

Traditional Forms and Revolutionary Politics
The English Romantic Political Sonnet

Ignatius Zaaijman
(0605907A)

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Declaration

I, Ignatius Zaaïjman, hereby declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work; that neither this dissertation nor any part of it has been, is being, or is to be submitted for an award at any other university; and that no information used in the dissertation was obtained by me while employed, or working under the aegis of, any person or organisation other than this university.

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Chapter One

The Sonnets of Bowles and Coleridge: Tradition, Form and Politics

Romanticism is one of the most often studied and discussed literary and artistic movements in the whole of the literature of England. While we justly acknowledge that politics play an important role in the formation of the stylistic distinctions of the movement, other aspects of the movement, such as the role of nature and theories about the imagination, have sometimes been concentrated on to such an extent by critics that we might tend to forget what the impulses were that helped form Romanticism. In this dissertation I will critically analyse some of the major political sonnets of the great English Romantic poets to come to an understanding of the political influences behind their work, and why the Romantics were so often inclined to apply the traditional form of the sonnet to their poetic discussions surrounding the revolutionary politics of the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

The great English Romantic poets were William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, who make up the first generation, and the second generation comprising Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats. This distinction helps to show how the traditions of the first generation regarding the Romantic political sonnet were to be continued by the second generation. The Romantics helped to reintroduce the form of the sonnet and a fair number of those sonnets reflect the political age and circumstances in which the poets lived. The Romantics' sonnets that are concerned with politics and political figures seem interesting because the form of the sonnet is an old and traditional form of poetic expression, and yet the Romantic poets used the form on many occasions to represent their thoughts concerning contemporary revolutionary politics. Why then did the Romantics use this traditional form when writing about revolutionary politics, especially since they were often committed to formal innovation? This dissertation will attempt to answer this question by analysing some of the major political sonnets of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats. For this first chapter I will trace a short history of the sonnet in Western literature, its relation to politics, and the eventual reappearance of the sonnet in the Pre-Romantic period. I will also discuss why the sonnets of Coleridge were so influential for the continuing use of the form in the late 1790's and early 1800's, and

why his contributions to the political sonnet were so important for other poets living in this turbulent age.

As a young man, Samuel Taylor Coleridge lived through the politically tense years of the 1780's and 1790's when European monarchical systems of government were being bloodily reconstituted by means of physical force and revolution. By the time of the French Revolution of 1789, Coleridge and Wordsworth were young men on the verge of their mature poetic careers, with Wordsworth later visiting France, experiencing the effects of the Revolution first hand.

The French Revolution, as Percy Bysshe Shelley later remarked, is the "master theme of the epoch in which we live" (*Letters*, I, 504). It has probably been said thousands of times in print that this momentous political event was the initial impulse and driving force behind the radical changes that took place in the arts that we today label as "Romantic". Romantic art stood in opposition to the ideals of the Neoclassical or Augustan writers and artists, who aspired to emulate the great artistic models of antiquity and to acquire some kind of formal and intellectual balance in their literary works. Romanticism represented a "return to nature", as Rousseau remarked (Furst, *Romanticism*, 2), as well as an emphasis on feeling and the expression of the emotions of the individual ego. Romanticism stands in somewhat stark contrast to the ideals and aesthetics of the Neoclassical period. The focus was less on artificiality of poetic expression and more on expressing elements of the human experience and the feelings of the ego.

With regards to the French Revolution and its relation to the artistic consciousness of the age, what critics have rightly pointed out is that the advent of Romanticism in the arts goes hand in hand with the political upheaval of the French Revolution. What we thus have is an understanding of a movement in the arts that was inspired and influenced by the political events that took place in the 1780's and 1790's. It is almost taken for granted that we apply this knowledge to a reading of a Romantic work of art, yet often this fact is mentioned without being further explored. This dissertation therefore aims to read the politically influenced sonnets of the English Romantic poets in relation to the socio-political environment in which the poets lived while explaining what significance the sonnet form had for the Romantic poets. Politics are too

important not to bear in mind when reading a Romantic poem, yet I think we often take a political understanding or reading of a poem for granted without really studying the significance politics played in the formation of Romantic art and consciousness. The fact that Romantic poets still used traditional forms such as the sonnet in the revolutionary times of the late 18th century requires some understanding of what intrinsic value traditional formal poetic and artistic devices possessed for writers living in an age where traditional structures and forms, whether they are political, social, or artistic, were being pulled down and reformed.

Formalist Theories

At this point it might be useful to briefly discuss some theories of Formalism in art and why this 20th century form of literary criticism might be applied to the reading of a politically influenced work of literature from the 18th century. Stuart Curran, at the very beginning of his seminal work, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, says, “Conceptual structures haunt the human mind” (3). Formalism, “Refers to the critical tendency that emerged during the first half of the twentieth century and devoted its attention to concentrating on literature’s formal structures in an objective manner” (Wolfreys et al, *Key Concepts*, 43). After the Russian Revolution of 1917, Russian literary theorists like Victor Shklovsky started putting together a theory of Formalism. In *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, A Reader*, K. M. Newton says, “The Formalists were uninterested...in the representational or expressive aspects of literary texts; they focussed on those elements of texts which they considered to be uniquely literary in character” (20). While I will be focussing on the literary nature of the political sonnet in the Romantic age, I will also look at the expressive and representational aspects of the form, because I believe that these constitute an important element in an understanding of the poets’ relationship not only to the form of the sonnet, but also the influences behind their use of the form. In *Russian Formalism, History – Doctrine*, Victor Erlich quotes Jakobson: ““The subject of literary scholarship...is not literature in its totality, but literariness (*literaturnost*), i.e., that which makes of a given work a work of literature”” (172). Erlich continues, saying, “Clearly, the difference between literature and non-literature was to be sought not in the subject matter, i.e., the sphere of reality dealt with by the writer, but in the mode of presentation” (173).

What I am concerned with is the way in which the form of the sonnet seems to possess certain thematic and ideological implications for writers. If we write a sonnet, we write about certain themes that the form of the sonnet traditionally expressed. By writing about something else, the form of the sonnet stays the same, but our reception to the thematic possibilities of the form starts to change. To give one example useful to this study, Milton can be regarded as the first major English poet who used the sonnet to express himself on political themes and subjects. The sonnet at the time was still primarily used to express love and emotions connected with the state of being in love, yet Milton changes the way in which we view the form as well as what we can use the form for. By the time of the first generation of Romantic poets, Coleridge uses the example of Milton and writes sonnets about politics. The form of the sonnet, then, has been extended beyond its received function of expressing the traditional theme of, say, disappointed love, in order to express the poet's thoughts on political questions and circumstances.

Northrop Frye believed that literature was organised according to a system. "It was not in fact just a random collection of writings strewn throughout history: if you examined it closely you could see that it worked by certain objective laws...These laws were the various modes, archetypes, myths and genres by which all literary works were structured" (Eagleton, *Literary Theory, An Introduction*, 79). By rewriting the thematic content of the form of the sonnet, Milton broke the rules, and provided a model for Coleridge and the other young Romantics to follow. Thus the reception of the thematic affinities of the sonnet starts to change. We no longer expect merely traditional themes of frustrated love if we read a sonnet, but also political discussion, not the politics of Eros, but Realpolitik.

History of the Sonnet

The sonnet is an old and much used form of poetic expression. More precisely, one can say that it is a medieval poetic form. Geoffrey Spiller points out in his study, *The Development of the Sonnet, An Introduction*, that this form was first used in Southern Italy in 1230 (1). By the time Coleridge and Bowles were using the form, it was already nearly six centuries old, and one can argue that the sonnet, in the late 18th century, was already a respected and often used form of poetry, perhaps even an archaic form. Poets such as Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) and Francesco Petrarch

(1304-1374) had already started using the form in the 13th and 14th centuries. Dante in his collection entitled *La Vita Nuova* (*The New Life*) uses the sonnet to express his love for the woman who first awakened his romantic impulses. Dante further explains in his text how each of the sonnets works, and how we as readers might interpret each of the sonnets in his collection. A good example of such early self-reflexivity is the very first sonnet of the sequence:

To every captive soul and gentle lover
 Into whose sight this present rhyme may chance,
 That, writing back, each may expound its sense,
 Greetings in love, who is their lord, I offer.
 Already of those hours a third was over
 Wherein all stars display their radiance,
 When lo! Love stood before me in my trance:
 Recalling what he was fills me with horror.
 Joyful Love seemed to me and in his keeping
 He held my heart; and in his arms there lay
 My lady in a mantle wrapped, and sleeping.
 Then he woke her and, her fear not heeding,
 My burning heart fed to her reverently.
 Then he departed from my vision, weeping.

