Wordsworth's Prudent Conservatism: Social Reform in the Lyrical Ballads

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There can be no doubt that William Wordsworth (1770-1850) in his youth ardently supported the French Revolution. We know, moreover, from his retrospective account in The Prelude that he had hoped the principles animating the revolution would extend beyond France to England and indeed to "the whole Earth." Nor can there be any doubt that, from about 1812011, Wordsworth sympathized with the Tory cause and had become deeply influenced by the teachings of Edmund Burke. What has been much debated in Wordsworth criticism is exactly when this shift occurred. Until recently, the prevailing view has been that while Wordsworth became disenchanted with his earlier radicalism, he did not default on the liberal principles and in fact remained a committed liberal throughout his "great decade" (1798-1808). According to this view, only after he had written his finest poetry did Wordsworth switch to the conservative side.

Within the past ten or fifteen years, however, a number of New Historist critics have contended that as early as 1796 with The Borderers and certainly by the 1798 edition of Lyrical Ballads Wordsworth had been significantly influenced by the doctrines of Burke. As a consequence of this influence and a growing disillusionment with the course of the French Revolution, they argue, Wordsworth largely abandoned his desire for radical change in English society. According to this view, he retreated from a poetry of protest aimed at affecting material change in society (such as the eradication of poverty) to an interiorized poetry of nature and the imagination. In the infamous phraseology of Jerome McGann, "Between 1793 and 1798 Wordsworth lost the world merely to gain his own immortal soul." On the other hand, certain critics, directly or indirectly in response to the former critics, have attempted to save the radical Wordsworth. That is, they attempt to show that Wordsworth maintained fairly radical ideals well into the nineteenth century. Against the latter critics I will argue that by the late 1790s (that is, from the beginning of the great decade) Wordsworth was indeed closer to Burke than to the revolutionaries in his politics, while against the former I will argue that Wordsworth did not in fact "lose the world," but instead set more prudent goals and altered his proposed means for achieving those goals.

For Wordsworth, any attempt to influence actual and lasting social reform required serious attention to the health of the "immortal souls" both of those who

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would actuate and of those who would receive the benefits of social reform. Thus, whereas the Wordsworth of the first half of the 1790s had desired reform which was total and immediate—a cataclysmic upheaval and restructuring of society based on the French Revolutionary model with millennial hopes—the Wordsworth of the end of the 1790s had taken a view of reform that is long but not eschatological, one that takes into account the law of unforeseen consequences and recognizes limits to the possibilities of human reform, and of the dangers of attempting to exceed those limits. Consequently, while he was writing his greatest and most famous poetry, Wordsworth was already a prudent conservative in the Burkean sense.

I

Although Wordsworth’s 1800 Preface to Lyrical Ballads is generally seen as a revolutionary doctrine—and in many ways it is—we can still detect in it the influence of Burke. James K. Chandler detects Burke’s influence on the Preface in Wordsworth’s denigration of the utility of reason and emphasis on the “taste” of the author, in the importance of habit for morality, and in the stress on experience. To this might be added Wordsworth’s distrust of the abstract and stress on “flesh and blood,” his insistence on the empirical method of “look[ing] steadily at [his] subject,” and his acceptance of prejudice, or “honorable bigotry.”

A careful perusal of the Preface also reveals that Wordsworth chose the rural poor as his subject matter not in order to reveal their privation and to call for its alleviation, but rather to demonstrate that they are actually the most suitable subject matter for good poetry. “Low and rustic life was generally chosen,” he says, because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language... In other words, the poor serve his needs, not he theirs. In any case, the poverty that Wordsworth most concerned with is spiritual and not material. Not political oppression or economic exploitation, but a blunting of the powers of the mind is what Wordsworth considers the most significant problem of the age. This is a “general evil” of such a “magnitude” as to “oppress” Wordsworth with a justifiable melancholy. But Wordsworth remains optimistic in the natural strength of the human mind and in the belief in an emerging systematic opposition to this “evil...by men of greater powers” than himself.

