CHAPTER 5

Violent Waters
The River Duddon *and* Ecclesiastical Sketches

After Peterloo

On 30 May 1820 Mary Wordsworth records how she and her husband, pausing in Manchester to change coaches on their journey to Banbury, prior to their departure to Belgium in the second week of July, 'took a walk, and inspected Peterloo; the particulars of the Stations of the Performers, the ground upon which certain feats were wrought, etc., we learned from a Person upon the spot, who had witnessed the whole scene'.[1] At once indefinite and exacting, Mary concludes her account by noting that 'William was not inclined to see anything further'.[2] A few weeks later, the field of Waterloo seemed, at first, to present a similarly uninspiring prospect. Yet, as Dorothy observes in her journal entry for 17 July, while there 'was little to be seen' there was 'much to be felt, —sorrow and sadness, and even something like horror breathed out of the ground as we stood upon it!' (*JDW* III. 29). Responding to Dorothy's impressions, Wordsworth writes in his sonnet 'After Visiting the Field of Waterloo' that even as the field appeared 'joyless, blank, and cold' (l. 6) and 'Meanings […] could not there be found' (l. 10), still 'we felt as Men *should* feel,/With such vast hoards of hidden carnage near,/And horror breathing from the silent ground!' (ll. 12–14).[3] That Wordsworth found significance in the 'great exploits' of Waterloo (l. 12) but felt disinclined to retrieve meaning from 'certain feats' at Peterloo is unsurprising. Writing to Viscount Lowther the previous autumn Wordsworth had made clear his opposition to 'the revolutionary projects' of those 'active Reformers' who sought to arouse 'public disapprobation of the conduct of the Manchester Magistrates' (*MY* II. 558), and as late as December 1820 he felt moved to remark critically on the conduct of a Leicestershire bookseller, 'a notorious Jacobin and Incendiary, and Usher of a school', who had appointed a teacher of radical principles 'who had given the "Manchester Massacres" as a Theme for his Boys' (*MY* II. 657).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

Civilian pilgrimages to European battlefields were, by 1820, a common enough occurrence, but what the Wordsworths' visit to Peterloo unintentionally reveals is the striking congruity between sites of national and international conflict. That both sites could be regarded as notable additions to the tourist's itinerary, transformed from bloody, corporeal events to theatrical set-pieces, compounds the sense in which Peterloo was conceived, in the autumn of 1819, as the ironic counterpart of Waterloo.[4] That the massacre was, at least in part, perpetrated by soldiers who had served at Waterloo, and that at least one of the victims, John Lees, had also fought in that battle, underscored the relationship still further.[5] On the journey to Manchester Wordsworth, afflicted by the eye disease that would dog him for the remainder of his life, and that was most likely transmitted by soldiers returning from the fight against Napoleon in Egypt, remained 'silent and looked ill'.[6] According to Mary, the poet's spirits were roused only by the sight of the race ground at Manchester, populated by an 'immense concourse of persons—10,000, as we were afterwards told. The race was just over, and the stream of life that was flowing down from the mass which still seemed stationary, was a sublime sight'.[7] Pre-echoes of this vision were heard the previous summer when, for instance, the radical reformer and journalist Archibald Prentice observed the stream of gaily clad people moving 'slowly and orderly' down Mosley Street on their way to the hustings.[8] Yet, with its emphasis on fluidity and stasis, an optical illusion reminiscent of Wordsworth's encounter with the 'stationary blasts' of the Gondo gorge,[9] Mary's account may also be read as a proleptic response to Samuel Bamford's memorable description of the breaking of the dense, compacted crowd at St Peter's Field: 'For a moment the crowd held back as in a pause; then was a rush, heavy and resistless as a headlong sea; and a sound like low thunder, with screams, prayers, and imprecations from the crowd-moiled, and sabre-doomed, who could not escape'.[10] Here, two versions of the sublime may be compared and contrasted. While Bamford draws on Homeric tropes of catastrophic terror, engulfing the crowd in a tsunami-like wave of destruction, Mary's emphasis on the poised 'stream of life' recalls the observations of the river Duddon that had preoccupied Wordsworth the previous year. By informing her vision with a related affirmation of unity amidst change, Mary endeavours to reverse the current, recasting an 'immense concourse of persons' as a flowing yet stationary mass, in sight of an end that is forever delayed. Those 'certain feats' of which the Wordsworths learn but are reluctant to envision are here effectively consigned to temporal oblivion, annulled by an intelligence in thrall to the recovery of a pre-political society. Witnessed only

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

in glimpses and notably only when on holiday, the Wordsworthian social ideal is characterised nevertheless by a sense of historical indeterminacy, a state in which the distinctions between peace and war become difficult to discern let alone sustain.

Drawing on such observations, this chapter argues that while Wordsworth's direct references to Peterloo may be few and predictably conservative, his indirect referential engagements with 'treasons, tumults', and 'wars' in poems published in the aftermath of Peterloo reveal a thoughtful and unpredictable engagement with the place of conflict in civil society.[11] The principal focus of the chapter is on a single collection, *The River Duddon, a Series of Sonnets: Vaudracour and Julia and Other Poems. To Which Is Annexed, a Topographical Description of the Country of the Lakes, in the North of England*. That, in 1820, Wordsworth regarded *The River Duddon* as the culmination of a five-year period of sustained creativity, and that the volume was intended to serve as a pacific coda to the bellicose imaginings of the Thanksgiving volume, is made clear by an advertisement informing the reader that 'This publication, together with "The Thanksgiving Ode," January 18 1816, "The Tale of Peter Bell," and "The Waggoner," completes the third and last volume of the Author's Miscellaneous Poems'.[12] As observed in Chapter 3, purchasers wishing to add the collection to the 1815 two-volume *Poems* and the aforementioned works are provided with an alternative title page, 'Poems by William Wordsworth: Including The River Duddon; Vaudracour and Julia; Peter Bell; The Waggoner; A Thanksgiving Ode and Miscellaneous Pieces. Vol. III', and a tipped-in spine label: 'Wordsworth's/Poems/Including the/ River Duddon/Vol. III'.[13] Bringing together within one binding poems and prose writings composed during the period of the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars (*Peter Bell*, *Vaudracour and Julia*, the guide to the Lakes), verses written in the wake of Waterloo (the 'Thanksgiving Ode' and related poems), the post-Peterloo sonnets and other 'Miscellaneous Pieces' concerned with governance, morality, and war, the rare third volume of Wordsworth's *Poems* offers a sustained commentary on the historical origins of political violence while seeking, through meditation on the natural histories of rivers, mountains, and lakes, the grounds for a peaceable, albeit reactionary, alternative.[14]

Composed, for the most part, a year in advance of Peterloo, but appearing in its disruptive wake, the *Duddon* sonnets' depiction of peace turns out to be strangely dissonant, even warlike, reflecting the poet's suspicion that social tensions, hitherto kept in check by the maintenance of hostilities with a foreign antagonist, were about to spill over into outright

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

civil war. How is it that a sequence of poems, contrived to celebrate the enduring presence of a native British river, should come to be associated with conflict? Pastoral waters ought, ideally, to bring peace to troubled souls but Wordsworth's engagement with the fluvial tradition rarely conforms to expectations, in part because of his inveterate self-scrutiny, which intensifies in the later poetry to the point where confident declarations of inviolable truth are stirred by underswells of doubt, insecurity, and self-contestation. Inspired by Coleridge's aborted plans for 'The Brook', a poetical essay on 'men, nature, and society' that took 'a stream, traced from its source in the hills [to the sea]' as its subject,[15] *The River Duddon* can be read as a tributary of Wordsworth's own great unrealised project: 'The Recluse'. In the autumn of 1804, a few weeks prior to resuming work on the expanded version of *The Prelude* – a poem that begins and ends with the sound of running waters – Wordsworth, accompanied by Dorothy, undertook a tour of the Duddon valley. The tour inspired the writing of a sonnet, 'To the River Duddon', a poem that offers oblique commentary on the wayward progress of 'The Recluse' ('paths renew'd/By fits and starts […] through this passage cleave/Attended but by thy own Voice', ll. 7–13), while providing a source for the 1820 sequence.[16] Wordsworth's declaration of autonomy and purposefulness rises again in the *Duddon* sequence's opening sonnet but, as I go on to argue, the rhetoric of self-confidence is undercut by recollections of that which has been left undone, as well as by intimations of bloodshed, war, and sacrifice stirred up by allusions to sacred founts and rivers belonging to the classical tradition.

