

WORDSWORTH'S ANGLO-FRENCH PAMPHLET: PUBLIC ARGUMENT AND PRIVATE CONFESSION IN "A LETTER TO THE BISHOP OF LLANDAFF"

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*Wordsworth's first substantial composition on returning from France in December 1792 was his "Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff," an intended contribution to the British pamphlet war in which he declares himself to be a Republican, an egalitarian and a defender of regicide. Wordsworth adopts a Painite stance and prose style, continuing the polemic against Burke and confronting Richard Watson, the Bishop of Llandaff, with the betrayal of his former liberal values. Yet he also brings to bear first-hand knowledge of revolutionary France, citing Watson's French counterpart, Abbé Grégoire, the revolutionary Bishop of Blois, and the Breton peasant-politician Michel Gérard ('Père Gérard'), another iconic figure of the Revolution, who may have been some kind of role model for Wordsworth. He includes, too, a comment on "the present period," two striking quotations from Racine's *Athalie*, a tragedy about king-killing, royal succession and a concealed child. Analysing these references and Wordsworth's public self-fashioning as a French revolutionary eyewitness entering the fray of British political debate, this article also uncovers coded allusions to Wordsworth's scandalous personal life. Left unfinished and unpublished, Wordsworth's outspoken "Letter" reveals the ultra-radical political views that were one (temporary) legacy of his French experience but it also holds clues about his inner state of mind as he resumed his English life separated, seemingly by his own volition, from his French mistress Annette Vallon and their new-born love-child. By examining its polemical tactics, its strategic use of Anglo-French comparison and its interweaving of public and private codes, the article shows that the "Letter" is a more significant and revealing document than has previously been recognised.*

In what state of mind did Wordsworth return to England in December 1792, after his momentous, life-changing year in revolutionary France? Many of his later writings bear traces of his French experience and testify to the complexity of any answer to that question, but the most direct evidence comes not from retrospective accounts such as *The Prelude* but from an unpublished pamphlet he wrote probably during February and March 1793. Entitled "A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff on the Extraordinary Avowal of his Political Principles contained in the Appendix to his late Sermon," this was his first substantial composition after returning from France, drafted while he was living in London with his brother Richard at Staple Inn. Though unpublished and, to judge from the sole surviving manuscript, unfinished,¹ the pamphlet sheds light on both Wordsworth's political convictions and his sense of personal identity as he made the transition from revolutionary France to the very different world he found back home. His movement between French and English discourses, and between public and private themes, produces a strangely hybrid text which makes his first venture into political pamphleteering a more significant and revealing document than has

¹ The manuscript, held by the Wordsworth Trust, Grasmere (DCMS 8), is a fair copy with unfinished authorial amendments and a missing passage marked by asterisks. It lacks a final page, breaking off mid-sentence; how much text is lost is conjectural. Subsequent references in brackets in the text are to the annotated edition in vol. 1 of *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

previously been recognised, though, paradoxically, its greatest personal revelation – once we learn to decode it – is that he had something important to conceal.

As a work of polemical prose, due to be published anonymously under the signature “By a Republican,” the “Letter” stands in marked contrast to the two long poems which Wordsworth did publish at this time, *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches*, released together, in quarto editions, on 29 January 1793.² The first of these dates from his time as a student in Cambridge; the second is a record of his walking tour through France and the Alps in 1790 with his college friend Robert Jones, though it was mostly composed in 1792, when he was living in Blois and Orléans. Preparing them for publication and seeing them through press was the first task he undertook on returning from France: in career terms, an important step, since these were his first published volumes. On the title pages, he presents himself to the public as a respectable, university-educated poet, “W. Wordsworth, B.A. of St. John’s, Cambridge,” writing topographical poetry in establishes genres – the “epistle” and the verse “sketch” – about fashionable locations: the English Lakes and the “Italian, Grison, Swiss, and Savoyard Alps.” In *Descriptive Sketches*, epigraphs from Virgil and Lucretius and a formal dedication to Jones, now ordained and a fellow of St. John’s College, complete the impression of conventionality and conformity. The authorial self-fashioning could hardly be more different from his self-presentation on the title page of the “Letter.” By declaring himself “a Republican,” Wordsworth was positioning himself on the radical extreme of British politics, signalling his support for the French republic and opposition to the British constitution, and using a term which by February 1793 had become, as Joseph Priestley observed, “one of the most opprobrious in the English language.”³

What prompted this provocative, though anonymous, display of radicalism was the publication on 30 January 1793 of Richard Watson, the Bishop of Llandaff’s appendix to a sermon he had delivered in Westminster eight years earlier and was printing for the first time. The *Sermon* itself was one target of Wordsworth’s polemic, since Watson had used it to defend God’s infinite wisdom in creating both rich and poor, and to give reasons why the poor should “be perfectly contented with their conditions, and be satisfied that things could not have been better ordered.”⁴ The damaging effects of poverty and the injustice of the economic system that perpetuates it are major themes of Wordsworth’s pamphlet and he takes Watson to task for adopting what he sees as a fundamentally unchristian position. But it is Watson’s *Appendix* that is the focus of his attack. Watson had previously been a supporter the French Revolution – he was known, Wordsworth reminds him, as the “levelling prelate, bishop of the dissenters” (1: 31) – but the execution of Louis XVI on 21 January had occasioned a complete change of heart and a renunciation of his liberal principles. Watson denounces the execution of the king as an act of savagery, declares republicanism “the most

² William Wordsworth, *An Evening Walk. An Epistle. In Verse. Addressed to a Young Lady, from the Lakes of the North of England* (London: J. Johnson, 1793); *Descriptive Sketches. In Verse. Taken during a Pedestrian Tour in the Italian, Grison, Swiss, and Savoyard Alps* (London: J. Johnson, 1793).

