

Wordsworth and the Druids

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AT THE BEGINNING OF BOOK III of *The Excursion*, the Poet, the Wanderer and the Solitary leave the Solitary's cottage. They emerge into silence broken only by disparate sounds, 'A humming bee—a little tinkling rill' and two 'clamorous' falcons wheeling round a tall rock. Moving from one room, they occupy a greater vacancy, and 'deep within that lonesome valley, stood | Once more beneath the concave of a blue | And cloudless sky.' The Solitary's guests appear to be in a great benign prison: he jokes, "'Ye have left my cell,—but see | How Nature hems you in with friendly arms! | And by her help ye are my prisoners still.'" ¹ This is not open air, it is circular space, and the travellers are offered two straight routes out of the valley, either uphill towards the shelter of a yew tree, or along the rill, seeking its source. They follow the stream, only to find a waterfall. It is a dead end, and the walkers see this in front of them:

Upon a semicirque of turf-clad ground,
The hidden nook discovered to our view
A mass of rock, resembling, as it lay
Right at the foot of that moist precipice,
A stranded ship, with keel upturned, that rests
Fearless of winds and waves. Three several stones
Stood near, of smaller size, and not unlike
To monumental pillars: and, from these

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¹ All quotations from Wordsworth, from *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, 2nd edn., revd. Helen Darbishire, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1952–1959); here, *Excursion*, III. 1–15.

Some little space disjoined, a pair were seen,
 That with united shoulders bore aloft
 A fragment, like an altar, flat and smooth:
 (*The Excursion*, III. 50–60)

Confronted with this hidden nook, the Wanderer is first to interpret the place: it is “‘a cabinet for sages built’”, bearing “‘A semblance strange of power intelligent’”, in which “‘a chronicle survives | Of purposes akin to those of man.’” (74–90) He reads it as a sort of Cumbrian Delphi, where the transcendental umbilical cord penetrates out from the omphalos,

From whose calm centre thou, through height or depth,
 May'st penetrate, wherever truth shall lead;
 Measuring through all degrees, until the scale
 Of time and conscious nature disappear,
 Lost in unsearchable eternity!

(108–112)

And this would appear to be the end of the matter, since the Wanderer has suggested a history and a purpose for this place, and has given handy transcendental directions, a sort of map for mystics, which tells how to get lost. But sometimes exasperated readers of *The Excursion* might share the views of one of its earliest readers, Francis Jeffrey, who objected to the absurdity of the Wanderer as a philosophical pedlar, ‘a wordy rhetorician, who talks about Thebes and allegorizes the heathen mythology’.² Yet whatever the Wanderer says, his interpretation into eternity is here, as frequently in the poem, the cue for more talk. This time, it serves to introduce the most serious matter of the poem, the Solitary’s story of youthful ideals followed by the loss of his family, a loss for which mourning was never completed. In the words of the Argument to Book III, the result is ‘languor and depression of mind, from want of faith in the truths of Religion, and want of confidence in the virtue of Mankind’.³ As Wordsworth was finishing the poem, Book III was written in grief, a story recast after the poet suffered the loss of both of his children within six months of each other in 1812.⁴ It also had to carry the matter of twenty years of Wordsworth’s own waverings of faith in and between Mankind

² Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, Nov. 1814, quoted in *Wordsworth, the Critical Heritage*, ed. Robert Woof (London, 2001), p. 404.

³ Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, V. 75.

⁴ See Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 293–5. Gill implies that the need to cope with Mary and William Wordsworth’s depression following their double bereavement enabled the poet to write the Solitary’s narrative and thus complete and publish *The Excursion*.

and Religion in a time of Continental war, from the Terror to the Treaty of Paris. He thus sends his character through a version of his own intellectual and political history, seeking earthly answers in a story mapped across Revolutionary France and back disillusioned to warring England. The Solitary then travels west to America, where he finds the modern capitalist state to be an “unknit Republic”, governed by “the mart | Of dire rapacity” (914–18). His final resolution is to seek consolation in the freedom of absolute irresponsibility in wilderness,⁵ and the hope that there he will find “Primeval Nature’s child” (919). As with the middle-aged Wordsworth, for whom Rousseau was reverting to Hobbes, moral freedom gives way to personalised anarchy and the Solitary finds only ignoble savagery:

But that pure archetype of human greatness,
I found him not. There, in his stead, appeared
A creature, squalid, vengeful, and impure;
Remorseless, and submissive to no law
But superstitious fear, and abject sloth.
(953–5)

The grounds for such disillusion follow on from the place in which the story is told, this hidden nook which prompts the efforts of three of the poem’s characters—the secular thinker, the poet, and later the theologian—to correct the despondency of its fourth, the sceptic. This place provides the starting point for a poetic dialogue of sorts, a dialogue between Wordsworth’s characters about prehistory which tries to answer some of the questions which originate in the enlightenment scepticism which has overpowered the Solitary, a scepticism which predominates in the latter-day humanities. The questions might go thus: if we work merely from physical remains and partial written records, must the imaginative recreations of human lore always be written by history as mere conjecture? Loaded as that might be with a fictiveness which here might be the stuff of poetry, must it inevitably amount to hoax? Faced with such scepticism, does the modern, indeed modernising, state encourage a credulity with respect to the past in order to balance conjecture with the state’s need that its subjects maintain the conviction of a continuous accommodation with an unknowable prehistory? To take the disparately conjoined state in which Wordsworth was writing, the United Kingdom of the late

⁵ “Roaming at large, to observe, and not to feel | And therefore not to act—convinced that all | Which bears the name of action, howsoe’er | Beginning, ends in servitude—still painful | And mostly profitless” (892–6).

eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, how did a poet who moved from brief youthful republican apostasy back to the established church and monarchism balance latter-day Anglicanism with the seeming barbarism of what the 1850 *Prelude* calls ‘our dim ancestral past’? And above all, why are visions of the primitive freighted more with psychic pain than historicist interest?

To start with the latter question, for the Solitary, speaking in the present which follows his multiple disappointments, the hidden nook constitutes neither intelligence nor design. Rather, it is a mere accidental arrangement of rocks and stones, misconstrued by the Wanderer’s fancy. And such fancies bring with them an effect, conveyed in a new Wordsworthian language for fear and despondency, “‘Fraught rather with depression than delight’” (156), where those words ‘fraught’ and ‘depression’ seem to mean much the same to Wordsworth as they do to us today.⁶ For the Solitary,

The shapes before our eyes
And their arrangement, doubtless must be deemed
The sport of Nature, aided by blind Chance
Rudely to mock the works of toiling Man.
And hence, this upright shaft of unhewn stone
From Fancy, willing to set off her stores
By sounding titles, hath acquired the name
Of Pompey’s pillar; that I gravely style
My Theban obelisk; and there behold
A Druid cromlech!—thus I entertain
The antiquarian humour, and am pleased
To skim along the surfaces of things,
Beguiling harmlessly the listless hours.

(124–36)

Those ss at the end there bubble and hiss over a blank verse which is not so blank: there are a number of assonantal near rhymes and anagrams sounding around the keynote in the word ‘Man’ in the passage—‘Chance’, ‘hence’, ‘unhewn stone’, ‘Fancy’, ‘name’, ‘Theban’—which disperse into the leisure of historicism: ‘entertain’ and ‘antiquarian’. Such depths as might be sounded within these skimmed sonic surfaces are those of geography, history or etymology: this English location entertains a fancy of foreign remains, Latin (‘Pompey’s pillar’), Greek (‘Theban obelisk’), and Welsh (‘Druid cromlech’)—or not wholly Welsh, because if

⁶ *OED* does not record the word ‘fraught’ to mean ‘distressed or distressing’ until 1966. ‘Depression’, as synonym for ‘dejection’ is not noted at all between Samuel Johnson and Jane Carlyle; it is first recorded in psychiatry to mean ‘misery, anguish or guilt’ in 1905.

cromlech is Welsh or Breton for stone circle or megalith, one disputed etymology of the Old Irish *druoid* suggests it comes from Greek, from *δρῦιδάι* (*druwidae*), son of oak-tree.⁷

All this play with the sounds and histories of words can only remain mere ‘antiquarian humour’, until depression gets a hold of it. The Solitary switches mood suddenly:

But if the spirit be oppressed by sense
Of instability, revolt, decay,
And change, and emptiness, these freaks of Nature
And her blind helper Chance, do *then* suffice
To quicken and to aggravate—to feed
Pity and scorn, and melancholy pride,
Not less than that huge Pile (from some abyss
Of mortal power unquestionably sprung)
Whose hoary diadem of pendent rocks
Confines the shrill-voiced whirlwind, round and round
Eddying within its vast circumference,
On Sarum’s naked plain—than pyramid
Of Egypt, unsubverted, undissolved—
Or Syria’s marble ruins towering high
Above the sandy desert, in the light
Of sun or moon.

