CHAPTER I

Conscripting 'The Recluse'

It Is Like a Dream

Seven years after the collapse of the Peace of Amiens, an end to the war appears in sight: first, in October 1813, the defeat at Leipzig followed by the retreat to Mainz and the collapse of the northern Italian states; then, at the beginning of 1814, Blücher's crossing of the Rhine followed by three months of fighting in northern and eastern France, the Allied march to Paris, and the announcement, on 6 April, of the emperor's abdication. In Rydal, these events seem barely to merit attention until on 24 April, writing to Catherine Clarkson, Dorothy declares:

> To the last page I am come, and not a word of the Emperor Alexander, the King of France or the fallen Monarch! Surely it might seem that to us, encircled by these mountains, our own little concerns outweigh the mighty joys and sorrows of nations; or I could not have been so long silent. It is not so—every heart has exulted—we have danced for joy! But how strange! It is like a dream—all in a moment—prisoners let loose—Englishmen and Frenchmen like brothers at once!—no treaties—no stipulations. (*MY* II. 142)

In England's dreaming the peace is welcomed by the left and right alike. Even the restoration of the Bourbon king is given a cautious endorsement by opposition figures.[1] Yet, dismayed by Napoleon's ignoble retreat from the battlefield, and perturbed by the liberality of his pension, Dorothy comes to share with commentators as varied in background and opinion as Lord Byron, William Hazlitt, Lewis Goldsmith, and Walter Savage Landor the sense that the scourge of Europe had somehow failed to be himself: better that he should have fought 'to the Death' and then, having 'yielded himself a prisoner', been 'tried for the murders of the Duc d'Enghien, of Pichegru, of Captain Wright—of Palm—of one or all' (*MY* II. 142).[2] The general relief at the announcement of peace yielded, with the arrival of summer, to murmurs of discontent from wartime profiteers, who

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

now found their livelihoods to be in danger, and to declarations of alarm from those members of the political opposition who, having cautiously welcomed the return of Louis XVIII, feared that the menace of 'unlimited and arbitrary power' would injudiciously subvert the constitutional settlement.[3]

Throughout this period, there is no mention of *The Excursion* – the poem with which Wordsworth has been engaged since 1809 – until, a day after Dorothy's letter, William announces to Francis Wrangham: 'I am busy with the Printer's Devils. A Portion of a long Poem from me will see the light ere long. I hope it will give you pleasure. It is serious, and has been written with great labour' (*MY* II. 144). Adding a degree of portentousness to this mysterious announcement, on 28 April Wordsworth informs Thomas Poole: 'I have at last resolved to send to the Press a portion of a Poem which, if I live to finish it, I hope future times will "not willingly let die"' (*MY* II. 146). Aligning himself with Milton, 'my great Predecessor', while anticipating the judgement of posterity on 'The Recluse', Wordsworth makes plain his wish to claim a place in the English imagination, hoping to restore his dwindling reputation through the publication of a 'portion' of that long, philosophical poem. Amid this dalliance with authority and futurity Wordsworth, signing off to Wrangham, and perhaps wishing to provoke his liberal friend, proclaims: 'I congratulate you on the overthrow of the execrable Despot: and the complete triumph of the *War-faction* of which noble body I had the honour to be active a Member as my abilities and industry would allow' (*MY* II. 144). Wordsworth's allusion to John Stoddart's recent attack in *The Times* on the '*Peace-faction*' who sought a negotiated settlement with France seems unequivocal, and indeed who, having read the patriotic sonnets, the Cintra tract, and the establishment soundings of *The Excursion*'s concluding book, would wish to quibble with this self-assessment?[4]

Published in July 1814 in expensive quarto format, *The Excursion* proclaimed its author's allegiance to the Tory establishment through the inclusion of a dedication to the poet's patron, 'the Right Honorable William, Earl of Lonsdale'.[5] Although treated with suspicion by liberal readers, and often surveyed as a demonstration of Wordsworth's political apostacy, passages from *The Excursion* were nonetheless cited by these same readers as exempla of those progressive tendencies that the poem, in its bid for establishment approval, had sought to defeat.[6] The fact that such readers could respond to the poem in this way owes much to its connection with 'The Recluse', the unrealised '*first* and *only* true Phil. [*sic*.] Poem' that would, in accordance with Coleridge's projection, have effected

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

a 'Reconciliation' that would end mankind's 'enmity with Nature', providing, at last, the means to effect the chiastic union of Man, Nature, and Spirit ('true Idealism necessarily perfecting itself in Realism, & Realism refining itself into Idealism').[7] Though it fell short, in some measure, of Coleridge's vision of millenarian fulfilment, *The Excursion* advanced its own vision of how peace might be restored, presenting in the character of the Solitary a case study in how disappointment with the political amelioration of mankind may be assuaged through an awakening to the love of Nature leading, in turn, to the love of God. It would be some time before the poem's rejection of communitarian solutions to the crises of the age and its endorsement of a form of individualised, therapeutic conservatism would find a receptive audience, but in the immediate post-war period it was the survival within the poem of radical political, ecological, and theological sentiments adapted from poetry drafted in the late 1790s and early 1800s that, with their promise of deliverance from the belligerent antimonies of Enlightenment thought, most appealed to Wordsworth's second-generation contemporaries. In these revenant passages, voiced by characters either excluded from or on the margins of the poem's loyalist community, Keats, Hazlitt, Hunt, and Shelley would find the resources for a radical critique of the post-bellum settlement.

Hidden in plain sight within *The Excursion*, therefore, are traces of a poem that spoke in support of the *Peace-faction* rather than the *War-faction*. In the late 1790s, the first drafts composed for 'The Recluse' – 'The Discharged Soldier', 'The Ruined Cottage', 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' – had engaged almost exclusively with the victims of Britain's prosecution of the war against France.[8] These passages were, in turn, complemented by the series of blank verse fragments, mostly written in Germany, that hinted at a vision of life relieved of antagonism – 'There is an active principle alive in all things', 'I would not strike a flower', 'There are who tell us that in recent times'.[9] In the two-book *Prelude* that emerged from these tentative beginnings, echoes of 'bliss ineffable' (l. 449) emanating from the 'one life' (l. 460) offered consolation to those revolutionary fellow travellers who, like Wordsworth, had succumbed in 'these times of fear' to the 'melancholy waste of hopes overthrown' (ll. 478–9).[10] However, by the time the poem evolved into the thirteen-book *Prelude* most of these anti-war sentiments had been dispersed or waylaid, leaving the aspiration to enduring peace, a dream of Fancy, to be weighed in the balance alongside passages addressing Imagination's dark abyss. The harmony between mind and nature that is presented at the close of the 1806 *Prelude* attempts to bring Imagination into alignment with mortal being, but in 'Home

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

at Grasmere' (1800–6), and then in 'The Recluse' fragments of 1808, we find Wordsworth returning to an older, less fraught, but no less ambitious envisaging of how peace might be found in our relations with the world. It is to the recovery of these pacific inclinations, as they emerged in manuscript and as they appeared in print, that this chapter is, for the greater part, directed.

To understand how 'The Recluse' took shape as a debatable response to the end of war, I begin with a reading of 'Home at Grasmere', paying attention to the poem's uncertain engagement with the poetics of peace, conceived at once as an immanent field of joyful, energetic play *and* as a transcendental domain of immutable concord. From here I move to an account of the 1808 poems, with a focus on 'The Tuft of Primroses', looking at how the desire for eternal peace is fractured from within by the recognition of its own interior violence. In a concluding discussion of *The Excursion*, I consider how the Solitary's recollections of the pacific ideals of the French Revolution, together with passages indulging in fanciful portrayals of peaceful co-existence in nature, transplanted, and to some extent reorientated, from the 1808 drafts, may be read as counterpoint to the support for defensive war outlined in the tract on the Convention of Cintra and in Wordsworth's correspondence with the military theorist Sir Charles Pasley. While the Solitary grants expression to the dashing of revolutionary hope, that very act of negation, as Hazlitt's affirmation of the poem's remembrances of that 'glad dawn of the day-star of liberty; that spring-time of the world' suggests, offers in its recitation of the Revolution's ambition to establish universal and perpetual peace a paradoxical hope for its future success (*CWWH* XIX. 18).[11]

Residency and Redundancy in 'Home at Grasmere'

Between the patriotic sonnets that followed the collapse of the Peace of Amiens and the bellicose prose and poetry that came in the wake of the Cintra affair, Wordsworth's poetry returned to sentiments that would have made of 'The Recluse' an extended meditation on the blessings of peace. This new poetry, overtly local and contemplative, joyful and fanciful, would have shifted Wordsworth's poem away from the war-torn beginnings of the long, philosophical poem. But, as these modal verbs and past participles betray, the drive towards the combative separation of 'coarser pleasures' and 'elevated thoughts' seems always to triumph in the end. By keeping sight of these fleeting yet frequent expressions of animal delight, of blissful absorption in everyday life, it should, however, be

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

possible to imagine a world 'Made for itself and happy in itself',[12] a world as yet unharried by thoughts of insufficiency or understood merely as 'the correlate of human thought'.[13] Conceived in 1800, then shaped into a finished work in 1806 during the period of extraordinary creativity that followed in the wake of John's death, 'Home at Grasmere', also known as '*Part first Book first*' of '*The Recluse*',[14] appears to offer just such a vision.

Centred on a schoolboy's memory of 'a golden summer holiday' (l. 4), the poem's opening lines celebrate the 'thought of clouds/That sail on winds':

> of breezes that delight
> To play on water, or in endless chase
> Pursue each other through the liquid depths
> Of grass or corn, over and through and through,
> In billow after billow evermore;
> Of Sunbeams, Shadows, Butterflies, and Birds,
> Angels, and winged Creatures that are Lords
> Without restraint of all which they behold. ('Home at Grasmere'. MS. B. ll. 25–33)

Edenic in conception yet strangely disconcerting, the ascription of 'delight' to 'breezes' suggests that feeling is no longer the sole preserve of the human but is, as it were, everywhere, imbued in lives that strive, in the Spinozian sense, to pursue their existence. The child's love of the limitless variety and endless succession of organic forms, conveyed rhetorically by alliteration, anaphora, and polysyndeton, prompts the speaker to claim a corresponding expression of 'liberty' and 'joy' in chiastic play: 'To flit from field to rock, from rock to field,/From shore to island, and from isle to shore' (ll. 37–8). The poem is titled 'Home at Grasmere', but in these lines at least, the idea of home as a permanent domicile or residency, centred on the notion of a self-contained unit or other 'substantial' dwelling, is challenged by the emphasis on restlessness and change. Here, operating in accordance with the associative pleasures of Fancy, the idea of home as a protective space, shielding inhabitants from violent intrusion, may be taken for granted, for Wordsworth's happy valley overflows with love for all God's creatures and for all that is around them.