The River Duddon speaks, then, to the memory of a lost totality, its activation of hostile currents preventing the realisation of harmony, synthesis, and reconciliation. As a 'late work', in the sense identified by Adorno and Said, the collection aspires towards completion but is baffled at every stage by the late poet's ingrained self-reflexivity, resulting in a style that is 'bristling, difficult, and unyielding'.[17] But the cultivation of self-consciousness is not the only source of trouble in *The River Duddon*. Julia S. Carlson has observed that the organising principle of the sonnet sequence bears some resemblance to Joseph Priestley's charts and Friedrich Strass's *Stream of Time* – large-format chronological 'maps', which sought to impose graphic order on the messy contingency of human history (Figures 3 and 4).[18] Inscribed beneath an epigram from Horace's Ode 3.29, '*Fluminis ritu Feruntur*', or 'flows away like a river',[19] Priestley's *Chart of Biography* (1764) depicts history as a succession of discrete, yet interconnected, 'spaces of time', floating 'on the surface' of an 'immense river […] without beginning or end'.[20] In *A Description of a New Chart of History* (1769), Priestley

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

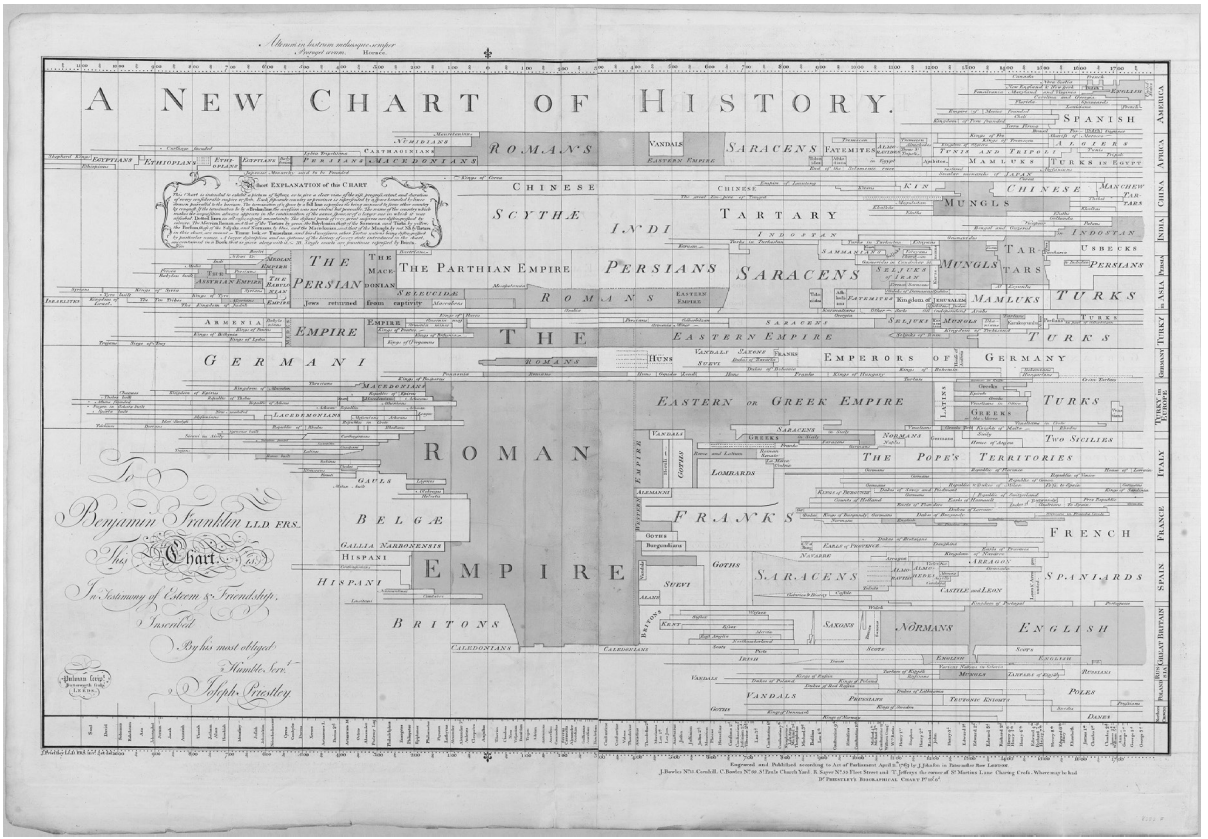


Figure 3 Joseph Priestley, from *A New Chart of History* (London 1769).
Source: Engraved and published by Joseph Priestley.
64.8 cm × 97.8 cm. Public domain.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

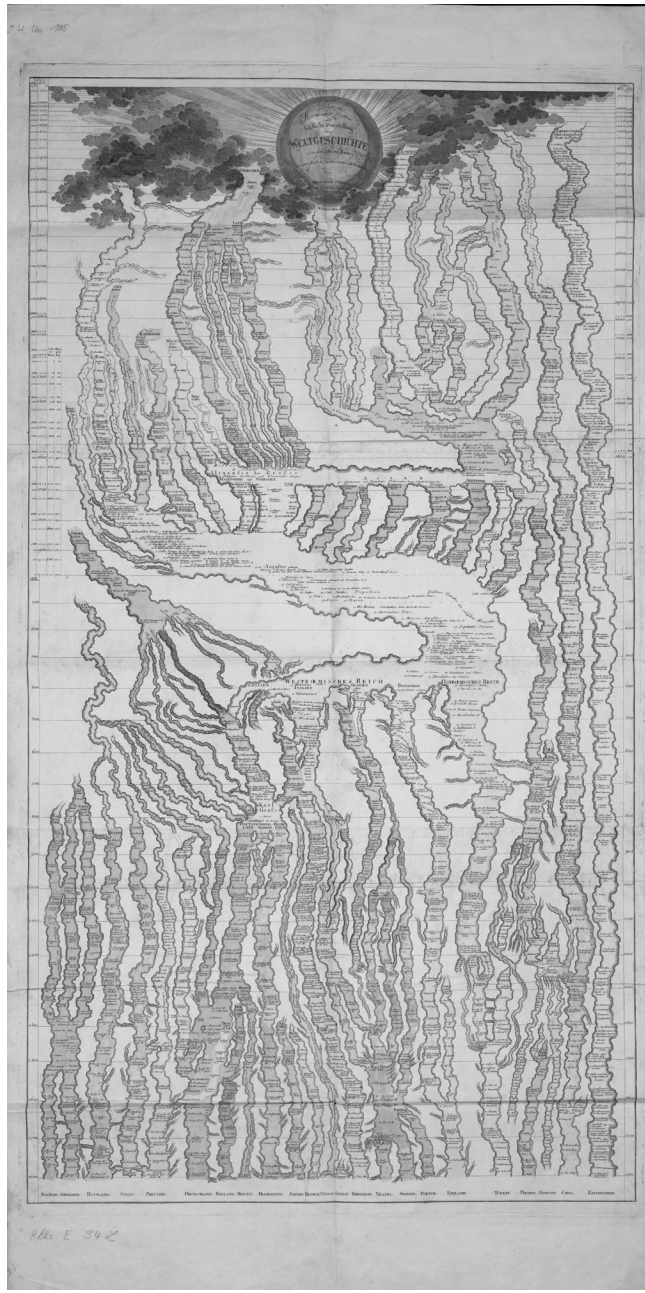


Figure 4 Friedrich Strass, *Der Strom der Zeiten* (*The Stream of Time*) (1804). Source: Berlin: Garde. 13 cm × 70 cm. Public domain.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

anticipates the response of a notional reader of this chart, dismayed by the 'torrents of human blood' that distort and disfigure its surface, belying its claims to order, uniformity, and constancy. Acceding to the perspective of the 'Most high', for whom wars and revolutions are always 'subservient to most benevolent purposes', Priestley assures his reader that such disruptions have, on the whole, been 'extremely favourable to the progress of knowledge, virtue, and happiness' and that 'it will not be long before this world assumes another, and more agreeable aspect; and that the chart of history some centuries hence, will not be intersected and disfigured, in so shocking a manner, as it has been in centuries past'.[21]

Alluding, in the *Duddon* sequence's well-known conclusion, to Horace's 'yet on it glides, and on it will glide, rolling its flood forever',[22] Wordsworth observes the progress of human history from a position of a-temporal constancy, not unrelated to Priestley's divine point of view:

> For, *backward*, Duddon! as I cast my eyes,
> I see what was, and is, and will abide;
> Still glides the Stream, and shall for ever glide;
> The Form remains, the Function never dies […] (Sonnet XXXIII, ll. 3–6)

Yet, while the poem observes human limits from a transcendental perspective, the sequence that precedes it retains the sense of how small pockets of unmeasured time, held in discordant specificities, introduce those 'sly/ And sure encroachments of infirmity' (Sonnet IX, l. 13) that bring all life to an end. In this sense, *The River Duddon* is perhaps more in tune with the gloomy and uncertain pronouncements on futurity that can be found in William Bell's translation of Strass's *Descriptive Guide to the Stream of Time* (1810). Rejecting the 'stiff regularity' of Priestley's lines in favour of a literal rendering of time's riverine course, 'more agreeable in its variations to the nature of the abstract notion', Strass nevertheless struggles to address the problem of contingency, which threatens always to reconfigure the shape and course of history.[23] Acknowledging this problem, Bell provides the reader with a 'short space' at the end of the chart 'for the introduction of any great events, which may occur in the two succeeding decenniums; and indeed from the probable instability of the present state of things'. Writing in 1812, at the height of the Peninsular War, Bell sees no immediate end to 'the present afflicting contest'; the prospect of 'a general and stable peace' remains no more than a possibility.[24] We might imagine the purchaser of Strass's chart inscribing 'Waterloo' in 1815 to rebut Bell's pessimism, only to inscribe 'Peterloo', somewhat ruefully, just a few years later.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