Dante offers us the following explanation of his sonnet and what inspired him to write it: “As I had already tried my hand at the art of composing rhyme, I decided to write a sonnet in which I would greet all Love’s faithful servants; and so, requesting them to interpret my dream, I described what I had seen in my sleep” (32). Dante’s dream requires or invites interpretation. The critical element is foregrounded, as is the issue of consciousness, and the need for a critique of the movements of the poet’s consciousness. *La Vita Nuova* is an often overlooked though acknowledged piece in the Dante canon, and it clearly illustrates a major European writer engaging with the sonnet close to the invention and introduction of the form in Western literature. It also gives us clues not only to the personal life of Dante and his love for Beatrice, but also to the methods he used in writing the collection, and what the creative impulses were that underscored his sonnets. Importantly, Dante uses the sonnet as a means of expressing the personal and emotional state and feelings that he harboured for his beloved.

The form of the sonnet then becomes a means for Dante of expressing emotion; in other words, the sonnet becomes a *lyric* form of poetry. Yet by writing for an

audience Dante also implies that the reader possibly shared the feelings and emotions that he wrote about as well. This we see in his explanatory note where he talks about “Love’s faithful servants”. Even early on, the form of the sonnet seems to be able to reach beyond the personal world of the poet, and relate in some way to the reader. The sonnet will continue to be used as a predominantly lyric form of expression right up to the present day. In *The Development of the Sonnet, An Introduction*, Spiller says, “The sonnet is...compact, shapely, highly finished, and able to contain, in concentrated form, almost all that is human” (1). The earliest sonneteers such as Dante had shown what this short and concise form was capable of.

Petrarch, as is the case with Dante, uses the sonnet to express his love for his seemingly unattainable woman. In Petrarch’s case the unattainable beloved is Laura. Just like Dante, Petrarch groups his sonnets into collections, the best known being the *Canzoniere*. This may signify some unease with the length of the sonnet. Both Dante and Petrarch might have felt that the sonnet, while it is long enough to contain certain emotions and thoughts of the poet in its fourteen lines, may still not be a large enough structure to stand on its own, or to represent the collective thoughts and feelings of the writer. This is a practice that has continued through the years, with the best-known collections being those by Shakespeare from the early 17th century, through to Wordsworth, Coleridge and Dante Gabriel Rossetti in the 19th century. Unlike Dante, however, Petrarch does not offer us a critique of what he has written. The poems, and their implied meanings, Petrarch seems to be saying, should be enough to stand on their own. While Dante offers autobiographical readings or guidelines to his poems, and feels compelled to explain in prose why he wrote what he did, Petrarch gives us an overview of his relationship with Laura, and lets the poems speak for themselves.

The European Renaissance, which began in Italy in the 14th century, represents a return to the texts of the classical authors and their notions of humanism. Texts from the East began to slowly emerge in Italy, as Venice was an important harbour for trade and cultural exchanges. With the development of the printing press in Germany in the mid-15th century, classical texts could be relatively easily produced in reasonably large numbers, and from then on spread through Europe as other countries adopted the new technology perfected by Johannes Gutenberg. Renaissance authors turned to the models of the classical writers as guidelines as to how to produce literary

texts. The Renaissance, however, was slow in arriving in England, largely due to the insular nature of England, and also because of ongoing conflicts between England and France, best represented by the Hundred Years' War.

When the Renaissance did arrive, together with the sonnet, there was an almost immediate explosion of sonnet writing. Geoffrey G Hiller in his anthology, *Poems of the Elizabethan Age*, makes the observation that the sonnet was a "literary form attempted by most poets whether or not they were in love, and by most lovers whether or not they could write poetry" (1). The predominance of the theme of love, especially that of frustrated love, is further explained by Hiller: "The Petrarchan sonnet gave the Elizabethans a set of conventions, appealing in themselves, which formed a secure foundation on which an endless number of themes and variations could be constructed" (1). Thus we see that two important literary movements arrived in England from Italy at about the same time: The Renaissance, with its interest in classical texts, and the poems of the medieval Italians, including the sonnet as the most popular poetic form to use for the expression of unattainable love.

This helps to illustrate how the sonnet and the themes that were used for it continued along a set and unvaried path. The form is compact yet long enough for the expression of fruitless love, as in the case of Dante, Petrarch and the Elizabethan poets, yet there seems to be little variation with regards to the themes that the sonnet was used for. Sure enough, John Donne is a major exception to the rule, with his "Holy Sonnets", including his most famous sonnet from that collection, "Death be not Proud", in which he focuses on metaphysical questions by means of using verse and poetic expression. Despite Donne's inventiveness, the sonnet seems to have remained a favourite vehicle for the expression of heterosexual love, and often a man's love for mysterious and unattainable women, such as Laura in the case of Petrarch, or the Dark Lady in the case of Shakespeare. It would only be towards the very end of the Augustan or Neoclassical era that we find poets using the form for the expression of their involvement and observation of the natural world.

Milton

Before discussing the Pre-Romantic poets such as Bowles and Warton, I will discuss John Milton's sonnets, which represent a crucial thematic innovation that was to

influence the work of Coleridge later on. I am in particular thinking of the political sonnets that Milton penned late in his career. Milton lived in an era where the English Civil War disrupted the rule of the monarchy, and also in the era of the Restoration from 1660 onwards, when the monarchy under Charles II was re-instated. These events seem to foreshadow the social and historical context of the French Revolution in which the first generation of Romantic poets wrote some of their most important poems for this study, such as Coleridge's *Sonnets on Eminent Characters*.

Georgia Christopher in her article, "Milton and the Reforming Spirit", in *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, says, "The Reformation was an important part of England's national identity in the seventeenth century and an important part of Milton's identity" (197). In her article, Christopher also explores the influence of religion and the relation of the church to the state. Milton was not only a devout Christian, but also politically involved in matters that affected England. In his classic study, *Milton and the English Revolution*, Christopher Hill similarly explores the political role that Milton assumed. In a section aptly titled, "Politics Regained", Hill foregrounds Milton's reengagement with political questions after the Reformation and the opening up of the free press (216-221), at the time he would have written his political sonnets, thus demonstrating that the older Milton was by no means reclusive or silent on important political themes.

The sonnets of Milton seem to stand as a counterpart to the great epic poems such as *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*. William Hazlitt also makes this point in his essay, "On Milton's Sonnets", in his *Table Talk*. Hazlitt says, "Compared with *Paradise Lost*, they are like tender flowers that adorn the base of some proud column or stately temple" (174), and, "The beauty of Milton's sonnets is their sincerity, the spirit of poetical patriotism which they breathe" (176). Hazlitt rightly sees the sonnets of Milton as complimentary counterparts to the larger epics. Hazlitt's understanding of them as "tender flowers that adorn the base of some proud column or stately temple" is crucial: the sonnets are not inferior in theme or statement to the longer poems, yet they are more easily accessible and perhaps more lyrically beautiful than the epics. At the same time they also aspire to "proud" or "stately" themes or topics, one important theme being the political situation at the time in which Milton lived. As Hazlitt says, the sonnets of Milton breathe "poetical

patriotism". This is an important reading of the character of Milton's sonnets, in that Hazlitt remarks on both the form and the subject matter of the poet's sonnets.

Of Milton's political sonnets, Hazlitt remarks, "the political or (what may be called) his *State-sonnets*, those to Cromwell, to Fairfax, and to the younger Vane, are full of exalted praise and dignified advice...the writer knows what is due to power and fame" (177). The sonnets Milton wrote to the great political figures of his day, Hazlitt says, are both full of praise for their achievements, and yet they also contain cautious advice. "He pays the full tribute of admiration for great acts achieved, and suggests becoming occasion to deserve higher praise. That to Cromwell is a proof how completely our poet maintained the erectness of his understanding and spirit in his intercourse with men in power" (178). Here is Milton's sonnet "To the Lord General Cromwell":

Cromwell, our chief of men, who through a cloud
Not of war only, but detractions rude,
Guided by faith and matchless fortitude
To peace and truth thy glorious way have ploughed,
And on the neck of crowned fortune proud
Hast reared God's trophies and his work pursued,
While Darwen stream with blood of Scots imbrued,
And Dunbar field resounds thy praises loud,
And Worcester's laureate wreath; yet much remains
To conquer still; peace hath her victories
No less renowned than war, new foes arise
Threatening to bind our souls with secular chains:
Help us save free conscience from the paw
Of Hireling wolves whose gospel is their maw.