In spite of this, however, there can be no doubt that the Lyrical Ballads are revolutionary in the degree to and manner in which they treat the rural poor. Indeed, most contemporary reviewers took them to be low or vulgar, and some contemporaries even took them to be radical. And without question, the ballads—at least implicitly, by bringing to the reader’s attention the plight of the poverty-stricken—call for some sort of reform in the treatment of the poor. But the question remains: Just what sort of reform? We must keep in mind that it is altogether possible for poetic form and content to be revolutionary, while the views expressed by that form and content are conservative. As Wordsworth himself said to Charles Fox regarding their political and literary differences, “in poetry you must admit that I am the Whig and you the Tory.” This clearly indicates that Wordsworth can at least conceive of simultaneously being a political conservative and poetic revolutionary. In order to qualify as Burkean reform the proposed plan must call for the organic modification rather than the fundamental altering of existing social arrangements; it must proceed gradually and cautiously so as not to cause civil
unrest and create worse problems than it solves by destroying the stability and order upon which society stands; it must take into account all conceivable contingencies and hence cannot be based on an abstract blueprint drawn up by social engineers; and finally it must be possible, not utopian. The plan which Wordsworth does implicitly offer in the Lyrical Ballads is based on these Burkean premises, but goes one step further than Burke himself in regard to poor relief. That step specifically deals with those among the poor who slip through the cracks of the existing system, usually because a member of the upper class fails or is unable to perform his duties.

By 1798 Wordsworth seems to have developed a strong distrust for the "meddling intellects" of those economists and statesmen who thought that they could rationally solve all of society's problems. For instance, in "The Old Cumberland Beggar," a poem included in the 1800 edition of Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth opposes those "political economists... [who] war upon mendacity in all its forms, and by implication, if not directly, on Almsgiving also." For this reason, as David Simpson points out, few "have failed to register some measure of embarrassment or outrage at 'The Old Cumberland Beggar.'" But just what is the source of this outrage?

Chandler convincingly traces the influence of Burke on this poem. Wordsworth's main concern in this poem is that the beggar not be considered useless. But as Chandler points out, the beggar's use aids not himself, but the villagers who live around him. Wordsworth's main concern, in other words, is not with the indigent, but with those who are affected by the indigent. The presence of the beggar—and his continual need for charity—makes, to paraphrase Burke, a habit of the villagers' virtue: "Where'er the aged Beggar takes his rounds,/ The mild necessity of use compels/ To acts of love; and habit does the work/ Of reason." The second use of the beggar, Chandler adds, "is that he reminds the villagers of their kind offices toward him." Like Burke, Wordsworth also castigates the presumption of statesmen "Who are so restless in [their] wisdom" and "have a broom still ready in [their] hands/ To rid the world of nuisances." He advises these vain men to let the beggar be. Finally, Chandler also makes the important point that Wordsworth's position has clearly shifted since 1793, when in the Letter to Llandaff he dares to hope that the "class of wretches called mendicants" will soon cease to exist.

David Simpson takes up Chandler's argument, but while he admits the undeniable influence of Burke on this poem, he nevertheless tries to save Wordsworth as much as possible from a position which he believes indicates "some moral shortcoming." He does so by maintaining that Wordsworth's main polemic is not pro-Burke, but anti-Bentham. By defending charity against Bentham, however, Wordsworth more or less inadvertently falls into the conservative camp, denying the need of public relief. Simpson maintains, in any case, that "Wordsworth is far more subtle than Burke." Moreover, in his haste to counter Bentham, Wordsworth merely slips into an ideological confusion. Simpson therefore claims that the "Burkean affiliations of this poem, while they are surely there, are not its major argument."

While I do not deny the anti-Benthamite polemic in "The Old Cumberland Beggar," I do think Simpson underestimates the degree of conscious Burkeanism present in the poem. As we saw in Chandler's reading, there are more similarities to Burke than just an implicit denial of the need for poor relief. There is the emphasis on charity and habit, the distrust of meddling politicians, and also the clear shift from Wordsworth's own
earlier position. But just how much "saving" does Wordsworth need anyway? Chandler is as uncomfortable with the implications of his own reading as Simpson is, but just how much of a "moral shortcoming" should we ascribe to Wordsworth because of this poem?