In the final part of the chapter, I trace the re-emergence of these violent waters in the three-volume *Poems* (1820), the four-volume *Miscellaneous Poems* (1820), and *Ecclesiastical Sketches* (1822). Criticism that focusses on the links between these collections is rare, surprisingly so given the ways in which, between 1818 and 1822, Wordsworth devotes himself to the development of a poetics of riparian nationalism, a project culminating with the pan-European reflections of *Memorials of a Tour on the Continent, 1820* (1822), which I go on to examine in the next chapter.[25] In all of these collections, the motif of the river journey provides the poet with a means to measure and endure the vicissitudes of time: pursuing, in *The River Duddon*, the course of a 'native Stream' from source to sea; connecting, by virtue of their location in the three- and four-volume editions, the *Duddon* sonnets, and the Thanksgiving poems; comparing, in *Ecclesiastical Sketches*, the historical assent of the Anglican Church to a 'cloud-fed spring' destined for that 'Eternal City—built/For the perfected Spirits of the just!'; celebrating, in *Memorials of a Tour on the Continent, 1820*, those 'unconquerable' streams that witnessed the rise and fall of revolutionary and Imperial France.[26] Alert to how traumatic memories of war resurface in *The River Duddon*, the collected *Poems*, and in *Ecclesiastical Sketches*, this chapter contends that sensitivity to the contested histories of rivers, a pervasive motif in contemporary nature writing, from Claudio Magris's *Danube* to Robert Macfarlane's *Underland*, is nothing new: Wordsworth has known, all along, that sacred founts are laved in blood.

September Songs: 1815–1819

To initiate this reading of *The River Duddon* I want first to consider two poems composed by Wordsworth in the immediate aftermath of the events in Manchester. Commentary on Romantic poetry and the Peterloo Massacre owes much to Jerome McGann, whose 1979 article 'Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism' proclaimed, to the consternation of critics as varied in approach as Paul Fry, Nicholas Roe, and Vincent Newey, that 'To Autumn' 'is an historically specified fiction dialectically called into being by John Keats as an active response to, and alteration of, the events which marked the late summer and early fall of a particular year in a particular place'.[27] Sharing common ground with Marjorie Levinson's Marxian critique of Wordsworth's 'repression' of material contradictions in the landscape of 'Tintern Abbey',[28] McGann's reading of 'To Autumn' was widely interpreted as a wholescale denunciation of the high Romantic lyric and its purported evasion of history. Yet what is

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

striking about the criticism written in response to McGann's provocation is the corresponding narrowness of its attention, which with the exception of some notable discussions of Shelley's *Masque of Anarchy* and associated poems remained almost solely focussed on providing subtle defences of Keats's politics and poetics. In the articles, essays, and books that emerged in this period and that attempted to engage with Peterloo there are hardly any mentions of poetry by Wordsworth, a surprising omission given that Wordsworth wrote two poems in the autumn of 1819 that may be read, along McGannian lines, as 'an active response to, and alteration of, the events' at St Peter's Field.[29] For reasons that will become clear, the poems in question, 'September 1819' and 'Upon the Same Occasion', included in *The River Duddon* volume, deserve closer attention.

Composed during a period when Wordsworth, disabled by a severe attack of trachoma and concerned by 'the revolutionary projects' (*MY* II. 558) of the Broughamites, was beginning to reassess his role as a poet and cultural authority, 'September, 1819' seems, at first, to present an image of peace and plenitude far removed from the shocks occasioned by the Manchester massacre:

> The sylvan slopes with corn-clad fields
> Are hung, as if with golden shields,
> Bright trophies of the sun!
> Like a fair sister of the sky,
> Unruffled doth the blue Lake lie,
> The Mountains looking on. (ll. 1–5)[30]

As idealised and idealising as Keats's complementary portrayal of autumn – at the start of September Dorothy records how 'torrents of rain' had caused severe damage to the corn (*MY* II. 554) – the mood of peace and plenty, enhanced as much by the prosodic assurances of *rime coué* as by the imagery of pastoral seclusion, is subtly challenged by the inclusion of those 'golden shields' (l. 2). These spoils of war assembled under the name of Apollo, god of the sun, of healing, and of poetry, present a strikingly troubling image. The impression of internal dissonance is compounded further still when one recalls Nicholas Roe's discussion of the allusion to the goddess Ceres in Keats's ode. Noting the resemblance between Keats's personification of the season and the female deity of justice, liberty, and autumnal abundance depicted on the Peterloo banner, Roe argues persuasively that the ode participates in a radical re-reading of classical mythology, drawing on Ceres' associations with husbandry, cultivation, and 'common' law to mount a quiet denunciation of the pernicious effects of the Corn Laws

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

in solidarity with the protestors in Manchester.[31] Composed like Keats's poem in a time of economic deprivation and state oppression, 'September, 1819' is, by contrast, ruthlessly combative, marshalling images of armoured fruition to quell political unrest. Where Keats's poem grants the vibrant delights of spring, in order to celebrate the mellow, attenuated pleasures of autumn, Wordsworth offers stark criticism, asserting that the autumnal tone is 'more profoundly dear/Than music of Spring' (ll. 11–12):

> For *that* from turbulence and heat
> Proceeds, from some uneasy
> Seat in Nature's struggling frame,
> Some region of impatient life;
> And jealousy, and quivering strife,
> Therein a portion claim. (ll. 13–18)

In opposition to the constitutional unrest of spring, an echo of the Hobbesian *bellum inter omnia* advanced in the 'Topographical Description of the Country of the Lakes',[32] the poem thus establishes autumn as a season of 'soft harmony' (l. 26) unchecked by internal conflict. Yet, because such seasonal concord is predicated on the suppression of 'impatient life' and 'quivering strife' it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain a distinction between the institution of the peaceable state and the primal antagonism from which it is said to emerge. To extend this Hobbesian notion further, autumn is presented in Wordsworth's poem as a state of exception, founded on, or facilitated by, the threat of violence against that singular, self-constituting multitude that would jeopardise the power of the sovereign to maintain the distinction between internal and external peace.

In the pendant poem 'Upon the Same Occasion' a related attempt is made to shift the focus of attention towards 'undiscordant themes' (l. 21).[33] In concert with the poet's Waterloo poetry, the verse is as much about Wordsworth's aspiration to be acknowledged as a national bard, overcoming faction and dissent in the name of a higher, literary principle as it is about the wish for release from internal division. Sustaining the meditation on aging and poetic decline introduced in the previous poem, 'Upon the Same Occasion' initially makes light of the poet who, beset by the lively din of 'social Warblers gathering in/Their harvest of sweet lays' (ll. 11–12) and 'conscious that my leaf is sear,/And yellow on the bough' (ll. 14–15), can yet find 'cheer' (l. 13) in the prospect of bestowing his 'myrtle wreaths' (l. 16) on the head of some younger bard. The mood of quiet acceptance changes, however, in the fourth stanza, as the poet turns to address those contemporaries who, gripped by 'vernal extasies,/And passion's feverish

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

dreams' (ll. 23–4), would 'enervate and defile' (l. 30) the analeptic labour of the Apollonian bard. It is possible that Hunt and Keats, poets readily associated with 'vernal extacies' and the 'snares of soft desire',[34] are the target of these lines, but as Carl Ketcham suggests it seems more likely that Wordsworth has Lord Byron in mind, whose recently published *Don Juan*, Canto 1 had lampooned Wordsworth and his fellow Lake poets.[35] In addition to striking back at Byron for this public attack, Wordsworth might also have wished to single out the poet for his ambivalent response to the defeat of Napoleon and for his support of radical political causes. Tellingly, in the poem's concluding stanzas Wordsworth invokes as model for the post-Peterloo bard the ancient Greek poet Alcaeus who supported the nobles in the civil war in Mytilene and whose 'fierce vindictive song' was the scourge of the leaders of the people, known as 'Tyrants' (ll. 37–41). Combining sympotic and lyrical impulses, Alcaeus, together with Horace, is thus presented as an exemplar of the 'deathless powers' (l. 25) of poesy, assessing and overcoming moral and political corruption through the adoption of a timeless, dispassionate perspective.