This sonnet, and the others that Milton wrote to other political figures, stands in stark contrast to the love sonnets of the Elizabethans and Dante and Petrarch. The political concerns of Milton have now been transferred to a traditional poetic form often reserved for the expression of the poet's love and emotions. Milton therefore represents an important break with set conventions and traditions of the form of the sonnet, in much the same way that Donne also rethought the possibilities of the form in his "Holy Sonnets". R. S. White observes, "Milton...loosened the sonnet from its place in a fictional sequence, paving the way for treating it as a personal meditation on a significant occasion rather than advancing a narrative" ("Survival and Change: The Sonnet from Milton to the Romantics", 171). Here we find an example of the

personal sphere and the public world combined in the sonnet. In Milton's political sonnets the reflective element is still present. From Dante onwards the form of the sonnet contained the reflections of the poet. In the case of Milton, the reflective element is coupled with a growing realisation of the importance of politics, and the possibilities of the sonnet to express personal feelings on politics. Milton not only praises Cromwell for what he has done, but he also warns him of mistakes he should not make, and tells him how to win further praise. For White, Milton, "makes sonnets into poetic weapons of persuasion and intervention in contemporary events" (168). Milton's political sonnets thus look forward to Coleridge's *Sonnets On Eminent Characters* in terms of their focus on political matters, as well as their use of a traditionally lyric form of poetry to express ideas on political questions.

The similarities between Milton's political sonnets and those of most of the Romantic poets can be said to be their focus on the figures of politics, and less about the politics themselves. Yet it should be added that the figures of politics, such as Oliver Cromwell in the case of Milton, are representative of the political age in which they lived. By writing a sonnet addressed to Cromwell, Milton is really writing about the politics and ideas that Cromwell represents, and much less about Cromwell the man. The same can be said about Coleridge's *Sonnets on Eminent Characters*. Yet it is not as easy as that. There is a sense in which the individual man is coming to be seen as embedded in the age, his reactions either symptomatic of that which the poet finds praiseworthy or condemnable.

Milton's sonnets seem to represent a last flowering of the form in English literature since the great explosion of sonnet writing in the Elizabethan age. Milton's death in 1674 marks a culminating point and even summation in the history of the writing of sonnets in England. Milton almost seems to have exhausted the form to a certain extent, writing not only technically flawless works (one only needs to look at the above example), but also introducing new subjects for the form to express. In much the same way Donne had furthered the possibilities of the form with his sonnets on metaphysical and religious subjects. The reason Milton's sonnets are so important for this study is that they mark the introduction of new subject matter for the sonneteer to engage with, and also point toward the political sonnets of Coleridge. Coleridge might

indeed have been influenced by the example of Milton, in that Milton illustrated to Coleridge how to write a sonnet with a political theme. White says,

Politics, scenery, moods, special occasions and other topics could act as starting points and justifications for sonnets. Here we can trace a steady expansion of the form's resources away from expressions of praise and unrequited love, and toward the Romantic use of it to express a spectrum of moods: from solitude to sociability, from politics to visions of nature that mirror human states of emotion or 'inner weather'. (166)

It might be useful to demonstrate the difference between the kinds of sonnets Milton wrote. On the one hand we have the political sonnets, yet on the other hand Milton also penned sonnets more representative of his emotional state, such as "To Mr Cyriack Skinner Upon his Blindness":

Cyriack, this three years' day these eyes, though clear
To outward view, of blemish or of spot;
Bereft of light their seeing have forgot,
Nor to their idle orbs doth sight appear
Of sun or moon or star throughout the year
Or man or woman. (1-6)

The emotional reticence in lines of such power is rather extraordinary. It is as though he catalogues, objectively, a condition of blindness. Then there is also an earlier sonnet, which deals with natural objects, in this case a nightingale:

O nightingale, that on yon bloomy spray
Warblest at eve, when all the woods are still,
Thou with fresh hope the lover's heart dost fill,
While the jolly hours lead on propitious May (1-4)

These two examples show us that Milton was not merely concerned with politics in his sonnets, but that he could also write about other, perhaps more conventional, subjects, such as the nightingale, or about his blindness. These sonnets serve to illustrate Hazlitt's point that Milton's sonnets are predominantly lyrical pieces, or as he calls them, "tender flowers". It is also worth mentioning that Coleridge took the theme of the nightingale as a central part to his Conversation Poem, "The Nightingale", and that in that piece, he directly quotes from Milton's "Il Penseroso", the line, "Most musical, most melancholy!" (63). Importantly, Coleridge rewrites Milton's view that the nightingale is sad, saying that the bird is anything but

“melancholy”. At any rate, it is hoped that this illustrates Coleridge’s reading of the literary traditions Milton outlined. Yet it is Milton’s political sonnets that not only anticipate the Romantics in their use of a traditional form while discussing revolutionary politics, but also provided the Romantics with a model of how to go about writing these types of works.

Not that Milton chose to write about political topics merely in his poetry. Milton was also a prolific prose writer, the complete works of which run to several volumes in modern editions. Andrew Sanders remarks, “As a prose polemicist, John Milton... was a masterly and at times vituperative defender of the various public causes he chose to espouse... in 1644 he offered his great defence of ‘free’ speech, *Areopagitica*, as a means of countering the licensing ordinance of a predominantly Presbyterian Parliament” (*The Short Oxford History of English Literature*, 225). One only need look at the titles of some of Milton’s prose works to understand his involvement in contemporary politics: *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, and *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* being some of the better-known examples. And of course there is the *Areopagitica*, perhaps his best-known prose work, in which he eloquently speaks for the continuance of uncensored public printing. Revolutionary politics often represent an opening-up of the possibilities of a better life for the people, yet new governments also have to control what is being said about them. We only need to remind ourselves of what happened after the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the paranoid control the state exerted upon the free speech of its citizens to appreciate Milton’s point of view, or the contemporary situation in South Africa regarding the Protection of Information Bill. And there is also the famous example of Coleridge and Wordsworth being followed by a government spy while residing in the Lake District.

Coleridge, like Milton, would also go on to write prose works regarding politics, continuing the tradition of Milton and various other poets and writers in English literary history. One only need think of the *Biographia Literaria*, and also the various parts of his *Table Talk*, including pieces on “Education”, “The French Revolution” and “Parliamentary Reform”. We can mention the *Lay Sermons* as well, with its section on “The Statesman’s Manual; or The Bible as the best Guide to Political Skill and Foresight”.

The Century After Milton

After Milton's death in 1674, the sonnet seems to have fallen into disuse. Colin Burrow, in his review of *The Art of The Sonnet* entitled, "Toolkit for Tinkerers", emphasises this point and goes on to say that, "People get bored of static intensity in short poems as they periodically tire of floral shirts...there is something about the deliberate provisionality of the sonnet which makes it unimaginable that Alexander Pope should ever have written one" (20). Burrow mentions Milton's sonnets, saying, "Milton's abrasive political sonnets, prompting 'the age to quit their clogs', which used the form to make an urgent response to both personal and political events, may not have helped the status of the sonnet in the early 18th century either" (20). If we accept that the Augustan age was one of a return to classical models in its championing of Neoclassicism, then the sonnet, being a medieval form from Southern Italy, seems to stand as an ugly duckling in comparison with the great literary works of the ancients.

If one thinks about the kind of poems that Pope wrote, it is also, as Burrow says, not surprising that the sonnet should have disappeared from the literary scene. The Augustans valued satire, such as in the poems of Pope or the plays of Sheridan, and the sonnet seems not to have been an ideal vehicle for this kind of literary fashion. The sonnet was perhaps too formal, too constrained to fully accommodate the views of the Augustan satirists adequately enough. Stuart Curran, in his important study, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, says, "That the sonnet virtually disappeared from the British shores in the century after Milton's death...is a symptom of the cultural distance the eighteenth century imposed between itself and the Elizabethans" (29). Culture and literary tradition change from one age to the next. It is only therefore logical that the tastes of poets and the reading public will also change. Curran points out, "Renaissance sonnets appear foreign to a refined taste" (29). The Augustans seemed to be opposed to the aesthetics of the English Renaissance, and shunned the sonnet as a form of poetic expression.

It would only be towards the end of the 18th century that English writers would again start to use the form of the sonnet to express themselves. The fashion of Neoclassicism was starting to wear thin, as fashions generally do, and a growing political change was in the air. New political eras and circumstances would seem to

influence the makeup of a people's way of life and thinking, and as such demand new forms of expression. This is a fundamental way of reading the emergence of Romanticism in the arts. The political situation in France changed the way people viewed the monarchy and nobility, and with the emergence of figures such as Napoleon Bonaparte, the conception of the self and the self's egotistical expression of emotion started to take shape, culminating in the heroes of some of Byron's poems such as Harold and Don Juan. Byron in *Don Juan* famously states, "I was born for opposition" (Canto XV, Stanza 22, 8). The question of how "opposition" might find expression in and through a traditional form such as the sonnet seems to me to be well illustrated by Byron's comment.