³ Joseph Priestley, *An Appeal to the Public on the Subject of the Riots in Birmingham, Part II* (London: J. Johnson, 1792) 113. For early influences on Wordsworth’s republicanism, see Zera Fink, “Wordsworth and the English Republican Tradition,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 47 (1948): 107-108; and Leslie F. Chard, II, *Dissenting Republican: Wordsworth’s Early Life and Thought in their Political Context* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972). Both studies, however, underestimate the French resonance of the word and the political dangerousness of Wordsworth’s self-identification as a “Republican” at this moment, just months after the declaration of the French republic, and with Britain and France now at war. Wordsworth, too, may have underestimated this, and his decision not to publish the pamphlet may reflect the advice of others – possibly his publisher Joseph Johnson and/or his lawyer brother Richard – in a better position to judge.

⁴ Richard Watson, *A Sermon Preached Before the Stewards of the Westminster Dispensary at Their Anniversary Meeting, in Charlotte Street Chapel, April 1785. With an Appendix. By R. Watson, D.D. Lord Bishop of Llandaff* (London: T. Cadell and T. Evans, 1793) 3.

odious of all tyrannies,”⁵ rejects the French doctrines of Liberty and Equality as total perversions of those principles, and, while admitting that the British constitution is not perfect, insists that is “far too excellent to be amended by peasants and mechanics.”⁶

In framing his reply, Wordsworth takes in, too, Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), the source for most of Watson’s loyalist rhetoric and the prototype for the “extraordinary” act of apostasy involved in what Wordsworth sarcastically terms Watson’s “political confession of faith” (1: 32). Much of the critical commentary on the “Letter,” including Owen and Smyser’s in the standard Clarendon Press edition, has been concerned with identifying Wordsworth’s own sources, placing his pamphlet in the context of the French Revolution debate in Britain, and gauging the precise level of Wordsworth’s political radicalization. Though the exact date of composition is not known, it is now accepted that the “Letter” was composed soon after Watson’s pamphlet, whilst the “modish lamentation” (1: 32) for the executed king, to which Wordsworth refers, was still widespread.⁷ Most commentators now agree, too, that Wordsworth’s stance on most political issues (parliamentary reform, universal suffrage, social equality, the absurdity of titles, primogeniture) is Paineite rather than Godwinian.⁸ Godwin’s *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, published on 14 February 1793, was once considered a possible source, but Wordsworth’s engagement with it appears to postdate the “Letter,” whereas he draws continuously, without naming Paine, on the two parts of *Rights of Man* (1791, 1792) and Paine’s earlier tract, *Common Sense* (1776).⁹

In a pattern of Anglo-French cross-reference we will see replicated on other levels, the echoes of Paine are balanced by extensive citation of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. This includes a direct quotation from the *Contrat social* (1762) and allusions to other Rousseau texts as well as to the strongly Rousseauvian *Déclaration des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen* of 1789.¹⁰ Where Wordsworth diverges most markedly from Paine is over the execution of Louis Capet. Paine who, as a Quaker, did not believe in capital punishment, had voted against this sentence in the trial of Louis in the National Convention, thus incurring the wrath of Marat, but Wordsworth condones the execution, dismissing Watson’s exaggerated concern for “the personal sufferings of the late royal martyr” (1: 32) and insisting that, had Watson “attended to the history of the French revolution as minutely as its importance demands,” rather than bewailing the king’s death he would instead “have regretted that the blind fondness of his people had placed a human being in that monstrous situation which rendered him unaccountable before a human tribunal” (1: 32). In justifying the regicide, Wordsworth takes, as Gregory Dart notes,¹¹ the Montagnard line, a position that few British radicals would openly espouse and one which shows he is still thinking in French terms, though writing for a British readership.

When he turns to the more general question of revolutionary violence, he takes a similarly radical line, arguing that “a time of revolution is not the season of true Liberty” since “the obstinacy & perversion of men is such that she is too often obliged to borrow the very arms of despotism to overthrow him, and in order to reign in peace must establish herself by violence. She deploras such stern necessity, but the safety of the people, her

⁵ Watson 19. Wordsworth quotes this passage in his reply (1: 35).

⁶ Watson 26.

⁷ For other examples of “modish lamentation,” see Owen and Smyser 1: 52.

⁸ Owen and Smyser 1: 23; Mary Moorman, *William Wordsworth: A Biography. The Early Years 1770-1803* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957) 255.

⁹ For echoes of Paine, see Edward Niles Hooker, “Wordsworth’s ‘Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff,’” *Studies in Philology*, 28.3 (1931): 522-31.

¹⁰ For Rousseau’s influence on the “Letter,” see Gregory Dart, *Rousseau, Robespierre and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 163-67.

¹¹ Dart 164.

supreme law, is her consolation.” (1: 33-34) This rationalization of political violence closely anticipates that of Robespierre in his famous speech on the principles of political morality, where he defines revolutionary government as “le despotisme de la liberté contre la tyrannie.”¹² Such arguments from extreme expediency, which led in April 1793 to the formation of the Committee of Public Safety and later to the Terror, were increasingly common in France from mid-1792 onwards, but rarely heard in England. In invoking them, Wordsworth again shows himself to be still immersed in French revolutionary discourse, adopting positions and using language that would almost certainly have been considered seditious in an English context.

Wordsworth offers a second justification of political violence by arguing that, such is the level of oppression people suffered “in all the old governments,” it is inevitable that once they gain their liberty, they will initially abuse it: “The animal just released from its stall will exhaust the overflow of its spirits in a round of wanton vagaries, but it will soon return to itself and enjoy its freedom in moderate and regular delight.” (1: 38) The ‘liberated animal’ metaphor was a familiar one in both French and British writing on the Revolution: Mary Wollstonecraft, for example, in her *Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* (1794), compares the French people to a “wild elephant,” goaded in captivity until it finally breaks free, then “treading down with blind fury friends as well as foes.”¹³ Wordsworth’s more homely version of the metaphor, of a farm animal released from its stall, is notable for its euphemism: “a round of wanton vagaries” is an oddly benign description¹⁴ of acts of violence that included the September Massacres of 1792, whose immediate aftermath he had experienced at first hand in Paris, and about which he was later to write in such shocking terms in *The Prelude*.