In maintaining this perspective, Wordsworth resumes the vatic tone adopted in his earlier post-war autumnal sonnet 'September 1815'.[36] Composed shortly after the victory at Waterloo, the octave registers a sense of an oncoming period of austerity and of the likelihood of a forthcoming civil war, culminating with the advice to '"Prepare/Against the threatening Foe your trustiest shields"' (ll. 7–8). In the sestet, the forewarning of conflict is countered by the image of a 'season potent to renew,/Mid frost and snow, the instinctive joys of song, —/And nobler cares than listless summer knew' (ll. 12–14). In these lines the threat of destruction is incorporated within a rhythmic seasonal cycle, one that allows conflict to be refigured as a 'potent' source of creative, moral, and political renewal. What remains unclear is how the bracing destruction of mid-year lassitude may be aligned with the 'soft harmony' (l. 26) that, in 'September, 1819', transcends 'Nature's struggling frame' (l. 15), allowing the spirit 'to mount above/The anxieties of human love' (ll. 22–3). Moreover, as the manuscript of 'Upon the Same Occasion' graphically displays, the two models of poetry outlined in these verses – one divinely inspired and politically legitimate, the other profane and alarmingly radical – would seem to be struggling for primacy.[37] Close attention to the manuscript reveals that in place of the fifth stanza denouncing those poets who would 'enervate and defile' their sacred 'function', Mary had inadvertently copied the fifth stanza of 'September, 1819', which had been intended not only as an affirmation of the voice of eternal harmony over and above the conative strife

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

of nature but also as a corrective to the vagaries of contemporary taste. Crossed out in the manuscript, the lines nevertheless ghost the characterisation of those young contemporaries who, as a result of indulging their rebellious passions, would lose sight of the eternal, thereby committing themselves to the relentless assaying of discordant themes.

A small detail in the manuscript adds to the complexity of this vision. In place of 'function' in line 28, Mary has inserted the word 'Patron'. But who are the poets who would disclaim their patrons, 'pleas'd with what is aptliest framed/To enervate and defile'? In this first version of the poem the target no longer seems to be Byron and the Cockney School; instead, the focus turns to Wordsworth himself who, throughout the month of September, had been engaged in frantic correspondence with Lord Lowther regarding the consequences for Westmorland of the political disturbances in Manchester. Might it be the case that Wordsworth through seeking to condemn those 'kindred souls' who, enamoured of 'feverish dreams', would neglect their higher vocation was, in truth, holding a light up to that part of himself that felt drawn towards the indulgence of aberrant desires in defiance of the bonds of patronage? Nothing in the published record provides support for this suggestion, but still one wonders how far Wordsworth detected in the writings of his young contemporaries an echo of his early and perhaps undiminished fascination with sexual and political transgression.

Currents of Disturbance: Sounding War in *The River Duddon*

The desire to transform discordant themes, discovering in the process the extent to which such themes shape one's identity, is present in *The River Duddon* too. Wordsworth casts his sequence as a response to Coleridge's aborted long poem 'The Brook', a work intended to rival Cowper's *Task* in providing 'equal room and freedom for description, incident, and impassioned reflections on men, nature, and society' while yet supplying 'in itself a natural connection to the parts, and unity to the whole'. Recalling the plan for 'The Recluse', Coleridge states that his own essay on 'men, nature, and society' was to have taken for its subject 'a stream, traced from its source in the hills [to the sea]'.[38] In the postscript to *The River Duddon* Wordsworth freely admits his borrowing of this unifying motif but states that his work differs from 'The Brook' on account of 'the restriction which the frame of the Sonnet imposed upon me, narrowing unavoidably the range of thought, and precluding, though not without its advantages,

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

many graces to which a freer movement of verse would naturally have led'.[39] By embracing formal restrictions Wordsworth is able, as Daniel Robinson explains, to partially fulfil the promise of 'his and Coleridge's shared vision'.[40] But in revisiting these, as yet, unrealised works, through the medium of the loco-descriptive river poem, Wordsworth also, necessarily, recalls the genre's elegiac aspects. Thus, as much as *The River Duddon* seeks to make good on the youthful poet's promise to complete a work addressing 'men, nature, and society', the combination of formal 'narrowing' and thematic revisiting cannot help but place the sequence in relation to a greater and, seemingly, lost object. *The River Duddon*, I would suggest, is therefore couched, from the outset, as a work of melancholy.

Writing in *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1815–1845* of the failure of *Ecclesiastical Sketches* to encompass the contested history of the Anglican Church, Tim Fulford observes that the sonnet form's 'narrow room' is 'too isolated and too static to allow the sequence to articulate historical struggle' and that its primary 'architectonic metaphor—the holy river—remains too gestural to compensate for this deficiency'.[41] Recalling the strained endeavour of sonnet XXXIII to encompass 'what was, and is, and will abide' (l. 4), one might concur that *The River Duddon* fails no less to forge a collective narrativisation of the relations between man, nature, and society that a 'large-scale poetic structure' would have accomplished.[42] But while it is fruitful to read *The River Duddon* as a fallen version of 'The Recluse', the publication of the sequence in the wake of Peterloo suggests a relationship not merely with a lost object but with an impossible object. In Wordsworth's autumnal poems, as we have seen, the attempt to establish a realm of post-war harmony is jeopardised by the return of images of internal strife. And in the *Duddon* sequence's orchestration of local and national history the progressive narrative is shadowed by memories of conflict: from the 'unprotected' man 'nurs'd/In hideous usages, and rites accurs'd' (VIII, ll. 5–7; *passim*), to the 'sovereign Thames', freighted with 'Commerce' or 'triumphant War' (XXXI, ll. 12–14). Thus, as much as Wordsworth pursues the ideal of a peaceable society, seeing in the Duddon's journey to 'Eternity' an image of how the 'tumultuous' workings of history may at last be 'left behind' (XXXII, ll. 10–14; *passim*), the poetry speaks repeatedly of the impossibility of attaining this goal.

Regarded in this light, Wordsworth's refusal to reflect on the significance of St Peter's Field may be understood as a manifestation of perplexity at the blurring of distinctions between allies and enemies, citizens and soldiers, but also as a sign of the poet's unwillingness to register the work of *stasis* in determining that which is political and that which is unpolitical.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

Nevertheless, as the *Duddon* sonnets reveal, aspects of civil discord are manifest throughout the sequence, consuming not merely the city but also nature. For if, according to Agamben, 'civil war is a projection of the state of nature into the city' then the converse must also be true; that is, we should not be surprised to see descriptions of natural life (*zoē*) – the physical realm of rocks, rivers, earth, and plants – marked by the effects of a dissolving *bios politikos*.[43] If this statement about the violent transformation of nature seems counterintuitive, it is important to remember that the pastoral tradition that Wordsworth recalls in his poetry is forged in a context of civil discord. In showing through the *Duddon* sequence how the significance of rivers is informed by the effects of war, Wordsworth positions himself in relation to Horace and Virgil, sharing their anxieties about the politicisation of nature.[44]

The opening sonnet identifies three established and, by implication, overworked poetic precedents: Horace's spring of Bandusia (ll. 1–4); the Persian fountains that, in the wake of Sir William Jones's imitations of Nezami, had become a stock feature of literary orientalism (ll. 5–6), and the 'Alpine torrents' (ll. 7–8) that had featured in Wordsworth's earlier loco-descriptive poetry, as well as in Book VI of the unpublished *Prelude*, and that Byron had since imitated to considerable acclaim in Canto III of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and in *Manfred*.[45] Against these well-worn, exotic, and populist precedents, dismissed through a series of verbal negations, the poet declares a wish to 'seek the birth-place of a native Stream' (l. 8) so that his verse may 'flow […] pure, vigorous, free, and bright' (l. 13), unencumbered by generic expectations. Yet, despite the confident turn, the octave's accumulation of literary sources signals an understanding of the fraught relations between imitation and innovation and, further still, displays a shrewd awareness of the submerged violence of the pastoral tradition. Key to both insights is the significance of the opening allusion to Horace's Ode 3.13, a poem that seems to have held a lifelong fascination for Wordsworth.[46] Horace's verse takes the form of a dedicatory address to a *fons Bandusiae*, an obscure spring believed to be located in the grounds of Horace's Sabine estate.[47] As translators and commentators have pointed out, Horace is attempting in this poem to elevate a Roman fountain and, by extension, Roman verse to the distinguished position occupied by Greek springs and Greek pastoral poetry.[48] Thus, the *fons Bandusiae* will emerge as a rival to Arethusa, Castalia, and Hippocrene, and Ode 3.13 as a worthy successor to the feted river songs of Theocritus and Callimachus. However, just as Horace's assertion of literary authority is qualified by its acknowledgement of Greek models of inspiration, in

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

particular the modest 'holy fountain' in Callimachus' *Hymn to Apollo*,[49] so Wordsworth's description of native purity is sullied by its engagement with Horace. The priority of that 'rocky spring' may not be envied, but the sonnet must be forged within its 'shades' (ll. 1–2).

