's true successor.

The Recluse, had Wordsworth ever managed to finish it, was to have been the final expression of this insight. In 'Home at Grasmere' – written by Wordsworth between 1800 and 1806, and intended by him to be the first book of the first part of that never-completed epic – he retold once more the story of how 'while yet an innocent little-one' he had been a creature of 'wild appetites and blind desires', fond of 'deep pools, tall trees, black chasms, and dizzy crags', sea battles, military heroism and other sublime spectacles, until Nature 'tamed' him and taught him to 'be mild, and love all gentle things':

Thy glory and thy happiness be there.
Yet fear (though thou confide in me) no want
Of aspirations which have been – of foes
To wrestle with and victory to complete,
Bounds to be leapt and darkness to explore.
That which enflamed thy infant heart – the love,
The longing, the contempt, the undaunted quest –
These shall survive, though changed their office, these
Shall live, it is not in their power to die.⁷⁰

Here, yet again, is the confirmation – spoken, this time, by Nature herself – that Wordsworth could still live a life of epic heroism despite his turn away from all the martial and terrifying scenes and activities he loved when he was young. Curiously, the hero that Nature seems to be reassuring him that he can still be is not Milton's Adam but Milton's Satan: 'the longing, the contempt, the undaunted quest' all sound like distinctly Satanic attributes, and the 'bounds to be leapt and darkness to explore' recall Satan's overleaping of the boundaries of Eden and his exploration of Hell and Chaos, respectively. Yet there is a certain logic to this: as discussed in Chapter Four, Milton's Satan was held to be the ultimate example of the sublime, which is precisely the quality that Nature is attempting to convince Wordsworth that he can still possess. Thus comforted, Wordsworth tells us, he learned to put aside 'the Warrior's Schemes' and 'the hope to fill/The heroic trumpet' (i.e. to write traditional epic poetry), and turned instead to his personal, rural and domestic subjects.⁷¹ He writes:

Paradise and groves
Elysian, fortunate islands, fields like those of old

In the deep ocean – wherefore should they be
A History, or but a dream, when minds
Once wedded to this outward frame of things
In love, find them the growth of common day?⁷²

This is Wordsworth at his most ambitious, asserting that his everyday world of 'common day' is not just equally suitable as epic material when compared to the worlds of the traditional epic poets, but actually superior to them, for in it Milton's 'Paradise', Virgil's 'groves Elysian' and Homer's 'fields ... in the deep ocean' are realised not just as 'a history, or but a dream' – as they implicitly are in the works of those poets – but as real, immediate truth, if only we can learn to wed our minds to 'this outward frame of things/In love'. In a passage written in clear and obvious imitation of the opening of *Paradise Lost*, Wordsworth asserts that 'this is my great argument', to be written with the aid of the 'prophetic Spirit' whose 'Temple [is] in the hearts/Of mighty Poets'; like Milton, Wordsworth calls this holy spirit down into himself, asking 'that my verse may live and be/Even as a Light hung up in hearts to cheer/Mankind in times to come!' Yet the predominant note remains hesitant and conditional, expressed in a series of 'ifs'; *if* 'more lowly matter' and the 'little realities of life' can thus be made to stand alongside and express 'highest things', then Wordsworth asks God to help him make his account of his own life 'express the image of a better time'. 'Be with me and uphold me to the end', he implores – and with that line the invocation to the Prophetic spirit comes to an end, along with the poem itself.⁷³ The rest of *The Recluse* was never written, although the poem eventually published as 'The Excursion' was originally intended to have formed another part of it. Throughout 'Home at Grasmere', Wordsworth asserts that his move away from the traditional epic material he loved as a child was an advance, rather than a retreat. But he never appears entirely confident of it; and, if the results of his invocation are anything to judge by, it would seem that the 'Prophetic spirit' that he called upon shared his doubts on the matter.