Yet before we arrive at this stage, there was a transitory period in English literature that is often loosely labelled as the Pre-Romantic era. The first author we will be concerned with is Thomas Warton (1728-1790). Curran writes that, "Warton caused a stir when he published a modest series of sonnets in his *Poems of 1777*" (*Poetic Form*, 30). The form had lain dormant for about a hundred years since the death of Milton in 1674, untouched by most major English poets. One of Warton's sonnets is particularly interesting in that it anticipates the work of Coleridge. It is called "To the River Lodon":

Ah! What a weary race my feet have run
 Since first I trod thy banks with alders crowned,
 And thought my way was all through fairy ground
 Beneath thy azure sky and golden sun,
 Where first my muse to lisp her notes begun.
 While my pensive memory traces back the round
 Which fills the varied interval between,
 Much pleasure, more of sorrow, marks the scene.
 Sweet native stream, those skies and suns so pure
 No more return to cheer my evening road;
 Yet still one joy remains- that not obscure
 Nor useless, all my vacant days have flowed,
 From youth's grey dawn to manhood's prime mature,
 Nor with the muse's laurel unbestowed.

There are anticipations of Coleridge's sonnet, "To the River Otter", and also of some of the works of Wordsworth. Duncan Wu, in *Romanticism, An Anthology*, points out this sonnet by Warton was "probably his best known work (read by Wordsworth during his boyhood), and it began the series of poems to 'native streams', including

Bowles's 'To the Itchin', Coleridge's 'To the River Otter', and Wordsworth's 'Dear native brooks, your ways have I pursued'" (2). It is interesting that a little-known figure such as Warton would be so influential on the poets that came after him. Bowles, Coleridge and Wordsworth, in one continuous line, would be inspired by this sonnet and emulate it. There is also an emotive and autobiographical element running through the poem that would have appealed to the sensibilities of the early Romantics, as we find in line 8: "Much pleasure, more of sorrow, marks the scene". There is little of the Augustans' artificiality here, and the poem itself, with phrases such as "pensive memory" (16), seems to belong to the concerns of the Romantic age. Warton also focuses on the importance of the connection of memory with place, so important to the Romantic mode of writing. Gone is the language and diction of Pope, with his addresses to royalty and nobility. Here is a literary/poetic "return to nature", as Rousseau observed. More than this, Warton reflects on the importance of place, and the effect that a location might have on the poetic creativity of the poet.

Another important sonnet of the Pre-Romantic age is that of Thomas Gray (1716-1771), namely the "Sonnet on the Death of Mr. Richard West". Curran says, "Gray's elegiac sonnet, the suppressed record of his unfulfilled secret life, is the motive force underlying the entire Romantic revival of the sonnet, a model for hundreds of poets who...brought invention to the rescue" (30). Here are a few lines to demonstrate Curran's point:

In vain to me the smiling mornings shine,
And reddening Phoebus lifts his golden fire,
The birds in vain their amorous descant join,
Or cheerful fields resume their green attire...

I fruitless mourn to him that cannot hear,
And weep the more because I weep in vain. (1-4, 13-14)

Curran also says, "Where the Renaissance had played its variations on the ecstasies of love and religion, the latter eighteenth century reared its monument to unavailing sorrow" (30). This is a mode of writing that would continue with Charlotte Turner Smith's hugely popular *Elegiac Sonnets* of 1784, a publication that reached a ninth edition by 1800.

Bowles's Influence on Coleridge

The next, and perhaps most important poet in the chain of English sonnet writing is William Lisle Bowles (1762-1850). The year of the French Revolution, 1789, also marked the appearance of the first edition of Bowles's *Fourteen Sonnets, written chiefly on Picturesque Spots during a Tour*. Curran says, "in placing his sonnets within the framework of travel, Bowles wedded the sonnet of sensibility to the eighteenth century prospect poem and on a broader spectrum unwittingly created one of the paradigmatic modes of Romantic thought", which Curran concludes is the "meditative romance" of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* by Lord Byron (*Poetic Form*, 32). In these poems we not only see the seeds of English Romantic literary thought, but also the kind of works that Coleridge and Wordsworth wrote during their excursions in the countryside.

In his important article, "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric", M. H. Abrams outlines the development of the lyric from a mere expression of emotion to one that has evolved into an expression of the poet's thoughts encountering nature. Abrams considers Coleridge's blank verse "Conversation Poems" as the first great examples of the "Romantic Lyric", yet in order to arrive at this conclusion, Abrams first considers the influences on Coleridge. The most important poet to have influenced Coleridge, Abrams says, is Bowles, and among Bowles's poems specifically his sonnets. Bowles took the prospect poem and rewrote it into the form of the sonnet. Here we see Bowles taking the tradition of the prospect poem such as used by Cowper, and rewriting this tradition into the form of the sonnet, to create a new kind of sonnet.

Abrams continues, saying that the *Fourteen Sonnets*, "constitutes a sonnet-sequence uttered by a latter-day *penseroso* who, as the light fades from the literal day, images his life as a metaphoric tour from its bright morning through deepening shadow to enduring night...the local poem has been lyricized" (90). The form of the sonnet then offers a lyric alternative to the blank verse practised by Cowper and others in describing the emotional state of man living in and interacting with nature. Regarding the poems' influence on the young Coleridge, Abrams offers the following: "Bowles's sonnets opened out to Coleridge the possibilities in the quite ordinary circumstances of a private person in a specific time and place whose meditation, credibly stimulated

by the setting, is grounded in his particular character, follows the various and seemingly random flow of the living consciousness, and is conducted in the intimate yet adaptive voice of the interior monologue” (93). It may then be argued that it was not so much the form of Bowles’s sonnets as his engagement with his subject matter that impressed the young Coleridge so profoundly. Yet the form of the sonnet gave Bowles a certain formulae or method to use, a *way of writing* about his experiences in nature on his tour through the countryside. As Abrams notes, Bowles has lyricised the local poem. Had Bowles merely written in the manner of Thomson or Cowper, whose loco-descriptive poetry runs to several hundred lines (I am thinking about *The Task* and *The Seasons* in particular), Coleridge might not have been so influenced by Bowles. It is Bowles’s combination not only of the lyric and the loco-descriptive poem, but also of this new way of writing in the form of the sonnet, that I think so impressed Coleridge and other young Romantics such as Southey and Wordsworth. Bowles compressed the ramblings of Cowper and Thomson into fourteen lines.

The following sonnet by Bowles, “To The River Itchin, Near Winton”, the eighth of the series of *Fourteen Sonnets*, serves as a good illustration of the kind of work that was to influence Coleridge:

Itchin, when I behold thy banks again,
 Thy crumbling margin, and thy silver breast
 On which the self-same tints still seem to rest,
 Why feels my heart the shiv’ring sense of pain?
 Is it that many a summer’s day has passed
 Since in life’s morn I carolled on thy side?
 Is it that oft since then my heart has sighed
 As a youth, and hope’s delusive gleams, flew fast?
 Is it that those who circled on thy shore,
 Companions of my youth, now meet no more?
 Whate’er the cause, upon thy banks I bend
 Sorrowing, yet feel such solace at my heart,
 As at the meeting of some long-lost friend
 From whom, in happier hours, we wept to part.

Duncan Wu says, “Bowles combined the tender melancholy found in the sonnets of his Oxford tutor, Thomas Warton, with a sophisticated sense of the picturesque and sublime, fashionable in the late eighteenth century” (143). This can be related to what Abrams has said about the sonnets of Bowles, that he had combined the prospect poem, or loco-descriptive poem, with something that goes deeper than a mere

description of a natural scene. Wu also seems to say that Bowles has combined the picturesque, a description of a scene, with the sublime, that which engenders a sense of awe in the poet. The “Sublime” is a very loosely used term in the study of the art, but in a few words means the realisation of profound thoughts and feelings in the artist or viewer of art when encountering a majestic or terrifying scene in nature, or in a work of art (Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 316-319).

One only needs to look at the kind of lines Bowles wrote in the above sonnet to appreciate the effect they had on Coleridge and other Romantic poets, as well as the difference between this sonnet by Bowles and the previous one quoted by Warton. “Why feels my heart the shiv’ring sense of pain?” (4) for example is much different to the kind of descriptive verse used by Warton, and moreover it is the start of a series of questions in the poem that Bowles in a sense fails to resolve at the end of the sonnet. Lines 4 to 10 are comprised of questioning verse: Bowles, being influenced by the scene of the river, is recalling emotions that have been awakened by the river. Like Wordsworth in “The Solitary Reaper”, Bowles recalls those moments that he finds particularly important. Although there is a Wordsworthian conclusion in the last four lines, it is by no means as forward-looking and positive as say the last four lines of the “Immortality Ode”. There is also a kind of revisiting of a physical place, such as in Wordsworth’s *Tintern Abbey*, which recalls Bowles in its first few lines: “And again I hear / These waters...” (2-3).