More pressing still, for both poets, is the problem of how to maintain the sense of the pastoral mode, with its associations of peace, obscurity, and retirement. In stating that the Duddon and his poem about the Duddon is 'pure' Wordsworth displays his awareness of the contentious or mixed status of Horace's stream, which on the eve of a rustic festival is set to be stained by the blood of a sacrificial kid, a product of the 'wanton herd' (l. 8), whose 'budding horns' mark him out for 'Battles and love' (ll. 4–5).[50] Although line five may be understood as a reference to benign battles of love (*et venerem et proelia*) the kid's status as a symbol of Callimachean eroticism is itself sacrificed to the ode's larger concern with literary authority. For, rather than dwelling on or indeed dismissing the ignoble taints of blood, sacrifice, and war, the Horatian pastoral seeks to sublimate violence, thereby transforming itself into something greater than a Callimachean hymn to rural delights. In Erwin Panofsky's sense, Ode 3.13 exemplifies the aim of pastoral to 'resolve' instances of individual suffering through incorporation within larger structures of artistic harmony.[51] Thus, though blood may spoil the waters, the stream's consecration as one of the 'famous fountains' (l. 13) ensures that no lasting harm is done.

While Horace, like Callimachus, demonstrates the ability of art to triumph over destruction by portraying the blood of the sacrificial kid as, at worst, a temporary sullying of the sacred spring, and of the poem itself as capable of encompassing the bifurcated themes of love and war, the elevation of the humble brook in pastoral lyric is brought about as a reaction to the bellicose legacy of the epic tradition. In George Chapman's translation of *Iliad*, Book XXI, for example, Achilles battles with enemies in the whirling currents of the Xanthus:

> The siluer-gulphed deepe
> Receiu'd them with a mightie crie: the billowes vast and steepe,
> Ror'd at their armours; which the shores, did round about resound:
> This way, and that, they swum, and shriekt; as in the gulphs they drownd.[52]

Blinded by fury, Achilles escalates the slaughter, prompting the river, in the shape of a man, to protest against the accumulation of bodies that choke its currents with 'mortalitie'.[53] But still Achilles fights on, accelerating the combat to a struggle between man and river, thereby revealing how 'simple natural life' is politicised as 'bare life' through exposure to death.[54]

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

Echoing the concerns of his classical antecedents, Wordsworth's sonnet sequence offers glimpses of a post-war world, of that which remains after the apocalyptic struggle of man, nature, and society. In Sonnet VIII, for example, a series of Keatsian rhetorical questions, seemingly addressed to the ghost of an ancient warrior – 'What aspect bore the Man who rove or fled […] to this dark dell?', 'who first in this pellucid Current slaked his thirst?', 'Was the Intruder nurs'd/In hideous usages, and rites accurs'd,/That thinned the living and disturbed the dead?' (ll. 1–8) – is answered by silence: 'the earth, the air is mute', only the 'murmuring' stream provides a 'soft record' of a capacity to 'heal and to restore,/To soothe and cleanse, not madden and pollute!' (ll. 9–14). And in Sonnet XXIII, otherwise known as 'Sheep-Washing', the sequence returns to the relations between violence and purity addressed by Horace, only here, instead of receiving a slaughtered kid, the Duddon's 'laving currents' perform 'prelusive rites' (l. 3) so that the dales-men may shear their sheep. Moreover, should the 'Duddon's spotless breast receive/Unwelcome mixtures' of 'uncouth noise' (ll. 9–10), from 'barking dogs', boyish 'clamour', and fearful 'bleatings' (ll. 7–8), 'the pastoral river will forgive/Such wrong' (ll. 10–11). The 'stains' produced by such 'sports' are 'fugitive' and nature will be sustained in 'quiet equipoise' (ll. 13–14). Alert to the potential for furore encoded in the etymology of 'noise', Wordsworth in both poems presents the river as a form of sound baffle, a means of dampening the potential for tumult inherent in the pastoral mode.

In Sonnet XIII, 'Open Prospect', however, the soothing influence of the river in 'Sheep-Washing' is curtailed by a 'dread swell of sound' that cuts through the 'stiff lance-like shoots of pollard ash' (ll. 6–7). Rather than muffling the sounds of war, the river is itself a source of discord, emitting 'angry' notes (l. 11) that the nearby households must drown out by means of 'mantling ale' and laughter (ll. 12–13). Still, in this poem, the turn in line 9 towards the social realm cannot wholly conceal the echoes of pre-pastoral violence encoded in the octave's allusion to *Aeneid*, III, lines 24–82. Specifically, the 'lance-like shoots' recall the densely packed myrtles, 'rough with many a spear' (l. 32), which Aeneas, seeking to establish a homeland in Thrace, uses to build a canopy for a sacrificial altar.[55] In Wordsworth's translation of Virgil's poem the harvesting of the green shoots reveals 'a dire portent, […] wond'rous to be told!' (l. 36):

> No sooner was the shatter'd root laid bare
> Of the first Tree I struggled to uptear,
> Than from the fibres drops of blood distill'd,
> Whose blackness stain'd the ground. (ll. 37–40)

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

Aeneas tries a second time to tear the stalks from the earth and is met again by the sight of blood seeping from the torn bark. A third attempt elicits a 'mournful groan' (l. 56) and a warning to the hero to desist from his labours. The voice belongs to Polydorus, a victim of Achilles in the war against the Trojans, whose sword-pierced body, transformed into sanguineous 'myrtle lances' (l. 54), testifies to the co-implication of pastoral retirement and the reciprocal activity of death and wounding. For if rivers, plants, earth, and air serve as indelible registers of human suffering, must the *patria* itself be implicated? Is there no sacred space on which violence does not encroach?

Elsewhere, in *The River Duddon* volume, the Hobessian notion of nature at war with itself is manifested in 'The Brownie's Cell', which with its description of battle-wrought stars, 'winds combating with woods', and 'Lands delug'd by unbridled floods' (ll. 61–70) recalls the account of discordant nature as an augur of civil strife presented by Virgil in *Georgics* I: in advance of Caesar's assassination the sun is hid in 'dusky gloom'; Etna shoots out 'balls of flame and molten rocks'; the Alps rock with 'unwonted terrors'; the Eridanus, king of rivers, washes away whole forests, sweeping cattle and stalls alike across the plains; the sky is marked by lightning and 'blazing comets'.[56] A time will come when the farmer, tilling the soil with 'crooked plough', will uncover 'javelins eaten up with rusty mould, or with his heavy hoe shall strike on empty helms, and marvel at the giant bones in the upturned graves', but for now the 'crooked pruning-hooks are forged into stiff swords' and the world is convulsed by the thirst for annihilation.[57] The best that can be hoped for, as Virgil anticipates in *Eclogues* I, is a pastoral zone rescued from conflict: 'Happy old man! Here, amid familiar streams and sacred springs, you shall court the cooling shade' (ll. 46–58); but for every farmer who lives to till the soil, another must die so that the soil may be nourished, and thus there is no sacred spring that is not defiled by blood.[58]

In Sonnet XXVIII Wordsworth seeks to correct this assumption. The inspiration for the verse comes from the site of a disused Quaker burial ground, known locally as the Sepulchre, situated on the east bank of the Duddon about a mile above Ulpha Bridge. Amidst these 'retired domains', the poem records, there is no evidence of 'lance opposed to lance' (ll. 1–2) and, notably in light of the bleeding soil alluded to in sonnets VIII and XIII, no account of turf stained 'purple from the veins/Of heroes fall'n, or struggling to advance' (ll. 3–4). The ground, that is, bears no trace of epic fight or, more pointedly, of 'power usurp'd' (l. 13). 'Yet', the sestet confirms, the 'blank earth' shelters the remains of 'the loyal and the brave' who, though

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

'neglected and forlorn', receive the 'tribute' of 'passing Winds' and the 'praise' of torrents, 'inspiring […] glad acknowledgment of lawful sway' (ll. 6–14). Composed between March and December 1819, the sonnet may be read as a pointedly anti-conspiratorial gesture, using Virgilian meditations on pastoral exceptionalism and the outcome of 'doubtful combat' (l. 5) to inform a reactionary judgement of the current state of affairs. For if, like St Peter's Field, the earth is now unmarked, it serves, nevertheless, as confirmation of a power greater and more enduring than the human capacity for revolt. Still, the objects of this praise remain unregistered, and the voices of the winds and of the river are strictly inarticulate, suggesting that pacific heroes must remain exiles from signification.