As his private correspondence shows, Wordsworth was soon to take a very different line on revolutionary violence. By June 1794, while reaffirming his support for democracy and his opposition to the British constitution, he was telling William Mathews: “I recoil from the base idea of a revolution [...] I am a determined enemy to every species of violence.”¹⁵ The contradiction is stark, and, as many critics have pointed out,¹⁶ his altered view on this matter is clearly an important stage in the process of political realignment by which the radical extremist of early 1793 became the liberal moderate of 1798 and the Tory apologist of 1814. I want to make a different point, however, by emphasizing how, in the “Letter,” while entering the fray of British political debate, Wordsworth positions himself as an expert on *French* politics, a “Republican” with first-hand experience of revolutionary France, knowledge of its key events and locations, and personal insight into the thinking of the French people, including prominent politicians as well as ordinary citizens.

He was by no means the only such expert. The leading British commentator on revolutionary France was the expatriate poet and novelist Helen Maria Williams, whom Wordsworth had hoped to meet in Orléans or Paris but had missed. As he was drafting his

¹² Maximilien Robespierre, “Sur les principes de morale politique,” *Œuvres de Robespierre*, ed. Auguste Vermorel (Paris: Cournol, 1866) 302 (speech to the Convention, 5 February 1794). For Wordsworth’s “rehearsal of the Revolutionary poetics of violence” in the “Letter,” see Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989) 184-85.

¹³ Mary Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (London: J. Johnson, 1794) 32.

¹⁴ The manuscript shows Wordsworth worrying at the wording here: the phrase initially reads “commit a thousand vagaries” (1: 38 n.).

¹⁵ *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: Vol. I. The Early Years 1787-1805*, 2nd edn., ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Chester L. Shaver (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967) 124.

¹⁶ Eugene L. Stelzig, “‘The Shield of Human Nature:’ Wordsworth’s Reflections on the Revolution in France,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 45.4 (1991): 415-31 (423); James Chandler, *Wordsworth’s Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

“Letter,” she was preparing a third volume of her best-selling *Letters from France*, first published in 1790.¹⁷ Collaborating with her on this volume was the co-founder of the *Analytical Review*, Thomas Christie, who had previously published his own *Letters on the Revolution in France and on the New Constitution* (1791), a polemical reply to Burke which, like Wordsworth’s “Letter,” drew on first-hand knowledge of France. Another influential eye-witness account, with an opposite political message, was Arthur Young’s *The Example of France: A Warning to Britain*, published in London four days before Watson’s *Sermon and Appendix*. Like Watson’s, this was a recantation text, reversing the largely sympathetic account of the Revolution Young had given in his *Travels in France* (1792). The year 1793 also saw the first publications from the “English Press,” a radical publishing house launched in Paris by Williams’s partner John Hurford Stone.¹⁸ Among these was John Oswald’s *The Government of the People; or, a Sketch of the Constitution for the Universal Common-wealth* (1793), a follow-up to his *Review of the Constitution of Great Britain* (1791). As such titles suggest, preoccupation with constitutions was key feature of this phase of the Revolution debate, reflected both in Watson’s *Appendix* and in Wordsworth’s reply. Like Christie and the self-declared “Anglo-Franc” Oswald,¹⁹ Wordsworth writes from both French and English perspectives, countering Watson’s defence of the English constitution with reference to French constitutional theory.

Wordsworth’s use of Williams’s *Letters* for source material for *The Prelude* is well documented²⁰ and his knowledge of Young’s *Example of France* pamphlet is also likely, given its prominence and timing. His familiarity with more marginal “Anglo-Franc” publications such as Oswald’s remains conjectural. So too does his level of contact, if any, with the radical émigré circles out of which the “English Press” and other expatriate publishing ventures emerged. When in Paris in October to December 1792, did he form links with the newly formed “British Club,” of which Stone was president and other British and American writers including Paine, Williams, Wollstonecraft, Joel Barlow, Sampson Perry, John Oswald and Robert Merry members or affiliates?²¹ Was he present, as Kenneth Johnston and others have speculated,²² at the Club’s “English Civic Feast” at White’s Hotel on 18 November at which the French republic was toasted to the tune of “Ça ira,” and at which a series of other toasts were proposed: among them, to “[t]he speedy abolition of all hereditary title and feudal distinctions;” to “[t]he Ladies of Great Britain and Ireland, particularly those who have distinguished themselves by their writings in favour of the French revolution;” and to “the new mode of advertising good books by proclamation and the

¹⁷ For the publication history, see Helen Maria Williams, *Letters Written in France, in the Summer 1790, to a Friend in England; Containing Various Anecdotes Relative to the French Revolution*, ed. Neil Fraistat and Susan S. Lanser (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2001) 20-25.

¹⁸ See Madeleine B. Stern, “The English Press in Paris and Its Successors, 1793-1852,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 74 (Jan. 1980): 307-59; and Simon Macdonald, “English-Language Newspapers in Revolutionary France,” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 36.1 (2013): 17-33.

¹⁹ The phrase “Anglo-Franc” appears to be Oswald’s coinage, applied to himself on the title page of several of his publications. See David Erdman, *Commerce des lumières: John Oswald and the British in Paris, 1790-1793* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986) 189.

²⁰ Deborah Kennedy, “Revolutionary Tales: Helen Maria Williams’s *Letters from France* and William Wordsworth’s ‘Vaudracour and Julia’,” *Wordsworth Circle*, 21.3 (1990): 109-14.

²¹ See Rachel Rogers, “White’s Hotel: A Junction of British Radical Culture in Early 1790s Paris,” *Caliban: French Journal of English Studies*, 33 (2013): 153-72; and John G. Alger, “The British Colony in Paris, 1792-1793,” *English Historical Review*, 13.52 (1898): 672-94.