If we look at Coleridge’s sonnet, “To the River Otter”, there are immediate similarities between the sonnets of Warton, Bowles and Coleridge. Here are a few lines of Coleridge’s poem to illustrate this point:

Dear native brook, wild streamlet of the west!
 How many various-fated years have passed,
 What blissful and what anguished hours, since last
 I skimmed the smooth thin stone along thy breast
 Numbering its light leaps! Yet so deep impressed
 Sink the sweet scenes of childhood, that mine eyes
 I never shut amid the sunny blaze (1-7)

Bowles’s sonnets, and specifically the *Fourteen Sonnets* which appeared in the year of the French Revolution, were a major influence on Coleridge. Although they

perhaps aren't on the same level of inspiration and thoughtfulness as the sonnets that would be produced by the Romantics after him, they nevertheless provided the stimulus for the early Romantics to re-engage with the form. More importantly, Bowles showed the Romantics how to combine in the sonnet elements of the loco-descriptive poem as well as notions of the sublime, to produce sonnets that can be regarded as the most original rethinking of the possibilities of the form since the late political sonnets of Milton, penned more than a century earlier. Colin Burrow succinctly sums up the influence of Bowles in "Toolkit for Tinkerers": "Suddenly the sonnet seemed like the perfect vehicle for a small-scale personal meditation on bare ruined choirs, a modest form that could gesture towards sublime emotions", and, "Bowles, creaking though he now sounds, was a big influence on the sonnets of the major Romantic poets" (20). Although Bowles's inspiration was not on an equal level with that of the great Romantic poets, he was nevertheless an important influence in that he showed that the possibilities of the form of the sonnet were not yet exhausted.

Coleridge offers us what must be the best interpretation of the influence Bowles's sonnets had on his literary style and thinking in the first chapter of his *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*. Coleridge writes, "I had just entered on my seventeenth year when the sonnets of Mr Bowles, twenty in number, and just then published in a quarto pamphlet, were first made known and presented to me" (7). Coleridge was still a very young man when he first encountered Bowles, and had already written a sonnet called, "To the Autumnal Moon", a technically sound but still conventional piece. Coleridge continues, "My obligations to Mr Bowles were indeed important, and for a radical good...the genial influence of a style of poetry, so tender and yet so manly, so natural and real, and yet so dignified and harmonious, as the sonnets, etc., of Mr Bowles!" (8). The "radical good" that Coleridge refers to is the change that came over his poems from his first volume onwards. He says that his first volume had a "profusion of new-coined double epithets" (3), and that at a young age he had "bewildered [him]self in metaphysics and in theological controversy" (8).

Coleridge, The Sonnet, The Age

Yet Coleridge still looked upon this early volume of his with some affection: "my earliest poems were marked by an ease and simplicity which I have studied, perhaps

with inferior success, to impress on my later compositions” (3). It is exactly this kind of simplicity, combined with deeper thoughts, that he found in the sonnets of Bowles and that so impressed him. Coleridge says, “Bowles and Cowper were, to the best of my knowledge, the first who combined natural thoughts with natural diction; the first who reconciled the heart with the head” (13). Although Coleridge’s early poems had a simplicity that he was proud of, he was still too much influenced by complex metaphysical thoughts. It was Bowles, and Cowper as well, who showed him how to combine this simplicity of versification with a more natural choice of subject. In a sense, one might say Coleridge already had the “head” or technical know-how – now he only needed the “heart”, or correct choice of subject, to produce good poems.

Coleridge says, “So long ago as the publication of the second number of the *Monthly Magazine* I contributed three sonnets...The reader will find them in the note below, and will I trust regard them as reprinted for biographical purposes, and not for their poetic merits” (14-15). Coleridge here doesn’t rank too highly the three sonnets, and a look at any collected edition of the poems of Coleridge will show that they aren’t often included. Coleridge then includes the sonnets, written in 1797, in his *Biographia Literaria* of 1817 to show how important the form of the sonnet and the influence of Bowles’s example were to him. Coleridge had assimilated the blank verse loco-descriptive style of Cowper and the new Romantic lyric example of Bowles and had started to move away from metaphysics and other such concerns to concentrate on representing a natural scene while at the same time touching a deeper vein of thought and feeling, moving towards the sublime.

Yet we are still some way from the emergence of a Romantic political sonnet that would find practitioners in nearly all the great Romantic poets. Coleridge had taken the literary example of Bowles’s sonnets to apply it to his poetic thinking, and to give rise to a rebirth of sonnet writing in the Romantic era, yet he had not yet made the leap towards his *Sonnets on Eminent Characters*. If Coleridge at seventeen had found the sonnet a suitable and apt means and form of expressing himself, he had not yet applied the form to political concerns and circumstances. The Revolution in France of 1789 would no doubt have given impetus to a drawing together of the form of the sonnet and the politics represented in France at the time that would ultimately give rise to a Romantic political sonnet. For Coleridge to come to terms with combining

the traditional form of the sonnet with representing revolutionary politics, he would probably have gone back to the example of Milton's political sonnets. At the same time Coleridge would have acknowledged that the form of the sonnet is a means of expressing more than love, as he would have found in the sonnets of the Renaissance authors. Donne, in his metaphysical sonnets, and Milton in his political sonnets, had shown that the sonnet can be used to represent themes other than a traditional Petrarchan approach to possible topics. Added to this were the sonnets of Bowles, who combined "head and heart", to use Coleridge's phrase, in his representation of natural scenes. It required the French Revolution and its aftermath to guide Coleridge to combine a traditional form starting to gain popularity again in England with a theme of revolutionary politics. In all of this, Coleridge finds in the sonnet yet another version of "the secure foundation" of which Hiller spoke.

Romanticism and its schools of thought seem to regard the French Revolution as the source from which theories of Romantic thought emanated. In "Poetry in an Age of Revolution", in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, P M S Dawson argues, "Poets are no more insulated from political events and controversies than any other class of people, indeed, they are less so, in that poets work in *language*, the same medium in which political concepts and demands are formulated, contested, and negotiated" (48). Politics and political arguments are developed through language, just as a writer will come to terms with politics by means of language.

A politically charged social environment such as that in which Coleridge and Wordsworth lived can also have an effect on the mind of the poet. Dawson says, "Wordsworth's fullest and most moving account of the revolutionary ferment of the early 1790's is offered in *The Prelude*, whose central theme is the growth and development of his own mind" (50). Politics then had a profound effect on the formation of Wordsworth's thinking and "Bildung". It might be easy to dismiss the French Revolution, "a Pandora's box" (Dawson, 53) and the following Reign of Terror, as bloodthirsty and violent uprisings, yet its intellectual effect upon a new generation of intellectuals was immense, and perhaps necessary for the birth and conceptualisation of what we today label as Romanticism in the arts.

Before analysing the political sonnets of Coleridge, we must briefly look at William Hazlitt again, in this case his collection of essays on prominent public characters called *The Spirit of the Age*. In this collection Hazlitt mentions and analyses the characteristics of some of the most important figures of the Romantic age, among them Jeremy Bentham, William Godwin, Lord Byron, Wordsworth and Leigh Hunt. Looking at the array of people Hazlitt discusses, we see that he was not merely concerned with political figures or literary figures, but with *both* of these. The “spirit of the age”, or the “Zeitgeist”, is comprised of men who are both influential in the social and political make-up of the country, as well as the artistic and literary scene.

In the essay on “Mr Coleridge”, Hazlitt says, “The present is an age of talkers, not of doers” (194), referring perhaps to the political scene where rhetoric is often more predominant than actual action. Coleridge would belong with the talkers. Coleridge, and especially the Coleridge of his later Highgate years, was a prolific talker, often leaving people bewildered by the sheer number of different subjects he could expound upon. He was one of the revered literary figures of his day. Even Keats, when he met Coleridge, wanted to keep the memory of having shaken hands with the great man, as Coleridge relates in his *Table Talk (Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose, 594)*. By the time Hazlitt was writing his essay on Coleridge, Coleridge had already published the *Biographia Literaria*, as well as *The Friend* and other important prose works. Coleridge, in these works, sets out his religious beliefs, his philosophical ideas and literary thinking. For Hazlitt, Coleridge had always been a talker. With the publication of these prose works, he had become even more of a talker trying to “explain his explanation”, as Byron would later on facetiously note in the dedication to *Don Juan* (Stanza 2, 8).