Amid the celebrations, however, something does not ring true, as if the repeated claims to gleeful co-existence, in line with Wordsworth's related attempts to rescue post-political joy from the embers of revolution, were in some way *de trop*. Seeking to account for the giddy absurdism of the poem's opening statements, Kenneth Johnston has observed how '[e]verything about it is circular: its arguments tautological, its syntax redundant

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

and repetitious, its imagery full of rounded reflections which reinforce the circling tensions of its structure'.[15] Here, however, Johnston could be accused of missing the point. In his note on 'The Thorn', Wordsworth writes that 'repetition and apparent tautology are frequently beauties of the highest order', with the qualifier 'apparent' indicating that tautological expressions may well communicate something more than the words they repeat.[16] That sense of 'Something' (l. 164) exceeding the grasp of language, of that which, operating under the sign of the beautiful, sanctions the 'blended holiness of earth and sky' (l. 163) so that life in Grasmere is made synonymous with the state of enduring peace, is, nonetheless qualified by the awareness of how that which is perfect in itself, a 'Whole without dependence or defect' (l. 168), serves also as a 'termination' (l. 166). For, even as 'Home at Grasmere' seeks to substantiate its vision of enduring peace, the stress on the 'spirit/Of singleness and unity and peace/[…] In this majestic, self-sufficing world' (ll. 202–4), along with the repeated emphasis on the poet's attempts to claim ownership of this spirit, underscored and undermined by an excessively qualified variation on the 'Tintern Abbey' dialectic of fulfilment, loss, and abundant recompense, shows that the 'promise' (l. 248) of peace resists the drive towards self-possession:

> the unappropriated bliss hath found
> An owner, and that owner I am he.
> The Lord of this enjoyment is on Earth
> And in my breast […]
> What I keep have gained,
> Shall gain, must gain, if sound be my belief
> From past and present rightly understood
> That in my day of childhood I was less
> The mind of Nature, less, take all in all,
> Whatever may be lost, than I am now. (ll. 85–96)

Kevis Goodman has written brilliantly of how, in Wordsworth's poetry, 'Tautology may be homesickness by other means'.[17] Underwriting the tautological formulations of 'Home at Grasmere' we may discern the traces of that longing for home that blighted the minds and bodies of so many Enlightenment outsiders, not least those victims of war who, finding themselves removed from their sense of the everyday, fell prey to forms of compulsive behaviour that, in their somatic and semantic insistence, seek to defend the self against the rapid impress of the times. As if to escape the *-algia* of its yearning for home, it is not long before the poem conjures up an image of belonging understood not as an expression of self-predicated singularity but as a mode of inter-animated multiplicity – as when, at the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

return of Spring, the Grasmere waterfowl 'show their pleasure' (l. 286) in 'wanton repetition' (l. 296), the 'I', though unable to take 'possession of the sky' (l. 288) yet partakes of their 'thoughtless impulse' (l. 289):

> One of a mighty multitude whose way
> And motion is a harmony and dance
> Magnificent. Behind them, how they shape,
> Orb after orb, their course, still round and round […]
> In wanton repetition, yet therewith—
> With that large circle evermore renewed—
> Hundreds of curves and circlets, high and low,
> Backwards and forwards, progress intricate […]
> They tempt the sun to sport among their plumes;
> They tempt the water and the gleaming ice
> To show them a far image. (ll. 290–310)

Aptly conveyed through numerical excess, anaphoric insistence, and materialised tautologies, a sense is gained of what it might be like to embrace self-abnegation, to accept that individual life is formed and deformed by interactions with others, and, perhaps, emulating the example of the birds' apparent scorn for 'both resting-place and rest' (l. 314), to concede that peace, as such, will not be found in the home – at least insofar as home is understood as a form of self-possession.

One might imagine that, buoyed along by this insight at an early stage in its development, 'Home at Grasmere' could simply reiterate the sense of pleasure at being alive in the world, in anticipation of John Clare's delight in the ontographic repleteness of things.[18] But, as conveyed in the stumbling syntax, awkward negations, ambiguous determiners, and elided conjunction of lines 316–21, the poem struggles to sustain the faith in that 'active principle alive in all things' that, in the 1802 preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, had moved Wordsworth to celebrate 'the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which [man] knows, and feels, and lives, and moves' (*Prose* I. 140):

> Not upon me alone hath been bestowed—
> Me, blessed with many onward-looking thoughts—
> The sunshine and mild air. Oh, surely these
> Are grateful; not the happy Quires of love,
> Thine own peculiar family, Sweet Spring,
> That sport among green leaves so blithe a train. (ll. 316–21)

Who or what is grateful: the sunshine and mild air? The poet's thoughts? Is Nature in harmony with, distinct from, or identical with the mind of the poet? Are those signifiers of textual materiality, the 'Quires of love',

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

identical with or distinct from 'Thine own peculiar family'? And here again, whose family: the poet's quires or the Spring's waterfowl? Moreover, does the qualifier 'peculiar' refer to 'strange' or is its meaning informed by the Old English sense of 'particular' or, more remotely, by the Latin *peculiaris* 'of private property' or 'one's own', a meaning that would be aligned with the poem's previous emphases on claims to ownership? In MS. D, the substitution of 'The penetrating bliss' for 'The Sunshine and mild air' and the shift from 'blithe' to the comparative 'blither' do little to help matters. Strained to the point of unreadability by grammatical and semantic ambiguity, the assertion of joyful indifference to category distinctions calls out for the return of oppositional clarity.

Significantly enough, it is through the recognition of an act of violence that the poem starts to break free from the stultifying consequences of its attempts to articulate a purely irenic language. The moment of recovery occurs when the poet registers the absence of 'two, a lonely pair/Of milk-white Swans' (ll. 322–3), symbolic doubles for that tautologous pair, William and Dorothy. The poem conjectures that the swans may have been killed by a Grasmere shepherd, underscoring the sense in which dreams of undifferentiated harmony, dreams whose vacuity is exposed by the overworked allusion to the 'loveliest' and 'Blest pair' of *Paradise Lost* ('They strangers, and we strangers; they a pair,/And we a solitary pair like them', ll. 341–2),[19] pose a threat to the real life of the valley – the life that recognises violence as integral to existence. Fearing that 'by harbouring this thought' he has, in some way, done 'wrong' to 'this favoured Vale' (ll. 358–60), the poet embarks on a sequence of increasingly strained iterations of domestic tranquillity, ending with an attempt to eclipse the contractual dimensions of peaceful co-existence by presenting it as a natural fact:

> Ah! if I wished to follow where the sight
> Of all that is before my eyes, the voice
> Which is a presiding Spirit here
> Would lead me, I should say unto myself,
> They who are dwellers in this holy place
> Must needs themselves be hallowed. They require
> No benediction from the Stranger's lips,
> For they are blessed already. None would give
> The greeting 'peace be with you' unto them,
> For peace they have; it cannot but be theirs. (ll. 362–71)

As if exposing the potentially fatal contingency of the traditional liturgical greeting were not enough (for what would happen if the greeting were not returned?), the effort to present peace as a state of nature rather than

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

as a promissory act falls foul, as the Latinate phrasing of 'peace they have' and needless insistence of 'it cannot but be theirs' betray, not only of the necessity of predication but of the co-implication of the constative and the performative – an impure or contaminated condition that renders all declarations of peace, insofar as they are readable or intelligible, susceptible to contestation.[20]

A few lines on, the illusion of self-referential concord is qualified still further by the poem's uneasy recollection of ethical improprieties among the vale's inhabitants. The home that is sought for in 'Home at Grasmere' turns out to be a fraught domain that, with its accounts of 'double-dealing, strife and wrong' (l. 438), cannot help but reveal the violent trace that nurtures and informs the dream of eternal peace. Those who, through their actions, draw attention to this trace must suffer – like the adulterer who, stung by guilt, becomes 'his own world, without a resting-place', 'Wretched at home' and 'with no peace abroad' (ll. 516–17). Subsequently removed from MS. D, the adulterer's tale has no place in a poem founded on claims to conjugal harmony. Like the undesirable guest, whose presence in the home exposes the hostility that resides in hospitality, 'Home at Grasmere' must be shielded from the knowledge of the opposition on which the claim to peace is founded.

But even as the poem advertises its savviness in rejecting the delusory assurance of 'pastoral fancies' (l. 628; see also ll. 829–30), still the desire persists for 'a music, and a stream of words/That shall be life' (ll. 621–2) – a language purged of predicative violence that somehow, magically, enables existence to be at one with itself. The search for 'such a stream,/Pure and unsullied' (ll. 628–9), cannot help but recall the paradoxical origins of the classical sacred fount: the source of pastoral peace born of blood sacrifice that, as the poem's earlier recollection of 'Hart-leap Well' (ll. 236–56) had implied, underwrites the claim to domestic harmony. Condemned in this world to pollute the stream of life the poet inquires: 'must we seek [peace] where man is not?' (l. 631). Yet, despite repeated attempts to be at peace with the vale's 'animal being' (l. 673), to be at one with those feelings and sensations that would preclude the urge to individuation, the desire for sovereignty persists. Matters come to a head in lines 875–909 when, returning to the question of vocation, the poet rejects the life of oblivion and, embracing 'duty' (l. 879), asserts the existence of an 'internal brightness […]/That must not die, that must not pass away' (ll. 886–7), and that, while seeking fellowship with others, is 'solely mine/Something within, which yet is shared by none' (ll. 897–8). Having reached the point where claims to ownership, of being at home in the vale, flounder in the face of

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

repeated encounters with loss (a reminder that the home can never be the home), the poet asserts a claim to singularity that yet must be shared with an audience; hence, the repeated conditionals, 'I would impart it; I would spread it wide […] I would not wholly perish' (ll. 901–3), even as they signal a determination to move beyond self-scrutiny, run the risk of forestalling the projected poem on man, nature, and society, of reducing it, as *The Prelude* had already anticipated, to a declaration of individual fitness that remains without issue.

