

### Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, Books Nine and Ten: Revolutionary Ideals

“Foreman stand by giving directions from blueprints, but the blueprints do not correspond. A few eccentrics will labor only at little corners of their own. A great many struggle to keep standing what others would tear down. Some are doing nothing constructive; workmen who have turned against their work, or inhabitants who dislike the way the alterations are turning out... Meanwhile, in the distance coming closer may be seen a band of armed attackers, whether gangsters or policemen is not clear, but obviously bent on stopping the whole proceeding.

“The house so beset is France in the fifth summer of the Revolution. The approaching band is the armed force of monarchial Europe. The distracted throng is a babel of revolutionists, royalists and republicans, constitutionalists and insurrectionists, civilly sworn clergy, refractory clergy, renegade clergy, aristocrats and plebeians, Jacobins, Girondists, Mountaineers, Vendéans, Muscadins, federalists, moderatists and Enragés.” —Robert Palmer, 1894

#### Book Ninth [*Residence in France*]

9.1-39—The state of Wordsworth's mind at the time and his move to France. The opening epic simile of the river and the short simile of pasture both help embody the feeling of being restless, of returning and renewing the course of retrospection—though the former is about the poem and the later his youthful, unattached state at the time.

9.40-80--A catalogue of sights in Paris and his visit to the ruins of the former Bastille. The catalogue parallels in several ways the first catalogue of London in book seven.

9.81-125—His settling in Orleans and the local political realities, among other things reveal his buffered attitudes towards the culture shock about him. We learn that Wordsworth becomes truly supportive of the Revolution.

9.126-217—His friendship with the Royalist soldiers might then be surprising, yet he also uses this to show how he can as a poet pay attention to human detail and motivation, as well as possess an ability to find the admirable in them. Still, he does explain his resistance to their arguments, too.

9.218-267a—A longer passage that explains the sources of Wordsworth's egalitarian convictions, which he attributes to both his rural upbringing and the academic culture at Cambridge.

9.267b-292—The war with Austria and the soldiers' desire to fight against the Revolution. Notice how his judgment of the people 's dignity is part of what persuades him to oppose his friends.

9.293-437--Michael Beaupuy and their mutually shared political ideals and desires. 9.329-347 in particular is an epic catalogue that provides a short-hand summary of much of the republican political theory. Wordsworth is honest enough to see their youthful glee in accounts of court corruption. The second catalogue of ancient republican ideals is also revealing of their mindset.