²² Kenneth Johnston, *The Hidden Wordsworth: Poet, Lover, Rebel, Spy* (New York: Norton, 1998) 325; Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) 82.

court of King's Bench"²³ – an ironic reference to the Royal Proclamation against Seditious Writings of May 1792 and to Paine's forthcoming trial *in absentia* for seditious libel, publicity for which had served to boost the already huge sales of *Rights of Man*? If not, what else was he doing that evening? Tossing and turning in his Parisian garret, having Shakespearean nightmares about the September Massacres "a little month" earlier, as he tells us in *The Prelude* (1805: X, 65)?²⁴ Not according to the "Letter." Nobody loses sleep over "a round of wanton vagaries," and there is no sign in the "Letter" that in 1793 Wordsworth regarded the recent killings as anything other than part of the "stern necessity" of the revolutionary situation.²⁵

Whatever Wordsworth's contacts in Paris and whatever his knowledge of the émigré publishing scene, the "Letter" is an Anglo-French pamphlet, shaped as much by French thinking about the Revolution as by the British 'Revolution Debate' to which it was ostensibly contributing. Its most distinctive and effective manoeuvres are, precisely, comparative ones. Consider, for a moment, how Wordsworth develops his point about the "idle cry of modish lamentation" (1: 32) over the execution of the king. Having referred to the "monstrous" nature of a political system in which a monarch was deemed unaccountable to a human tribunal (i.e. the doctrine of the "divine right of kings"), he then does what no other British pamphleteer does when addressing this topic: quotes the Abbé Henri Grégoire, who, at the opening of the National Convention, had declared that there was not a citizen present at the *journée* of 10 August 1792, the bloody confrontation at the Tuileries, "who, if he could have dragged before the eyes of Louis the corpse of one of his murdered brothers, might not have exclaimed to him, Tyran, voilà ton ouvrage" (Tyrant, that is your handiwork).²⁶ The citation is a bold rhetorical move, underlining Wordsworth's point about the difference between genuine heart-felt sorrow for the victims of a ruthless tyrant and the shallow, conventionalized sympathy expressed by Watson for the king. But it is also a brilliant deployment of what Roland Barthes calls *écriture révolutionnaire*. In defining this mode of writing, a distinctive product of the 1789 Revolution, Barthes cites Baudelaire's remark about "the grandiloquent truth of that gestures on life's great occasions" and gives as an example the defiant words of the Girondin deputy Guadet as he was arrested and about to face the guillotine: "Executioner, do your duty. Go take my head to the tyrants of my country. It has always turned them pale; once severed, it will turn them paler still."²⁷ Grégoire's "Tyran, voilà ton ouvrage," as quoted by Wordsworth, captures the same sense of theatrical amplification, confirming Barthes's point that *écriture révolutionnaire* was an exact writing, life-size and adequate to the occasion, though now seemingly turgid and overblown.

As Nicholas Roe has noted, Wordsworth's citation of Abbé Grégoire has a special appropriateness here because he may well have known him personally.²⁸ Grégoire had been

²³ "Account from the Newspapers of an English Civic Feast at White's Hotel in Paris, on the 18th of November, 1792," *Annual Register, 1792*, reprint edn. (London: F. and C. Rivington, 1798) 2: 153-55. Based on reports in, e.g., *Journal de Perlet* 2, no. 61 (21 November 1721): 485-87.

²⁴ *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979). Subsequent references in brackets are to this edition.

²⁵ This was a view widely held by the French revolutionists and shared by an Englishman Wordsworth claimed to have met regularly in Paris, James Watt, Jr, son of the famous engineer. Watt wrote home in a letter to his father on 5 September 1792 about his "involuntary horror" at the scenes he was witnessing but added: "at the same time I see the absolute necessity of them". Quoted in Eric Robinson, "An English Jacobin: James Watt, Junior, 1769-1848," *Cambridge Historical Journal*, 11.3 (1955): 353.

²⁶ Owen and Smyser 1: 32. Grégoire's speech, delivered on 15 November 1792 (not the opening of the Convention, which took place two months earlier, but the day he was elected president, after calling for the king to be tried) was reported in *Le Gazette Nationale, ou Le Moniteur Universel* and elsewhere.

²⁷ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (*Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, 1953), trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981) 21-22.

²⁸ Roe 66-67; cf. Johnston 307-309.

elected Bishop of Blois in February 1791 and presided at meetings of the Blois branch of the Friends of the Constitution which Wordsworth may also have attended. Wordsworth, though, is not name-dropping, he is citing Grégoire for rhetorical effect. Part of the force of that rhetoric is contrastive, since he sets Grégoire directly against Watson, as a “bishop, a man of philosophy and humanity as distinguished as your Lordship” (1: 32), but of an opposite moral and political character. Contrast was a familiar device in literary and visual satire, given new currency by George Rowlandson’s much-reproduced caricature *The Contrast 1792*, juxtaposing “British Liberty” and “French Liberty,” variations on which became a staple of loyalist propaganda.²⁹ Wordsworth borrows the technique to opposite political effect, to juxtapose the qualities of two bishops, the lapsed liberal of Llandaff who defended monarchy and preached the necessity of inequality, and the ardent republican of Blois who coined the memorable saying “les rois sont dans l’ordre moral ce que les monstres sont dans l’ordre physique” (kings are in the moral world what monsters are in the natural world)³⁰ – a saying to which Wordsworth probably alludes in his reference to the “monstrous situation” (1: 32) of royal unaccountability.