What, then, would prevent the still-birth of 'The Recluse'? What principle, found within, would enable the poet, now set apart by virtue of his gift from common life, to communicate with the world? In a passage that survives the poem's final transcription, an attempt is made to connect that elusive 'Something which power and effort may impart' (l. 900) with the poet's youthful enthusiasm for tales of martial prowess:

> Yea, to this day I swell with like desire;
> I cannot at this moment read a tale
> Of two brave Vessels matched in deadly flight
> And fighting to the death, but I am pleased
> More than a wise Man ought to be; I wish,
> I burn, I struggle, and in soul am there. (ll. 928–33)

Couched in the present tense, this arresting account of sanguinary childhood reading habits may have been informed by the poet's more recent preoccupation with Nelson's heroic death at Trafalgar. It is likely, too, that mixed feelings of pain and pride over John's self-sacrifice, touched on in 'Character of the Happy Warrior', are latent within these lines.[21] But what is perhaps more significant is the extent to which the violent proclivities of youth insist on the present, urging the mature poet to repeat past imaginative transgressions, in defiance of monitory wisdom. Even as the adult is 'tamed' and made 'calm' (ll. 934–5) by Nature's influence, prompting the poet to abandon his plans to write a quasi-Miltonic epic on some British theme ('Then farewell to the Warrior's deeds, farewell/ All hope, which once and long was mine, to fill/The heroic trumpet with the muse's breath!', ll. 953–5), the wish to write 'On Man, on Nature, and on human Life' (l. 959) retains in the midst of its Spinozian insistence on the continuity between 'the individual mind' and 'being limitless' in the 'one great Life' (ll. 969–71) a sense 'of foes/To wrestle with and victory to complete,/Bounds to be leapt and darkness to explore' (ll. 946–8). When read in this light, the poem's celebrated statement of correlationist intent – 'How exquisitely the individual Mind […] to the external world/

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

Is fitted; and how exquisitely too […] The external world is fitted to the mind' (ll. 1006–11), a denouement that repeats the chiastic self-circling that is the poem's dominant rhetorical mode – appears less pacific than it might at first appear. So long as the human heart is 'enflamed' by 'longing', 'contempt', and the desire for 'undaunted quest' (l. 949–50), however 'changed their office' (l. 951), the 'great consummation' (l. 1004) of Mind and Nature must be conceived as the final act of an epic struggle, which amounts to saying that while human and non-human entities are conceived as dialectical opponents, and insofar as a non-violent language is untenable, paradise will not be regained on this earth and certainly not in this time.

Nevertheless, secreted into the 'Prospectus' is the hope that the poet will be protected from these violent urgings in the 'living home' (l. 991) of the beautiful. At one with the 'green earth' (l. 991), Beauty 'Pitches her tents' (l. 995) as the poet traverses the sublime 'haunt and main region' (l. 990) of his song, presenting an image of shelter that manages, simultaneously, to domesticate the threat of the sublime while raising the prospect of how, like the temporary shelters used by soldiers on a military campaign, the tent provides the mere illusion of protection from the risk of '[ ] vacancy' (l. 986).[22] Subsequently informed in MS. D by the comparative adjective 'blinder' (shades here of the desire to out-trope Milton), the materialised absence of MS. B speaks more profoundly of that violence to opposition that, according to Derrida, results in 'the worst violence': the violence of indifference, of nothingness, of pure non-sense.[23]

'The Ghostliness of Things': Ruin and Revival in the 1808 'Recluse' Poems

Unable to come to terms with its structural dependence on violence, and all too reliant on self-validating proclamations of harmony to protect the purity of its domestic ideal, 'Home at Grasmere' shows how claims to ownership, to self-possession, to being at peace with oneself and the world are open to the threat of home invasion, to the return of those 'passions' that, as Wordsworth suggests in his note on 'The Thorn', trouble the distinction between words, minds, and things.[24] The truth that 'Home at Grasmere' reveals is how tautology, born out of a desire to efface this distinction, exacerbates the disturbance that prevents the mind from finding a place in the world.[25] The idea that for peace to hold sway home should be given to that which violates home, that by acknowledging its structural

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

dependence on war the home should be understood as, in a sense, radically home*less*, is intimated in subsequent work undertaken for 'The Recluse'. Begun in the spring of 1808 the blank verse fragments 'To the Clouds', 'St Paul's', and 'The Tuft of Primroses' resume Wordsworth's study of the relationship between creativity and bellicosity, signalling again the extent to which 'The Recluse' maps the contours of a wartime imagination.

The extended apostrophe 'To the Clouds' opens with an explicit declaration of militant intent: 'Army of clouds, what would ye?' (l. 1).[26] Different in kind from the melding of singularity, sublimity, and abstraction that marks the opening simile of 'I wandered lonely as a cloud', the use of the second-person plural pronoun alerts us from the outset to the poem's fundamental conceptual difficulty: is the archaic address a formal honorific or an indicator of commonality? By extension, is the poet subordinate to the object of his attention, which darts rapidly across the sky, or is he able to engage with the polymorphic entity as an equal or, better still, as a superior? The answer to the latter question is important because it will determine whether the poet can claim command of a phenomenon that threatens, like the unformed matter of 'The Recluse' itself, to exceed his power. The conjectural barrage that follows the opening address, which deserves to be quoted at length, configures the army of clouds as a rich but volatile source of inspiration, pointedly aligned with the transitory creations of Fancy:

> O whither in this eagerness of speed?
> What seek ye? or what shun ye? of the Wind
> Companions, fear ye to be left behind,
> Or racing on your blue aethereal field
> Contend ye with each other? […]
> Or were Ye rightlier hail'd when first mine eyes
> I lifted, for Ye still are sweeping on
> Like a wide Army in impetuous march,
> Or like a never-ending Flight of Birds
> Aerial, upon due migration bound,
> Embodied Travellers not blindly led
> To milder climes? […]
> O whence, Ye clouds, this eagerness of speed?
> Sheer o'er the Rock's gigantic brow Ye cut
> Your way, each thirsting to reveal himself, to secure
> Each for himself an unbelated course?
> Ye clouds, the very blood within my veins
> Is quickened to your pace, a thousand thoughts,
> Ten thousand winged Fancies have Ye rais'd,
> And not a Thought which is not fleet as Ye are. (ll. 4–36)

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

Unable to create a taxonomy that would, in Goethe's sense, place a limit on 'the indefinite, the unstable and the unattainable',[27] the poet observes these 'silent Creatures' (l. 38) descend into 'some unapproachable abyss' (l. 43), only to witness the renewal of the 'long Procession' in 'wild impulse' from 'a fount of life/Invisible' (ll. 53–4). Reminiscent of the economy of life, death, and rebirth in 'Kubla Khan', but with echoes too of the 'blinder vacancy' in 'Home at Grasmere', the poet's recognition of the interchange between the life-giving fount and the deadly abyss proves to be a turning point in the poem, initiating a shift from the heady, apostrophic dependency of the poem's opening salvo to the calm assertion of creative independence that brings the verse to a close. Acting as a reminder that Fancy, by virtue of its protean nature, raises thoughts of war as well as peace, the 'rapid multitude' of forms (ll. 54–5) responds from here on to the call of a higher power, a 'blazing intellectual Deity' (l. 85), who like Apollo, the solar 'God of Verse' (l. 84) and, notably, of victory in battle, 'showers on that unsubstantial Brotherhood/A Vision of beatitude and light' (ll. 87–8), lending shape and significance to forms of life that would otherwise disappear. Those transient thoughts that, driven by the nomadic impulses of Fancy, had threatened at the beginning of the verse to exceed the conscious control of the poet must now succumb to the shaping spirit of Imagination, which makes of the conclusion an exercise in reterritorialisation, analogous, as the allusion in lines 25–6 to far and middle eastern sun-worshippers had teased, to the pacification of a rebellious colony. Confronted with a figure for control that unfortunately evokes its own form of unruly, pagan, and warlike potency, Wordsworth would add, when the poem was revised for publication in 1842, a suitably Christian conclusion, thereby ensuring that the 'transient' forms of 'the god of verse' find a home 'in the bosom of eternal things'.[28]

In 'St Paul's', the Imagination performs a similar service by relieving the poet of 'conflicting thoughts' (l. 1). Designated a 'holy power' (l. 9), Imagination appears before the poet, in an instant, materialised in a 'visionary scene' (l. 15), in which the emphasis on quietness, vacancy, purity, stillness, and, crucially, silence speaks, as it were, of the end of discourse, and thus of the end of war. Peace is found, then, in a world that is 'noiseless and unpeopled' (l. 24), sublime and sequestered. But the fact that the vision appears by 'Gift of Imagination's holy power' (l. 9), an act of self-divinisation worryingly akin to Napoleon's act of self-coronation in 1804, aligns this pacifying gesture once more with the will to extinguish opposition, including the opposition to opposition on which the vision of perpetual peace is raised. As Geoffrey Hartman long ago averred, the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

Wordsworthian Imagination is combative in form and nihilistic in intent, forever on the verge of bringing the poetry to an apocalyptic dead stop – materialised in 'St Paul's' as a vacant zone of 'purest white' (l. 18) – with no promise of millennial glory.

The question of how to bring such warlike imagining to book preoccupies Wordsworth throughout the composition of 'The Recluse' poems but finds its most extended treatment in 'The Tuft of Primroses', especially so in those passages that would eventually find their way into *The Excursion*. While 'To the Clouds' and 'St Paul's' speak of a power that blurs the distinction between peace and war, and that threatens, heretically, to make of the self a deity, 'The Tuft of Primroses' attempts to shield itself from the impulse to self-extinction by choosing, as its agent of peace, an object in nature. A hardy perennial, the primrose undergoes death, but is 'reviv'd,/And beautiful as ever, like a Queen/Smiling from her imperishable throne' (ll. 7–9), an image that recalls the 'throne/Of quietness', set 'Upon a primrose bank' on which Emily is seated, 'like a Virgin Queen', at the close of *The White Doe of Rylstone*,[29] a figure of peaceful endurance, rather than enduring peace, to which I return in the next chapter. As an emblem of beauty, embracing transience as a function of permanence, the primrose offers a way for peace to be decoupled from the deathly stasis of the sublime. Described as 'frail' (l. 11), the plant's location in the 'bosom of this barren crag' (l. 6) nonetheless ensures that it can bloom in 'solitary […] splendour', unmolested by the depredations of time and change. As the verse unfolds, however, this first impression becomes strained. Recalling the effect of the missing swans in 'Home at Grasmere', the loss of the ash, sycamore, and fir trees in Bainriggs, cut down in the interests of improvement, comes as a shock to the poet. The sight of a few, straggling survivors, left to mourn their 'fellows gone' in 'blanc and monumental grief' (ll. 99–100), suggests once again that the idealised peace of nature, expressed through ideas of species survival, is, when individuals are considered, vulnerable to violent alterations. The thought that imbues the trees with personal identity thus results in the return of that consciousness of death that absorption in the life of nature had promised to allay.