(137–53)

Something turns in the mood here, around that word ‘unquestionably’ but quickened by its interjection into the sceptic’s thoughts. ‘Some abyss | Of mortal power unquestionably’ suggests the anonymous creators of human remains as architects of their own despair, vast constructions which oppress, aggravate, subvert and dissolve. These constructions are given light by circle or semi-circle (sun and moon) and they transcribe geometrical shapes, circumference, pendent rocks, pyramid. They occupy flat land, plain or desert. The ‘counter-spirit’, so beloved of sceptical readings of Wordsworth, is at work here. The third of Wordsworth’s ‘Essays upon Epitaphs’ (1810–15) describes the counter-spirit as a mortal power of a language, in which words cease to be ‘an incarnation of the thought’, something which deranges, subverts, lays waste, vitiates and dissolves.⁸

⁷ On ‘Pliny’s folk etymologizing’ and philological debate over the origin of the word, see Bruce Lincoln in ‘The Druids and human sacrifice’, collected in *Death, War, and Sacrifice* (Chicago, 1991), p. 185, n. 6.

⁸ *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford, 1974), vol. 2, pp. 84–5. See Frances Ferguson, *Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit* (New Haven, CT, 1977).

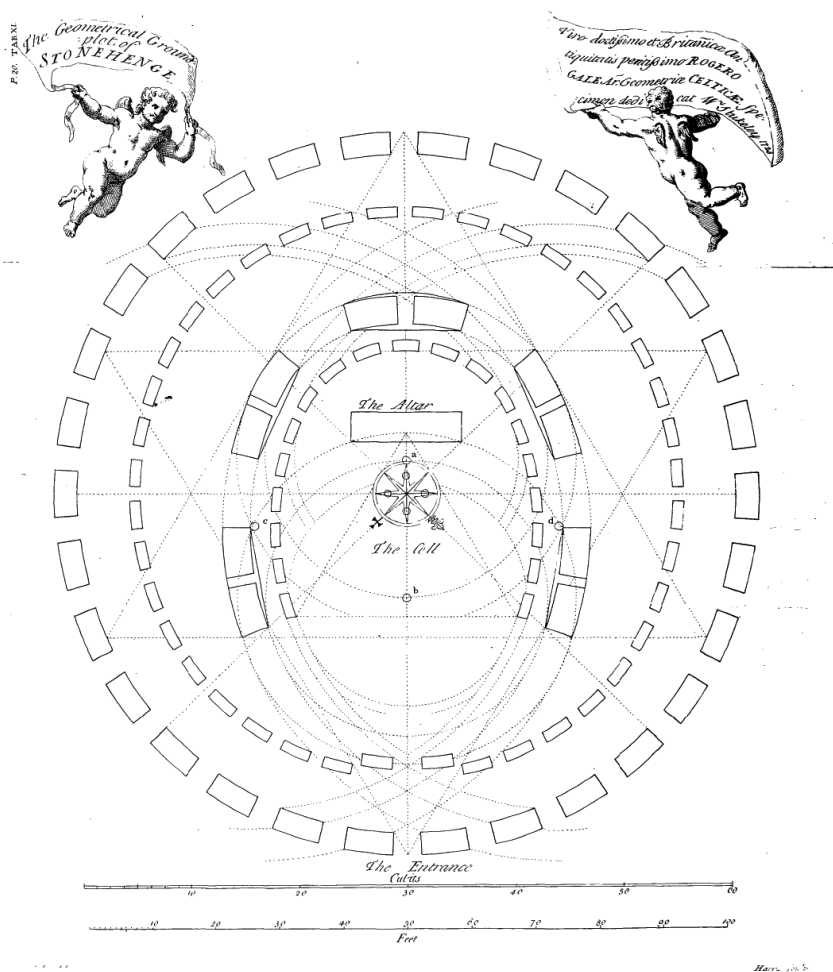


Figure 1. William Stukely, 'The Geometrical Groundplot of Stonehenge', in *Stonehenge, A temple Restor'd to the British druids* (London, 1740), p. 20

that huge Pile (from some abyss
Of mortal power unquestionably sprung)
Whose hoary diadem of pendent rocks
Confines the shrill-voiced whirlwind, round and round
Eddying within its vast circumference,
On Sarum's naked plain

(*The Excursion*, III. 143–8)

Wordsworth had summoned the counter-spirit as one consequence of a modern loss of 'solemnity and pensiveness' in the presence of human remains and memorials, churchyards, gravestones and other sites in which the dead make their presence felt, and from which the Wanderer and later the Pastor offer the cure for depression.

The Solitary's vision of the oppression of spirit by a fairly precise sequence of recent European history—'instability, revolt and decay'—gains an emblem in his nightmarish confinement within the whirlwind of pity and scorn transcribed through the circumference of the open circle of Stonehenge. The antiquarian dream is succeeded by the sublime immersion in the sites of a lost human history. The Solitary's Stonehenge, the pillars, obelisk and pyramids, seem to be mere geometry: the stone circle, for instance, is a place for the confinement only of the wind returning on itself—'round and round | Eddying within its vast circumference'—as an emblem of an untrammelled scepticism which seeks neither narrative nor ritual to inform ruin. For the Wanderer in the secular realm, and later the Pastor in his churchyard, all of these human ruins must be given presence by retelling the human stories which led to their various human memorials and epitaphs. The counter-spirit must be challenged, even when the story is one of conjecture, fancy or mere human lore.

* * *

Of course a violent history can bring historicist consolation with it, the sort of consolation that we might gain from history itself, the sense that the past is past, that history simply construes what might have happened in it, and that as sceptical modern subjects we are well out of it. For the British poet and historian, the history of the histories of Stonehenge in particular has long attracted the attentions of the enlightened. For instance, Thomas Warton simply restated a number of historical speculations about Stonehenge (Arthurian, Saxon, Celtic, Viking, Roman) before seeking consolation in the fact of study, the very telling of history itself acting as compensation for the inadequacy of the data:

Written at Stonehenge

Thou noblest monument of Albion's isle!
 Whether by Merlin's aid, from Scythia's shore,
 To Amber's fatal plain Pendragon bore,
 Huge frame of giant-hands, the mighty pile,
 T'entomb his Britons slain by Hengist's guile:
 Or Druid priests, sprinkled with human gore,
 Taught 'mid thy massy maze their mystic lore:

Or Danish chiefs, enrich'd with savage spoil,
 To Victory's idol vast, an unhewn shrine,
 Rear'd the rude heap: or, in thy hallow'd round,
 Repose the kings of Brutus' genuine line;
 Or here those kings in solemn state were crown'd:
 Studious to trace thy wond'rous origine,
 We muse on many an antient tale renown'd.⁹

The poetic recreation recedes by the sonnet's historicist ending, the last two lines settling the matter of the uncontestably unknown. This is quite self-consciously bookish stuff: listing historical fictions, its biggest fiction might be its title, since it is not at all necessary that it be 'Written at Stonehenge'.