I think the embarrassment and the outrage directed at this poem stem mostly from liberal misapprehensions about the basis of Wordsworth's thinking on this matter. Simpson clearly is no subtle reader of Burke. More significantly, he never considers Burke's argument, based on sound economic policy, that public relief, in the long run, would actually harm the poor. But perhaps the best way to understand this issue in Wordsworth's poem is not through Simpson, but through Harold Bloom's warning that "Wordsworth is not preaching the vicious and mad doctrine that beggary is good because it makes charity possible." Bloom drastically oversimplifies the issue here. It is not simply that beggary ought to be kept around so that charity might continue to exist; charity (in the general sense of love for the other, caritas), no doubt, does not require the existence of indigence to be performed. Rather, by 1798, Wordsworth, I think, is working under the assumption that the poor will always be among us. We live inescapably in "a world/Where want and sorrow" are. He has lost his earlier idealistic faith that poverty can be completely eliminated. But if it must exist, Wordsworth implicitly argues, it is better that it be taken care of at the local levels through charity, than by some remote statesman who presumes to consider the beggar a burden on the community that must be eradicated. Some good benefit, Wordsworth says, thankfully does accrue to beggary. If Providence—"the benignant law of Heaven" (167)—necessitates poverty for some, it also allows a measure of good to come of it. Charity reminds us of our moral equality. The French Revolution revealed the dangers of material levelling, but even "the poorest poor" are occasionally capable of charitable acts, which remind us that "we have all of us one human heart." Contrarily, if the government takes care of poor relief, no charitable action with its attendant benefits is involved. Moreover, human nature being what it is, if relief is made an entitlement to which all have a right, Wordsworth knew, the ranks of the poor will only increase. Thus we must not confuse Wordsworth's support of private charity against public aid with a naïve optimism in the general altruism of humankind, or with a callous indifference to the actual suffering of the poor. Indeed, we could just as easily accuse the advocates of systematic public relief of a naïve belief in the efficacy of governmental regulations to alleviate poverty, or of an imprudent shortsightedness in failing to recognize the harmful long-term consequences of making relief an entitlement of the poor.

In contrast to "The Old Cumberland Beggar," critics often hold up "Goody Blake and Harry Gill" as an example of Wordsworth's concern for social reform. This ballad relates the tale of a poor old woman who steals sticks from a wealthy man's hedge for fuel during the winter. When Harry Gill catches Goody Blake in the act of stealing the fuel, she curses him and he is immediately struck with a chill which remains with him for the rest of his life. The poem ends by admonishing other farmers to remember the story of Goody Blake and Harry Gill. Certainly, Wordsworth does not endorse things as they are in this poem. But what sort of reform does "Goody Blake and Harry Gill" suggest is needed?

Wordsworth goes out of his way to inform the reader that Goody Blake is an unusual case. Most of her neighbors do not suffer as much as she. Not only is her hut "poor," but also it is located in an inconvenient spot:
Remote from sheltered village-green,
On a hill's northern side she dwelt,
Where from sea-blasts the hawthorns lean,
And hoary dews are slow to melt.

Presumably other huts were sheltered in
the village-green. But hers sits in the
coldest of all possible locations: on the
northern side of a hill facing the sea. Her
plight is also unusually bad because she
is alone, without husband or even an old
female friend to help her. And "two poor
old Dames" living together, the speaker
tells us, typically get along better than
lonely old Goody Blake. We also know
that Harry Gill specifically suspects
Goody Blake of stealing from his hedge.
We might surmise that his suspicion of
her arises from a knowledge that she, of
all his surrounding neighbors, most needs
to steal to keep warm; the others provide
well enough for themselves.

Wordsworth also lets the reader know
that her life is not entirely horrendous.
She gets along quite well when the
weather is warm:

'Twas well enough, when summer came,
The long, warm, lightsome summer-day,
Then at her door the canty Dame
Would sit, as any linnet, gay.

Despite her poverty and shabby clothes
and dwelling, when the weather was nice
she could be downright cheery. This sug-
gests that the remedy to the situation
here is rather simple and easy. To ease
her predicament, all Goody Blake needs
is to be provided with a bit of fuel during
the winter months to keep her warm.
Harry's hedge could easily provide this
bit of charity without harm or inconve-
nience to anyone.