In the lines that follow, Wordsworth works hard to mitigate the effects of the shock of mortality through the invocation of Christian consolation, but the Grasmere steeple that oversees the 'changes of this peaceful Vale' (l. 129) is 'naked and forlorn' (l. 126) and is personified as an injured body observing the 'profanation' and 'despoil' of 'fairest things' (ll. 133–4). Here, in a passage echoing the architectural sympathies of 'The Ruined Cottage', the sad decline of the Sympsons and their cottage

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

is described, its roof 'Laid open to the glare of common day' (l. 143). The account of the garden's descent into wilderness unsurprisingly raises thoughts in the poet of those 'works' (l. 203) that, made for pleasure and as a shelter from the ravages of time, sink into disuse and decay, 'self-lost/ In the wild wood, like a neglected image/Or fancy which hath ceased to be recalled' (ll. 218–20). The threat espoused in this lavishly crafted chain of associations is to memory and to the loss of those creations 'Of love and diligence and innocent care' (l. 229) which, 'sullied and disgrac'd', are swallowed by 'a gulf', locked in a 'cave', or blighted by 'perpetual winter' (ll. 230–34). This meta-reflection on the fate of poetry or, more specifically, on the fate of 'The Recluse', juxtaposing images of nurturing and shelter with images of formlessness, obscurity, and unceasing despair, is made all the more acute because of its contrast with the primrose, which remains, unhoused and unnurtured, 'in sacred beauty, without taint/Of injury or decay' (ll. 236–7). Would that all life, animate or inanimate, could maintain such constancy.

This thought compels the poet to long for some form of universal protection, a guardian spirit to preserve the beasts of the field and the green-leaved thicket from harm. Yet no sooner have the human ministers of this spirit entered the frame, vowing to protect to maintain a 'Continual and firm peace, from outrage safe/And all annoyance' (ll. 261–2), than, revealed in their mundane role as gamekeepers, the poem is once more open to violent intrusion, embodied in the figure of that 'sovereign' who 'Urges the Chase with clamorous hound and horn' (ll. 262–4), an image that returns, yet again, to the poet's unwitting alignment with the oppressors of nature depicted in 'Hart-leap Well'. Still, the poem cannot give up on its projection of a life of peace, founded on a mandate to defend those forms of beauty in which 'the blissful pleasures live' (l. 271). A strong wish to shield such life may be read in the mountains' 'looks of awe' (l. 272), while a voice from the streams 'pleads, beseeches, and implores' (l. 274). Such fancies are, however, swiftly dismissed as 'vain' (l. 275), condemned along with all the resting places of the heart to 'unrelenting doom' (l. 279), an image that serves to recall the blank abyss into which cottage gardens, human lives, and works of poetry are destined to fall.

The 'Tuft of Primroses' has been read productively as a discontinuous litany of ruined forms and ravaged enclosures that in their failure to present a unified image of peaceful sequestration point to a fundamental irresolution at the heart of the poem itself.[30] However, the seeming disparity between the ruins of Grasmere Vale and the scenes of imperilled monastic seclusion in fourth-century Anatolia and modern-day France with which

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

the verse concludes overlooks the extent to which the poem is informed by Wordsworth's reading in the history of continental monasticism and its influence on the formation of Christian communities in ancient Britain. As Jessica Fay points out, from his reading of Thomas West's *Antiquities of Furness* (1774) Wordsworth would have been aware of the considerable reach of St Basil's teaching and its formative role in the development of Cistercian Houses in England and Wales.[31] The poet's overwhelming grief at the destruction of the Grasmere Churchyard fir-grove may well have suggested thoughts of the vital role played by the ruins of Furness Abbey in providing a focal point for 'local identity and collective memory'.[32] But further still, by highlighting the transnational history of monasticism, and by indicating the extent to which religious retreat in all places and at all times is jeopardised by war, Wordsworth's poem begins to look more coherent than it might first appear.

Seeking 'confirm'd tranquillity […] quiet and unchanged […] consistent in self rule' (ll. 303–7), the poem dwells for a time on the life of the hermit, 'craving peace' (l. 287),

> The central feeling of all happiness,
> Not as a refuge from distress or pain,
> A breathing time, vacation, or truce,
> But for its absolute self, a life of peace,
> Stability without regret or fear,
> That hath been, is, and shall be ever more. (ll. 288–93)

Here, inspired by a reading of William Cave's life of St Basil of Pontus (1716), Wordsworth entertains a vision of perfect calm, a mountain haven protected from violence by castellated natural forms.[33] Surveying an 'enduring paradise' (l. 362) of herbs, trees, and flowers, Basil is removed from history, unconcerned by the blasting or decay of worldly empires, enjoying precisely the 'refuge from distress or pain' that, only a few lines earlier, Wordsworth had dismissed as motivation for the hermit's retreat from society. Significantly, Cave's biography includes among its early examples of the beneficence experienced in Pontus an account of how God, to 'gratifie his Servants with Delicacies', directs a herd of deer to 'voluntarily' offer 'themselves to the Knife'.[34] The problem of inter-species violence is thus happily expunged. In addition to addressing the destructive urgings of 'Hart-leap Well', the story speaks concertedly of how, in a life informed by works of grace, nature is no longer abused by the economics of survival. As willing sacrifices, rather than as natural resources, the deer are given freely, with no price on their head, with no expectation of return,

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

and, miraculously, without aggressivity. Commenting on Wordsworth's representation of the superabundance of Pontus, Simon Jarvis observes that the poem announces the possibility of 'a different life', a world in which 'the central feeling of happiness' is not bound up with the instrumental life of getting and spending but, like 'the fruits that hang/In the primeval woods', is granted 'freely' and 'Ungrudgingly' (ll. 423–7). In recollection of the daisy's apostolic function, the Pontic monks inhabit the time in which 'hope and memory are as one' (l. 305), enabling them to live a life that is 'quiet and unchanged' (l. 306), a life of peace in which the 'present is continually animated by past and future, hope and memory', rather than cynically voided by calculations of economic worth.[35] The claims to ownership that bedevilled the peace of 'Home at Grasmere' thus no longer apply in Pontus. 'Disturb'd by no vicissitudes' of profit and loss, 'unscarred/By civil faction' (ll. 373–4), beatific pleasure transcends the melancholy dirge of modernity, creating a form of unalienated, uncontested 'common life' (l. 464), 'More beautiful than any […] hitherto […] conceived', that shines 'through many an age,/In bright remembrance, like a shining cloud' (ll. 466–73).

Were this vision to have entered the public realm, it is tempting to imagine that it might have been taken as a resounding affirmation of the good life, or more specifically of how peace could be attained by rejecting 'the Glory, the Pomps, Plenty, Grandeur, Luxuries and Pleasures' of the world.[36] But it is more likely that the endorsement of dispossession, inspired by Basil's ambition to 'possess nothing', would have been rejected as proof of seditionary intent or, less grandly, as mere whimsy.[37] Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, the description of Basil's influence on the world breaks off, and with it the utopianism of a life free from the effects of violent competition. We will see in Chapters 2 and 4 how, in *The White Doe of Rylstone*, *Peter Bell*, and *The Waggoner*, Wordsworth's earlier indications of the peaceable life were presented to and received by a sceptical post-war public, but to conclude this discussion I want to return to the question of how in 'The Tuft of Primroses' the dream of ascetic retirement survives as a ghostly trace in the sacred ruins of the world, made 'glorious in decay' (l. 493).

Surveying the wreckage of Tintern Abbey and Fountains Abbey, some echo of Basil's teaching outlives 'the ravages of time' (l. 495), but the vulnerability of these mortal forms to 'troubled thoughts or vain desire', to 'perishable bliss' and 'fond regrets' (ll. 501–7; *passim*), underscores the extent to which dreams of enduring peace remain open to the vagaries of history. When read in the light of the poem's faint assertions of the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

survival of peace in ecclesiastical ruin, the abrupt shift in the manuscript to an account of the occupation of the Grande Chartreuse by French revolutionary soldiers in 1792 is not as jarring as it might first seem. As initially recounted in *Descriptive Sketches* (1793), the desecration of the Carthusian monastery is experienced as an all-encompassing disaster, startling the cloister with 'gleam of arms' (l. 60), prompting the angler to swell 'the groaning torrent with his tears' (l. 67), forcing 'screams' from 'the frighted jay' (l. 68) as demons mock with 'hideous laughter' the cross 'by angels planted on the aëreal rock' (ll. 70–1).[38] Even though the French occupation is formally decried, the apocalyptic and millennial imaginings that resound throughout the poem tend to muddy its striving for ideological clarity, confusing irreparably those 'ideas of morality' that the war for peace, as the contemporaneous Llandaff letter makes clear, inadvertently suspends (*Prose* I. 33).