An analogy to Wordsworth’s polemical tactics here is the anonymous pamphlet, *Paine and Burke Contrasted* (1792), which performs textually the kind of binary opposition Rowlandson and others were using in visual satire.³¹ By 1793, the point at which Wordsworth joined the pamphlet war, the comparative principle was a familiar enough device to make possible the publication of an anthology entitled *A Comparative Display of the Different Opinions of the Most Distinguished British Writers on the Subject of the French Revolution*.³² Though not strictly binary, since it includes a range of views on each topic, this book is a striking illustration of the self-consciousness of the Revolution debate in Britain, which was being anthologized even as it unfolded. By 1793, the intertextual tactics of the debate had acquired a level of finesse which meant that writers operated through a kind of short-hand, mobilizing well-established arguments in an abbreviated form, alluding glancingly (and often playfully) to other positions, and using a heavily ritualized form of intellectual combat.³³

In this context, what is notable about Wordsworth’s “Letter,” if we examine it for its discursive and stylistic properties, rather than simply its doctrinal content, is its assimilation of the codes both of the British pamphlet war and of French *écriture révolutionnaire*. The device of contrast is one such code, and Wordsworth’s juxtaposition of Burke and Paine is as strategic as his contrasting of Watson and Grégoire. Another code is radical irony, a device Wordsworth learned from Paine, whose writing is full of insolent ripostes intended to subvert and mock his opponents’ arguments. There are several attempts at this kind of writing in the “Letter.” One of the most strongly Paineite sections is where Wordsworth gives his own version of the “governing beyond the grave” passage in *Rights of Man*, where Paine ridicules

²⁹ See David Bindman, *The Shadow of the Guillotine: Britain and the French Revolution*, exhibition catalogue (London: British Museum Publications, 1989) 118-22 (nos. 71-76). The original design, engraved by Rowlandson, was by Lord George Murray.

³⁰ Speech at the opening of the Convention, 21 September 1792.

³¹ See David Duff, “Burke and Paine: Contrasts,” *The Cambridge Companion to British Writing of the French Revolution in the 1790s*, ed. Pamela Clemit (Cambridge University Press, 2011) 47-70.

³² [Anon.], *A Comparative Display of the Different Opinions of the Most Distinguished British Writers on the Subject of the French Revolution*, 2 vols. (London: J. Debrett, 1793)

³³ On this aspect of the pamphlet war, see Marilyn Butler, “Introduction,” *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and Revolution Controversy*, ed. Marilyn Butler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 2; Steven Blakemore, *Intertextual War: Edmund Burke and the French Revolution in the Writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine, and James Mackintosh* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997); and James T. Boulton’s foundational study, *The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963).

Burke's rewriting of Rousseau's theory of social contract as an inviolable compact between the living, the dead and the yet-to-be born.³⁴ Like Paine, if somewhat more clumsily, Wordsworth presents Burke's theory as a form of Gothic, Oriental grotesquerie, "a refinement in cruelty superiour to that which in the East yokes the living to the dead," in which, "by the indissoluble compact of a dead parchment, we are "bound to cherish a corse at the bosom, when reason might call aloud that it should be entombed." (1: 48) The technique of reductive analogy is similar to Paine's but the sentence is too laboured to be fully effective. Paine's wit is an art of concision (e.g., "governing beyond the grave") which Wordsworth reaches for but does quite match.

Another piece of quasi-Painite irony that slightly misfires and is in fact deleted on the manuscript of the "Letter" is where Wordsworth takes Watson to task for "faults of omission" (1: 48), namely passing over in silence two topical issues that were directly relevant to his argument: the campaign for parliamentary reform and the popular struggle for greater liberty and equality. "Your Lordship's conduct" in not mentioning "the two grand causes of this working of the popular mind," says Wordsworth, "brings to mind the story of a company of strolling comedians who gave out the play of Hamlet as the performance of the evening," but then tell the audience that "from circumstances of particular convenience it was hoped they would dispense with the omission of the character of – Hamlet" (1: 48 n.). This seems to be a cumbersome – and not especially funny – reworking of the 'Hamlet without the prince' joke, which rightly gets edited out of the fair copy.

Wordsworth makes a further attempt at humour in the subsequent paragraph when he pretends to ponder over the question of how to explain Watson's inconsistency. "In some parts of England," he writes,

it is quaintly said, when a drunken man is seen reeling towards his house, that he has business on both sides of the road. Observing your lordship's tortuous path, the spectators will be far from insinuating that you have partaken of Mr Burke's intoxicating bowl; they will content themselves, shaking their heads as you stagger along, with remarking that you have business on both sides of the road.

(1: 49)

The use of humorous idiomatic expressions for satirical effect is another of Paine's techniques: Wordsworth deploys it here, switching from the earnest tone of earlier parts of the "Letter" to restate the charge of apostasy by means of a figurative joke. His uneasiness with this playful register, however, is signalled by the awkward repetition of the punchline and by his clumsy attempt to intensify the metaphor of drunkenness through a reference to "Mr Burke's intoxicating bowl" (meaning the seductive power of Burke's prose). Rather than strengthening, the elaboration dulls the metaphor, as do the superfluous details about spectators "observing," "insinuating" and "shaking their heads." The basic analogy is an apt and amusing one and but the delivery of the joke is flawed.

Wordsworth comes closest to mastering the laconic Painite manner in the final (extant) paragraph of the "Letter," where he links the question of political consistency with that of transparency. Here, once again, he juxtaposes English and French examples, remarking that outright enemies of Liberty are far less dangerous than the enemies "lurking in our ranks," the false friends such as La Fayette or Mirabeau who assume "the insidious mask of patriotism" while plotting against the cause they profess to support (La Fayette and

³⁴ Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man, Common Sense and Other Political Writings*, ed. Mark Philp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 92; Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969) 194-95.

Mirabeau, heroes of the early phase of the Revolution, had been subsequently exposed as closet royalists, in the pay of or sympathetic to Louis). In his open hostility to the revolutionary cause he had previously supported, Watson had displayed an admirable transparency which leads Wordsworth to declare, with heavy irony: “we thank you for your desertion” (1: 49). Interestingly, in condemning furtive duplicity, he uses the metaphor of masking that was a ubiquitous trope of French revolutionary rhetoric,³⁵ but then uses a distinctively British form of rhetoric – deadpan humour – to ridicule the opposite, flagrant self-contradiction.