Thus nowhere does this poem call for
major social reform. It does not condemn
existing social institutions for impover-
ishing Goody Blake, but rather Harry Gill
for not performing the duties attendant
upon his station. The current system
makes a Goody Blake the exception, not
the rule. But Wordsworth does go be-
ond Burke in two ways in this poem.
First, by recognizing that due to unfortu-
nate circumstances sometimes even the
industrious require charity. We are told
of Goody Blake that "All day she spun in
her poor dwelling;/ And then her three
hours' work at night."

Second, Wordsworth admits, as Burke
had not, that the wealthy do not always
perform their duties. In fact, Harry Gill
not only is negligent, but also actively
persecutes her. Presumably this detail
was added by Wordsworth in response
to the restriction of the gleaning rights
during the 1790s that made it more diffi-
cult for the poor to gather sufficient fuel.\(^{18}\)
But according to Burke, the poor were as
titled to customary or prescriptive
rights as the rich. Any opposition to the
restriction of these rights would thus
actually be reactionary. The changes
which need to be made are the changes
which return things to the way they used
to be before farmers could persecute the
poor for stealing sticks. "Goody Blake
and Harry Gill" suggests a reform not of
the external social structure brought
about by governmental regulation, but of
the internal disposition of the wealthy
farmers. This calls not for public relief,
but for the "farmers all" to recall their
duty, to "think.../ Of Goody Blake and
Harry Gill!" Wordsworth's thinking here,
I believe, is based on two assumptions,
neither of which can be proved or dis-
proved: that human ideas, affections, and
attitudes act upon material reality more
than material reality acts upon human
behavior; hence, any external change
without a corresponding internal change
will ultimately be ineffective.

Another ballad, "Simon Lee, the Old
Huntsman," as John Williams notes, "was
among the poems singled out by Francis
Jeffrey in the Edinburgh Review for being
as seditious politically as it was unac-
ceptable aesthetically." But just how seditious is it? The poem tells of a man, Simon Lee, who used to be the huntsman for Ivor Hall. The hall is now deserted and Simon has grown too old and weak to till his plot of ground. When a passerby helps Simon with a simple task, Simon is overwhelmed with gratitude. The poem concludes with the reflection that it is sad to see such profuse thanks offered for such a minor deed. But, as in “Goody Blake and Harry Gill,” Wordsworth emphasizes that Simon’s is an atypical case. A “heavy change” has befallen old Simon; he lacks not only health and strength, but also friends and kindred. Indeed, due to some unknown but surely unusual circumstance, the master as well as all the men who had lived in Ivor Hall have all passed away. Like Goody Blake, certain unforeseeable occurrences have left Simon without the typical means of support in old age. The speaker informs us that although Simon in his younger days had a plot of ground, and was proud at being the huntsman for the lord of the manor, he “little cared/ For husbandry or tillage.” This seems a superfluous bit of information, but perhaps it is meant to show Simon’s improvidence. Had he learned to be a better husbandman in his youth, perhaps now in his weak old age he would better know how to cultivate his land.

Indeed the uniqueness of the poetic subject, that is, the unusualness of this sort of abject and pitiful poverty, recurs throughout Wordsworth’s poetry from this period. Even in the earlier and more radical “Salisbury Plain” poem, Wordsworth’s protagonist laments how “homeless near a thousand homes I stood,/ And near a thousand tables pined for and wanted food.” Here we have one homeless, hungry person among a thousand families well housed and fed; we do not have a thousand poverty-stricken families cowering around a single palatial estate. Any system that can provide adequate food and shelter for 99.9 percent of its population is doing exceedingly well. This clearly suggests that Wordsworth conceives of the present system as generally working, as capable of working, without major adjustment. Wordsworth’s concern is not with restructuring existing means of aid, but with taking care of those few poor souls who fall between the gaps in the current structure.