The struggle to maintain a vision of universal peace, an end founded in and advanced by enmity yet somehow uncontaminated by such means, is evident at the close of *Descriptive Sketches* when, in a continuation of the earlier account of a landscape convulsed by apocalyptic presumptions of death and renewal, allusions to Virgil's fourth eclogue, the Gospel of St Peter, and the Book of Revelation coalesce to inform a description of the millennial transformation of the earth following the triumph of 'Liberty' (l. 774) over 'Pride's perverted ire' (l. 780). Signalled by the 'dull undying roar' (l. 779) of a 'lonely cannon' (l. 776), the war that would establish peace engulfs the land in hellish fire, yet from these 'innocuous flames' arises 'another earth' (l. 783). Attempting to salvage some principle of restoration from the collapse of the Revolution into despotism and terror, Wordsworth surveys the global conflict from a divine perspective, seeming to regard its ultimate end, the 'virgin reign' (l. 784) of Love, Truth, and Justice, as an end sufficient to justify the means. The means by which futurity diminishes the horrors of the present is advanced still further by a prayerful appeal: 'Oh give, great God, to Freedom's waves to ride/Sublime o'er Conquest, Avarice, and Pride,/To break, the vales where Death with Famine scowr's,/And dark Oppression builds her thick ribb'd tow'rs' (ll. 792–5). But while these lines look forward to the triumph of eternal peace, the poem's conclusion, with its allusion to the sorrowful end of *Paradise Lost* ('To night, my friend, within this humble cot/Be the dead load of mortal ills forgot,/Renewing, when the rosy summits glow/At morn, our various journey, sad and slow', ll. 810–13), is a reminder that deliverance from poverty, injustice, and war belongs to a time that is yet to come.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

That the most compelling passages in *Descriptive Sketches* relate to its portrayals of destruction raises the suspicion that the poet derives more than a little satisfaction from the conflation of pagan and Judeo-Christian imaginings of the apocalypse, enough at least to inflect the vision of millennial concord with recollections of the discord and division it would ideally transcend. Although muted in 'The Tuft of Primroses', the account of the expulsion of the monks from the Grande Chartreuse nonetheless causes a return of the despondency that dogged Wordsworth following the collapse of the French Revolution and that would blight his attempts to reanimate that 'glorious dawn' as a peaceable, poetic revolution. Seeking again for a principle that would halt the wanton destruction of human and non-human life, the poet invokes the voice of Nature who, seated on an 'Alpine throne' (l. 537), in emulation of the lowly Primrose's throne, implores mankind to '"leave in quiet this embodied dream,/This substance by which mortal men hath clothed,/[…] the ghostliness of things,/In silence visible"' (l. 538–41). More so than the endorsement of 'nature's pure religion' (l. 499), the powerfully resonant '"ghostliness of things"', together with the strangely distorted Miltonic allusion '"silence visible"' (the inverse of 'blinder vacancy'), comes close to capturing the sense in which intimations of peace might, at last, be detectable in forms of oxymoronic and synesthetic violence, illogical figures that, in pushing the limits of the sayable, provide a home for the constitutional opposition that is at the heart of life.

Such hope for peace is, however, swiftly dissipated. Looking to correct the approval of revolutionary violence that forms the climactic core of *Descriptive Sketches*, the voice of Nature urges 'new-born liberty' (l. 546) to 'spare/This House' (ll. 551–2) so that 'Heaven-descended truth' (l. 569) may endure. Nevertheless, as the qualifying formulations and fragmented declarations that follow this pronouncement confirm ('I heard, or seem'd to hear'; '"if past and present be the wings"'; 'Such repetition of that [ ]/My thoughts demanded', ll. 544–68; *passim*), perpetual peace exceeds architectural and verbal incarnation alike. Whatever hope for peace on earth was glimpsed in the poem's previous accommodation of oxymoronic violence appears now to have vanished.

'The Tuft of Primroses' does, however, attempt one final time to locate a home for peace: a '[?lowly] Edifice' (l. 585) inhabited by 'female Votaries' (l. 572), set at a remove from the 'Sublime' (l. 580) arches and towers of the Grande Chartreuse. But, like the frail tents of 'Home at Grasmere' that, operating under the sign of the beautiful, provide temporary shelter from that 'gulf' which 'renders nothing back' (ll. 230–1), the coenobitic dwelling, reminiscent of the Symonds's 'happy House' (l. 149) and, by

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

inference, of Dove Cottage, from which the Wordsworths moved in May 1808, not long after composition was resumed on 'The Recluse', can 'screen and hide' (l. 588) but not protect its inhabitants from the threat of dissolution.[39] Condemned to repeat the same, sad story, a melancholy round of peaceable domains blighted by sickness, poverty, environmental damage, and war that, in their ruin, offer wraithlike intimations of eternal peace, the poem stumbles to a desultory halt. Like St Basil, prompted by 'urgent summons' to leave 'the heavenly Mount' to take up 'a station of authority and power' (ll. 459–61), Wordsworth abandons his poem, discovering in the ill-fated Convention of Cintra an instance of an ignoble and iniquitous cessation of hostilities sufficient to call into question the desirability as well as the possibility of seeking to establish the 'life of peace' that 'hath been, is, and shall be ever more'.

Towards a Community of War: *Concerning the Convention of Cintra*

On 21 August 1808, the British army, under the command of General Arthur Wellesley, attained a decisive victory over the French forces, led by Major-General Junot, at Vimiero in Portugal. Whereas in one sense the victory marked a turning point in the war against Napoleon, in another, the terms on which the French retreat was brokered, widely denounced at the time for their leniency, allowed France to continue its campaign in the Peninsula, leading to the evacuation of General Moore's forces at Corunna in January 1809 and the second invasion of Portugal the following year. Published in May 1809, *Concerning the Relations of Great Britain, Spain, and Portugal, to Each Other, and to the Common Enemy, at This Crisis and Specifically as Affected by the Convention of Cintra: The Whole Brought to the Test of Those Principles, by Which Alone the Independence and Freedom of Nations Can Be Preserved or Recovered*, to give Wordsworth's tract its full, unwieldly title, undertakes a point-by-point analysis of the treaty's numerous shortcomings while negotiating a complex dialogue between neo-Burkean conservatism and radical enlightenment republicanism. As Richard Gravil, David Bromwich, Timothy Michael, and other readers of the *Convention of Cintra* have noted, the tract's 'curious blend of exhortations – "at once republican, nationalist, and cosmopolitan"',[40] highlights the extent to which Wordsworth's observations on British mismanagement in the Peninsula War manifested an internal conflict, one that turns, for our purposes, on the efforts of the Imagination, conceived as the nation's 'inward mind', to transform martial passions into

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

'instruments of nobler use', raising them 'to a conformity with things truly divine' (2662–8), so that war may be pursued in the interests of peace.[41]

That, ultimately, the national imaginary should be willing to act in conformity with the divine, even to the point of extinction, is implicit in Wordsworth's reasoning but is made clear in his denunciation of that 'specious sensibility, which may encourage the hoarding up of life for its own sake, seducing us from those considerations by which we might learn when it ought to be resigned' (1300–2). Recalling Wordsworth's reservations concerning the political and economic expediency of the Peace of Amiens, the identification of 'life for its own sake' with commercial self-interest and self-preservation becomes shorthand for the moral failings of the Convention; in what amounts to a nihilistic advancement on the radical otherworldliness of Pontus, a nation maintaining steadfast adherence to transcendental principles cares not for temporary relief from danger, still less for life conceived as capital accumulation, but will pursue its aims, buoyed by the conviction of heavenly satisfaction, to the very end; indeed, as the actions of the Spanish people display, contempt for national safety may well be a condition of national identity:

> Riddance, mere riddance—safety, mere safety—are objects far too defined, too inert and passive in their own nature, to have ability either to rouze or to sustain. They win not the mind by any attraction of grandeur or sublime delight, either in effort or in endurance: for the mind gains consciousness of its strength to undergo only by exercise among materials which admit the impression of its power,—which grow under it, which bend under it,—which resist,—which change under its influence,— which alter either through its might or in its presence, by it or before it. (2510–18)

Echoing Burke's thoughts on the analogy between the experience of the sublime and the pains of physical labour ('The best remedy for [the evils of languor, melancholy, and despair] is exercise or *labour*; and labour is a surmounting of *difficulties*, an exertion of the contracting power of the muscles'),[42] Wordsworth identifies war with the effort to attain self-completion, conveyed through a series of ringing repetitions that mimic the striving of the body to control and contain external energies. Though redolent of Spinozian *conatus*, and with traces too of Aristotelian *energeia* or 'being-at-work',[43] the drive towards completion is such that it cannot admit of the possibility that mind might itself be a material that is shaped and informed by opposing forces. Moreover, what cannot be entertained in this scenario is the possibility that the nation, as home, might labour to the point where weakness, diffusion, and indifference are embraced, ending forever the exclusionary logic on which identity is predicated.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

In addition to its work on the mind–body relationship, Wordsworth's wartime ontology extends to the consideration of time. While, during times of tranquillity, attention focusses on the present and the past, that is, 'to the self which is or has been', in a state of tension 'the vigour of the human soul is from without and from futurity' (2529–30). The mind that attains self-consciousness by acting on the malleable things of the world is, of course, a mind guided by Imagination, that 'word of higher import, denoting operations of the mind upon [external] objects'.[44] Most importantly, through this act of material transformation, the nation is relieved of those fanciful impulses that would 'quicken and beguile the temporal part of our Nature' and is directed instead to those imaginative values that 'incite' and 'support the eternal'.[45]

As the tract's opening paragraphs illustrate, a nation that loses sight of such values becomes mired in a 'conflict of sensations' (9); beset, in the midst of the 'congratulation and joy' (13) that greeted the Cintra declaration, by 'an under-expression which was strange, dark, and mysterious – and, accordingly as different notions prevailed, or the object was looked at in different points of view, we were astonished like men who are overwhelmed without forewarning – fearful like men who feel themselves to be helpless, and indignant and angry like men who are betrayed' (17–22). In Wordsworth's retelling, the Cintra affair becomes the occasion for a tempering of those emotional extremes which become prevalent during wartime, recalling that state of astonishment that, in Burke's consideration 'Of the passion caused by the SUBLIME', so fills the mind with horror that it is unable to reason on that object which overwhelms it.[46] Thus oppressed, the nation veers from 'a sedate and stern melancholy, which had no sunshine and was exhilarated only by the lightnings of indignation' (123–4) to a state of fervour, prompted by 'the rising of the people of the Pyrenean peninsula' (127). But if, 'from that moment', the British attitude to the contest regained its 'dignity', the change must be attributed to the 'revelation' of that 'state of being that admits not of decay or change, to the concerns and interests of our transitory planet, from that moment "this corruptible put on incorruption, and this mortal put on immortality"' (128–33). The closing quotation from 1 Corinthians 15.53 is oriented to the moment when, at the sounding of the last trumpet, 'Death is swallowed up in victory' (15.54) – in other words, to the moment in which a nation, assured of the triumph of life over death, may regain its sense of 'inward liberty and choice' (135).

The status of knowledge, as Timothy Michael points out, is of central importance to the philosophical work of the Cintra tract.[47] Conceding

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

the role of observational knowledge in determining the war's *Realpolitik*, Wordsworth is eager no less to uphold the primacy of that immutable, a priori knowledge that allows the nation to transform the contingent horrors of war into an object of reason. In stark contrast to that exemplar of the military spirit, Napoleon, whose 'domain of knowledge is narrow' (2764), it is the 'spacious range of the disinterested imagination' (3012) that grants access to that 'higher knowledge' (3009) on which lasting peace is secured. Better to fight in the service of this knowledge than to settle for that phony peace in which, motivated by 'calculations of presumptuous Expediency' (3734), the 'discriminating powers of the mind' are reduced to 'a state of almost savage torpor'.[48] If soldiers and statesmen should be guided by experiential knowledge, moving from the observation of things to ideas, their knowledge, in turn, should be subsumed by that eternal knowledge, which the philosopher and poet, unconstrained by material concerns, bear with them as their own.