William Wordsworth, on the other hand, tells us in *The Prelude* that his experience of walking over Salisbury Plain in the Summer of 1793 was one of the 'spots of time' which was to be written and rewritten for at least the next fifty years of his poetic career. In her exemplary 1966 exploration of the resonance of the Salisbury Plain experience, Enid Welsford pointed to what she calls the 'few lovely lines' of this sonnet of 1815, 'Mark the concentrated hazels that enclose', to convey the 'quintessence' of the debate in *The Excursion* around the meaning of the remains of prehistory, the imposition of human significance onto them, and the delights, not depression, which might follow. Welsford roots Wordsworth's environmental ethics in the ground of fearful respect. Wordsworth, she says, knew that, 'the "Forms of Nature" from which emblematic wisdom was derived were not to be trifled with'.¹⁰ But Wordsworth does allow the emblematic fancy into this sonnet. The poem describes a circle of trees, a stone in the middle and a fantasy of a megalith, the Celtic remains of some ancient Chieftain. It turns from its delayed 'turn' (a Miltonic trick apparent in Warton's sonnet, and one that Wordsworth said he learnt from Milton in 1801)¹¹ towards the end of the ninth line, from death to life and on to Nature's generous accommodation of an erring human mind:

Mark the concentrated hazels that enclose
 Yon old grey Stone, protected from the ray
 Of noontide suns:—and even the beams that play
 And glance, while wantonly the rough wind blows,
 Are seldom free to touch the moss that grows
 Upon that roof, amid embowering gloom,

⁹ Thomas Warton, *Poems: A New Edition, with Additions* (London, 1777), p. 78.

¹⁰ Enid Welsford, *Salisbury Plain: A Study in the Development of Wordsworth's Mind and Art* (Oxford, 1966), pp. 107–8 and 115–16.

¹¹ See Wordsworth on Milton's sonnets, *Poetical Works*, III. 417–18.

The very image framing of a Tomb,
 In which some ancient Chieftain finds repose
 Among the lonely mountains. — Live, ye trees!
 And thou, grey Stone, the pensive likeness keep
 Of a dark chamber where the Mighty sleep:
 For more than Fancy to the influence bends
 When solitary Nature condescends
 To mimic Time's forlorn humanities.¹²

That lovely delayed rhyme at the end, barely the echo of a rhyme after the six lines spent waiting for it, brings Nature ('Live ye trees!') and mankind ('humanities') together in an exemplary resolution of a version of the Wordsworthian nostrum of the love of Nature here allowing the love of mankind.

The humanities are only in a secondary sense the objects of proper scholarly enquiry, or indeed of the Solitary's 'antiquarian humour'. A 'humanity', the *OED* tells us, is an act of kindness, and its plural 'humanities' is recorded in Holinshed, but peters out by 1852. 'Time's forlorn humanities': that little echo of the fate of lost human lore in forlorn¹³ suggests humanity's common practice of investing stones with stories. The sonnet describes Ossianic space, one of Wordsworth's frequent accommodations of material he officially found numerous grounds to abhor, mainly on the basis of Macpherson's error in misconstruing the Natural.¹⁴ 'Quintessence' of the argument of *The Excursion* this may be, but despondency is still corrected by conjecture, by a vision of the pre-historic 'Mighty' at sleep. It is a fancy of, and then a guess at, human remains, the Might or power of those remains, and the tolerance of a parental Nature which now and again allows itself humanities.

¹² *Poetical Works*, III. 24–5. Date of composition uncertain. In the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets', Wordsworth placed the poem between 'Not Love, not War, nor the tumultuous swell | Of civil conflict' (1823), a sonnet counselling a reclusive life in nature, and 'Composed after a Journey across the Hambleton Hills, Yorkshire' (1802), a poem which views a sunset and clouds which suggest a fancy of Indian, Greek and Christian religious buildings.

¹³ There is no etymological pun being played with folklore: forlorn is the past participle of OE *forlese*, to lose.

¹⁴ See Wordsworth's objection to Macpherson's 'spurious' imagery in the 'Essay Supplemental to the Preface' (1815), *Poetical Works*, II. 423–5. Macpherson reverses the 'distinct' imagery of nature; in the *Ossian* material, 'everything (that is not stolen) is . . . defined, insulated, dislocated, deadened—yet nothing distinct'. The counter-spirit of an arbitrary false sublime is at work here: 'It will always be so when words are substituted for things.' Percy's *Reliques*, by comparison, even if modern forgeries, are 'writing superior to that of any other man by whom in modern times it has been cultivated'. (422)

The counter-spirit might stir, though, if we were to think about reawakening the Mighty. Thus, in a contrary version of these visions of the antique, Clifford Geertz has told us that we don't have to share in a sceptical consciousness pushed fully to self-alienation to find unease in our dealings with what we imagine to be the differences in prehistoric or 'primitive' versions of ourselves. For Geertz, such encounters make us look at what is 'found in translation' not lost; rather, there is a challenge to what he called 'the modern earnestness led in beyond its depth'. That phrase has resonances for the young Wordsworth's account of his experiences in revolutionary France and counter-revolutionary England, which I'll discuss briefly below. But in more general terms, it raises an imaginative and ethical problem perhaps too easily absolved by beneficent Nature in Wordsworth's sonnet, or by the mere fact of historicism in Warton's:

Whatever use the imaginative productions of other peoples—predecessors, ancestors, or distant cousins—can have for our moral lives, then, it cannot be to simplify them. The image of the past (or the primitive, or the classic, or the exotic) as a source of remedial wisdom, a prosthetic corrective for a damaged spiritual life—an image that has governed a good deal of humanist thought and education—is mischievous because it leads us to expect that our own uncertainties will be reduced by access to thought-worlds constructed along lines alternative to our own, when in fact they will be multiplied . . . the growth in range a powerful sensibility gains from an encounter with another one, as powerful or more, comes only at the expense of its inward ease.¹⁵

Geertz's insight comes from a consideration of a mid-nineteenth-century Danish trader's conflicted account of witnessing a terrible beauty, *suttee*, the Balinese cremation rite in which wives and concubines threw themselves into the burial fire of the Rajah. He seeks to use it in argument with Lionel Trilling, the sort of humanist critic who, he says, mischievously, is 'still possessed . . . of the primitive belief that there is such a thing as life itself', and who doesn't follow Geertz into thinking 'that society comes to more than behaviour'. Trilling had come late in life to an anxiety about unbridgeable cultural difference, worrying that the 1970s student of the humanities needed more than a historical leap to understand Jane Austen.¹⁶ Geertz's argument rubs Trilling's pedagogic worry against what he memorably calls 'the clouds of imagery that collect about impressive death'.

¹⁵ Clifford Geertz, 'Found in translation: on the social history of the moral imagination', *Georgia Review*, 31/4 (1977), 788–810.

¹⁶ Lionel Trilling, 'Why we read Jane Austen', *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 March 1976.

William Wordsworth certainly believed there was such a thing as life itself ('Live, ye trees!'). But in his youth he also believed that society comes to more than behaviour, by which phrase I assume Geertz to have been alluding to the great ideological formations unleashed into history by revolutionary America and France.¹⁷ In his dealings with the primitive which emerged during and then after his ideological moment, but written from and during a time of war, Wordsworth did not always find that nature had given him more than the 'Fancy' of the past granted in 'Mark the concentrated hazels'. He did always receive a 'remedial wisdom, a prosthetic corrective for a damaged spiritual life'. To shift the discourse slightly (from anthropology into what used to be known as comparative religion), Wordsworth's historical sense dallies with the possibility of historical return, of seeking in human as much as seasonal patterns a corrective for a damaged present. Like Mircea Eliade, writing just after the Second World War, the Wordsworth of Salisbury Plain and *The Excursion* (published in 1814, bar the hundred days which led up to Waterloo, the last year of war) remained caught in relation between what Eliade calls 'historical man' and the traces all about him, and in him, of 'traditional man'.¹⁸ For Eliade, as 'historical', the modern consciousness either knows the past to be past or, if Christian, believes that Christ redeemed time, setting it on a linear, albeit eschatological course (there will be one return only, the second coming, and time will end). Traditional man believes that time is cyclical, that there is nothing new, and thus abolishes history, since seasons, rituals and all human labour simply reiterate what has gone before and always will.

In pastoral moments, Wordsworth's writing is drawn to the traditional. Resenting the historical, his characters inhabit common land until modernity takes it from them: property and its struggles in war all aggravate, subvert, and dissolve the Natural regenerative seasonal cycle in which humans now find it so difficult to live and work. In Eliade's terms, this gives rise to the greatest challenge to what is termed 'historicism', 'the terror of history', against which people seek a cyclical account of history which will give them some trans-historical consolation. In early Wordsworth, this terror is experienced by the peasant in a time of the enclosure of vast tracts of common land in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century

¹⁷ It may be that Wordsworth enters into Trilling and Geertz's differences when the Solitary bemoans his error in finding that his own experience in France turns him into an ideologue, one who 'promptly seized | All that Abstraction furnished for my needs' (III. 794-5).