Thus we can assume that the master of Ivor Hall, who apparently was rather close to Simon, would have provided for him had he survived. If “Goody Blake” had chastised negligent farmers, “Simon Lee” confronts the situation that arises when the landowner is no longer around to perform his duties. The small act of charity performed by the speaker for Simon implicitly suggests the proper means of providing for someone in Simon’s situation. In the absence of one wealthy man to supply relief, the surrounding neighbors all ought to contribute to alleviating Simon’s difficulties. Unfortunately, however, the excessive gratitude shown by Simon indicates that his neighbors have not been doing their part. The speaker mourns at Simon’s gratitude for two reasons. He hates to see a good man—and as with Goody Blake we are told that Simon attempts to the best of his ability to labor—suffer. And he grieves that these small acts of charity are apparently so infrequent for Simon, whose neighbors fail to do for him what the villagers had gladly done for the old Cumberland beggar. “Simon Lee” suggests the same sort of reform as “Goody Blake.” The present system takes care of most people and thus no radical innovations are necessary. But Wordsworth asks the common neighbors, as he asked the wealthy farmers, to perform their duties.

“The Last of the Flock” offers a more complex view of social reform. This ballad tells of a shepherd forced during a time of need to sell his entire flock. He is
denied parish relief because he owns the sheep, while the truly needy have nothing at all. His misfortune drives him to the point of insanity, where he actually conflates his children and his sheep. Hermann Wuscher believes that this poem “contains the most overt social criticism” of all the 1798 poems. Numerous critics agree that the poem attacks William Godwin’s anti-property polemic as well as the system of parish relief. But the reader does not know how to take the shepherd in this poem. We sympathize with him on the one hand, but on the other we are shocked when he says his sheep are “As dear as [his] own children” and equates the size of his flock with the amount of love he feels for his children. Who is to blame for this strange conflation of sheep and human beings: the man himself or the parish relief system?

Clearly “The Last of the Flock” focuses on the mental and the spiritual rather than on the physical effects of poverty. Readers familiar with Wordsworth should not be surprised by this. Not that the poem posits a direct relationship between spiritual and material well-being. Rather it suggests that extremes of poverty can interfere even with our ability to love our families. But does the poem offer a moral, as Wuscher suggests, that the “closest of human ties, the blood relationship, has thus been impaired by social injustice”? Put another way, what does it mean that Wordsworth presents this shepherd in a rather unfavorable light and refrains, at least explicitly, from accusing the parish of injustice? Ultimately the poem resides in ambiguity. Wordsworth has devised a most unfortunate circumstance where there is no one to blame—no irresponsible farmers or neighbors or statesmen. No solution to the problem is recommended because no good solution exists. “The Last of the Flock” is, then, an indictment of no one, but instead a portrait of the way things are. Wordsworth does, however, offer us a sympathetic look at true human suffering. And in this portrait of a deluded father, the poem informs us unambiguously that extremes of poverty can have wrenching spiritual and mental consequences. This poem subverts nothing; it is truly radical only in its realism.

II

We turn now to the “lines” or lyrics which comprise the remainder of the volume. The most significant and most highly contested of these is the “Tintern Abbey” poem. New Historicist criticism often discredits this poem for eluding or sublimating historical, political, and economic realities. My purpose here will be to investigate to what extent “Tintern Abbey” does address these concerns—in particular the issue of social reform—and how the proposed reform in “Tintern Abbey” relates to that of the ballads we have just examined.

In the final section of this essay I will take up the defensibility of Wordsworth’s position, but for now we should note the strangeness of these New Historicist claims if we put “Tintern Abbey” back in its original context as the concluding poem in *Lyrical Ballads*. After having read about mad mothers and idiot boys, freezing old ladies and weeping shepherds, beggars and convicts, and the rest of the people populating *Lyrical Ballads*, we can hardly say that Wordsworth was afraid or incapable or unwilling to represent “real people in real distress.”22 That is, in other poems in the volume, Wordsworth has been more than willing to depict involuntarily dispossessed vagrants without transforming them into voluntary hermits, as Marjorie Levinson claims he does in her highly influential essay.24 We must therefore conclude that Wordsworth’s decision not to depict the social realities surrounding the abbey in the Wye valley was consciously made in order to achieve some purpose,25 not an
absolute refusal or inability to confront social, historical, or ideological realities.

If we recall that for Wordsworth an inner revolution—a revolution in the way of thinking and feeling—must precede any effective social reform, we can begin to see why Wordsworth chose the particular subject matter that he did for the content of his “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey.” We begin to see, that is, why he wrote the poem he did instead of the poem many New Historicists apparently would like him to have written. For “Tintern Abbey” chronicles exactly that: a mental and spiritual, or an epistemological and moral, revolution.