Elsewhere in the “Letter” Wordsworth uses other polemical devices that had become staple features of the British pamphlet war: ironic reversal, for example, where an opponent’s arguments or images are turned back on themselves, as in the many ripostes to Burke’s “age of chivalry” passage in the *Reflections*.³⁶ Wordsworth offers another variation on this well-worn theme, referring sarcastically to Burke’s “philosophic lamentation over the extinction of Chivalry” (1: 35) while mocking the “fatality by which the advocates of error furnish weapons for their own destruction.” (1: 35) The banter quickly subsides, however, when he turns to address Burke directly (“infatuated moralist!”) before resuming his reply to Watson, whom he accuses of “labouring under the same delusion” (1: 36).

Wordsworth provides his own version, too, of another set-piece of the Revolution debate, mockery of Burke’s reference to the “swinish multitude.” This ill-advised metaphor for the working class, gleefully adopted by Burke’s opponents, inspired numerous radical publications with ironic titles like *Pig’s Meat*, *Hog’s Wash*, and *The Rights of Swine*, all of which were devoted to educating ordinary people about their political rights in exactly the way Burke was objecting when he used the phrase.³⁷ In Wordsworth’s case, it is not so much Burke’s insulting metaphor that triggers the response, as Watson’s reprise of Burke’s argument in the *Appendix*, where he insists on the exclusion of “peasants and mechanics” from political representation on the grounds that their “utility [...] ceases when they affect to become legislators; when they intrude themselves into concerns, for which their education has not fitted them.”³⁸ Rather than confronting this egregious snobbery and discrimination by highlighting the plucky resolve of the British working class, as Thomas Spence, Daniel Isaac Eaton and other popular radicals did in their replies to Burke, Wordsworth draws instead on his French experience and invokes the counter-example of “Père Gérard.” This was the sobriquet of the Breton peasant-politician Michel Gérard who, as Deputy for Rennes from 1789, had played an important role in the establishment of the National Assembly by lending popular legitimacy to the largely middle-class Third Estate. Widely respected for his honesty, integrity and plain-speaking eloquence, Gérard had retired from politics in 1791 but his fame was perpetuated by the publication that year of Collot d’Herbois’s *Almanach du Père Gérard*, a cheaply priced almanac which borrows his name and ideas to popularize the precepts of the new constitution.³⁹ A highly effective piece of revolutionary propaganda, the *Almanach* depicts Père Gérard returning from Paris to his native Brittany and explaining to the local people the principles of the constitution through a series of twelve easily-understood

³⁵ Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (London: Methuen, 1986) 39 (chapter “The Rhetoric of Revolution,” 19-51)

³⁶ Burke 169-70. For polemical responses to the “age of chivalry” passage, see David Duff, *Romance and Revolution: Shelley and the Politics of a Genre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 21-30 (section “Antithesising Burke: Paine, Godwin, Mackintosh”).

³⁷ For these and other examples of this motif, see Duff, “Burke and Paine” 59-62.

³⁸ Watson 26-27.

³⁹ Jean-Marie Collot d’Herbois, *Almanach du Père Gérard, pour l’année 1792* (Paris: Buisson, 1792). For the publication history, see Michel Biard, “L’Almanach du Père Gérard, un exemple de diffusion des idées jacobines,” *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 283 (1991): 19-29.

conversations.⁴⁰ The *Almanach* went through numerous editions and was translated into several languages, including an English translation by John Oswald, jointly published in Paris and London.⁴¹

In contemporary illustrations,⁴² Père Gérard was shown as the embodiment of the democratic ideal, a politician addressing ordinary people not *de haut en bas* but as “a man speaking to men” (and women and children). As such, he may have served as an important role model for Wordsworth, many of whose poems, including the French Revolution sections of *The Excursion* (1814), feature Gérard-like versions of himself engaged in earnest political discussion in country settings much like the one in the *Almanach*. Despite the brief description of Père Gérard in Williams’s *Letters Written in France*,⁴³ his name was not well known in England in 1793, which makes Wordsworth’s reference to him in the “Letter” all the more revealing. Père Gérard’s “blunt honesty,” Wordsworth writes, “overawed and baffled the refinements of hypocritical patriots,” and his name “will long be mentioned with admiration and respect through the eighty-three departments” (1: 39). His example serves not only to refute the argument of Watson that a peasant or mechanic could never be a useful legislator, but also as a French foil to “hypocritical” British (or Irish) patriots like Burke, who put their rhetorical “refinements” at the service of anti-democratic values. Barthes, in his analysis of *écriture révolutionnaire*, singles out the newsletters of the foul-speaking stove mechanic “Le Père Duchesne,” pseudonym of the radical Parisian journalist and revolutionary leader Jacques Hébert, to illustrate a special mode of discourse – full of expletives – that marked the revolutionary situation.⁴⁴ *Père Gérard*, with his more wholesome discourse, is *Père Duchesne*’s rural counterpart, and Wordsworth’s citation of him in the “Letter” is an important strand in his own, Anglo-French version of *écriture révolutionnaire*.

In the last part of this paper, I want to highlight another thread in this rich intertextual weave which will throw light on the personal dimension to Wordsworth’s pamphlet and on the daring way in which he uses literary allusions in both English and French to encode sensitive biographical information. One of the key themes of the “Letter” is public reputation: this is vital to his political argument, insofar as much of the pamphlet consists of a sustained attack on the probity of his antagonist, Richard Watson. As with much political polemic from this period, the method of argument is unashamedly *ad hominem*, the validity of ideas being measured in part by the credibility of the people who hold them. Watson’s apostasy is presented not simply as a shift of opinion but as a fall from grace, an indelible stain on his once-impeccable reputation. The importance of this theme is signalled in the very first paragraph of the “Letter,” which opens with the word “reputation” and contains an extended allusion to Addison’s “The Vision of Mirza,” a “sublime allegory” about a perilous bridge full of trapdoors through which we can fall at any moment.⁴⁵ In Addison’s original allegory,

⁴⁰ For the political function of almanacs, see Lise Andries, “Almanacs: Revolutionizing a Traditional Genre,” *Revolution in Print: The Press in France 1775-1800*, ed. Robert Darnton and Daniel Roche (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) 203-22.