¹⁸ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York, 1954).

Britain. Eliade speaks of ‘the sufferings and annihilation of so many peoples who suffer and are annihilated for the simple reason that their geographical situation sets them in the pathway of history’.¹⁹ Of course, Eliade’s solution is mystical, in the return of cyclical versions of trans-historical time. It is also Judaeo-Christian, in which freedom is implied by an emphasis on faith and the human personality.

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One of William Wordsworth’s answers to these questions was eventually to be Christian, and nowhere more so than in the conclusion to *The Excursion* in 1814. But this problem dates back at least to the point where the poet might have found himself on the pathway of history, in the Summer of 1793, and his recurrent attempts to give poetic as much as historical flesh to some of these ideas. His problem was that he was in a sense running away from history. In the terms of what have become sacred texts for profane readings of Wordsworth, looking back to 1793 from 1798 he describes himself in ‘Tintern Abbey’, as more ‘like a man | Flying from something that he dreads, than one | Who sought the thing he loved’ (70–2). Or before this, in 1792:

Such ghastly visions had I of despair
And tyranny, and implements of death,
And long orations, which in dreams I pleaded
Before unjust Tribunals, with a voice
Labouring, a brain confounded, and a sense,
Of treachery and desertion in the place
The holiest that I knew of, in my own soul.

(*The Prelude* (1805), X, ll. 374–80)²⁰

From such evidence, much critical and biographical speculation has ensued. The questions have long been, what was he running away from and why did he suffer such fantasies of himself as the tongue-tied accused? One answer is the best-known, retold in fiction in the story of Vaudracour and Julia in Book IX of *The Prelude*: the penniless Wordsworth had left a lover, Annette Vallon, and his illegitimate daughter, Caroline, behind in France. Ostensibly returned to England to seek employment in order to afford marriage or at least the upkeep of his family, history got in the way,

¹⁹ Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, p. 151.

²⁰ Wordsworth, *The Prelude, The 1805 text*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, revd. Stephen Gill (Oxford, 1970).

and the French declaration of war on Britain in February 1793 meant that the young poet was stranded in England, a poor republican alienated from the country of his birth, cut off from those who needed his support, and who were, in their turn, on the wrong side of what was becoming a French civil war.

This might be sufficient biographical evidence for most to suffer feelings of guilt and powerlessness, but late in life Wordsworth let it slip to Thomas Carlyle that he had witnessed the guillotining of a journalist friend, Antoine Gorsas. This story sets up an autobiographical anomaly: Gorsas's execution on 7 October 1793 occurred at a time when in the chronology of *The Prelude* the poet was supposed to be in Wales. From Mary Moorman onwards, most biographers are prepared to accept that Wordsworth *might* have returned to France.²¹ Not all of Wordsworth's critics follow Kenneth Johnston, who reconstructs the poet as a spy traversing Northern France on his legendary walker's legs, 30 miles a day, on the run from revolutionary guards who would be tracking down just the sort of person they might imagine the young Englishman to be, a counter-revolutionary expatriate with Girondin connections.²² Other accounts are equally speculative and the best, by David Bromwich, guesses at some betrayal, a guilty action deeply repressed, which led to the arrest or worse, execution, of a friend.²³

I don't really wish to enter into this well-mined biographical ground here. Suffice to say, in much of Wordsworth's writing of his experience in the early 1790s, we both sense Geertz's 'modern earnestness led in beyond its depth' and cannot help reverting to the feeling that most readers of the poet share, that Wordsworth is not entirely telling us everything. But this, again, is partly what Wordsworth gives to English poetry, that unformed thing in consciousness that seeks articulation but can never quite find it,

²¹ In her classic 1957 biography, Mary Moorman was circumspect about the matter, but expressed the conventional view of Wordsworth's druidic visions, that 'the horrible realism of their form is more explicable if he had seen the terror at first hand'. *William Wordsworth, A Biography: The Early Years, 1770–1803* (Oxford, 1957), p. 242.

²² Kenneth Johnston, *The Hidden Wordsworth*, 2nd edn. (London, 2000), pp. 262–93.

²³ David Bromwich, *Disowned by Memory: Wordsworth's Poetry of the 1790s* (Chicago, 1998), p. 17. See also Nicolas Roe, 'Politics, history and Wordsworth's poems', in *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 96–212, where Roe fairly carefully reconstructs Wordsworth's Girondin connections. I might add that the Solitary in *The Excursion*, a character which found its narrative focus in the tragic circumstances of Wordsworth's second family, tells us just where the revolutionary part of his narrative matches that of Wordsworth, that he remained 'circumscribed' in Britain and therefore did not become 'entangled among deeds | Which, now as infamous, I should abhor' (III. 814–15).



Figure 2. Hogarth, 'The Idle Prentice, Executed at Tyburn', *Industry and Idleness*

the poet trembling like a guilty thing surprised.²⁴ Or again, for those who might have witnessed violent death, there may be two fairly opposite responses, either joining in the festive spectacle of public execution or just looking away. The 1795 *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* ends with this savage scene, with the body of its wandering Godwinian murderer on public show in the gibbet:

They left him hung on high in iron case,
And dissolute men, unthinking and untaught,
Planted their festive booths beneath his face;
And to that spot, which idle thousands sought,
Women and children were by fathers brought;
And now some kindred sufferer driven, perchance,
That way when into storm the sky is wrought,
Upon his swinging corpse his eye may glance
And drop, as he once dropp'd, in miserable trance.²⁵

Wordsworth revised the gibbet out of the published version of the Salisbury Plain story, *Guilt and Sorrow*, in 1842, but he still ended with the moment

²⁴ 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from recollections of Early Childhood', 150.

²⁵ Wordsworth, *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, 1795–9, stanza 92, in *The Salisbury Plain Poems of William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (New York, 1975), p. 154.

of the drop of the hanging man. I can add little to David Bromwich's beautiful words on the final lines here:

The *drop* of the hanged man, the drop of the eye of the witness, both recalling the faint of the hero in terror at a similar spectacle early in the poem, make a diagram of suffering that is as much a shadow on the landscape as if the hero's corpse were still exposed to view.²⁶

With both Wordsworth and Bromwich we are impelled both to follow the spectacle and to look away, caught in the clouds of imagery which gather about impressive death.

* * *

Which brings us to the druids. This particular pathway of history leads back to Salisbury Plain. It is a familiar story, but in this case it is one that Wordsworth did tell about himself. In the Summer of 1793, between the declaration of war and prior to his supposed return to France, the 23-year-old poet set off on a tour of the West Country. An accident with his carriage meant that he became separated from his companion and he abandoned the plan of travelling west and headed off on foot north across Salisbury Plain towards his friend Robert Jones in Wales. He worked through many versions of this particular journey, and the last account was posthumously published in book XIII of the 1850 *Prelude*:

To a hope
Not less ambitious once among the wilds
Of Sarum's Plain, my youthful spirit was raised;
There, as I ranged at will the pastoral downs
Trackless and smooth, or paced the bare white roads
Lengthening in solitude their dreary line,
Time with his retinue of ages fled
Backwards, nor checked his flight until I saw
Our dim ancestral Past in vision clear;
Saw multitudes of men, and, here and there,
A single Briton clothed in wolf-skin vest,
With shield and stone-axe, stride across the wold;
The voice of spears was heard, the rattling spear
Shaken by arms of mighty bone, in strength,
Long mouldered, of barbaric majesty.
I called on Darkness—but before the word
Was uttered, midnight darkness seemed to take
All objects from my sight; and lo! again

²⁶ Bromwich, p. 13.