Hazlitt continues, giving us a summary of the political conditions in which Coleridge grew up and evolved as a poet and writer:

It was a misfortune for any man of talent to be born in the latter end of the last century...The spirit of the monarchy was at variance with the spirit of the age. The flame of liberty, the light of intellect, was to be extinguished with the sword – or with slander, whose edge is sharper than the sword. The war between power and reason was carried on by the first of these abroad – by the last at home. No quarter was given (then or now) by the Government-critics, the authorised censors of the press, to those who

followed the dictates of independence, who listened to the voice of the tempter, Fancy. (203)

It seems important to me that Hazlitt wrote these lines while discussing the life and achievement of Coleridge. Although most of Hazlitt's essay on Coleridge in *The Spirit of the Age* concerns his philosophical and literary thinking, Hazlitt doesn't really mention the influence of the political circumstances in which he wrote. Yet here Hazlitt makes the case for the effect of social and political conditions on Coleridge. Hazlitt also says that the "flame of liberty" at the start of the French Revolution was put out with the "sword" of the subsequent Terror. We can understand why Hazlitt feels there are more talkers than doers. The conservatism of European governments prohibits and controls any new thinking or actions. Backward thinking and bloody repression have extinguished the flame of liberty. Thus, paradoxically, the Revolution and its ideals of liberty lead to paranoid conservatism.

What was Coleridge's relationship to politics? In "Political Thinker", his article in *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, Peter J Kitson argues that Coleridge was one of the most politically engaged of the Romantics:

Throughout his life, S. T. Coleridge was a politically engaged thinker. From his student days as an undergraduate at Jesus College, Cambridge, when he participated in agitation in support of his hero, William Frend, to his later years as the 'Sage of Highgate' criticising the pervasion of materialist thinking and commercial ethics through all aspects of life, Coleridge was a deeply political man. His writings reveal him as someone who closely followed the contemporary political scene as it unfolded during one of the most turbulent and exciting periods in the nation's history, a man steeped in the leading ideas of European political philosophy. (156)

The above passage sums up the importance politics had for Coleridge, as well as Coleridge's importance on the political scene. We realise that Coleridge was both an active member of political rallies and events, and an important thinker and philosopher about politics in an age rich in political theorists, such as Burke and Paine. Coleridge of course also wrote a stately poem about the French Revolution, "France: An Ode". Paul Hamilton, in his study, *Coleridge's Poetics*, notes a marked paradox in the political thought of Coleridge. Hamilton says, "Coleridge's political theory where his notion of an educated class, the Clerisy, is intended to enrich and inform the fabric of society...is described...as something separate from the actual

functioning of the state” (200). We should remember that Coleridge is one of the richest and at the same time most paradoxical of the great Romantic theorists. As such, isolating his political thought into one or two sentences is both misleading and unhelpful. William Walsh, in, *Coleridge: The Work and the Relevance*, says, “Coleridge’s political theory occupied a middle position between the extreme rationalism and individualism of Rousseau on the one side and an excessive State absolutism on the other” (150). Although this is a very short summation of the politics of Coleridge, it nevertheless highlights Coleridge’s paradoxical nature, something one should always take into account when reading his politically orientated works. Robert O. Preyer perhaps sums up Coleridge’s thought best when in his article, “Coleridge’s Historical Thought” he simply says, “Coleridge’s thought was dualistic” (152).

Richard Holmes, in his introduction to the section of Coleridge’s sonnets in the Penguin edition of the *Selected Poetry*, says, “No one now thinks of Coleridge as a “sonneteer”. The form seems too decorous, too limited and much too tidy for him” (3). When we think of the kind of typical Coleridgean poems that are most famous today, such as *The Rime of The Ancient Mariner*, *Christabel* and *Kubla Khan*, we can understand Holmes’ point. The form of the sonnet is strict and demands of a poet that he express himself in fourteen lines. Coleridge wrote blank verse poems that run to several hundred lines, allowing himself full expression on a given topic, and not limiting himself to a strict formal structure. Holmes says, “Coleridge wrote sonnets at crucial moments in his life: when he went to school in London; when he invented Pantisocracy at University; when he got married...when he fell in love again with the Lake District...and when he was slowly dying at Highgate” (3). Using the sonnet form seems to be an almost ritualistic act of writing for Coleridge, and the form assumes an “occasional” character. He didn’t merely write one series of sonnets such as we have in the *Sonnets on Eminent Characters*, but he continued to use the form at important personal changes in his life. Coleridge almost seems to be poetically commemorating important events in his life, and for this he uses the form of the sonnet. Here we also find another example of the private world combined with the public world. It is as though the poet is making public aspects of his private life.

Holmes continues, saying, “Traditionally, the sonnet lent itself to love poetry, but Coleridge rarely uses it in this way...Coleridge first made his name as a young poet

with a sequence of twelve “Sonnets on Eminent Characters” (radical writers, politicians and scientists, as well as an actress)” (4). Coleridge breaks with the traditional use of the form, rather writing about public figures in his first collection. Michael O’Neill says, “The sonnet form, placing a premium on saying a great deal in a short space, wins from Coleridge’s political voice an urgency that fails, if it fails, only through excess of force” (“The Romantic Sonnet”, 193). Coleridge’s definition of the sonnet depended, paradoxically, on the subject matter rather than the form. ““Poems, in which no lonely feeling is developed, are not Sonnets because the Author has chosen to write them in fourteen lines; they should rather be entitled Odes, or Songs, or Inscriptions”” (Coleridge in Holmes, 4). The form of the sonnet for Coleridge, then, depends rather on the themes, subjects and emotions he addresses than the actual form. Holmes offers the following explanation:

It is remarkable how many of Coleridge’s best sonnets conform to this psychological definition of their structure. A moment of intense isolation or self-awareness is progressively resolved by the revelation of some common law or experience in Nature...As he wrote in the 1796 Preface: “They create a sweet and indissoluble union between the intellectual and the material world. Easily remembered from their briefness, and interesting alike to the eye and the affections...they domesticate with the heart, and become, as it were, a part of our identity”. (4-5)

Holmes sums up Coleridge’s use of the sonnet saying, “the sonnet is not, finally, his ideal form because it placed him under restraints” (5). As I have pointed out before, Coleridge seems at his best or most distinctive when using blank verse in order to express himself more fully. Yet, as Holmes points out, we should not forget the influence Coleridge had on the sonnet: “With Wordsworth, Coleridge was responsible for a powerful recovery of interest in the possibilities of the sonnet...He helped to liberate it from weight of Shakespeare and Milton, and make it feel more intimate and modern” (5).

Daniel Robinson, in his article “‘Work Without Hope’: Anxiety and Embarrassment in Coleridge’s Sonnets”, says, “His [Coleridge’s] active participation in the sonnet revival, his preoccupation with the form, and his admiration for Bowles’s sonnets reveal that the sonnet is the source of anxiety and embarrassment for Coleridge” (82). Robinson then goes on to quote the famous words Coleridge sent John Thelwall in 1796, “I love Sonnets; but *upon my honor* I do not love *my* Sonnets”. Coleridge seems

to take to the form, but not his experiments with the form, hence the “anxiety” and “embarrassment” of Robinson’s title. Robinson says, “The form itself becomes for Coleridge a locus of considerable angst...The sonnet, with its considerable formal demands, becomes...the site of Coleridge’s most self-conscious and deliberate poetic composition and ultimately of his self-perceived inadequacies as a poet” (82). This shows that Coleridge artistically and intellectually engaged with the form, and that he consciously grappled with formal complexities in writing his sonnets.

Sonnets on Eminent Characters

Michael O’Neill says that in the *Sonnets on Eminent Characters*, “Coleridge compresses biographies of leading political figures, while expanding their significance under the pressure of the poet’s admiration or rage” (192). For Robinson, “They are the first sonnets of the revival to develop at length political subjects”, and that they would be followed by “Southey’s sequence on the slave trade (1796) and, later, by Wordsworth’s “Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty in *Poems, In Two Volumes* (1807). These sonnets correspond with Coleridge’s first foray into politics” (95). Importantly, Coleridge was the first of the Romantic poets to use the form to discuss political issues. Yet he wasn’t the first English poet to use the form for this purpose. “Coleridge’s series ostensibly recalls Milton’s sonnets to Cromwell, Fairfax and Vane” (Robinson, 96). As Robinson points out, critics have often pointed out the influence of Milton, yet the language is not Milton’s: “Is this really Milton’s voice? Is it Milton’s more than it is Bowles’s? Obviously Milton is the great precedent in English poetry for political sonnets; and Coleridge’s publishing them [the *Sonnets on Eminent Characters*] in a newspaper gives them a certain political immediacy” (96). Coleridge seems to succeed in combining the public voice of Milton with the more natural and personal tones of Bowles in writing his political sonnets.