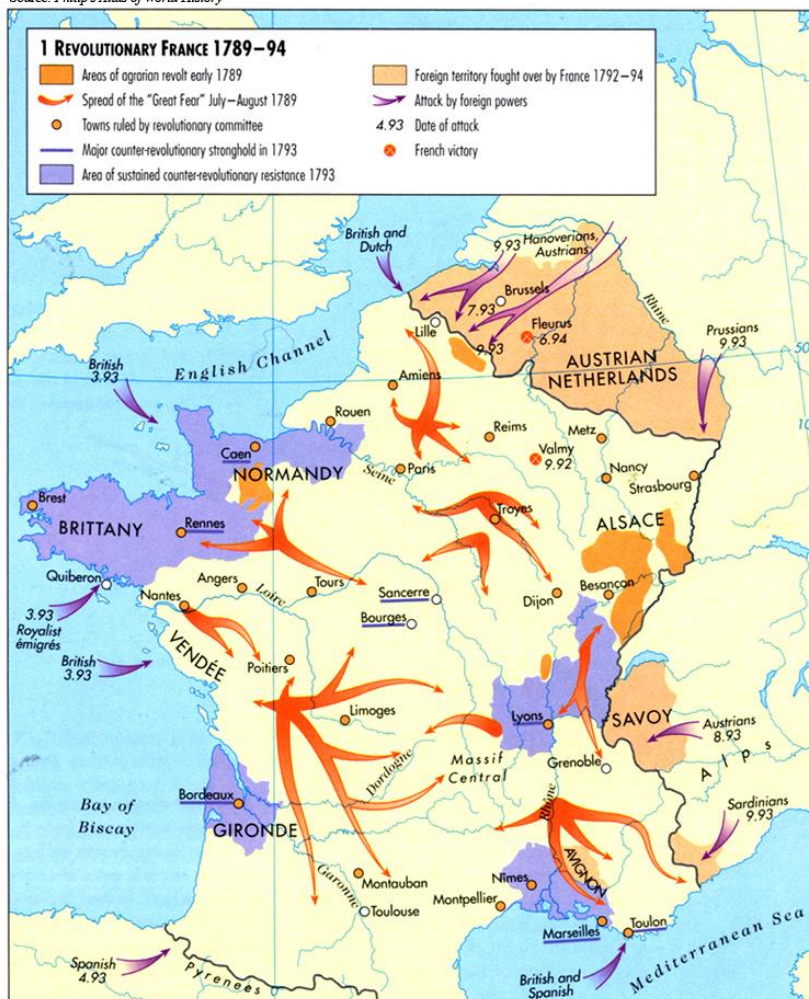
9.438-555—Three longer descriptions of Wordsworth's own state of mind, along with the caveats concerning the ruin of Chartreuse Abbey and his chivalric imaginations while visiting Blois Castle. His high idealizations that the revolution would eliminate poverty is of particular note. There is some irony in the chivalric and heroic ideals that he fed his imagination on, while a supporter of the Revolution.

9.556-935—The long poem-within-a-poem, the account of *Vandracour and Julia* is an interesting example of this mixture of sentiment and revolutionary class zeal.

### Discussion Questions for Book Ninth

1. What was Wordsworth looking for in France?
2. What stand out as the most essential characteristics of Michael Beaupuy?
3. Is chivalry compatible with republicanism? Why and/or why not?
4. Is Wordsworth fair to his ideological opponents?
5. What characteristics of melodrama does the *Vandracour and Julia* episode exhibit? Which ones does it not? Is that significant?

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▲ The French Revolution did not occur simultaneously throughout the country, but spread out into the countryside from urban centres. Some areas remained stubbornly resistant to revolutionary rule, but by the mid-1790s even these were brought under the control of central government. The crowned heads of Europe feared the spread of revolutionary fervour into their own countries, and were thus anxious to quell the revolutionary French. However, the Austrians were eventually defeated at Fleurus, while the Prussians were repulsed in Alsace, as were the Sardinians in Savoy, the Spanish in the south, and the British on the Vendée coast and the Mediterranean. Avignon (a papal state) was incorporated into France in 1791.

Book Tenth [*Residence in France and French Revolution*]

10.1-37—The deposal of the French king and the declaration of the Republic. An extended simile (which is even more extended in the 1850 version) that imagines the invading armies as a kind of Mongol hoard that is turned back in fear.

10.38-127—Arrival after the 1792 September Massacres, and the denouncing of Robespierre by Louvet. Wordsworth describes his own fear while residing in Paris for these few months, as well as what he saw while there. He almost prayed for a kind of Pentecost.

10.128-201a—His mindset at the time was one of a continued faith in the revolution, a higher view of humanity, and his thinking back to school themes against tyranny. His disappointment in himself for returning home.

10.201b-274—Returns to England during the Wilberforce campaign against slavery, yet he admits that it did not hold his interest, in part because he believed slavery would fade if the Revolution finished its work in France. Shocked that England declares war on France, and he feels isolated in his hopes for a French victory.

10.275-305—Transition passage recounting his seeing the naval fleet on the Isle of Wight before they sailed.

10.306-345—The Reign of Terror, the division between Catholicism and the Religion of Reason, and those who feed upon the carnage.

10.346-465—Madame Roland is condemned by the Terror. France turns back the invaders. Wordsworth is divided--his growing despair at the bloodshed and carnage and his belief that suffering can still bring great nobility.