In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom uses Wordsworth's relationship with Milton as an example of the process he calls *askesis*, whereby a poet 'yields up part of his own human and imaginative endowment, so as to separate himself from others, including the precursor'.⁷⁴ 'This *askesis*', Bloom writes, 'yields up a Wordsworth who might have been a greater poet than the one he became, a more externalised maker who would have

had a subject beyond that of his own subjectivity'.⁷⁵ Whether Wordsworth really had no subject other than 'his own subjectivity' is open to debate; but in the course of his struggle to establish himself as Milton's true heir, he certainly yielded up the world of traditional epic. In his 'Prospectus' he claimed that his own subject – 'the mind of man' – was in fact much bigger and more sublime than the one he had renounced, but in some ways it was obviously also a much smaller subject than the political and martial events of the Homeric epics, let alone the cosmic visions of Milton. Eighteenth-century criticism had praised Milton for the scale of his imagination, sweeping over whole universes of space and 6,000 years of time; Wordsworth's vision, which he claimed was even greater, covered only thirty-odd years in the life of a single private individual. Bloom argues that this radical shrinkage was needed in order to give Wordsworth a poetic territory of his own, somewhere Milton had not already been before him, allowing him to 'separate himself from ... the precursor [i.e. Milton]', and he frames this retreat in terms of immutable artistic and psychological laws, arguing that any 'strong poet' in an analogous situation would have to do the same in order to avoid an unwinnable battle with their invincible poetic predecessor. Yet even if this were so, Wordsworth's most talented contemporaries seem to have felt no compulsion to shrink back to the domestic and internal worlds: Blake's epics toss infinities around like juggling balls, while Shelley and Byron would write their epics about individual heroism and large-scale political events. It was only Wordsworth who moved away from them, just as it was only Wordsworth, of all the major Romantic poets, who made a deliberate decision to renounce the grand (terrible/Miltonic) sublime. But then, the rest of the British Romantics experienced the breaking-through of the terrible sublime into history, which later writers and survivors would go on to refer to simply as 'the Terror', at a safe distance: Blake and Coleridge were in England at the time, Byron and Shelley were only a few years old, and Keats had not even been born. Only Wordsworth came close enough to have 'felt and touched it', and his consequent retreat from Terror – in poetry, in politics, in Milton – imposed upon him an *askesis* more extreme than any of his contemporaries. Having rejected the Miltonic sublime, Wordsworth was compelled, as Blake, Byron and Shelley were not, to carve out a new kind of epic: one that would allow him, both as a poet and as an epic subject, to maintain a safe distance from the sublime of terror.

IV

In his later years, Wordsworth seems to have become more, rather than less, concerned with comparisons with Milton. If Hazlitt is to be believed, it became something of an obsession for him: 'Milton is his great idol', he remarked in his essay on Wordsworth, 'and he sometimes dares to compare himself with him ...'.⁷⁶ While willing to grant that his sonnets 'have something of the same high-raised tone and prophetic spirit' as Milton's, Hazlitt seems mostly to have found Wordsworth's habit of constantly comparing himself with the incomparable Milton rather tiresome. 'Why must a man be for ever mouthing out his own poetry, comparing himself with Milton, passage by passage, and weighing every line in a balance of posthumous fame which he holds in his own hands?' he asked irritably in his essay 'On People with One Idea'.⁷⁷ Or, as he put it elsewhere: 'It would be no niggard praise to Mr Wordsworth to grant that he was either half the man or half the poet that Milton was.'⁷⁸ In Hazlitt's (not overly sympathetic) view, Wordsworth could never be a poet of Miltonic stature, and his repeated attempts to claim that he was served only to demonstrate his own shortcomings by comparison. A much stranger, but equally revealing, perspective on Wordsworth's continuing obsession with Milton is to be found in the *Recollections* of his disciple Thomas De Quincey. There De Quincey tells the story of how upon obtaining a copy of the portrait frontispiece to Richardson's commentary on Milton – the portrait of Milton which, according to De Quincey, was said to be truest to life – he was astonished to discover 'a likeness nearly perfect of Wordsworth, better by much than any which I have since seen' ('Lake Reminiscences from 1807 to 1830', number 1, 'William Wordsworth': DQ 11:59). A comparison of this portrait with surviving portraits of Wordsworth suggests, at least to my eye, that they did resemble one another, but De Quincey's anecdote implies much more than that; it suggests that De Quincey thought (or wished to believe) that Wordsworth was more like Milton than he was like himself. If Wordsworth's self-identification with Milton was anything like as powerful as Hazlitt suggests, then De Quincey, during his years of close association with him, would certainly have picked up on it: and given his reverence for Wordsworth, he could easily have absorbed and amplified the idea that Wordsworth was a second Milton until the two poets became irrevocably mingled in his mind. The same thing may have happened to other members of Wordsworth's circle; tellingly, when De Quincey went to the Wordsworth

family with his amazing discovery, none of them disagreed with his opinion that his portrait of Milton was a perfect likeness of Wordsworth 'at the height of his powers' ('Lake Reminiscences from 1807 to 1830', number 1, 'William Wordsworth': DQ 11:60).