As the tract progresses, sentence structure imitates the volatile and protracted nature of the campaign in the Peninsular, rendering the management of the nation's emotional engagement with the war a matter of formal, aesthetic control:

> The history of all ages; tumults after tumults; wars, foreign or civil, with short or with no breathing-spaces, from generation to generation; wars—why and wherefore? yet with courage, with perseverance, with self-sacrifice, with enthusiasm—with cruelty driving forward the cruel man from its own terrible nakedness, and attracting the more benign by the accompaniment of some shadow which seems to sanctify it; the senseless weaving and interweaving of factions—vanishing and reviving and piercing each other like the Northern Lights; public commotions, and those in the bosom of the individual; the long calenture to which the Lover is subject; the blast, like the blast of the desart, which sweeps perennially through a frightful solitude of its own making in the mind of the Gamester; the slowly quickening but ever quickening descent of appetite down which the Miser is propelled; the agony and cleaving oppression of grief; the ghost-like hauntings of shame; the incubus of revenge; the life-distemper of ambition;—these inward existences, and the visible and familiar occurrences of daily life in every town and village; the patient curiosity and contagious acclamations of the multitude in the streets of the city and within the walls of the theatre; a procession, or a rural dance; a hunting, or a horse-race; a flood, or a fire; rejoicing and ringing of bells for an unexpected gift of good fortune, or the coming of a foolish heir to his estate; these demonstrate incontestably that the passions of men (I mean, the soul of sensibility in the heart of man)—in all quarrels, in all contests, in all quests, in all delights, in all employments which are either sought by

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

> men or thrust upon them—do immeasurably transcend their objects. The true sorrow of humanity consists in this;—not that the mind of man fails, but that the course and demands of action and of life so rarely correspond with the dignity and intensity of human desires. (4205–30)

Wordsworth's point here is to draw attention to the existence of an 'object of love and of hatred' (4195–6) adequate to the spiritual demands of the Spanish people, an object born out of foreign military 'Oppression' (4193) that, by way of contrast to the flow of everyday private and public, petty and grand, dissatisfactions, itemised in the passage with such intricate and exhaustive relish, testifies to a unique alignment of actions and desires. But, as well as drawing attention to the moral qualities of the Spanish resistance to French imperialism, the passage serves a more general purpose. Here, in a demonstration of how disparate passions, once guided by Imagination, submit to the control of a higher principle, the reader, initially overwhelmed by the accumulation of subordinate clauses and parentheses, 'with short or with no breathing-spaces', can transcend, manage, and contain the rising tide of feeling. Such, according to Wordsworth, is the state of mind, itself immune to change, best suited to control the affective chaos brought on by war.

The martial sublime advanced in the Cintra tract bears the imprint of Wordsworth's desire to establish himself within a bardic tradition. Horace, Virgil, Milton, and Shakespeare are the most frequently quoted precursors in this tradition, but it is Burke who stands as its guiding light, providing silent authority for the tract's concluding assertion: 'There is a spiritual community binding together the living and the dead; the good, the brave, and the wise, of all ages' (4235–7). Crucially, the 'higher mode of being' (4284) that unites a people during wartime, and that enables them to withstand and overmaster the conflict of sensations – melancholy, fear, wrath, grief, and shame – 'does not exclude, but necessarily includes, the lower […] the sentient […] and the animal' (4285–7). All life, that is, becomes the pliant material of Imagination, a weaponised faculty acting in the service of a people 'encouraged to deem themselves an army, embodied under the authority of their country and of human nature' (359–61). Maintaining a balance between the competing claims of 'the civic and military spirit' (375–6) – the former tending to lassitude, the latter to senseless destruction – presents a challenge, however, and while Wordsworth is keen to embolden the British in their attitude to the war, he is concerned, at the same time, not 'to trust too exclusively to the violent passions' (380–1). Such passions may be useful in times of war but, unless governed by 'contemplative reason' (2655), risk corroding the principles of eternal justice

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

and divine love on which a nation should, ideally, be founded. Notably, Wordsworth makes no appeal in this discussion to politics as a means of tempering the violent passions; indeed, as the unlawful actions of the French imperial forces confirm, the unholy alliance of political and military force is precisely what is at issue insofar as it places the French outside that imagined 'community of war' (1378) in which, unfettered by worldly concerns, a nation, undergirded by civic virtue, realises its identity.[49]

Writing in 1811 to Captain (later Sir) Charles Pasley, the friend of Coleridge and author of *The Military Policy and Institutions of the British Empire*, a lengthy essay published the previous year that was greeted with a surprising degree of popular attention, Wordsworth develops this notion further, directing Pasley to a key formulation from the Cintra tract: 'On the moral qualities of a people must its salvation ultimately depend. Something higher than military excellence must be taught *as* higher; something more fundamental, *as* more fundamental' (*MY* I. 479). Concerned by Pasley's support for an aggressive policy of 'conquest permanently established on the Continent' (478), a policy that, as the letter makes clear, would have dire economic, social, and moral consequences for the British people, Wordsworth provides a model for the establishment of national identity that, even as it accepts perpetual enmity, regards the antagonistic other not as a force to be annihilated but as a necessary check on the desire for unlimited territorial expansion:

> Woe be to that country whose military power is irresistible! […] If a nation have nothing to oppose or to fear without, it cannot escape decay and concussion within. Universal triumph and absolute security soon betray a State into abandonment of that discipline, civil and military, by which its victories were secured. If the time should ever come when this Island shall have no more formidable enemies by land than it has at this moment by sea, the extinction of all that it previously contained of good and great would soon follow. Indefinite progress, undoubtedly, there ought to be somewhere; but let that be in knowledge, in science, in civilization, in the increase of the numbers of the people, and in the augmentation of their virtue and happiness; but progress in conquest cannot be indefinite […] (*MY* I. 480)

Wordsworth's 'prayer, as a Patriot, is, that we may always have, somewhere or other, enemies capable of resisting us, and keeping us at arm's length' (480). The nation, that is, is prevented from self-destruction precisely as a result of the boundary confirming the existence of its closest opponents.

A telling irony of Wordsworth's letter to Pasley is its treatment of the aesthetic. While the letter begins with some wry criticism of the first part of Pasley's essay, which, by adopting the techniques 'of a Poet or novelist,

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

who deepens the distress in the earlier part of his work, in order that the happy catastrophe which he has prepared for his heroine or hero', works 'to frighten the People into exertion' (474) rather than persuade them by rational means, the check on the martial spirit that Wordsworth proposes at the letter's conclusion turns unashamedly to the creative faculty that Wordsworth would go on to locate as the cornerstone of his poetic practice in the 1815 preface:

> England, as well as the rest of Europe, requires […] a new course of education, a higher tone of moral feeling, more of the grandeur of the imaginative faculties, and less of the petty processes of the unfeeling and purblind understanding, that would manage the concerns of the nations in the same calculating spirit with which it would set about building a house. (481)

Finally, and with imperious certitude, the letter makes its prioritising of the role of the artistic spirit in guiding and supporting political affairs abundantly clear:

> Now a State ought to be governed (at least in these times)—the labours of the statesman ought to advance—upon calculations and impulses similar to those which give motion to the hand of a great Artist when he is preparing a picture, or of a mighty Poet when he is determining the proportions and march of a Poem. Much is to be done by rule; the great outline is previously to be conceived in distinctness, but the consummation of the work must be trusted to resources that are not tangible, though known to exist. (481–2)

Nations and poems alike draw on the intangible resources of the Imagination, and while the 'power' of a military force 'is a visible thing,/Formal, and circumscribed in time and space', the element on which it draws is as 'indefinite' as the object of religion. Hence, in his enthusiastic defence of the Spanish juntas, Wordsworth sidesteps some of the more unsettling implications of his subsequent lyric defences of guerrilla warfare, by ensuring that the 'military spirit', which, echoing Longinus's exemplar of the natural sublime, spreads 'like the Nile over the whole face of the land', is kept in check through union with a '*civic* spirit' (361–5; emphasis in original).

Still, the potential for spirits to decouple from their material coordinates remains a problem for Wordsworth. So much so that by the end of the tract mere civic power alone cannot be relied on to resist the politicisation of the sublime. As exemplified by the illimitable 'wickedness' of Napoleon (3286–7), 'sublime and disinterested feelings' (4275), once detached from 'the ground-nest in which they were fostered' (4268–9), are apt to soar into chill regions of ideation, ultimately to return as disfigured

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

and destructive versions of their former promise. Turning to a figure of the beautiful to contain the aberrant energies of the sublime, the tract conjectures an 'all-embracing circle of benevolence' (4270), in which web-like filaments bind the 'higher mode of being' with 'the lower' (4284–5) to prevent the flight into abstraction. Neither the politician nor the soldier can be relied on to 'feed and uphold "the bright consummate flower"' of 'National Happiness' (4288–90); that task belongs to the poet, to one who, like Milton, Petrarch, or, indeed, Wordsworth, is 'retired for wider compass of eye-sight, that he might see in just proportions and relations; knowing above all that he, who hath not first made himself master of his own mind, must look beyond it only to be deceived' (4354–7). As Theresa Kelley has pointed out, Wordsworth's endorsement of the poet's wider compass folds imperceptibly into recognition of the necessity of placing a limit on the powers of the visionary imagination.[50] It is to the exploration of the necessity of self-limitation, as well as to the recollection of those self-less impulses on which the radical ideal of lasting, international peace was founded, that Wordsworth turns next.