The characteristic pattern of affirmation via negation is sustained at the sequence's close. In Sonnet XXXI the Duddon is released from the picturesque hold of 'flower-enamelled lands', 'blooming thickets', and 'rocky bands' allowing the river to flow in 'radiant progress' towards the Irish sea (ll. 1–4). Following a densely plotted series of negated verbs – 'Not hurled […] Lingering no more […] nor […] held' – in line 5 the heavily accented '*now*' signals the Duddon's possession of the tidal flats, allowing it to sweep in 'unfettered' majesty over 'smooth flat sands' (ll. 5–6). The river is presented from hereon in terms of the natural sublime, its grandeur unsullied by transient picturesque forms, by baroque rhetorical constructions, or by fears of mortality.[59] The octave, composed in advance of the sestet between December 1818 and March 1819, makes comparison between the Duddon and the 'sovereign Thames' (l. 12). United in 'Stately mien' (l. 12), the concluding lines depict the latter river 'Spreading his bosom under Kentish downs,/With freighted Commerce or triumphant War' (l. 14).[60] As the penultimate sonnet makes clear, the 'Majestic Duddon' may be 'allied' (Sonnet XXXI, ll. 12) to the 'sovereign Thames' but is ultimately immunised from the oppositional logic that defines the capital river's supremacy.[61] Thus, in Sonnet XXXII, the octave composed during the same period as the previous sonnet's sestet confirms that 'no cannon thunders to the gale' and 'no haughty pendants cast/A crimson splendour' upon the waves (ll. 1–2); and in like manner, in the sestet, written in advance of the octave between December 1818 and March 1819, the 'Wanderer' (l. 7) and the 'Poet' (l. 9), taking the river's progress towards the sea as their model, resign the 'strange vicissitudes' (l. 6) of mortal life, 'Prepared, in peace of heart, in calm of mind/And soul' to 'mingle with Eternity!' (ll. 13–14). Peace, therefore, is presented at the close of *The River Duddon* as a release from the alternation between opposing or contrasting things, specifically from the constitutional violence – 'Commerce' *or*

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

'War' – in which the *polis* is forged. Of significance here is the fact that the lines most preoccupied with conflict – the sestet of XXXI and the octave of XXXII – were both written after the violent events in Manchester. Benjamin Kim observes that in its original form Sonnet XXXI provided a much neater and far less worldly ending to the sequence.[62] The revised sestet of XXXI therefore introduced a disjunctive element that the octave of XXXI was designed to resolve, as if in recognition of the impossibility of preventing the alliance of warlike and pacific rivers.[63]

As the final sonnet in the sequence confirms, the attempt to pacify antagonism can succeed only by accepting and upholding a mode of life that, by virtue of its release from death, is no longer subject to politicisation. Looking back on his journey, the poet of Sonnet XXXIII, 'Conclusion', sees 'what was, and is, and will abide;/Still glides the Stream and shall for ever glide;/The Form remains, the Function never dies' (ll. 4–6). In the continuity of being through past, present, and future tenses, in the paradoxical logic of 'For, *backward*, Duddon' (l. 3) and 'Still glides' (l. 5), and in the assertion of life living on, not as bare life but as eternal Platonic Form, Wordsworth releases the stream and the literary work in which the stream is enshrined, from the exclusionary/inclusionary logic of the *polis*. From another perspective, however, the attempt to protect nature from death merely replaces one form of co-optation – the political – with another, namely, the religious. For just as the peaceable fount is retroactively produced through the violent suspension of the political, so that 'life' which lives on is made conditional on the inclusive exclusion of death through 'faith's transcendent dower' (l. 13). In line 9 the distinction between the acceptance of mortality and the declaration of that 'something', which 'from our hands have power/To live, and act, and serve the future hour' (ll. 10–11), is, accordingly, signified through a protracted pause: 'We Men, who in our morn of youth defied/The elements must vanish;—be it so!' (ll. 8–9). The terminal clause that enables the poem to accept the necessity of non-existence and that serves also to enable progression beyond the potentially fatal pause is reminiscent of the '*now* expands' clause of Sonnet XXXI and, in like manner, signals the poem's commitment to the upholding of internal division as a key element in the furtherance of life. By marking a reciprocal relation between nullity and activity, the clause paves the way for the iambic insistence of the transient verbs in line 10, which seek fulfilment in a deferred object, 'the future hour' (l. 10) in which 'We feel that we are greater than we know' (l. 14).

Thus, the conclusion to *The River Duddon* performs the work of a lemniscate, melding the river's origin and tendency in seamless continuity.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

Of all the poems in this sequence, therefore, Sonnet XXXIII appears successfully to withstand the irresistible encroachment of political violence in the peaceable kingdom, surveying these encroachments from the perspective of a benevolent future in which, as Priestley anticipated, war is no more. Yet, as intimated above, death is included within the poem's constitution, echoing the call to self-sacrifice that impels the Happy Warrior:

> Who, doom'd to go in company with Pain,
> And Fear, and Bloodshed, miserable train!
> Turns his necessity to glorious gain;
> In face of these doth exercise a power
> Which is our human nature's highest dower;
> Controls them and subdues, transmutes, bereaves
> Of their bad influence, and their good receives […][64]

Like the Duddon poet, the Happy Warrior 'looks forward' to 'noble deeds' (l. 75) that, sanctified by 'Heaven's applause' (l. 83), grant 'fame' beyond the bare life of 'a dead unprofitable name' (ll. 79–80). Notably, the transmutation of 'Pain,/And Fear, and Bloodshed' (ll. 13–14) is accomplished by means of bereavement, a privation that yields 'nature's highest dower' (ll. 16–17). To adapt Steven Miller's unsettling analysis, the poem may be read as a defence of the 'dignity of war-and-death against the incursion of violence worse than death'.[65] For it is precisely because war 'imposes and upholds death' as 'both sacrifice and limit' that life is protected from annulment,[66] whether that annulment is conceived as the effect of the death drive or, in the sense outlined earlier, as a consequence of the failure to transmute loss so that it may be placed in the service of life. What Sonnet XXXIII shares with 'Character of the Happy Warrior' is the realisation that conflict subsists within the contours of the real so that life may be preserved from the urge to return to a state of inertia. A poem proclaiming peace thus internalises war so that life may be saved from a fate worse than death – a point of cancellation seen in a '*backward*' glance, an extended pause, a river that is 'Still'.

Binding *The River Duddon*

Bound within *The River Duddon* and, ultimately, within the boards of a collected edition, the conclusion to the *Duddon* sequence speaks of a peace that is always to come, a peace that, by virtue of its inability

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

to coincide with the here and now, maintains life at the threshold of extinction. Those material thresholds – the boundaries that determine how books and poems flow in and out of each other – take on a special significance in the case of the afterlife of *The River Duddon*. In its original form, as the alternative title page makes clear, the *Duddon* sonnets were intended to be bound with 'Vaudracour and Julia; Peter Bell; The Waggoner; A Thanksgiving Ode and Miscellaneous Pieces', thus forming the third volume of Wordsworth's collected *Poems*. Copies of this elusive three-volume edition are by no means uniform. In addition to the third volume having no connection with the classification system used in 1815, compilers of the edition did not always follow the recommended order as, in some cases, *The Waggoner* precedes *Peter Bell*.[67] One constant is the positioning of the *River Duddon* at the start of the third volume and the placing of the 'Thanksgiving Ode' at the end. Importantly, the poet's collected works are bookended by collections that provide alternately oblique and direct perspectives on the disruptive effects of war and peace.

That war might be ineradicably related to peace is highlighted when one considers how a reader of the three-volume *Poems* would have been able to encounter the *River Duddon* volume as a conduit between two expressive odes.[68] Might the 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality' that concludes the second volume of *Poems* and the 'Thanksgiving Ode' that concludes the third be more closely connected than first appears? In Chapter 3 I observed how counter-currents of guilt, shame, and grief lurk beneath the surface of Wordsworth's most notorious public poem. What the three-volume *Poems* inadvertently reveals is just how closely the 'Thanksgiving' ode, in its concern with loss and restoration, in its engagement with the passage from corporeal to incorporeal being, and, as noted earlier, in its efforts to supplant the transient glee of the French Revolution, repeats the central concerns of the 'Immortality' ode. In each of these poems the emphasis falls on those primal sympathies – love of nature and love of country – 'that spring/Out of human suffering' and 'In the faith that looks through death' (ll. 184–9; *passim*). The immortalising sentiments of *Duddon* Sonnet XXXIII sits naturally between these poems, metonymically invoking, in the circulatory relationship between the 'cloud-born stream' and 'the Deep',[69] a sense of the silent horizon of peace as the origin and tendency of life.