The Desert visible by dismal flames;
 It is the sacrificial altar, fed
 With living men—how deep the groans! the voice
 Of those that crowd the giant wicker thrills
 The monumental hillocks, and the pomp
 Is for both worlds, the living and the dead.
 At other moments—(for through that wide waste
 Three summer days I roamed) where'er the Plain
 Was figured o'er with circles, lines, or mounds,
 That yet survive, a work, as some divine,
 Shaped by the Druids, so to represent
 Their knowledge of the heavens, and image forth
 The constellations;—gently was I charmed
 Into a waking dream, a reverie
 That, with believing eyes, where'er I turned,
 Beheld long-bearded teachers, with white wands
 Uplifted, pointing to the starry sky,
 Alternately, and plain below, while breath
 Of music swayed their motions, and the waste
 Rejoiced with them and me in those sweet sounds.²⁷

This vision is part of the two books of *The Prelude* written to exemplify the head-note: 'Imagination and Taste, How Impaired and How Restored'. The first of those two books had first developed the idea of the 'spot of time', locations to which the subject can return either in memory or in person, seeking what Wordsworth calls 'renovating virtue', or Geertz might call, in terms which our culture may very well owe to Wordsworth, 'a source of remedial wisdom, a prosthetic corrective for a damaged spiritual life'. The two books are eventually addressed to Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The passage continues,

This for the past, and things that may be viewed
 Or fancied in the obscurity of years
 From monumental hints: and thou, O Friend!
 Pleased with some unpremeditated strains
 That served these wanderings to beguile, hast said
 That then and there my mind had exercised
 Upon the vulgar form of present things,
 The actual world of our familiar days,
 Yet higher power; had caught from them a tone,
 An image, and a character, by books
 Not hitherto reflected.

(350–60)

²⁷ William Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, one vol. edn. (Oxford, 1936). Here, *The Prelude* (1850), XIII, ll. 312–49.

A mere fifteen lines from here, Wordsworth sets the grounds of the location of the great equilibrium that *The Prelude* seeks to demonstrate to his 'Friend', between the human self and the natural world: 'A balance, and ennobling interchange | . . . the best power | Both of the object seen and the eye that sees' (375–8).

However, this equilibrium is not gained without much of the doubt and fear which followed from the poet's traumatic French experiences. The view or fancy glimpsed in the obscurity of years has conflated 'monumental hints' (literally, hints inferred from the monumental, Stonehenge) into hints of monumental import (imaginatively, the terror of history). Taken as a whole, the two books move from the first autobiographical example of the 'spots of time', telling the story of the poet as a lost child discovering a murderer's name written where a gibbet used to be.²⁸ The story then passes as rapidly over intense personal pain as it might decently do, telling of the death of the poet's father, which is, ominously, a 'chastisement' to an orphaned guilty child. And thus in the next book there are visions of more 'impressive death', confronting the sacrificial altar, the wicker man and the druids.

Wordsworth's telling and retelling of his druidic vision in the various versions of *The Prelude* are in themselves returns. He locates the first moments of his friendship with Coleridge in the praise he received for the first written version of his wanderings on Salisbury Plain. The 'unpremeditated strains' Wordsworth had shown Coleridge was the manuscript of a poem of 1793–4, called on its title page both *Salisbury Plain* and *A Night on Salisbury Plain*. The strains are unpremeditated, because from its first invocation of 'the hungry savage',²⁹ the poem seeks no less than the trans-historic collapse of savage and civilised, prehistoric and present, into one night on Salisbury Plain. Unpremeditated, too, because it has yet to shake off the Ossianism which seems inevitably to cling to any talk of ancient Britons. And also unpremeditated because the Ossianic brings with it, in the terms of Northrop Frye, both the matter of pseudepigrapha—literary hoaxes—and the striving for the dithyrambic, the wild oracular utterance which many recreations of the 'bardic' had sought in the eighteenth century, from William Collins' 'Ode on the

²⁸ This is followed by the sight of a girl with a pitcher of water on her head, struggling to carry it in a strong wind. 'It was in truth | An ordinary sight', the poet says, and it leads on to the recollection of 'visionary dreariness', a phrase that no poet but Wordsworth could give up to his readers.

²⁹ Suggested, according to Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth: A Life*, p. 75, by his recent reading of Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*.

Poetical Character' onwards. For Frye, such compositions are an example of what he calls *Fables of Identity*, they 'take what is psychologically primitive, the oracular process of composition, and project it as something historically primitive'.³⁰ The 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* puts paid to this, because it introduces reflection in to the creative process: if the dithyrambic or oracular is the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', Wordsworth teaches that the poet must follow this with 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'.³¹

To take an example of the oracular, Frye was a Blakean, but I don't think that William Blake's versions of Stonehenge, for instance, show much tranquillity:

In awful pomp & gold, in all the precious unhewn stones of Eden
 They build a stupendous Building on the Plain of Salisbury; with chains
 Of rocks round London Stone: of Reasonings: of unhewn Demonstrations
 In labyrinthine arches. (Mighty Urizen the Architect.) thro which
 The Heavens might revolve & Eternity be bound in their chain.
 Labour unparallel'd! A wondrous rocky World of cruel destiny
 Rocks piled on rocks reaching the stars: stretching from pole to pole.
 The Building is Natural Religion & its Altars Natural Morality
 A building of eternal death: whose proportions are eternal despair
 Here Vala stood turning the iron Spindle of destruction
 From heaven to earth: howling! Invisible! But not invisible
 Her Two Covering Cherubs afterwards named Voltaire & Rousseau:
 Two frowning Rocks: on each side of the Cove & Stone of Torture:
 Frozen Sons of the feminine Tabernacle of Bacon, Newton & Locke.
 For Luvah is France: the Victim of the Spectres of Albion.

Here we have that labyrinthine architecture, that circling structure of sacred space, yet all the while, in the Solitary's terms from book III of *The Excursion*, 'oppressed by sense | Of instability, revolt, decay'. For all that Blake provides his own gloss, reading the great errors of 'Natural religion' and 'Natural Morality' as well as those of the rationalists, scientists and positivists into his allegory of Stonehenge, he cannot resist 'the clouds of imagery that collect about impressive death', mixing the erotic and the thrill of the horror:

Los beheld in terror: he pour'd his loud storms on the Furnaces:
 The Daughters of Albion clothed in garments of needle work
 Strip them off from their shoulders and bosoms, they lay aside
 Their garments; they sit naked upon the Stone of trial.

³⁰ Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity* (New York, 1963), p. 136–7.

³¹ Preface to 2nd edn., of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), *Poetical Works*, II. 400.