⁴¹ Jean-Marie Collot d’Herbois, *The Spirit of the French Constitution, or the Almanach of Goodman Gérard, for the Year 1792*, trans. John Oswald (London: Ridgway; Paris: Printing Office of the Social Circle, 1791). For Oswald’s collaboration with Collot, see Erdman 126-27. The original and translation were published simultaneously in late November 1791.

⁴² Most editions of the *Almanach* carried an engraved frontispiece by Nicholas de Launay, *Le Père Gérard tient le livre de la Constitution et l’explique à ses concitoyens*.

⁴³ Williams 86 (Letter VII).

⁴⁴ Barthes 1.

⁴⁵ [Joseph Addison], “The First Vision of Mirzah,” *The Spectator*, ed. D.F. Bond, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965) 2: 121-26 (No. 159, 1 September 1711). As Owen and Smyser note (1: 50-51), Wordsworth had translated this paper into Italian while at Cambridge.

the bridge signifies human life and its moral and psychological pitfalls; Wordsworth's version is specifically about "public life" and the danger of losing one's reputation, imaged here as plunging through a trapdoor into "the tide of contempt" (a pointed reworking of Addison's phrase "Tide of Eternity"). The applicability of the allegory to Watson becomes all too clear as the argument proceeds.

By starting to publish, however, Wordsworth himself was entering public life, and he harboured a personal secret which, if known, would have destroyed his reputation and undermined his ability to take others publicly to task. I refer to his illegitimate daughter Anne-Caroline, born to his French mistress Annette Vallon on 15 December 1792, but as yet unseen by Wordsworth, who had left Annette in Blois two months earlier. Whatever his intentions towards Annette, the scandal of this relationship had already ruled out his hopes of a curacy – the career path he had at one point contemplated – and alienated him from his uncles, his former legal guardians. The fact that Britain was now at war with France had deepened the scandal – he had slept with the enemy – and reduced the possibility of his resolving it through marriage, by making travel to France more difficult as well as severely interrupting postal communication (the two extant letters from Annette to Wordsworth and his sister, both dated 20 March 1793, survive only because they were intercepted by the French authorities and preserved in a public record office in Blois;⁴⁶ other letters from her got through but are now lost, as is the Wordsworths' side of the correspondence). The necessity for concealment was evident and Wordsworth's success in doing this is attested by the fact that his relationship with Annette and the existence of their child were known to only his closest friends and members of his friends throughout his lifetime and beyond.

Yet Wordsworth is a confessional writer, and the "Letter" is a tract about moral integrity and transparency, Rousseauvian virtues which he explicitly extols in it. Understandably, modern biographers, now in possession of at least some of the facts, have scoured the "Letter" for traces of Annette and Caroline. The closest that any has come to identifying an autobiographical thread is a pattern of images referring, as Kenneth Johnston puts it, "to the naturalness of passion in a time of the pregnancy, labor, and birthpangs of a new social order," metaphors which are counterpointed by a second group of images referring to the "unnatural (that is, illicit) sexual practices to which the poor are driven by economic hardship."⁴⁷ Wordsworth could have employed neither set of metaphors, Johnston argues, "without having his own situation in mind." Just how tangled and uncomfortable his thinking on this front may have become is suggested by the strangely convoluted passage where he refers to the "miseries entailed upon the marriage of those who are not rich," and the "promiscuous intercourse" to which "the bulk of mankind are [...] are impelled by the instincts of nature, and the dreadful satisfaction of escaping the prospect of infants, sad fruit of such intercourse, whom they are unable to support" (1: 43).

The oddness of this statement resides not only in the oxymoronic nature of the phrase "dreadful satisfaction" but also in the self-contradiction of simultaneously "escaping" the prospect of unwanted children and being confronted with them as the inevitable "fruit" of promiscuity. One possible explanation⁴⁸ is that "dreadful satisfaction" is a reference to contraception, crude forms of which were available in Wordsworth's time; the implication would then be that men turn to prostitutes, using contraception, in order to avoid having children in their own marriage which they are then unable to support. The statement, though, is also open to the interpretation, proposed by Johnston, that it is not about men avoiding conception but about them fleeing from the sight of their illegitimate children whom they are

⁴⁶ For (untranslated) texts of the letters, see Émile Legouis, *William Wordsworth and Annette Vallon* (London: Dent, 1922) 124-33 ("Appendix II").

⁴⁷ Johnston 338.

⁴⁸ I am grateful to Christoph Bode for this suggestion, made in conversation.

unable to support.⁴⁹ On this reading, the relevance to Wordsworth's own predicament is obvious, and it must have been painfully so to the author himself, whose uneasiness may be betrayed by the awkwardness of the syntax and phrasing.

Perhaps, though, a third and more scandalous reading is possible. Is the "dreadful satisfaction" referred to here – of conceiving and then abandoning a love-child – a foretaste (not chronologically but in the order of autobiographical revelation) of the "act of stealth / And troubled pleasure" described in the boat stealing episode of *The Prelude* (1805: I, 383-84), an episode that Christoph Bode has suggested is "emblematic of Wordsworth's dealing with the past in general and with the French Revolution in particular"?⁵⁰ Is this strange, symptomatic phrase in the "Letter" a first, probably unconscious, indicator that this seemingly respectable English poet liked, in his youth, to live dangerously, and that the truly formative experiences in his life were not the ones in early childhood but the ones in early adulthood: the promiscuous, wanton, terrifying, guilt-inducing, imagination-inflaming experiences of revolutionary France, on the blood-stained streets of Paris and in the arms of Annette Vallon – or indeed on the run from her?