In completing *The Prelude* Wordsworth may have felt that he had, at least partially, lived up to the challenge of becoming a modern Milton. As his fame spread, a growing number of his contemporaries began to think so too, even though almost none of them had yet read the unpublished *Prelude*. In 1816, Haydon sent Wordsworth a poem by the young John Keats, which described Wordsworth in terms almost identical to those which he had used to describe Milton fourteen years before:

Great spirits now on earth are sojourning;
He of the cloud, the cataract, the lake,
Who on Helvellyn's summit, wide awake,
Catches his freshness from archangel's wing ...⁷⁹

Weighing up their respective merits as poets in a letter of 1818, Keats confessed to 'an uncertainty' over 'whether Wordsworth has in truth epic passion', but ultimately concluded: 'I must think Wordsworth is deeper than Milton – though I think it has depended more upon the general and gregarious advance of intellect, than individual greatness of Mind'.⁸⁰ It is an equivocal judgement: Wordsworth is the deeper poet, but the lesser mind, and it is perhaps his lack of obvious sublime genius on a Miltonic scale that leaves the truth of his 'epic passion' open to question in a way that the truth of Milton's is evidently not. Furthermore, despite his poetic successes, Wordsworth had emphatically failed to achieve Miltonic stature as a political figure, for while Keats may have believed that Wordsworth was a worthy poetic heir to Milton, he still felt that Milton lacked a true political successor, and in an 1818 letter to his brother George he virtually quoted Wordsworth's 1802 sonnet 'Great Men Have Been among Us' by writing despairingly: 'We have no Milton, no Algernon Sidney ...'.⁸¹

To Keats's more politically engaged contemporaries Shelley and Byron, Wordsworth had not just failed to become the radical Miltonic poet-philosopher he had once aspired to be; he had consciously and deliberately abandoned his chance to succeed, turning his back on the ideals of his youth. In 1816 Shelley, who idolised 'the sacred Milton' as 'a republican, and a

bold inquirer into morals and religion’, wrote a bitter sonnet entitled ‘To Wordsworth’ about the older poet’s betrayal:

Thou wert as a lone star, whose light did shine
On some frail bark in winter’s midnight roar:
Thou hast like to a rock-built refuge stood
Above the blind and battling multitude:
In honoured poverty thy voice did weave
Songs consecrate to truth and liberty, –
Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve,
Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be.⁸²

Shelley’s description of Wordsworth as ‘a lone star’ evokes Wordsworth’s description of Milton: ‘Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart’. Likewise, Shelley’s description of Wordsworth’s early life – ‘In honoured poverty thy voice did weave/Songs consecrate to truth and liberty’ – is reminiscent of Wordsworth’s account of Milton’s Christ-like life, his ‘cheerful godliness’ and his acceptance of ‘the lowliest duties’ of ‘life’s common way’. In this poem, then, Shelley mourns for Wordsworth as a failed Milton, one who took up the Miltonic burden only to drop it again. Byron, indiscriminately attacking Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey in the Dedication to *Don Juan*, was more brutal:

If fallen in evil days on evil tongues,
Milton appeal’d to the Avenger, Time,
If Time, the avenger, execrates his wrongs,
And makes the word ‘*Miltonic*’ mean ‘*sublime*’,
He deign’d not to belie his soul in songs,
Nor turn his very talent to a crime –
He did not loathe the sire to laud the son,

But closed the tyrant-hater he begun.
Think’st thou, could he, the blind Old Man, arise
Like Samuel from the grave, to freeze once more
The blood of monarchs with his prophecies,
Or be alive again – again all hoar
With time and trials, and those helpless eyes,
And heartless daughters, worn, and pale, and poor,