Losing Hope in *The Excursion*

The corrective to the fanciful yearning for perpetual peace that Wordsworth encounters in the 1808 fragments, and that the Cintra tract and Pasley letter build into a formal critique of Britain's military policy, culminates with *The Excursion*. Published within weeks of the signing of the Treaty of Paris on 30 May 1814, *The Excursion* entered a cultural sphere torn between feelings of relief at the end of hostilities and uncertainty over the terms and conditions of the peace settlement. Hazlitt's essay 'On the Late War', which appeared in *The Champion* on 3 April on the eve of Napoleon's conditional abdication to the Coalition sovereigns, provides a taste of the fractious political climate that greeted the poem. Responding to Stoddart's attack on the '*Peace-Faction*' in *The Times* and his support for a policy of unbridled conquest, Hazlitt announces that as 'the war with [the Pitt-school] was a war of extermination, so the peace, not to fix a lasting stigma on their school and principles, must be a peace of extermination' (*CWWH* VII. 72). In the same month Dorothy writes that the peace, though welcome, 'is like a dream'. Frustrated, like Stoddart, by the lack of a decisive finale to the conflict and the resultant air of unreality she wishes that the allies had put Napoleon to death while her brother declares himself to be a member of the '*War-faction*', as if in response to Hazlitt's gloomy prognosis of the war's conflicted aftermath.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

A concern with the establishment of boundaries between dreams and reality, schools and factions, negotiated conclusions and violent termini seems, then, to characterise the climate in which Wordsworth's poem was first received. Once the war is over, and voices in authority have delineated the contours of the real, we find Hazlitt refusing to accept the terms on which these contours have been set. The post-war dream state may be over, seemingly dispelled forever if not through a 'peace of extermination' then through a re-imposition of the *ancien régime*; but for Hazlitt another kind of dream persists, one that 'will never cease, nor be prevented from returning on the wings of imagination to that bright dream of our youth':

> that glad dawn of the day-star of liberty; that spring-time of the world, in which the hopes and expectations of the human race seemed opening in the same gay career with our own; when France called her children to partake her equal blessings beneath her laughing skies; when the stranger was met in all her villages with dance and festive songs, in celebration of a new and golden era; and when, to the retired and contemplative student, the prospects of human happiness and glory were seen ascending like the steps of Jacob's ladder, in bright and never-ending succession. (*CWWH* XIX. 18)

Hazlitt is responding to Wordsworth's portrayal of the Solitary, but he might as well be recalling the poet's first impressions of revolutionary France, as recounted in Book 6 of *The Prelude*. Though the 'season of hope is past', the Revolution has left behind 'traces, which are not to be effaced by Birth-day and Thanksgiving odes, or the chaunting of *Te Deums* in all the churches of Christendom' (*CWWH* XIX. 18). Slightly revised in 1817 to take account of Wordsworth's and Southey's post-Waterloo encomiums, Hazlitt's review of *The Excursion* casts doubts on the poem's ability to discover in Tory paternalism and Anglicanism a salve for the despair brought on by the demise of the Solitary's early, revolutionary hopes. But more to the point, Hazlitt's affirmation of the ineradicable nature of those 'traces', which, as I go on to show, emerge literally in the poem as remnants from earlier work, may be read as a refusal of post-revolutionary despair and therefore as a denial of the need for the programme of conservative rehabilitation enacted in Wordsworth's poem.

A former army chaplain, the Solitary is well versed in the business of war. It is possible that Wordsworth included this detail in the Solitary's biography as a subtle allusion to the work of Adam Ferguson, the social philosopher, diplomatist, and sometime chaplain of the Black Watch Highlander Regiment. Best known for his *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), Ferguson shares with Adam Smith a belief in the division of

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

labour as a foundational principle of economic prosperity. Unlike Smith, however, Ferguson emphasised the importance of maintaining social order to check the disruptive effects of capital accumulation. Unsurprisingly, the military, with its emphasis on duty and self-sacrifice, is highly prized by Ferguson; through engaging periodically in conflict with foreign competitors, the philosopher affirms, the nation places a check on economic individualism, dissolving self-interest in the service of a higher cause. Like Wordsworth, Ferguson comes to value the existence of enemy states, arguing that 'he who has never struggled with his fellow-creatures, is a stranger to half the sentiments of mankind'.[51] As a critic of British interference in America, Ferguson is nonetheless concerned to place a limit on the nation's martial activities and, again like Wordsworth, comes to decry the economic, social, and ideological costs of 'distant wars'[52] – a position that is in accord with *The Excursion*'s concluding vision of imperial benevolence, a global hegemony founded on the dissemination of knowledge, piety, and 'virtuous habits' (IX. l. 362) with no mention of the violent enforcement of colonial law.

Having strayed alike from the disciplinary concord of military and religious life, the task of *The Excursion* is directed towards the re-education of the Solitary. Drawing on the resonances of the Latin *conscribere* (to write down together, to enrol), and with a knowing glance towards the levying of French troops in 1798, *The Excursion* aims to conscript the Solitary into its ideological texture, effectively re-writing and, when this technique fails, silencing those revolutionary traces that would reanimate the movement for liberty, equality, and universal peace. How the poem negotiates the path between the death of the French Revolution and its spectral return can be considered in those passages in Book III in which the Solitary reflects on his early hopes for the amelioration of mankind. At the start of this dialogue, in lines adapted from the St Basil episode in 'The Tuft of Primroses', one of many instances of creative recycling from earlier, rejected drafts, the Solitary expresses sympathy with the Epicurean who, 'curtained round/With world-excluding groves' (ll. 353–4), prefers 'Tranquillity to all things' (l. 369). Foregrounding the indulgences of pagan *ataraxia* to qualify the earlier poem's effusion on the virtues of monastic piety, the Solitary is therefore shown, from the outset, to be mistaken in his desire for the establishment of worldly peace. Longing for the 'life where hope and memory are as one', where 'earth is quiet and unchanged' (ll. 406–7), for the time when, as the original version of these lines recalled, the relations between the past and the future were not governed by mercantile calculations of present worth, the Solitary's discourse

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

becomes rapidly clouded, its advocacy of 'a calm/Without vicissitude' (ll. 431–2) racked by 'fear—doubt—and agony' (l. 468) for 'Mutability is Nature's bane' (l. 465). Amid the peaceful vale, the Wanderer discovers the Solitary's weatherworn copy of *Candide*, cast aside as a children's plaything. Voltaire's satire on Leibniz's theodicy of optimism is condemned by the Wanderer as a work 'framed, to ridicule confiding Faith' (IV, l. 1003), but as Sally Bushell suggests, *The Excursion*, though opposed to Voltaire's position, nonetheless maintains sympathy with the Solitary's disillusionment with the Panglossian mantra: all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.[53] Despite the Wanderer's blithe assurance that mortal life, 'howe'er sad or disturbed', is superintended by a Being 'Whose everlasting purposes embrace/All accidents, converting them to Good' (IV. ll. 13–17), at no stage does the poem diminish the felt experience of individual suffering. Rather, as the Solitary's shifting moods confirm, the poem is accepting of the idea that personal anguish may well turn out to be doggedly resistant to assuasive abstractions.

Falling, like Candide, into despair when his dream of rural tranquillity is shattered, the Solitary is at first restored by the 'prophetic harps' (l. 731) of the French Revolution, which ring out the assurance that '"War shall cease"' (l. 732). Hence 'reconverted to the world' (l. 742), the Solitary's soul is 'diffused' in 'wide embrace/Of institutions, and the forms of things;/As they exist, in mutable array,/Upon life's surface' (ll. 746–9), echoing the process philosophy entertained in Wordsworth's earlier poems of fancy; thus distracted from the negative connotations of mutability, the Solitary experiences, albeit briefly, a release from the pain of self-consciousness that had assailed his previous attempts to make peace with the world. Before too long, however, adhering to the familiar narrative that ascribes the expunction of Liberty and the ensuing Terror to the machinations of a self-interested few, the Solitary recounts the tragic decline of the Revolution, mapping its descent into civil and international conflict onto his experience of internal 'strife' (l. 796). Hence, disturbed by the 'iron bonds/Of military sway' (ll. 829–30) and unable to recover peace amid Europe's 'fields of carnage' and 'polluted air' (l. 842), the Solitary travels to America but, as a result of his disassociated condition, is unable to make a home there. Like the female vagrant, whose baleful experiences in the new world results in a perpetual fugue state, the Solitary is condemned to an undomesticated existence, his cottage displaying 'a wreck' of 'broken' and 'shattered' tools (II. ll. 686–97) as if in intimation of Dürer's *Melancolia I* which, through its display of discarded creative objects, portrays a state of inertia, depression, and lost inspiration.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

Detached from community and the 'visible fabric of the World' (III. l. 970), the Solitary stands, then, as an indicator of the limits of hospitality – a remnant of those 'blasted hopes' (l. 841) that the post-war settlement, in its overweening pursuit of peace, stability and continuity, would seek to unhouse. Like Margaret, whose tale of wartime ruin opens *The Excursion*, the Solitary is presented at this stage in the poem as one who, having relinquished 'all/We have, or hope, of happiness and joy' (IV. l. 133), has become detached alike from the transient pleasures of 'this unstable world' (l. 157) and the assurance of 'that state/Of pure, imperishable, blessedness,/Which Reason promises, and holy Writ/Ensures to all Believers' (ll. 158–61).[54] Seeking to retrieve grounds for hope while acknowledging with a recollection of Margaret's 'torturing hope' (I. 913) how 'overconstant yearning' (IV. l. 176) for 'what is lost' (l. 172) disrupts the passage of time, rooting the afflicted self to an object cast out of history, the Wanderer, 'speaking now from such disorder free,/Nor rapt, nor craving, but in settled peace' (ll. 185–6), endeavours to instil in his despondent friend a sense of how 'limitless desires' (l. 184) must accede to the limits of the flesh. Once self-limitation is accepted, the Wanderer maintains, the one who grieves will find 'Repose and hope among eternal things' (l. 63). As noted above, the Solitary may be moved by such wise counsel, yet remains stubbornly attached to the memory of history's lost causes. Out of melancholic fealty to that most recent lost cause, the French Revolution, the Solitary's hopelessness stands in the poem as a profane riposte to those who, like the Wanderer, would hope for the return of a 'sacred Spirit' (l. 319) to deliver the world from 'Tartarean darkness' (l. 298). Giving up on hope, which, as the Wanderer's discourse betrays, is founded on the opposition between the broken world and the recovered world that is to come, does not mean abandoning hope per se but rather embracing the possibility of negation on which hope is founded. Echoing Spinoza's account of the relationship between hope and uncertainty ('Hope is an inconstant joy, born of the idea of a future […] whose outcome we to some extent doubt'),[55] while also looking forward to Quentin Meillassoux's understanding of hope as 'a gift of the just made across time',[56] the Solitary's despair for the salvation of the world paradoxically paves the way for its deliverance, allowing for the possibility of new forms of life and new forms of community that, even if they cannot be foreseen, can yet be imagined. Such, at least, is the hopeful despair, as well as the despairing hope that Hazlitt discovers in Wordsworth's poem, a fractured hope arising from and oriented towards the 'wreck' we 'have around us' (II. ll. 686–7).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

To reach this point, however, is no easy task; indeed, to all intents and purposes *The Excursion* works to resist such an unorthodox position, as one might expect given the poem's perceived political and religious conservatism. True enough, peace is postulated as the redemptive horizon of the Wanderer's prayer, but the distinction between mortal inadequacy and divine perfection on which this prayer is offered shows that opposition and separation will not be replaced by the awareness of an irreparable belonging anytime soon.[57] The orientation to a realm of deferred tranquillity, from which derives the sense of the world as alienated and incomplete, aligns *The Excursion* with the ontological violence of the Cintra pamphlet and the letter to Pasley, rendering questionable the hope for peace in these times or, indeed, for any conceivable time. For Wordsworth, as the course of the poem makes clear, the wish to revive the pacific aspirations of the Revolution runs up against the surety that 'confidence in social Man' (IV. l. 262) cannot be sustained in a world fundamentally riven by discord and whose only hope of salvation resides in the hope of a better world to come.