Robinson makes this clear as he goes on to say, “the sonnets can be read as evidence of Coleridge’s ambivalence towards the Miltonic sonnet...Coleridge recasts the newspaper series as “effusions”, thus softening their political import in the implicit affiliation he makes with the literature of sensibility” (96). The political sonnets of Coleridge are still political, yet the language they use is different from Milton’s. Coleridge, according to Robinson, has softened their immediate effect by using the language of Bowles and by renaming them “effusions”. Despite this, the reading

public would no doubt still have appreciated the kind of works they were and the kind of topics they examined.

Yet the influence of Milton had not yet completely escaped Coleridge. Robinson says, “Despite a few Miltonic resonances, these sonnets, particularly when they are read as effusions, represent the more socially aware, but not less feeling heart of the elegiac sonneteer” (96). Coleridge has moved away from the kind of sonnet Milton wrote to political figures. Coleridge’s series, for Robinson, represents a poet with a lyrical side as well as a socially and politically aware side. In other words, Coleridge, in his sonnets, combines his head with his heart, a quality he so admired in Bowles’s work. The form of the sonnet, therefore, offers a Romantic poet writing about politics the following useful points: The sonnet can contain one thought on a political topic neatly in fourteen lines, and since the form itself is often used for lyrical expression, a poet can combine his feelings and emotions on politics together with a more public and logical line of thought on a given political question. In a word, Coleridge has lyricised the political Miltonic sonnet, by means of the influence of Bowles’s example. The combination of head and heart, stressed so by Coleridge, issues in a removing of the combination of the “private” emotion with the “public” presence and attitude that is so intrinsic to Romantic poetic practise.

Of the fifty or so sonnets that Coleridge wrote during his life, thirteen of them belong to the *Sonnets on Eminent Characters*, or fourteen, if we include both versions of the seventh sonnet, “To the Rev. W. L. Bowles”. They were written from 1794 to 1795, and represent the first political sonnets of the Romantic age. They also constitute a reasonable number of the complete corpus of Coleridge’s sonnets, showing how Coleridge thought the form suitable for the expression of feelings and thoughts on political and social questions. The first of the series, “To the Honourable Mr Erskine”, illustrates the points that I have made above regarding the combination of head and heart:

When British Freedom for an happier land
 Spread her broad wings, that flutter’d with affright,
 ERSKINE! Thy voice she heard, and paus’d her flight
 Sublime of hope, for dreadless thou didst stand

(Thy censer glowing with the hallow’d flame)

A hireless Priest before the insulted shrine,
 And at her alter pour the stream divine
 Of unmatched eloquence. Therefore thy name

Her sons shall venerate, and cheer thy breast
 With blessings heaven-ward breath'd. And when the doom
 Of Nature bids thee die, beyond the tomb
 Thy light shall shine: as sunk beneath the West

Though the great Summer Sun eludes our gaze,
 Still burns wide Heaven with his distended blaze.

This sonnet illustrates how different Coleridge's use of the form is when expressing political questions in comparison with Milton. Although there is little actual reference to political issues, Coleridge manages to contain in the name "Erskine" the political, and for most of the poem focuses on a kind of blessing for what Erskine had achieved. Thomas Erskine (1750-1823) is perhaps best remembered for defending Thomas Paine, accused of seditious libel after the publication of the second part of *The Rights of Man* and for speaking against the two bills in 1795 (Halmi, et al, *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, 14). This sonnet stands in opposition to the kind of political sonnets Milton wrote. There is a lyrical voice expressing its thanks for Erskine. Coleridge manages to convert the Miltonic political sonnet into a lyrical political sonnet. Politics aren't absent, yet they play a somewhat minor role in relation to the feelings and emotions of the poet. We might say that Coleridge took the form of the political sonnet from Milton, and made it a lyrical, Romantic form of expression, while yet not ignoring the obvious political background and subject. Yet at the same time, Coleridge introduces passion into the political debate, which seems to be one of the most strikingly individual features of this series of sonnets.

It is crucial to note how early are Coleridge's characteristically pointed references to language. Erskine is memorialised for his "voice". The voice is also lauded for its link to divinity, as Coleridge represents Erskine's influence as "stream divine / Of unmatched eloquence" (7-8). Erskine's cultural and political presence is seen as the confluence of verbalisms, for his eloquence produces a rhetoric of praise which will "cheer [Erskine's] breast / With blessings heaven-ward breath'd" (9-10). Erskine seems to be a punctum between the earthly and the divine, with the flow of language being the medium that unites these two spheres. Posthumously, the language becomes a "light" that continues to shine. The "light in sound", that Coleridge will refer to in

“The Eolian Harp” (28), is here the salvation of a freedom-defending language used by Erskine. In this way, Coleridge sanctifies Erskine’s language by aligning it, implicitly, with the first divine utterance, “let there be light”.

The second sonnet of Coleridge’s series concerns Edmund Burke. Burke was a hugely influential figure in the discussion of revolutionary politics and theory, and his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* was a very popular and influential work. In this book, Burke condemns the Revolution and its bloody aftermath, saying that there are other ways of obtaining liberty than through bloodshed and violent force. This sparked the composition of Thomas Paine’s *The Rights of Man*, a reply to Burke’s seemingly conservative ideas insisting that people had the right, by whatever means, to demand and achieve liberty. These two works by two of the great political theorists of the day represent the two sides of the Revolution in France and the way people interpreted it. Coleridge’s sonnet is simply called “Burke”:

As late I lay in Slumber’s shadowy vale,
 With wetted cheek and in a mourner’s guise,
 I saw the sainted form of FREEDOM rise:
 She spake! Not sadder moans the autumnal gale-

‘Great son of Genius! Sweet to me thy name,
 Ere in an evil hour with alter’d voice
 Thou bad’st Opression’s hireling crew rejoice
 Blasting with wizard spell my laurell’d frame.
 ‘Yet never BURKE! Thou drank’st Corruption’s bowl!
 Thee stormy Pity and the cherish’d lure
 Of Pomp, and proud Precipitance of soul
 Wilder’d with meteor fires. Ah Spirit pure!

‘That Error’s mist had left thy purgéd eye:
 So might I clasp thee with a Mother’s joy!’

This sonnet differs in a number of ways from the first one on Erskine: we see for the first time Coleridge writing in the first person, there is a build-up of expectation toward the name of Burke, and there is more personal expression on the theme of politics from the speaker. Coleridge also uses his characteristic capitalisation of words and names that he thinks are particularly important, as well as his persistent use of exclamation marks, a recurring characteristic of especially his earlier poetry. “Freedom”, for example, in line 3, is capitalised as a whole word, as is the name of Burke in line 9, at the traditional change of argument in the form of the sonnet. On

this point we can also mention that the first sonnet on Erskine seems not to follow this Petrarchan convention of a change in the line of thought between the octave and the sestet. In the sonnet on Burke Coleridge adheres to the tradition of the Italians.

In the sonnet, if one puts aside politics for a while, there are some conventional stock themes and images that mark the poetry of the Romantic age, even more than in the previous sonnet. There is “Slumber’s shadowy vale” (1), for example, a representation of the meditative element in Romantic verse, as well as “not sadder moans the autumnal gale” (4), a line that might be out of Keats in its subject matter and sensibility. These “Romanticisms” aside, the sonnet is more directly concerned with politics than the first one. What these common Romantic phrases do suggest, however, is the way in which the language and thought of the sonnet had altered from Milton to Coleridge. Milton would not have written lines such as those above with the kind of phrases that are found in Coleridge. This further illustrates how the Miltonic political sonnet had become lyricised, or to put it another way, Romanticised. There are instances of the Romantic prospect poem and of a general autumnal quality that clearly points to the climate of the individual’s soul. The poet subsumes the status of the lamenting Petrarchan lover “With wetted cheek” (2) into the politically concerned plaint about the demise of “Freedom” (3). However much one might be moved to mirth by the poet’s somewhat precious self-portrait in the opening lines of his sonnet, the personal is again intersected with the public and the political climate.

Coleridge seems to be expressing his feelings regarding what he sees as Burke’s betrayal of the ideals of the Revolution. Especially the last two lines of the sonnet seem to emphasise Coleridge’s stance regarding the political philosophy of Burke. Coleridge also seems to be a little careful as to how he expresses himself. It is not Coleridge, but the ‘sainted form of FREEDOM’ (3) that is expressing its view of Burke. Was Coleridge being overly careful in ascribing for himself a lyrical first person voice? Perhaps, when one appreciates the vehement attacks against Burke’s conservatism by writers such as Paine.