Would *he* adore a sultan? *he* obey
The intellectual eunuch Castlereagh?⁸³

Here, yet again, is the trope of Milton's resurrection, his return to judge the present from beyond the grave. For Byron, Milton's life is the standard by which Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey are judged and found wanting: unlike him, they had failed to remain true to their ideals in the face of 'time and trials', and were thus unable – and unworthy – to become his successors. Both Byron and Shelley condemn Wordsworth for lacking the moral fortitude that was the hallmark of the republican sublime, of which Milton was the ideal type. As J. G. A. Pocock has shown, the ability to maintain unfailing *virtu* in the face of the bewildering shifts of *fortuna* that govern the world of politics was generally understood to be the defining characteristic of republican excellence: Cato, Milton and Robespierre, like the stars and mountains to which they were compared, were unchanging and inflexible, and while the tide of history might batter and even drown them it could not divert them from their course.⁸⁴ This was the ideal that Byron and Shelley set themselves, and accordingly both men lived and died without ever much altering their political views. Wordsworth's opinions, however, did change, and one of the symptoms of that change was a shift from the inflexible republican sublime of stars and mountains, in which change is only a sign of weakness, to a more fluid sublime of air, water and growing things, in which change is part of the process of life. This aesthetic was not inherently worse or weaker than the one it replaced, but it was a great deal less Miltonic; and in the fragments of *The Recluse* that Wordsworth was still wrestling with, the Heavenly Muse was invoked only to give praise for Lakeland landscapes and Dorothy's companionship.

If Milton *had* returned in 1819 – or, indeed, in 1820, when Shelley 'dreamed that Milton's spirit rose' – he would probably have shared Byron's disdain for his would-be successor William Wordsworth.⁸⁵ By then comfortably installed in a minor nook of the British establishment, he had become a man of property and a defender of constitutional monarchy. Probably worst of all, to Milton's eyes, would have been the fact that he had become an *Anglican*; and not just a normal Anglican, but a *high-church* Anglican, much given to praising the memory of Milton's old enemy Archbishop Laud in print.⁸⁶ Wordsworth's career as a sonneteer had begun in 1802, when he 'took fire' from the spirit of Milton's sonnets: now, in 1820, he turned his

Miltonic gift of sonnet-writing to the most un-Miltonic purpose imaginable, by writing a 102-sonnet sequence on the glorious history of the Church of England. He had come full circle; his views on Milton were now, in all likelihood, very similar to those of his more conservative teachers back in the 1780s, for while he still admired Milton's poetry, he had come to consider him lamentably mistaken in his political opinions. In his 1821 'Vision of Judgment', Southey – now Poet Laureate, and fresh from condemning the new 'Satanic school' of poetry being written by Byron, Shelley and their ilk – gave Milton's spirit a place in his Royalist heaven on one condition:

Milton's severer shade I saw, and in reverence humbled
Gazed on that soul sublime: of passion now as of blindness
Heal'd, and no longer here to Kings and to Hierarchs hostile ...⁸⁷

One recalls the lines of Nahum Tate, himself about to become Poet Laureate, in 1691: 'For common-wealths no more his Harp he strings/By NASSAU's virtue Reconcil'd to Kings'.⁸⁸ Southey's poem is a much greater exercise in wishful thinking than Tate's: given that hatred of bishops was one of the defining features of Milton's life, it is rather easier to imagine his spirit converting to constitutional monarchism – or, indeed, to Islam – than it is to imagine it no longer 'to Heirarchs hostile'. But it was a wish that Wordsworth, with his new passion for Anglicanism, must have shared; as Milton had never changed or wavered in life, they were reduced to hoping that he had proved less inflexible after death. It was the old eighteenth-century refrain come back again: 'Why *wouldn't* Milton understand that Anglicanism was the one true way? Let us hope he knows better now, wherever he is ....'