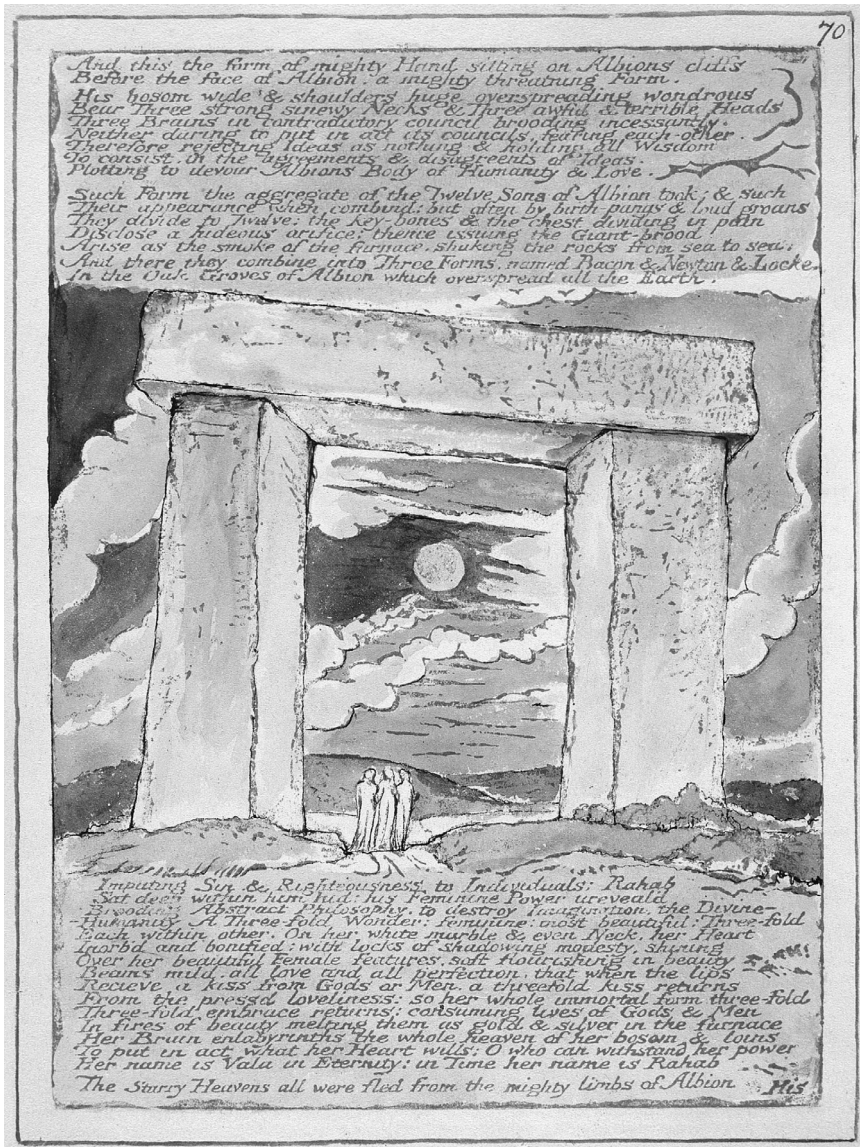


Figure 3. Blake, Jerusalem, 'And this the form of mighty Hand . . .' (plate 70). Jerusalem the Emmanation of the Great Albion, William Blake (1757–1827), 1804 to 1820. Relief etching printed in orange, with pen and watercolor sheet: $13\frac{1}{2} \times 10\frac{3}{8}$ inches (34.3×26.4 cm) Plate: $8\frac{3}{4} \times 6\frac{1}{8}$ inches (22.2×16.2 cm). (Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection. B1992.8.1(70).)

The Knife of flint passes over the howling Victim: his blood
Gushes & stains the fair side of the fair Daug[h]ters of Albion.

...

But they cut asunder his inner garments: searching with
Their cruel fingers for his heart, & there they enter in pomp,
In many tears; & there they erect a temple & an altar:
They pour cold water on his brain in front, to cause
Lids to grow over his eyes in veils of tears: and caverns
To freeze over his nostrils, while they feed his tongue from cups
And dishes of painted clay . . .³²

In Wordsworth's compacting of the psychologically primitive with the historically primitive in his earliest unpremeditated phase in the 1793 *Salisbury Plain*, an Ossianic sunset is followed by a voice which speaks directly out of the 'mountain-pile' of Stonehenge, a speech which is given no rational explanation, no frame other than to suggest it speaks from the dead:

For oft at dead of night, when dreadful fire
Reveals that powerful circle's reddening stones,
'Mid priests and spectres grim and idols dire,
Far heard the great flame utters human moans,
Then all is hushed: again the desert groans,
A dismal light its farthest bounds illumines,
While warrior spectres of gigantic bones,
Forth-issuing from a thousand rifted tombs,
Wheel on their fiery steeds amid the infernal glooms.³³

Of course where this is not oracular is in the shape of the stanza it inhabits. Blake takes one of the common forms of oracular writing, related both to the eighteenth-century irregular ode and James Macpherson's poeticised prose, part-mimic of translations of the prophets as that was. Blake's verse is something not that far removed from either, what Frye calls 'a series of utterances, irregular in rhythm but strongly marked off one from the other'.³⁴ The fact that lines end is the strongest thing that suggests to us that it is verse. Wordsworth sets his vision in something more artfully antique, the stanza of Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, a stanza to which his immediate successors—Byron, Keats—would return in order to sound out visions of what the passage I have just read from the

³² William Blake, *Jerusalem The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, in *The Complete Illuminated Books*, ed. David Bindman (London, 2000), plate 66, pp. 363 and 467.

³³ Wordsworth, *Salisbury Plain*, 1793, stanza 11 in Gill, *The Salisbury Plain Poems*, p. 24.

³⁴ Frye, *Fables of Identity*, p. 134.

1850 *Prelude* calls the ‘dim ancestral past’. It is also the stanza of another Wordsworth poem about men, stones and nature’s reparative powers, ‘Resolution and Independence’. In *Salisbury Plain*, its characteristic hexameter final line is particularly well-adapted to the moments of the primitive artfully held within the narrative.

This is the 1793 vision of the mighty Celts, the blood sacrifice at Stonehenge, and the druids, where the final lines fill the stanza out, most notably at the end, ‘And charmed for many a league the hoary desert smiles.’

Gigantic beings ranged in dread array.
Such beings thwarting oft the traveller’s way
With shield and stone-ax stride across the wold.
Or, throned on that dread circle’s summit gray
Of mountains hung in air, their state unfold,
And like a thousand Gods mysterious council hold.

21

And oft a night-fire mounting to the clouds
Reveals the desert and with dismal red
Clothes the black bodies of encircling crowds.
It is the sacrificial altar fed
With living men. How deep it groans—the dead
Thrilled in their yawning tombs their helmets uprear;
The sword that slept beneath the warrior’s head
Thunders in fiery air: red arms appear
Uplifted thro’ the gloom and shake the rattling spear.

22

Not thus where clear moons spread their pleasing light.
—Long bearded forms with wands uplifted shew
To vast assemblies, while each breath of night
Is hushed, the living fires that bright and slow
Rounding th’aetherial field in order go.
Then as they trace with awe their various files
All figured on the mystic plain below,
Still prelude of sweet sounds the moon beguiles
And charmed for many a league the hoary desert smiles.³⁵

That final line might be argued to be hypermetrical, the discussion of which starts Simon Jarvis’s recent book on Wordsworth as a philosophical singer. Jarvis very nicely suggests that

³⁵ Gill, *Salisbury Plain Poems*, pp. 26–7.

The speculative element in Wordsworth's verse can be thought of as a kind of cognitive hypermetricality. It exactly overflows the measure, that is: as a 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling' in which poetry blurts out its wish to have back everything that has been taken away by (what is now) sheer common sense.³⁶

In the 1793 *Salisbury Plain*, the hexameter final line returns to be regularised back into the expectations of the stanza. Thus, in Spenser, the first hexameter, 'Fierce warres and faithfull loves shall moralize my song', is complemented by (and rhymes with) the next hexameter nine lines later, 'O helpe thou my weake wit, and sharpen my dull tong', and so on.³⁷ That little lengthening can of course cause the voice to linger rather longer than it might comfortably wish: 'And drop, as he once dropp'd, in miserable trance.' 'And drop' is the falling of the body, the extra foot of the hexameter, the eye still lingering by the spectacle of the hanged.

As an antique, the *Faerie Queene* stanza was of course no megalith, as distant in time from Wordsworth as Wordsworth is from us. And part of Spenser's matter was also the origins and government of the emergent British state. Wordsworth was to exchange Spenser's verse form for another, Milton's, and the Miltonic movement from chaos into cosmos, to paraphrase Eliade, is apparent not only throughout these scenes, but also in turning the originally rhymed vision of ancestral barbarity away from rhyme—'the invention of a barbarous age'—into blank verse. Yet despite this recasting of the vision from elaborately rhymed stanza to blank verse, Wordsworth retains its echo. The later version of the druidic vision in *The Prelude* was addressed to Coleridge, who had been one of these lines' first readers. Wordsworth's blank verse remembers the archaeological remains of that first reading for his friend. Words and phrases are lifted from the 1793 text not just to be written and rewritten by 1804 or 1840, but placed intact into the blank verse, rhyming no longer:

Gigantic beings ranged in dread array.
Such beings thwarting oft the traveller's way
With shield and stone-ax stride across the wold.

³⁶ Simon Jarvis, *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 8–21, *passim*. The point might work better if Jarvis's example, from the 'Ode to Duty', were actually hypermetrical, 'And the most ancient Heavens through Thee are fresh and strong'. He admits that each stanza ends with a hexameter, but counts syllables rather than stresses to suggest the hypermetricality of the line.

³⁷ *The Faerie Queene*, Book I, Canto I, st. 1 and 2, in *Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser*, ed. J. C. Smith and E. de Selincourt, one vol. edn. (London, 1970).