10.466-566—The Day Robespierre died. Wordsworth describes his being at peace near the river Levan and visiting the grave of an old schoolteacher. When he hears the news of Robespierre's death, he rejoices. [The end of book ten in the 1850 version, and perhaps originally Wordsworth's intent. The 1805 book ten naturally breaks here.]

10.567-656—His continued, admittedly somewhat naive, trust in the Republic. In particular he names the kind of criticisms that Edmund Burke brought and why Wordsworth was unable to take them seriously.

10.657-790—A long recapitulation of the arc of his faith and doubt from 1792 until 1794.

10.791-900—His despair once France begins a war of aggression. His radical trust for a season in Godwin's political explanations, and his eventual disappointment. [The 1850, 11.303-334 is worth reading; it further lines out the nihilism that Wordsworth hit bottom with.]

10.901-965—Dorothy's encouragement to William, and his imagination of Coleridge being more present. His anger at Napoleon's rise to power and having himself crowned emperor.

10.966-1038—Compares France's current pessimistic state with the even worse situation in Sicily where Coleridge is visiting. Yet there is still a society of the noble living and dead. He ends by offering a catalogue of the classical poets of Sicily. He ends with an image of Coleridge at Mount Etna, a worshipper of Nature and triumphant then.

### Discussion Questions for Book Tenth

1. What is combined effect for the reader of Wordsworth's descriptions of the more bloody events of the French Revolution?
2. How does he map out for his various responses—faith, shock, disappointment, despair, nihilism, renewed faith?
3. What makes the death of Robespierre so significant for him (and others)?
4. Is Wordsworth capable of political realism/ realpolitick? Why and/or why not?

### **William Godwin (1756–1836) *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793):**

1. Political institutions corrupt natural human innocence.
2. They are necessary evils in the face of human destructiveness.
3. They will gradually disappear with the spread of reason and moral understanding.
4. This moral understanding arises from the cultivation of ethical sensibilities.
5. Moral understanding includes moral sentiment and empathy.
6. This cultivation depends upon good breeding and education.
7. Justice is the chief principle of society in which all individuals receive their fair share.
8. Public discourse and debate is one of the chief means of this education.
9. He rejects private property and marriage as expressions of this institutional enslavement.
10. He prophesied a common era in the future when mastery over disease would make people immortal.

A thousand times have I asked myself, as your tender sympathy led me to do, "why was he taken away?" and I have answered the question as you have done. In fact, there is no other answer which can satisfy and lay the mind at rest. Why have we a choice, and a will, and a notion of justice and injustice, enabling us to be moral agents? Why have we sympathies that make the best of us so afraid of inflicting pain and sorrow, which yet we see dealt about so lavishly by the Supreme Governor? Why should our notions of right towards each other, and to all sentient beings within our influence, differ so widely from what appears to be His notion and rule, if everything were to end here? Would it not be blasphemy to say that, upon the supposition of the thinking principle being destroyed by death, however inferior we may be to the great Cause and Ruler of things, we have more of love in our nature than He has? The thought is monstrous; and yet how to get rid of it, except upon the supposition of another and a better world, I do not see. As to my departed brother, who leads our minds at present to these reflections, he walked all his life pure among many impure. Except a little hastiness of temper, when anything was done in a clumsy or bungling manner, or when improperly contradicted upon occasions of not much importance, he had not one vice of his profession. I never heard an oath, or even an indelicate expression or allusion, from him in my life; his modesty was equal to that of the purest woman. In prudence, in meekness, in self-denial, in fortitude, in just desires and elegant and refined enjoyments, with an entire simplicity of manners, life, and habit, he was all that could be wished for in man; strong in health, and of a noble person, with every hope about him that could render life dear, thinking of, and living only for, others, — and we see what has been his end ! So good must be better; so high must be destined to be higher.

--Wordsworth, Letter 12 March 1805