In the same year as Southey wrote his 'Vision of Judgment', Wordsworth dedicated the better part of one of his 'Ecclesiastical Sonnets' to Milton. Entitled 'Latitudinarianism', it demonstrates how much their relationship had changed since 1802, when Wordsworth had last written about Milton in sonnet form:

And One there is who builds immortal lays,
Though doomed to tread in solitary ways,
Darkness before, and danger's voice behind!
Yet not alone, nor helpless to repel
Sad thoughts; for from above the starry sphere

Come secrets – whispered nightly to his ear;
And the pure spirit of celestial light
Shines through his soul – ‘that he may see and tell
Of things invisible to mortal sight’.⁸⁹

‘Darkness before, and danger’s voice behind’: Wordsworth had used that line before, in *The Prelude*, when he described the aged Milton as standing ‘almost single, uttering odious truth’. Even that had been a development of his earlier lines on Milton from 1794, when he had written: ‘In dangerous night so Milton worked alone’. But now Wordsworth revised his earlier views: although ‘doomed to tread in solitary ways’ Milton is ‘not alone’, being instead attended by ‘the pure spirit of celestial light’ – which is to say, by God. This small self-revision suggests a large change in Wordsworth’s view of Milton – and, given the power of his identification with Milton, perhaps also of himself. The Milton of 1794, like the Wordsworth of that year, is primarily a political figure; he is alone because his political movement has been defeated, and most of its adherents have abandoned it, leaving only Milton to go on in star-like constancy. The Milton of 1821, like the Wordsworth of *that* year, is primarily a religious figure; he is not alone, because God is with him. The ‘awful’ Milton of *The Prelude*, like the Milton of *Don Juan*, utters odious truths to those in power; the gentler Milton of ‘Latitudinarianism’ ‘builds immortal lays’ instead. Wordsworth had regressed from the dangerous, radical Milton he discovered in revolutionary France to the safe, pious Milton of his schooldays in Hawkshead and Cockermouth. Having come too close to the sublime for comfort during the 1790s, he was now keen to put a safe distance between ‘the sublime Milton’ and himself: like so many others, he had come to prefer a distant and otherworldly Milton to one disturbingly alive and active in current affairs.

In 1837, Wordsworth – now sixty-seven years old – visited the abbey of Vallombrosa in Italy, which the monks there assured him that Milton had also visited two centuries before.⁹⁰ Wordsworth wrote a poem about his visit, dwelling on the Miltonic associations of the place, although by this stage in his life political radicalism had become so repugnant to him that he felt obliged to add an explanatory note to his poem:

I have spoken of the author of ‘Paradise Lost’ in a strain of panegyric scarcely justifiable by the tenor of some of his opinions, whether

theological or political, and by the temper he carried into public affairs in which, unfortunately for his genius, he was so much concerned.⁹¹

One recalls Thomas Warton's disapproving comments in 1785: 'Those years in which imagination is on the wing, were unworthily and unprofitably wasted on temporary topics ... Smit with the deplorable polemics of Puritanism, [Milton] suddenly ceased to gaze on *such sights as youthful poets dream*' (TW xi). The young Wordsworth could easily have read Warton's edition of Milton, either at Hawkshead or Cambridge; now, the aged Wordsworth echoed Warton's opinions, lamenting that such a great poetic genius as Milton had stooped to involve himself in politics. In his poem 'At Vallombrosa', Wordsworth constructs a version of Milton with no discernible 'theological or political' opinions at all, a man wholly concerned with art and God. Far from involving himself in 'public affairs', Wordsworth's Milton is a virtual hermit: the poem depicts him keeping 'lonely vigils' in his 'sequestered Retreat' at Vallombrosa, and then skips over the entire middle section of his life to show him once more alone, living through 'a desolate time' in his old age. There is no hint as to why 'darkness and danger had compassed him round', no suggestion of what Milton had done with all those years between his lonely meditations in Italy and those in London. In fact, Wordsworth seems to imagine that Milton never truly left Vallombrosa at all:

The Monks still repeat the tradition with pride,
And its truth who shall doubt? for his Spirit is here;
In the cloud-piercing rocks doth her grandeur abide,
In the pines pointing heavenward her beauty austere;
In the flower-besprent meadows his genius we trace
Turned to humbler delights, in which youth might confide,
That would yield him fit help while prefiguring that Place
Where, if Sin had not entered, Love never had died.⁹²

Milton's spirit, then, is coterminous with the landscape of Vallombrosa itself: an Edenic landscape where beauty and sublimity mingle, its 'cloud-piercing rocks' offset by 'flower-besprent meadows'. If, as Wordsworth claims, Vallombrosa is Milton's true spiritual home, then it follows that the true Milton is the young Milton of Vallombrosa, the saintly hermit whose cell the

monks point out with pride, rather than the more threatening Milton of later years. Wordsworth continues:

When with life lengthened out came a desolate time,
And darkness and danger had compassed him round,
With a thought he might flee to these haunts of his prime
And here once again a kind of shelter be found.⁹³

By imagining the older Milton comforting himself with memories of Vallombrosa, Wordsworth's implicit claim is, once again, that what Milton truly loved was not public life but scenic retirement. Having first imagined a young Milton who passes the days of his Italian tour in 'lonely vigils' and contemplation of flowery fields – as opposed to visiting Galileo in prison and having theological arguments with Catholics, which is what Milton himself boasted of having spent his time in Italy doing – Wordsworth then asserts that this (imaginary) retreat from the world was the happiest part of Milton's life; so much so that in times of adversity he would recall, not his glory days under the Commonwealth, but his 'sequestered Retreat' in Italy. 'At Vallombrosa' enacts a very literal process of distancing, taking Milton away from 'public affairs' and placing him instead in a cell in an Italian abbey, completely cut off from the world, free to write religious poetry and contemplate God in silence and peace. Wordsworth's poem attempts to construct a Milton worthy of its own panegyric; one who, sequestered in his distant monastery, was as far removed from theological and political quarrels as possible.

When Wordsworth visited Vallombrosa, he had just had a quarrel of his own with his exasperated travelling companion Henry Crabb Robinson. Robinson had already seen Vallombrosa and was in no hurry to see it again, but Wordsworth would not be deterred; when his earlier tour of Europe was cut short in 1820, he had put Vallombrosa first in his list of places that he lamented not having had a chance to see, before Pompeii, Florence or even Rome.⁹⁴ Now, back in Italy after seventeen years in England, he was determined not to miss it again. He and Robinson argued, for the only time on their entire tour; sharp words were exchanged; and finally Wordsworth set off into the mountains on his own, leaving Robinson behind.⁹⁵ What was it that he was so eager to see at Vallombrosa? As his poem, and his notes on it, make clear, the only thing about the abbey and its surrounds that interested him were their (possibly mythical) associations with Milton. Yet that alone

was enough to compel him to go there, rising at five in the morning and riding up into the mountains at the age of sixty-seven, just so that he could stand where Milton might, perhaps, have stood 200 years before.⁹⁶ It was the gesture of a man still in thrall to Milton's legend, still following in Milton's footsteps, desperate to prove that he could match all Milton's achievements, do everything that Milton had done. In visiting Vallombrosa, the 'Valley of Shadows', Wordsworth demonstrated that he was as much haunted by 'Miltonian shades' as ever.⁹⁷ He was the most widely admired and respected poet in England, only a few years away from becoming Poet Laureate; but even though he was now older than Milton had been when he died, he had never finished his epic, and he was still standing in Milton's shadow.

Vallombrosa! of thee I first heard in the page
Of that holiest of Bards; and the name for my mind
Had a musical charm, which the winter of age
And the changes it brings had no power to unbind.⁹⁸

Which 'changes' was Wordsworth thinking of in these lines? He must have known that Hazlitt, Byron and Shelley had all condemned him precisely because, unlike Milton, he had allowed himself to change with age. In 'At Vallombrosa', Wordsworth was not just constructing a version of Milton that would be politically acceptable to his readers; he was also constructing one with whom he could acceptably compare himself. If Milton is 'that holiest of Bards', the contemplative religious poet that so many of his admirers had always wanted him to be, then the 'Miltonian shades' that surround Wordsworth at Vallombrosa may yet be comforting presences, willing to look kindly upon their pious successor, rather than rising up against him like the terrifying, unanswerable accusers imagined by Byron in *Don Juan*. By 1837, the year of Queen Victoria's coronation, England was safe, republicanism had been vanquished, and Milton had apparently been thoroughly laid to rest; even the rediscovery and publication of his *De Doctrina Christiana* in 1825, proving his heretical Arianism once and for all, had little effect beyond making a few religiously orthodox readers transfer their loyalties to more theologically sound poets such as Wordsworth, instead. But in poems such as 'Latitudinarianism' and 'At Vallombrosa' Wordsworth seems still to be glancing over his shoulder at Milton, as if to make sure that he really was going to stay dead.