Wordsworth chronicles his epistemological revolution in the fourth verse. As a young man Wordsworth had viewed nature only on its superficial level, feeling “no need of a remoter charm./ By thought supplied, nor any interest/ Unborrowed from the eye.” But in the five intervening years, he has learned to look beneath this material level and has recognized “a sense sublime/ Of something far more deeply interfused” whose dwelling ultimately is “in the mind of man.” It is precisely this thoughtful understanding of nature that allows Wordsworth to hear the “still, sad music of humanity,/ Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power/ To chasten and subdue.”

But of what is this “still, sad music” composed and why does Wordsworth choose to address it here rather than in the harsh and grating sounds of humanity detailed in the ballads, or, for that matter, in the actual vagrants inhabiting the area surrounding Tintern Abbey? This music arises not from cataclysmic events, but in the face of the “burden of the mystery” and “all this unintelligible world.” Nature, which makes this music audible, can also so inform

The mind that is within us, so impress
With quietness and beauty, and so feed
With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,
Rash judgements, nor the sneers of selfish men,
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
The dreary intercourse of daily life,
Shall e’er prevail against us.

Nature, that is, steels us against despair and keeps hope alive. Not massive events such as famine and war, Wordsworth tells us, but everyday dreariness dulls our senses and our capacity to react sympathetically to the suffering of others. For if we lack the power of empathy, we cannot understand the suffering of others; and if we despair, we will not dare to hope to intervene.

This epistemological revolution leads to a moral revolution. If nature has offered “coarser pleasures,” it has now become the “soul/ Of all my moral being.” In the second verse Wordsworth lists three benefits which the mature recollection of his earlier trip to Tintern Abbey yielded him. All three of these benefits relate in some way to the plan for social reform implied in the ballads. First, these recollections reinvigorate. Often, Wordsworth says, in “hours of weariness,” they have provided

sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind,
With tranquil restoration.

Such restoration affords succor against despair. Such assistance was much needed when many would-be reformers, disillusioned by the course of the French Revolution, had given up all hope of improving the human condition.26

Secondly, Wordsworth also specifi-
cally links the remembrance of the natural scene with charity:

feelings too

Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,
As have no slight or trivial influence
On that best portion of a good man's life,
His little, nameless, unremembered, acts
Of kindness and of love.

In his ballads Wordsworth had recommended just this sort of small charitable act as the necessary source for diminishing poverty. People needed to recall their inalienable duty to help others. The suffering of the day, Wordsworth holds, is mainly caused not by direct oppression but by sins of omission. If landowners and neighbors performed their responsibilities, those who presently slip through the cracks in the socio-economic system could easily be helped. Wordsworth(315,305),(680,341) suggests that the contemplation of a natural scene can call to mind forgotten charitable acts and also remind us that these acts form the "best portion of a good man's life," and encourage us to perform more of these acts in the future.

Finally, these recollections offer spiritual insight "into the life of things." Views such as this, which unreservedly ennoble the spiritual, most offend materialist critics such as Marjorie Levinson and Jerome McGann. For them, such a passage signals an unbridled retreat from worldly concerns. In casting aside the body to give rise to the "living soul," according to these critics, Wordsworth also casts aside the physical suffering caused by the poverty of his fellow human beings. But for Wordsworth this is not in fact the case. Beyond the importance Wordsworth places on the health of the soul regardless of the health of the body, this insight "into the life of things" is also a necessary precondition for a proper understanding of how to deal with bodily suffering. The lightening of the burden forges another weapon against despair. But it is the vision of the harmonious underpinnings of the universe, of the proper relation among all things, which teaches us how to act appropriately in the face of whatever personal adversity or social ill we might encounter. The "life of things" is analogous with, though not identical to, Burke's natural law. Both provide an understanding of the principles underlying the moral universe—and hence give some indication of the proper arrangement of society. Neither, however, is an abstract doctrine containing ideological blueprints for the one true structure of society. Historical contingencies determine the shape that "the life of things" takes, as they do the natural law. But without some such vision of order, we reform blindly, guided only by our own petty rationality, and create worse devils than those we would discard.