Or, throned on that dread circle's summit gray
 Of mountains hung in air, their state unfold,
 And like a thousand Gods mysterious council hold.

21

And oft a night-fire mounting to the clouds
 Reveals the desert and with dismal red
 Clothes the black bodies of encircling crowds.

It is the sacrificial altar fed

With living men. How deep it groans—the dead

Thrilled in their yawning tombs their helms uprear;

The sword that slept beneath the warrior's head

Thunders in fiery air: red arms appear

Uplifted thro' the gloom and shake the rattling spear.

22

Not thus where clear moons spread their pleasing light.

—**Long bearded forms with wands uplifted shew**

To vast assemblies, while each **breath of night**

Is hushed, the living fires that bright and slow

Rounding th'aetherial field in order go.

Then as they trace with awe their various files

All figured on the mystic plain below,

Still prelude of sweet sounds the moon beguiles

And charmed for many a league the hoary desert smiles.

(Salisbury Plain, 1793)

Saw multitudes of men, and, here and there,

A single Briton clothed in wolf-skin vest,

With shield and stone-axe, stride across the wold;

The voice of spears was heard, the rattling spear

Shaken by arms of mighty bone, in strength,

Long mouldered, of barbaric majesty.

Lo again

The Desert visible by dismal flames;

It is the sacrificial altar, fed

With living men—how deep the groans! the voice

Of those that crowd the giant wicker **thrills**

The monumental hillocks, and the pomp

Is for both worlds, the living and the **dead**.

...

where'er I turned,

Beheld long-bearded teachers, with white wands

Uplifted, pointing to the starry sky,

Alternately, and **plain below, while breath**

Of music swayed their motions, and the waste

Rejoiced with them and me in those sweet sounds.

(The Prelude, 1850)

Looking at the 1850 *Prelude* recension of the material, we can see that like most blank verse it can never quite stop itself rhyming. Particularly fine cross-rhymes can be heard in ‘clothed’ and ‘wold’, ‘heard’ and ‘mouldered’, ‘thrills’ and ‘hillocks’. ‘Wands’ and ‘sounds’ are even allowed to para-rhyme in end line positions. Nevertheless, Wordsworth has revised out the first rhymes in the Salisbury Plain originals. These revised lines still retain something else, something heard by Wordsworth and his ‘Friend’, the memory of the earlier ‘unpremeditated strain’ of the visionary moments, the spontaneous overflow, caught in the moment of first composition. According to Wordsworth, Coleridge’s first reading of *Salisbury Plain* didn’t find anything dim or ancestral at all, he found the new: ‘a tone, | An image, and a character, by books | Not hitherto reflected.’

* * *

The persistent revising of the verse of these poems suggests that the ancestral persists as sound as much as historical data in writing such as this. Whether sacred remains, hidden nook or chieftain’s stone, partial histories are added to by mere lore. But Wordsworth also leaves off his vision with the tune. In ways quite common in all writing about the druids, from Julius Caesar on, the perceived savagery of druidic practice gives way to a more beatific vision, here druid-astronomers accompanied by a ‘breath of music’ or the ‘still prelude of sweet sounds’.³⁸ In Book VII of *The Excursion* the druid music is updated into one of its transitional inheritors, the bardic. It is the remembrance of what Wordsworth calls ‘the ancient British harp’, as played by a Welsh ‘master’:

Strains of power
 Were they, to seize and occupy the sense;
 But to a higher mark than song can reach
 Rose this pure eloquence. And when the stream
 Which overflowed the soul was passed away,
 A consciousness remained that it had left,
 Deposited upon the silent shore
 Of memory, images and precious thoughts,
 That shall not die, and cannot be destroyed.

(*Excursion*, VII. 22–30)

These are familiar remains of an indigenous British culture, the Celtic motif of the echo of music continuing long after the apparent extinction of cultures, here Welsh harpist, otherwise Scottish Highlander or Irish Gael.

³⁸ See Ronald Hutton, ‘The wise druids’ in *The Druids* (London, 2007), pp. 41–78.

But the insubstantial can also sound through material of self-consciously 'British' origins, the Arthurian sense of the dim ancestral past ghosting through a now-Imperial culture. Alfred Tennyson's closing poem to the 1873 *Idylls of the King*, 'To the Queen', brings the British past into the present of his poem thus:

... accept this old imperfect tale,
New-old, and shadowing Sense at war with Soul,
Ideal manhood closed in real man,
Rather than that gray king, whose name, a ghost,
Streams like a cloud, man-shaped, from mountain peak,
And cleaves to cairn and cromlech still;³⁹

Tennyson's 'New-old' tale comports with places in the United Kingdom which are still old. His is an Arthur who is most unlikely to return, despite Tennyson's 'passion of the past'. But something 'cleaves' to those Irish and Welsh words there, 'cairn and cromlech still'.

Mention of the British monarchy suggests an initially centralising and subsequently imperial account of the relation of modern culture to its past. There is a suggestion that in some ways, like the English Haines in Joyce's *Ulysses* learning to speak Irish, these modern British poems usurp the culture of the peasant, the Chieftain or indeed the druids. Such arguments have been put by Katie Trumpener, in her ground-breaking *Bardic Nationalism*:

Nationalist accounts [of history and anthropology insist] on a notion of cultural tradition left out of the natural and national histories of the mainstream enlightenment. For the Enlightenment model is evolutionary, emphasising the inevitability with which each developmental stage, each historical culture, is replaced by the next, more advanced one. What shapes, destroys, and replaces cultural formations is an apparently impersonal, endlessly recurring historical process.⁴⁰

There is a slight problem here with how an 'evolutionary' process can be 'endlessly recurring', but the words of Arthur at the end of *Idylls of the King* echo through this, 'The old order changeth, yielding place to new.'⁴¹ While we might see this in the 'British' novels of Maria Edgeworth or

³⁹ 'To the Queen', *Idylls of the King*, 36–41, in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks, 3 vols. (London, 1987), vol. III.

⁴⁰ Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton, NJ, 1997), pp. 28–9.

⁴¹ 'Morte d'Arthur', 240; in *Poems*, II. Tennyson has a darker version of this in the 1852 version of his 'Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington': 'Perchance our greatness will increase; | Perchance a darkening future yields | Some reverse from worse to worse,' *Poems*, II, p. 487 n.

Walter Scott, we would have to look very hard at English poetry to find 'the Enlightenment model' as construed here, unless it were Blake's version which comes in at fairly radical opposition to this, where the enlightenment project is propelled by the modern druids of progress. This is where Wordsworth's druids and their seemingly endless recurrence throughout his poetry might come in.

As I have said, the vision of impressive death in Wordsworth's Salisbury Plain adventure is linked with the violence of the terror in France and some unspecified guilt or treason in the consciousness of the poet. What might appear to be the everyday eighteenth-century occurrence of sites of public execution—guillotine, gibbet, gallows—rubs shoulders with scholarly conjecture or, as *The Excursion* puts it, 'antiquarian humour': the thrill of imagining the British megaliths as sites of human sacrifice and thus the remains of the inherent savagery of our ancestors continuing into the present. This is not just marked on the landscape or construed in history, it lies buried in the history of the language itself: the Saxon word 'Stonehenge', or 'Stanenge', is a mere thousand or so years old and is based on an ambiguous etymology, both hinge, as in the hinges from which the pendant stones appear to hang, but also something which may be hanging, a body in a gallows. William Stukely had excavated the word thus in 1740,

hengen is in Saxon a hanging-rod or pole, ie. A gallows; and Stonehenge is a stone gallows, called so from the hanging parts, architraves, or rather impostes, the more remarkable part; and which can only persuade people from thinking, the stones grew in the very place . . .⁴²

Blake knew Stukely, and *Jerusalem* answers the question 'Was Britain the Primitive seat of the Patriarchal religion?' with the invocation of the Old Testament prophets as druids, and the new Jerusalem, London, built by druidism and public sacrifice: he shifts swiftly across time from the 'druid's golden knife', to 'They groan'd aloud on Tyburn's Brook', London's site of public execution until 1783. 'Tyburn's fatal tree'⁴³ was of course no tree at all, but a three cornered gallows; nevertheless, like Stukely's stones, it did appear to grow in the very place. Gibbeting was

⁴² William Stukeley, *Stonehenge a temple Restor'd to the British druids* (London, 1740), pp. 7–8. Stonehenge's association with druids and Celts is of course a historical conjecture based on the work of Stukely and others. See A. L. Owen's classic account of the literary figure of the druid in *The Famous Druids* (Oxford, 1962), p. 3 where he points out that Stonehenge predates Greek and Roman accounts of Celts and druids by up to 2,000 years.