That, by the poem's close, the Solitary should remain mute in the face of the Wanderer's impassioned defence of Britain's imperial destiny – 'Now, when destruction is a prime pursuit,/Show to the wretched Nations for what end/The Powers of civil Polity were given' (IX. ll. 415–17) – signals how concertedly Wordsworth intended *The Excursion* to serve as a rejoinder to the mordant prognostications of the peace-faction. The Parson's final words may be read as a direct response to the Solitary's misplaced faith in the Revolution's pacific intent: 'let thy Word prevail […] to take away/The sting of human nature […] let every nation hear […] and every heart obey […] then, shall persecution cease,/And cruel Wars expire' (IX. ll. 637–50), confirming that 'peaceable dominion' (l. 665) will be attained on earth only when faith, working through love, conquers the 'dire perverseness' (l. 660) of the atheistic experiment. Held up as a victim of this experiment, it is with the Solitary in mind that the poem offers its final, conjectural prayer, the baroque syntax and overfreighted conditionals transforming what seems, at first, to be a confident expression of the Solitary's recovery from historical trauma into a fraught display of epistemological uncertainty:

> To enfeebled Power
> From this communion with uninjured Minds,
> What renovation had been brought; and what
> Degree of healing to a wounded spirit,
> Dejected, and habitually disposed

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

> To seek, in degradation of the Kind,
> Excuse and solace for her own defects;
> How far these erring notions were reformed;
> And whether aught, of tendency as good
> And pure, from further intercourse ensued;
> This—(if delightful hopes, as heretofore,
> Inspire the serious song, and gentle Hearts
> Cherish, and lofty Minds approve the past)
> My future labours may not leave untold. (IX. ll. 783–95)

As the progression from the past perfect progressive phrasing of 'What renovation had been brought' to the use of the past subjunctive in the Miltonic 'How far these erring notions were reformed' indicates, the extent to which 'communion with uninjured Minds' provides lasting relief to the 'wounded spirit' has yet to be confirmed. Thus, struggling to access the 'central peace, subsisting at the heart/Of endless agitation' (IV. ll. 1140–41), the Solitary appears admonished rather than converted by the exhortations of his interlocuters. However, as silence grants expression to a counter-hegemonic yet ultimately powerless note of scepticism and despair, there is scope no less for the pulsing of an affirmative revolutionary trace, an '*active* principle' that 'subsists/In all things, in all natures', and that has beneficial properties extending beyond itself (IX. ll. 3–20; *passim*). Adapted from the 1798 fragment 'There is an active principle alive in all things', these lines speak to those hopes that 'breathe the sweet air of futurity' (l. 25), to the remembrance of life conceived not as 'An offering, or a sacrifice, a tool/Or implement, a passive Thing employed/As a brute mean' (ll. 116–19), but as a manifestation of that 'Being' who 'moves/In beauty through the world' (ll. 136–7).

While, in his concluding address, the Parson maintains that the Wanderer's affirmation of peace on earth is a 'transitory type' (l. 619) of the 'Imperishable majesty' (l. 630) of 'highest heaven' (l. 621), elsewhere, drawing on an unused passage in 'Home at Grasmere',[58] the Wanderer and the Poet offer visions of an immersive, immanent life, a world in which the antagonistic separation of thought and being, human and non-human, mind and nature has no purchase. In this 'mighty Commonwealth of things' (IV. l. 345) benignity pervades, joining emmets and moles, clouds and flies, rooks and sunbeams in 'social league', united in 'participation of delight/And a strict love of fellowship', discovering in the 'mild assemblage of the starry heavens' and 'the great Sun, earth's universal Lord!' (ll. 429–66; *passim*), the sense of joy in widest commonality spread. Moved by this speech, the Poet responds with a performance of combinative delight,

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

the lines reaching forward, hurried along by a succession of breathless connectives and associative fancies:

> How divine,
> The liberty, for frail, for mortal man
> To roam at large among unpeopled glens
> And mountainous retirements, only trod
> By devious footsteps; regions consecrate
> To oldest time! and, reckless of the storm
> That keeps the raven quiet in her nest,
> Be as a Presence or a Motion—one
> Among the many there; and while the Mists
> Flying, and rainy Vapours, call out Shapes
> And Phantoms from the crags and solid earth
> As fast as a Musician scatters sounds
> Out of an instrument; and while the Streams—
> (As at a first creation and in haste
> To exercise their untried faculties)
> Descending from the regions of the clouds
> And starting from the hollows of the earth
> More multitudinous every moment—rend
> Their way before them, what a joy to roam
> An Equal among mightiest Energies […] (IV. ll. 513–32)

Read in correspondence with the earlier lines describing the Solitary's disconnection from collective life, and his subsequent inability to recover meaningful relations in a wreck of broken things, the passage portrays a world in which presences and processes, singularities and multitudes, converge and diverge in ceaseless creative flux, a world no longer viewed as disunified or lacking and therefore in need of sovereign control.

Such a vision cannot, of course, be sustained, and the depiction of untrammeled 'multitudinous' life – a passage that appeared originally in an early *Prelude* draft, emphasising how the depiction of vibrant assemblages accords with the poem's palimpsestic form – is checked by the Wanderer who, while seeming to affirm his companion's Shaftesburian 'strain of transport' (l. 539), confirms that such 'noble restlessness' is but an echo of youthful ambition, a congenial recollection of 'the spots which once he gloried in' (l. 546).[59] Thus, whatever vestiges of radical, communitarian thought these speeches conveyed, whether informed by the native British tradition of agrarian republicanism or by Spinozian notions of the ideal commonwealth, is relegated to the past; now, as *The Excursion* draws to its close, the emphasis turns from the celebration of instinctive sociability to a Hobbesian account of the necessity of contractual restraint. Such is the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

lesson, taught by the *Convention of Cintra*, of how, in the interests of self-preservation, the society of unregulated natural passions must give way to the government of self-control.[60]

***

Writing to Catherine Clarkson in January 1815, Wordsworth, responding to Patty Smith's criticisms of the '*Spinosistic*' passages in *The Excursion*, strenuously denied that he was 'a worshipper of Nature': 'She condemns me for not distinguishing between nature as the work of God and God himself. But where does she find this doctrine inculcated? Where does she gather that the Author of the Excursion looks upon nature and God as the same?' (*MY* II. 188). Wordsworth goes on to declare his belief in God as an immortal and infinite 'spirit', distinguished from mutable 'objects of sense' (189). However, as we have seen, something of those early, pantheistic sentiments persists in *The Excursion*, surpassing the accession to Anglican doctrine that, to the sober-minded poet, marks the limits of the possible. And this may be enough to encourage us to retrieve an impression of the poetry as pacific even when, as we shall discover, the verse speaks most strongly of the brute realities and deviant appeal of destruction. To claim that such feelings persist throughout Wordsworth's career, extending beyond the watershed of 1815, is not to deny that sense of dissociation extending to coldness and insensitivity that is the pervading impression of the later poetry for most readers, but my point here is that Wordsworth's post-war writing is fundamentally contested, capable of holding up to scrutiny a range of mutually contradictory beliefs, thoughts, and feelings. Such a view is borne out by the reactions of contemporary readers to *The Excursion*, the majority of whom, like Hazlitt, responded as much to the poem's radical unorthodoxies as to its alleged conformism. A passage frequently quoted by reviewers is the Wanderer's account of how 'Man's celestial Spirit […] Sets forth and magnifies herself' by feeding 'A calm, a beautiful, and silent fire,/From the incumbrances of mortal life' (IV. ll. 167–71). Held up by Francis Jeffrey and John Herman Merivale as evidence of its author's 'cabalistic darkness' and 'mysticism',[61] and more charitably, by Charles Lamb as an expression of 'a sort of liberal Quakerism' or 'Natural Methodism',[62] the Wanderer's densely allusive guide to how paradise might be regained in a post-conflict world beset by 'error, disappointment' and 'guilt' (l. 1072) failed to capture the attention of readers drawn, in the long, hot summer of 1814, to the dissolute glamour of Byron's *Lara* and the antique reassurances of Scott's *Waverley*.[63]

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002

What hope could a poem charting the course of a nation's experience of war, beginning with the despoliation of a war-widow's cottage and ending with the half-hearted rehabilitation of a former revolutionary, offer to a public eager to forget the hardships of the last twenty years? As Lamb intimated, *The Excursion* was just not ready for these times. Writing to Wordsworth in August, Lamb interweaves praise of the poem with passages offering an arresting view of how, in the wake of Napoleon's defeat, Hyde Park had been transformed into a vast outdoor festival, overwhelmed by 'the stench of liquors, *bad* tobacco, dirty people, and provisions'.[64] But while, via a quotation from 'Hart-leap Well', Lamb anticipates the restoration of the park's natural beauty ('At the coming of the *milder* day/These monuments shall all be overgrown'), he delights at the same time in the festival's bacchic deviations, which seem 'like an interval in a campaign, a repose after battle'. Concluding his letter with an appreciation of the 'finer showers of gloomy rain fire that fell sulkily and angrily' from the firework displays in mock imitation of the 'Last Day', Lamb offers the sly assurance that such scenes and such 'triumphs' cannot distract from the 'calm and noble enjoyment' of his friend's poem.[65] For Lamb, the war may be over, but the incumbrances of mortal life continue to feed a zeal for obliteration that makes of the peace a temporary and conflicted affair.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 09 Nov 2026 at 21:23:31, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009363150.002