Such readings must remain speculative, and there is clearly a danger of over-interpretation of what remains an enigmatic passage. There is, though, one final piece of evidence, not thus far considered by biographers or critics, that the "Letter" contains, in a coded form, a reference to his own situation. It has been overlooked probably because it is contained within a literary reference which appears to be serving other purposes and which involves a canonical French text from which we might least expect a coded personal allusion. The text in question is Racine's *Athalie* (1691), his last and greatest tragedy, a play for which Wordsworth made an exception to his general dislike of French literature, retaining an admiration for it which he expressed to Thomas Moore nearly thirty years later when they met in Paris.⁵¹

The ostensible purpose of the reference to *Athalie* in the "Letter" is to underline his point that, with the execution of Louis Capet, the French monarchy has ceased to exist. "In France, royalty is no more; the person of the last anointed is no more also" (1: 33), he says bluntly, cutting through the sentimentality of Watson's lament (not only "modish" but also "irrational and weak") and demonstrating through his terseness the uncompromising republicanism he has been professing from the start. As in his justification of the "stern necessity" of revolutionary violence in the paragraph that immediately follows, the tone he strikes here is a recognisably French one. It is appropriate, then, that he chooses this moment to introduce an allusion to French literature, referring to a passage from Act I, scene 2 of *Athalie*, where Joad, the High Priest, prophesies that, despite the attempt of Athalie to eliminate the entire bloodline of the house of David by murdering all of her own grandchildren, one of them will escape that fate, overthrow Athalie, take up the throne and "reillumine the torch of extinguished David" (1: 33). Lest we miss the reference, as most of his English readers doubtless would have done, he spells out in parenthesis that "I allude to a striking passage of Racine," then supplies a footnote which quotes (in French) the passage in question and adds a further quotation from the same speech which, he says, "applies so strongly to the present period that I cannot forbear transcribing it" (1: 33n).

Interestingly, to make the allusion serve his purpose and fit the present circumstances, Wordsworth has to contradict Joad's prophecy and express the hope that it does *not* "please

⁴⁹ Johnston 338.

⁵⁰ See Christoph Bode's essay in the present issue, 00-00.

⁵¹ Duncan Wu, *Wordsworth's Reading 1770-1799* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 114. The meeting with Moore took place on 24 October 1820; significantly, Wordsworth told him that he did not wish to see *Athalie* acted, "as it would never come up to the high imagination he had formed in reading it" (quoted by Wu 114).

the almighty” to “raise his posterity to the rank of his ancestors” and reillumine the torch of David, since that would mean restoring the monarchy, Wordsworth has just declared extinct. Yet, in the play, that is precisely what happens: the child Joas has been rescued from the slaughter, kept hidden for eight years, then, in the final scene, in a masterful coup de théâtre, is presented sitting on the throne in the Temple to his murderous grandmother Athalie, who is promptly arrested and executed. Historically speaking, too, that is approximately what happened in France: contrary to Wordsworth’s assertion that “royalty is no more,” the defeat of Napoleon in 1814 led to a restoration of the Bourbon monarchy, with Louis XVI’s brothers successively coming to the throne.

Wordsworth was not to know, of course, in 1793 what would happen in France twenty years later, but the inappropriateness of the analogy between the plot of *Athalie* and the trajectory of the French Revolution begs the question of why Wordsworth chose to make the comparison in the first place. The answer, I suggest, lies not in the political but in the personal coding of the “Letter.” Despite his claim in his footnote about the topicality of Joad’s speech, Wordsworth’s reference to this play about a concealed child-king does not support his republican argument about the permanent eradication of the French monarchy. It does, on the other hand, throw out a coded hint – in the most dramatic way possible – that there was a secret child in Wordsworth’s life who would carry his bloodline into France and be part of that country’s future. If this secret had been revealed openly, it would have destroyed Wordsworth’s reputation, just as surely as Joas destroys the fortunes, and the life, of Athalie. A more perilous trapdoor – to revert to the Mirzah allegory – could hardly be imagined. But the secret was not revealed openly; it was revealed covertly, encoded in a French literary allusion. Nobody, it seems, knew how to decode the reference, and, in any case, the “Letter” remained unpublished. Even when, eventually, it was published, in modern critical editions, it remained under-interpreted, refusing to yield up till now its biggest, and, in personal terms, its most devastating secret.

For all its clumsiness, then – its phrasal infelicities, misfiring jokes and misplaced analogies – the “Letter” presents a remarkable interweaving of public and private codes, and of literary and non-literary discourses. Wordsworth’s use of *Athalie* suggests a method of encoding sensitive personal material which points forward to the strategy of displacement in Book IX of *The Prelude*, where the story of Vaudracour and Julia stands in lieu of an account of his relationship with Annette. The “Letter” is a political pamphlet, not an autobiographical poem, but personal experience breaks through the surface of the political argument, revealing (to himself if not to others) important parallels between his political and personal dilemmas as he made the transition from his French life, with its unresolved complications, to his uncertain new life back in England (it is no coincidence that the pamphlet opens with the metaphor of a bridge). To an extraordinary degree, the argument of the “Letter,” and its intertextual patterning, are structured through a sequence of binary oppositions, its English references systematically juxtaposed with French ones: Watson versus Grégoire, Watson versus Gérard, monarchy versus republicanism, the English constitution versus the French constitution, Paine versus Rousseau, Shakespeare versus Racine, the burning of the Priestley house (1: 38) versus the Diamond Necklace affair (1: 35) – and many more. To recognise these pairings, and the strategic interweaving of codes, is not to make claims for the “Letter” as a major work of literature but to recognise that it has more to tell us about the “growth of the poet’s mind” than may be apparent from a casual reading.