III

Clearly Wordsworth did not retreat into the solitude of nature and the imagination by the late 1790s. Instead he replaced his earlier revolutionary designs with a slightly modified or expanded Burkean concept of prudent reform. The social reform suggested by the ballads is complemented by the lyrics that reveal how inner reform might best take place. This reform, however, does not go nearly far enough, nor proceed fast enough for today's New Historicism critics. Jerome McGann, for instance, does not want "an overflow of sympathy and love for the sufferer," but "as in 1793-4, a sense of outrage, and an overflow of angry judgment upon those whom Wordsworth at the time held accountable for helping to maintain the social conditions which generated a surplus of social evil." In short, the New Historicism prefer the earlier revolutionary plans for radically restructuring society to the 1798 plan for prudent reform of existing social struc-
tures.

But did Wordsworth actually have good reason for abandoning his earlier idealistic hopes for a more realistic attitude? To answer this question requires the historicism that the New Historicism is not very good at, namely, analyzing a work in the context of its original historical situation. The New Historicism is not concerned with—indeed, sometimes denies the reality of—"factual" historical circumstances, and concentrates instead on "ideology," which Levinson defines as that "which is invisible as such (that is to say, which is experienced as Nature or the order of things) precisely because it has so perfectly framed what is inside: psyche."28 But this is not the place to pursue an evaluation of the relative merits of ideology versus a more traditional notion of historical fact. It must suffice here to say that an appraisal of Wordsworth's ideas concerning reform from the perspective of its own historical context—taking into particular account, of course, the development of the French Revolution and the English reaction to it—discloses a much different conclusion than when viewed from the perspective of ideological criticism.

Other critics have already persuasively shown how New Historicist assumptions about ideology and materialism go unargued in their critiques of Romanticism.29 My particular concern is to evaluate the viability of Wordsworthian reform in its own historical context. And within that political context, the Burkean arguments carry even more weight than they do today. The political climate at the time was extraordinarily volatile. All but the most radical dreaded a violent revolution in England. Wordsworth's earlier belief, expressed retrospectively in The Prelude, that the revolution "seemed nothing out of nature's certain course" and that the reasonableness of French principles would peacefully and inevitably overwhelm all nations by 1798, could no longer be sustained. The world had witnessed the dire results of France's unbounded aspirations. The philosophes had ushered in not the millennium, but Armageddon.

Additionally, Wordsworth also had Burke's Reflections—which must have seemed remarkably prescient by 1798—to which he could refer. Burke, whose nearly impeccable credentials as a reformer gave him added authority, had shown that the very principles upon which France proceeded carried within themselves the seeds of a terrible violence that would result in anarchy, then in an insatiable desire for revenge, and finally in a military dictatorship arising from the void. Burke, in other words, revealed that the course of the French Revolution was not an aberration from, but a fulfillment of the principles upon which it was based. Thus Wordsworth had excellent reason to avoid at all costs anything which might contribute to the start of a violent revolution—which would likely include the "sense of outrage" and "overflow of angry judgment" McGann would have preferred Wordsworth to have expressed. Wordsworth himself had said in 1795, "I recoil from the bare idea of a revolution."30 Under these circumstances, prudence dictated erring on the side of caution. Overstepping the bounds of the possible in such a situation could easily result not only in failure but also in a tremendous setback from backlash against reform.

Wordsworth never gave up his belief that the poor of England could and should be helped. He did, however, during the course of the 1790s, change his ideas concerning what sort of reform is possible and how best to bring it about. In 1798 Wordsworth was still in the middle of his shift from an idealistic republican Whig to a realistic conservative Tory; but surely he was by this time already far more a Burkean conservative. His earliest hopes for reform had been chiliastic:
a total and near immediate revolution propelled ineluctably and irreversibly by universal benevolence, ushering in a final and lasting golden age. The French Revolution taught him that such hopes were not simply futile but dangerous. He came to see that stable and lasting reform proceeds gradually. The reformer must look to the long-term consequences of his alterations and must be able to accommodate unforeseen circumstances as they arise. The desire to eradicate poverty immediately and completely is noble, but drastic attempts to achieve such a goal will almost certainly produce a cure worse than the disease. Wordsworth also came to see realistic limitations on all human reform. No reform within history can be ultimate. To paraphrase the political philosopher Eric Voegelin, Wordsworth realized that the eschaton cannot be made immanent.