Yet, despite their points of formal and thematic contact, the odes differ in the extent to which their respective explorations of collective and

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

individual renewal are informed by the circulatory economy of sacred waters. In a manner that corroborates readings of the later poetry that stress the subordination of nature to religion, the celebration of those brooks and fountains that, in the 'Immortality' ode, afford 'soothing thoughts' (l. 186) to 'the philosophic mind' (l. 189), appears to have been effaced in the 'Thanksgiving' ode's claim that the 'current of this matin song' lies 'deeper […] Than aught dependent on the fickle skies' (ll. 53–5).[70] However, when considered as a whole and in relation to those poems that precede it in the three-volume edition, the Thanksgiving volume does not entirely abandon its connection with the fluvial tradition. Prefiguring the Horatian concerns of 'Upon the Same Occasion', 'Ode. Composed in January 1816', for instance, expresses the hope that the 'Pierian sisters […] exiled too long/From many a consecrated stream and grove' (ll. 100–3) will return to 'meet my soul's desires!/That I, or some more favoured Bard' (ll. 114–15), may, from 'some spotless fountain' (l. 111), be inspired to immortalise Britain's military success.[71] But from this return to the classical notion of the water-drinking bard as a voice for the expression of martial triumph, the Thanksgiving volume also derives impulses of a more pacific order, informed in part by the positioning of these poems within the three-volume edition. A reader adhering to the recommended order of binding would, for example, encounter the 'Thanksgiving Ode' on the back of 'Eve's lingering clouds', the concluding sonnet of *The Waggoner* volume, which, with its Neoplatonic vision of 'waters, steeled/By breezeless air to smoothest polish' to reflect cosmic harmony, provides a tranquil alternative to 'earth's groaning field,/Where ruthless mortals wage incessant wars' (ll. 7–8).[72] Though the sonnet's investment in pagan Fancy is ultimately superseded by the ode's accession to Anglican sobriety, and by the ill-judged attempt to rationalise carnage as the working out of divine intent, the Thanksgiving volume, as well as the three-volume *Poems*, ends nonetheless with a resumption of this whimsical mood, envisaging in 'Elegiac Verses, *February* 1816' an act of spiritual cleansing 'to wash away' (l. 5) the 'rivers stained so oft with human gore' (ll. 26–7).[73] Having restored the 'secret springs' of Nature's 'lost maternal heart' (l. 22) with 'celestial dews' (l. 21), the poem concludes with the image of 'Discord […] chained for ever to the black abyss!' (ll. 28–32), an emblem of the long-desired peace that, were it to be attained, would negate the sense of longing on which pastoral is founded. Hence the close of the poem, which with 'vision closed in darkness infinite' (l. 36), offers the promise that Wordsworth's thirty-year engagement with the poetics of conflict and resolution will be concluded.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

Shortly after the publication of the *Duddon* volume the newly expanded *Poems* was made redundant by the appearance, in four volumes, of Wordsworth's *Miscellaneous Poems*, which dispersed the contents of the third volume under the classificatory headings first used in the 1815 edition. Shrewdly priced at 32 shillings, the new collection allowed purchasers to catch up on the favourably reviewed *Duddon* volume as well as almost all of Wordsworth's published works from *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches* of 1793 to *The White Doe of Rylstone* of 1815, and from the 1816 Thanksgiving volume to *Peter Bell* and *The Waggoner* of the previous year. *Miscellaneous Poems*, writes Peter Manning, therefore 'looked backward to an earlier work' as well as 'forward to a larger audience', attempting to 'defy the fall' in Wordsworth's reputation by making the poetry not only affordable but also reinvigorated as a result of its rearrangement into 'new configurations that recast the significance of the poems' and, by extension, the image of the poet.[74]

The new arrangement does indeed reveal some interesting correspondences: the third volume bookends 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty' with *The White Doe* and the 'Thanksgiving Ode'; the fourth volume, which opens with the *Duddon* sonnets, concludes with 'Epitaphs and Elegiac Poems', in which category 'Elegiac Stanzas, Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle, in a Storm', 'To the Daisy', 'Invocation to the Earth' (aka 'Elegiac Verses, *February* 1816') , and 'Ode—there was a time when meadow' form the edition's finale. Manning argues persuasively that the collection seeks to instantiate a sense of the English national character as one forged in 'peace' and 'fearful innocence',[75] upholding the anti-revolutionary sentiments that emerged in the 1802 patriotic sonnets, that informed the 'Immortality' ode, and that culminated in the 'Thanksgiving Ode'. But we may also trace within this arrangement a sense of how war threatens constantly to unsettle this narrative, shadowing its portrayal of gentle resistance to internal and external threats with stark reminders of the intentional and unintentional costs of war. In this edition we move, then, from a lament for the devastating aftermath of civil struggle (*The White Doe*) to a strangely unnerving declaration of triumph over the French Revolution (the 'Thanksgiving Ode'), to a sonnet series querying the establishment of the ensuing peace (*The River Duddon*), to end, after passing through 'Poems of Sentiment and Reflection', 'Poems on the Naming of Places', 'Inscriptions', and 'Poems Referring to the Period of Old Age', with a sequence of poems directly and indirectly concerned with the effects of grief in times of war ('Peele Castle', 'To the Daisy') and the promise of post-war restoration ('Invocation to the Earth', 'Ode—there was a time

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

when meadow'). Running through this final volume, the passage from the Bandusian spring (*Duddon* Sonnet I, l. 1) to 'the mournful murmur' of the sea ('To the Daisy', l. 54), and from the 'rivers stained so oft with human gore' ('Invocation to the Earth', ll. 26–7) to 'the mighty waters rolling evermore' ('Ode—there was a time when meadow', 170), shows how, for Wordsworth, dreams of pastoral completion are riven always and forever by fears of discordant returns.[76]

Outflow: Enduring Peace in *Ecclesiastical Sketches*

> All my lovely rapids are crammed with corpses now,
> no channel in sight to sweep my currents out to sacred sea—
> I'm choked with corpses and still you slaughter more,
> you blot out more! Leave me alone, have done—
> captain of armies, I am filled with horror!— *the River Xanthus protests to Achilles*[77]

To end this chapter, I turn to a collection that reflects on its formal and thematic relationship with *The River Duddon* and that attempts, through renewed engagement with the fluvial tradition, to reach a peaceful settlement by surveying the conflicted course of mortal history from the standpoint of the divine. Initiated shortly after the Wordsworths' return from the continent in the autumn of 1820, *Ecclesiastical Sketches* projects its history of the 'progress and operation of the Church in England' onto a river journey inspired directly, as the volume's introductory sonnet makes clear, by the 'strictly-measured pace' (I. I. ll. 4) of the *Duddon* sequence.[78] Shifting attention from the geophysical to the divine, Wordsworth locates the origins of this 'holy River' (l. 10) not on some 'cloud-fed spring' (l. 2) but on 'the heights of Time' (ll. 9–10), anticipating its terminus in the 'Eternal City', unstained and unpolluted by the accretions of history (III. XXVIII. ll. 11–12). Moving thus from the natural to the figurative, *Ecclesiastical Sketches* offers a view of history that, while acknowledging the pathos of human suffering, endeavours to regard such pains as providentially decreed. Like all battles fought in the name of Christian truth, the carnage that would pollute the sacred fount is cleansed by the hand of God.

To advance this proposition, however, the sequence must first take account of those lingering traces of militancy that would maintain the primacy of Imagination over 'Heaven's high will' (I. XI. l. 3). The introductory poem therefore correlates the tempering of poetic authority with the sacrificial origins of Christian faith, channelling the dormant combativeness that inspired the Duddon poet towards a gentler end:

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

I, who descended with glad step to chase
Cerulean Duddon from his cloud-fed spring,
And of my wild Companion dared to sing,
In verse that moved with strictly-measured pace;
I, who essayed the nobler Stream to trace
Of Liberty, and smote the plausive string
Till the checked Torrent, fiercely combating,
In victory found her natural resting place […] (ll. 1–8)

Presented as a tussle between subjective freedom and organisational control, the sestet submits, finally, via the heavily accented 'smote' of 'the plausive string', to the triumph of the latter over the former. Yet just as, in the octave, the aggressively foregrounded 'I' is displaced by the supervening authority of the blessed river and by the impersonality of the third person pronoun, so the rhetoric of militancy gives way to dismissal of those who, driven by 'lawless force' (ll. 11–12) – a possible slight at Byron's sensationalist appeal? – become the unworthy recipients of laurels. Foregoing the transient delights of popular acclaim for Milton's 'Immortal amaranth' (l. 14; *Paradise Lost* III. ll. 352), the poet no longer regards the river as a 'wild' (l. 3) subject to be 'checked' (l. 7) by the disciplinary pace of metre and rhyme but as a 'sacred Well' (I. II. l. 3), from whence flows, in divine measure, wisdom, justice, and order to a world overcome by 'savage' (l. 4) contestation.