⁴³ Blake, *Jerusalem*, plate 27, pp. 324 and 454, and plate 12, pp. 309 and 450.



Figure 4. 'A peep into the Sanctum Sanctorum', Stukely, p. 12. '*hengenne* is in Saxon a hanging-rod or pole, i.e. a gallows; and Stonehenge is a stone gallows, called so from the hanging parts, architraves, or rather impostes, the more remarkable part; and which can only persuade people from thinking, the stones grew in the very place.' Stukely, 7–8.

not abolished in Britain until 1832 and the public execution not until 1868. The impression at Stonehenge is of the vast empty display case which is the gibbet, once filled by public death. Whether he knew or cared about such historicity, given this combination of etymological dubiety and imperial distaste for the savagery of the present-day Gauls, Wordsworth's doubts about the ancestral savagery of the Britons lessened

through his career. That connective phrase ‘dim ancestral past’ is an addition to the 1850 *Prelude*.⁴⁴

* * *

As it nears its end, *The Excursion* tries to settle the matters I’ve been circling round in this lecture: the role of conjecture in imagining human prehistory; the relation between a nation’s past and its future, imperial as that would have been for a British poet publishing in 1814; and the possibility of consolation in all of this for the despondent, the melancholic or the guilty. The Wanderer is given this task first by glossing another example of the folkloric, the tale of a Knight’s tombstone in the churchyard embroidered by local lore and not by historical fact. The Solitary is seen by the wall of the Church,

Intent upon a monumental stone,
Whose uncouth form was grafted on the wall,
Or rather seemed to have grown into the side
Of the rude pile; as oft times trunks of trees,
Whose nature works in wild and craggy spots,
Are seen incorporate with the living rock—
To endure for aye.

(*The Excursion*, VII. 913–19)

‘Living rock’: Wordsworth gives both his reading away (Stukeley: ‘the stones grew in that very place’), and his own preoccupation with ‘incorporate’ stone, as with his leech gatherer, who is compared to ‘a huge stone [which] seems a thing endued with sense’.⁴⁵

The Knight’s tale leads the Wanderer to a discourse against those who ‘scoff’ at privilege. But he knows that the modern British state is shifting away from such feudalism:

The vast Frame
Of social nature changes evermore
Her organs and her members, with decay
Restless, and restless generation, powers
And functions dying and produced at need,—
And by this law the mighty whole subsists:

⁴⁴ Also in 1805, just before the druids and their wands appear, the poet had cast his vision as mere fancy, telling us he was ‘gently charmed, | Albeit with an antiquarian’s dream’. This note of doubt was removed. The second version of *Salisbury Plain* refers to Stonehenge as ‘that fabric scarce of earthly form’. By 1814, the Solitary states that it is ‘from some abyss | Of mortal power unquestionably sprung’.

⁴⁵ ‘Resolution and Independence’, 61, *Poetical Works*, II. 237.

With an ascent and progress in the main;
 Yet, oh! how disproportioned to the hopes
 And expectations of self-flattering minds!
 (VII. 999–1007)

This is not exactly a ringing endorsement of evolutionary modernity: with how much weight should the patrician voice sigh through that great qualifier, ‘an ascent and progress *in the main*’?

But *The Excursion* can’t leave the question of natural and historic remains unanswered, and at its very end it allows the druidic and the dithyrambic in once more. At first it is the Pastor’s ‘wild demeanour’, rounding with excitement on the word ‘Once’ used twice:

‘Once,’ and with wild demeanour, as he spake,
 On us the venerable Pastor turned
 His beaming eye that had been raised to Heaven,
 ‘Once, while the Name, Jehovah, was a sound
 Within the circuit of this sea-girt isle
 Unheard, the savage nations bowed the head
 To Gods delighting in remorseless deeds;
 Gods which themselves had fashioned, to promote
 Ill purposes, and flatter foul desires.
 Then, in the bosom of yon mountain-cove,
 To those inventions of corrupted man
 Mysterious rites were solemnised; and there—
 Amid impending rocks and gloomy woods—
 Of those terrific Idols some received
 Such dismal service, that the loudest voice
 Of the swoln cataracts (which now are heard
 Soft murmuring) was too weak to overcome,
 Though aided by wild winds, the groans and shrieks
 Of human victims, offered up to appease
 Or to propitiate. And, if living eyes
 Had visionary faculties to see
 The thing that hath been as the thing that is,
 Aghast we might behold this crystal Mere
 Bedimmed with smoke, in wreaths voluminous,
 Flung from the body of devouring fires, . . .’
 (IX. 679–703)

Why does Wordsworth allow this great former shock to his conscience back in? Up to this point, the Wanderer has been advocating Imperialism, the white man’s burden as educator and the possibility of a return to the land. Here, the verse picks up that circling assonantal music which is inherent in all of these descriptions: ‘circuit . . . sea-girt

... unheard', and the conflation of the natural and the human as the wild winds which work two ways, to swell the river to cataracts, and to amplify 'the groans and shrieks | Of human victims'. Wordsworth even tempts what Eliade would call the trans-historical: 'The thing that hath been as the thing that is'.

It is only a little step back to the solutions for such primitivist dangers. Ostensibly they lie with a conception of history which posits change:

'—A few rude monuments of mountain-stone
Survive; all else is swept away.—How bright
The appearances of things! From such, how changed
The existing worship; and with those compared,
The worshippers how innocent and blest!
So wide the difference, a willing mind
Might almost think, at this affecting hour,
That paradise, the lost abode of man,
Was raised again: and to a happy few,
In its original beauty, here restored.'

(710–19)

If ever a work of literature was damned by the opening sentence of one review it was Jeffrey's famous four word put-down of *The Excursion*, 'This will never do.'⁴⁶ And that might be what the modern secular reader would make of this conclusion of the arguments of a dialogue poem which has aspirations to being the highest Christian form, the theodicy: this looks like it seeks to justify the ways of the Church of England to man. But to revert to Eliade, if not entirely for mystical reasons, to shift from human sacrifice back to paradise regained⁴⁷ suggests a redemption of time: 'sea-girt isle', but also 'sceptred isle . . . This other Eden, demi-paradise | This fortress built by nature for herself.'⁴⁸ This England isn't exactly set off on a pattern of 'ascent and progress in the main'. Rather, the return effected by the Pastor is one which tries to reconcile the historical—'a few rude monuments of mountain stone'—and a human hint of what might be 'lost' if we write this material into an irrecoverable past, the meaning of which is merely a matter for conjecture or dispute.

In a way, this is where Wordsworth brings together the competing intellectual influences on his political life—Hobbes, Rousseau, Burke

⁴⁶ Jeffrey, in *Wordsworth, The Critical Heritage*, p. 382.

⁴⁷ See Welsford, p. 104 on the allusion to *Paradise Regained*.

⁴⁸ William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, Act II, sc 1, ll. 42–3.

and Godwin—within the institutions of the modern state, and as that develops, wicker man, gallows, guillotine and gibbet have given way to ‘English Heritage’ or even ‘National Trust’. The twenty-three year-old Wordsworth’s first tour round Stonehenge had ended thus in 1793, in a stanza never to appear in print in his lifetime. He did then think that while Reason might destroy sites of imprisonment, privilege and superstition, it might still allow us to preserve one structure from the primitive past:

Heroes of Truth pursue your march, uptear
Th’Oppressor’s dungeon from its deepest base;
High o’er the towers of Pride undaunted rear
Resistless in your might the herculean mace
Of Reason; let foul Error’s monster race
Dragged from their dens start at the light with pain
And die; pursue your toils, till not a trace
Be left on earth of Superstition’s reign,
Save that eternal pile which frowns on Sarum’s Plain.
(Salisbury Plain, 1793, st. 61)