Commenting on 'Nuns fret not at their Convent's narrow room', Joseph Phelan has observed how the choice of Milton's 'heavily rule-governed Petrarchan or "legitimate" sonnet' becomes 'an iconic representation of the poet's own freely chosen confinement; both his acquiescence in the rules of form and his minor creative infractions of them acquire an almost immediate moral and political resonance, reinforcing or counterpointing the poem's explicit discussion of the relative merits of liberty and submission to authority'.[79] Seeking to moderate the unruly course of poetic liberty in the opening sonnet of *Ecclesiastical Sketches* Wordsworth aligns conformity to literary tradition with allegiance to the Anglican Church, discovering, through the consecration of the pagan fount, a Christian solution to the problem of mortal strife, whether this strife be conceived in terms of the turbulent history of the Church or the contest between freedom and control that afflicts the would-be national poet. As the sequence proceeds, however, it becomes evident that peaceful resolution of corporate and singular struggles for recognition cannot take place in this world. Whether charting the sacrificial practices of the Druids, Roman persecution, the ravages of the Picts and Scots, the Saxon, Danish, and Norman conquests, the Crusades, the abuses of the Papacy, the dissolution of the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

monasteries, the Wars of the Roses, the Gunpowder Plot, or the curiously elided history of the English Civil War, the peace that Wordsworth anticipates is informed by the violence on which it is founded.[80]

Nonetheless, woven into this history of pain are threads of gentle resistance, lines of beatific calm that defy the ceaseless course of destructive change. Echoing the Catholic sympathies of *The White Doe of Rylstone*, Wordsworth writes appreciatively of the peace to be found in monastic seclusion and, though wary of the motivations that prompt the belligerent to forsake their arms in favour of 'cloistered privacy' (I. XXI. l. 6) and the sybaritic to indulge in fantasies of 'voluptuous indolence' (I. XXIII. l. 3), celebrates Bede as one who, rejecting 'penitential cogitations' (I. XXI. l. 9) and rusticated indolence alike, discovers in the 'Perpetual industry' (I. XXII. ll. 8) of 'a hallowed seat/Of Learning' (l. 6) a means to honour the glory of God. Wordsworth returns to this theme in Part 2, in a series of poems describing the dissolution of the monasteries. In 'Abuse of Monastic Power' and 'Monastic Voluptuousness' he mounts a predictably unfavourable attack on 'cloistered Avarice' (II. XII. ll. 5) and 'Unhallowed' revelries (II. XIII. l. 2), singling out in the latter poem 'Venus disguisèd like a Nun' and 'Bacchus, clothed in semblance of a Friar' (ll. 3–4) as instances of the corrupting effects of alcohol abuse in cloistered communities. Notably in thrall 'to madding Fancy dear' (l. 11), the debauched conventuals do not, however, stand as the sole representatives of the sequestered life. In sonnets XV and XVI, Wordsworth writes sensitively of the effects of the dissolution of the monasteries on the lives of devotees, young and old, who have been forced to leave their homes. Thus, the description of the worldly nun of XIII is matched in XV by the portrait of a 'lovely Nun' (l. 1) who, pursued by 'unrelenting mandates' (l. 5), 'Goes forth—unveiling timidly her cheek/Suffused with celestial hue' (ll. 5–6). Though raised above the taint of mortal longing, the comparison with Iris, personification of the rainbow and messenger of the gods – 'An apparition more divinely bright!/ Not more attractive to the dazzled sight/Than wat'ry glories in the stormy brine' (II. XV. ll. 10–12) – suggests that Wordsworth, no less than the figures decried in 'Monastic Voluptuousness', is drawn by pagan Fancy.

The path that connects pagan superstition and Catholic idolatry in *Ecclesiastical Sketches* strays, not infrequently, beyond the straight and narrow. In XVII 'Saints' and XVIII 'The Virgin', for example, Wordsworth laments the hardening of the heart that is a consequence of iconoclasm, going so far, in the latter sonnet, as to bemoan the toppling of those images of Mary that 'mixed and reconciled' in visible form a 'mother's love with maiden purity' (ll. 12–13). Considering the poet's comparison between the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

constricted form of the sonnet and the nun's narrow cell it is perhaps hardly surprising that traces of Catholic sympathy should be detected in these verses. In the image of the fallen Mother, blending 'high and low, celestial with terrene' (l. 14), Wordsworth may well have discovered a fitting analogue for his own attempts to marry the visible and the invisible. But perhaps more so, in the prospect of despoiled beauty, the poet could retrieve something of the nostalgia for Catholic worship that, in *The White Doe*, had merged with the desire for peace. In sonnet XX, 'Imaginative Regrets', and in sonnet XXI, 'Reflections', Wordsworth describes a global lamentation for the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire, a global grief extending from the Tiber to the Ganges and Nile sufficient in force to qualify the disclosure of papal 'trumpery' (II. XXI. l. 6) and fraud (II. XX. l. 10). Significantly, the 'dolorous groan' (II. XX. l. 4) issues not merely from 'justly honoured' sages (l. 2) but 'from all the ghostly Tenants of the wind,/Demons and Spirits' (ll. 3–4) joined in mourning for this 'dominion overthrown' (l. 5), suggesting that shock for the loss of Rome transcends national and religious allegiances to affect the world itself, and all that lies beyond.

But something more than high Anglican nostalgia animates Wordsworth's sympathetic response to the fall of Rome. In Part 1 of the sequence, sonnet XII, 'Monastery of Old Bangor', opens with a quotation from the sixth-century Brythonic poet, Taliesin: '*The oppression of the tumult—wrath and scorn—/The tribulation—and the gleaming blades*' (ll. 1–2). Dismissing the 'impetuous spirit' that inspired these bellicose sentiments, the sonnet goes on to declare: 'Ours shall mourn/The *unarmed* Host who by their prayers would turn/The sword from Bangor's walls' (ll. 3–5). Voicing support for non-violent resistance to anti-Christian oppression, the sonnet joins with other poems in the sequence in support of the 'gentle life' that 'spreads round holy spires' (II. I. 'Cistertian Monastery', ll. 12) causing 'Fierceness and rage' to 'melt away' (I. XXIV. 'Danish Conquests', ll. 6–8). Yet, as the Bangor sonnet sestet makes clear, all things in time must give way to loss, burning to 'senseless ashes' (l. 9) or dying 'like steam' (l. 10):

> Only perchance some melancholy Stream
> And some indignant Hills old names preserve,
> When laws, and creeds, and people, all are lost! (ll. 12–14)

Derived in large part from a passage in Samuel Daniel's *The Collection of the History of England* (1618), Wordsworth appears to have been struck by a vision of devastation, extending not only to the extinction of a people but to 'the open destruction, and desolation of the whole Country, whereof

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

in the end they extinguished both the Religion, Lawes, Language, and all, with the people and name of *Britaine*'. As Daniel goes on to explain, the 'subversion' of Britain

> concurred with the universal mutation, which about that time happened in all parts of the world; whereof, there was no one Countrey or Province but changed bounds, inhabitants, customes, language, and in a manner, all their names […] Wherefore, we are now here to begin with a new Bodie of people, with a new State, and government of the Land, which retained nothing of the former, nor held other memory but that of the dissolution thereof: where scarce a Citie, Dwelling, Riuer, Hill, or Montaine, but changed names.[81]

Holding no 'other memory but that of the dissolution thereof', global Christianity is thus birthed in desolation, registering the shock of the new in the pain of historical erasure; however militant we might deem Wordsworth's account of the rise of Anglican hegemony, there are instances of pathos enough in the *Ecclesiastical Sketches* to confirm that the poet remained attuned to the spiritual value of that which had been expunged to facilitate this rise. Catholicism is certainly one of those lost objects that the poet appears to mourn during this history, but there are glimmers too of that older, palpitating life that haunted the earlier work. Most notably, in Part 2, sonnet XIV reflects movingly on the dissolution of the monasteries – 'The tapers shall be quenched, the belfries mute' (II. XIV. l. 3) – only to discover, amidst their ruins, a revival of profane life as, within 'choirs unroofed by selfish rage':

> The warbling wren shall find a leafy cage;
> The gadding bramble hand her purple fruit;
> And the green lizard and the gilded newt
> Lead unmolested lives, and die of age. (ll. 5–8)

Thus, peace is found in the lattice-like connectivity of animate and inanimate beings, aspects of nature linked by adjectival attributes, tending towards a peaceful end.

Elsewhere, in Part 3, sonnet XVII, 'Old Abbeys', the contemplation of 'ruin, beauty', and 'ancient stillness' (l. 3) inspires toleration for 'the infirmities/And faults of others' (ll. 7–8) and distrust of the 'hidden ill' that prompts the inquisitive to 'break Time's charitable seals' (ll. 10–11). Addressing the ruins, the poet declares: 'Once ye were holy, ye are holy still;/Your spirit freely let me drink and live!' (ll. 13–14), allowing discord to dissolve in fanciful certitude. Here, then, is that other sacred fount – a source of pure, poetic imagining, unsullied by the demands of doctrinal

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006

rigour. In these moments we might almost forgive the ideological fervour that allows Wordsworth at the end of the sequence to describe the 'living Waters, less and less by guilt/Stained and polluted' (III. XXVIII, ll. 11), brightening as they roll towards that eternal city, 'built/For the perfected Spirits of the just' (ll. 13–14). Though the river journey allows us to float 'at ease' as nations efface nations, and 'Death gathers to his fold/Long lines of mighty Kings' (ll. 6–9), it reveals too how past traumas insist on the present and how peace may be found, if only fleetingly, amidst the ruins of the world.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:27:48, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.006