These first two sonnets are representative of Coleridge’s new type of political sonnet. For the next sonnet, on Priestly, Coleridge turns to religious questions and the role that religion and the church plays in society and politics. The church is of course a

crucial part of most Western societies, and is more often than not also closely involved in politics. In the sonnet Coleridge writes,

...RELIGION at his strong behest
Starts with anger from the Papal spell,
And flings to Earth her tinsel-glittering vest,

Her mitred State and cumbrous Pomp unholy; (6-9)

Priestly, at his “strong behest” (6) shows what is lacking in the use of religion by people who don’t appreciate its true nature and place in society. The sonnet also contains an attack on Catholicism.

The fourth sonnet on La Fayette echoes the same kind of sentiments as the first on Erskine, in that La Fayette is proclaimed as a patriot who has escaped from prison. The next sonnet on Kosciusko also runs along similar lines, yet this sonnet seems important to me because Keats later on would also write a sonnet on Kosciusko. “Taduesz Kosciusko (1746-1817) was a Polish patriot who fought against Russia...He had also fought for the United States in the War of Independence. He died a hero of English liberals. Hunt had a bust of him in his cottage” (Barnard, *The Complete Poems*, 578). What also marks this sonnet is that it is the first of the series written in one continuous stanza, and not broken up in definite sections:

O what a loud and fearful shriek was there,
As though a thousand souls one death-groan pour’d!
Ah me! They saw beneath a Hireling’s sword
Their Kosciusko fall! Through the swart air
(As pauses the tir’d Cassac’s barbarous yell
Of Triumph) on the chill and midnight gale
Rises with frantic burst or sadder swell
The dirge of murder’d Hope! While Freedom pale
Bends in anguish o’er her destin’d bier,
As if from eldest time some spirit meek
Had gather’d in a mystic urn each tear
That ever on a Patriot’s furrow’d cheek
Fit channel found; and she had drain’d the bowl
In mere wilfulness, and sick despair of soul!

One might say that this sonnet is a kind of elegy for the fallen Kosciusko, a lament for a man who, though brave in his patriotic ideals, was killed before he could have done more. This we might read into the sonnet, although Kosciusko only died in 1817,

some twenty years after Coleridge's sonnet. Coleridge seems to be saying that we should look after our patriotic heroes, and not let them be unnecessarily killed in battle. The kind of language Coleridge uses here is grave, yet still distinctly lyrical, especially in the cry in line 3, "Ah me!" Coleridge also follows his usual practise of capitalising certain words he considers important for the subject he addresses, such as "Hope" and "Freedom". It needs be said though, that while Coleridge's sentiments are clearly "in the right place", the verse tends towards the hackneyed and the histrionic. "O what a loud and fearful shriek was there" (1) is eminently mockable, while "Ah me!" (3) continues the kind of stylised precocity that Coleridge might well have come to be embarrassed by.

The sixth sonnet of Coleridge's series is on William Pitt, an important figure in the political set up of England at the turn of the nineteenth century. Pitt (1759-1806) was twice elected prime minister, and it was during his tenure that Nelson achieved victory at Trafalgar in 1805, defeating Napoleon's navy. Coleridge's sonnet, unlike his earlier ones, does not even include the name of Pitt in its text, and actually says very little about any specific political topic. Rather, it is an expression of emotions concerning political conditions:

Not always should the Tear's ambrosial dew
 Roll its soft anguish down thy furrow'd cheek!
 Not always heaven-breath'd tones of Suppliance meek
 Beseem thee, Mercy! Yon dark Scowler view,
 Who with proud words of dear-lov'd Freedom came-
 More blasting than the mildew from the South!
 And kiss'd his country with Iscariot mouth
 (Ah! Foul apostate from his Father's fame!)
 Then fix'd her on the Cross of deep distress,
 And at safe distance marks the thirsty Lance
 Pierce her big side! But O! if some strange trance
 The eye-lids of thy stern-brow'd Sister press,
 Seize, Mercy! Thou more terrible the brand,
 And hurl her thunderbolts with fiercer hand!

Coleridge asks Mercy to hurl thunderbolts against her foes, he wants her to inflict punishment. Of course there are many ways of reading this as a reference to Pitt, yet there is no mention of him in the text of the poem, which is odd considering the emphasis Coleridge has placed on the names and personalities of other political figures in previous sonnets in his collection. Yet we might also read the sonnet

according to the views of Robinson, who sees it as an “acrimonious sonnet” to Pitt (98). Robinson points out that Coleridge blamed Pitt for “war-mongering”, and also that he blamed Pitt for the Reign of Terror in France (98). Certainly Pitt is a traitor and, importantly, Coleridge focuses yet again on words and their capacity to deceive. Pitt flattered the country with “proud words of dear-lov’d Freedom” (5), but turns out to have an “Iscariot mouth” (7). Not only do we note how Coleridge’s idiom draws so resolutely upon his Christian and Biblical affinities, but the link to Milton’s Satan, the figure who debases language by speaking with forked tongue, is clear.

The seventh sonnet of the series concentrates not on a political figure, but on the hugely important and influential William Bowles. I won’t repeat what I have said about the influence of Bowles on Coleridge’s writing and thinking, but by looking at the two versions of the sonnet that he wrote, will illustrate Coleridge’s artistic debt to Bowles. By including a sonnet on Bowles in his collection of *Sonnets on Eminent Characters*, Coleridge pays tribute to his great example and predecessor. Coleridge not only draws our attention to Bowles’s stature and importance as a poet, but also the influence he had on Coleridge. The sonnet then becomes an autobiographical thanksgiving to Bowles, perhaps somewhat out of place among the other eminent figures and their political influence, yet still important for Coleridge and his development. It is this kind of confessional sonnet that one would not have found among the political or public sonnets of Milton. Again we find here the important confluence of art and politics as represented by the sonnet and its mutations of content. Here is the first, and to my thinking, better, version of the sonnet “To the Rev. W. L. Bowles”:

My heart has thanked thee, BOWLES! For those soft strains,
That, on the still air floating, tremblingly
Wak’d in me Fancy, Love, and Sympathy!
For hence, not callous to a Brother’s pains

Thro’ Youth’s gay prime and thornless paths I went;
And, when the darker day of life began,
And I did roam, a thought-bewilder’d man!
Thy kindred Lays an healing solace lent,

Each lonely pang with dreamy joys combin’d,
And stole from vain REGRET her scorpion stings;
While shadowy PLEASURE, with mysterious wings,
Brooded the wavy and tumultuous mind,

Like that great Spirit, who with plastic sweep
 Mov'd on the darkness of the formless Deep!

Reading this sonnet, it is clear that Coleridge offers us an autobiographical reading of his first encounter with the poems of Bowles. We only need to look at phrases such as “a thought-bewilder'd man!” (7) to recognise Coleridge referring to his youthful engagement in metaphysics, in which he became, as he said, entangled. Through reading Bowles's sonnets, Coleridge found a “healing solace” (8), a relief from the kind of thought he had previously pursued, and an indication and model for him how to go about forming a new line of thought and poetic language. In the concluding couplet, with its reference to the “great Spirit” (13), we can see foreshadowings of the famous lines that Coleridge would later come to use to define the imagination and its relation to divine creativity. In the *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge speaks of the imagination in terms of the human and the divine: “The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (167). The “formless Deep” of Coleridge's literary activity (14) has been transformed by the act of the imagination kindled by the verses of Bowles. A rich, but pre-lingual sensibility, is given form through Coleridge's exposure to the sonnet form as used by Bowles.

It is remarkable to note how early Coleridge's thoughts about creativity and the imagination take shape. His allusion in the close of this poem to the analogy between God's creative act as offered in Genesis, and that of the poet's own creative efforts is precise and succinct. The debt to Milton is as clear as that to Bowles. Coleridge's analogy between the activity of his mind and that of God's hinges on the verb, “brooded” (12), reminding us of Milton's comparison between his making of his poem, *Paradise Lost*, and God's creative feat: “Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss / And mad'st it pregnant” (*Paradise Lost*, Bk. 2, 21-22). The magical transformation effected by Bowles's sonnets on Coleridge, by the imagination on the recalcitrant materials of the mind and world, and by poetry on its readers is deftly caught in the shift from “scorpion stings” (10) to “mysterious wings” (11). The quality of writing trumps most of what we have seen previously and this must surely have to do with the fact that Coleridge is on more familiar and, as it were, more sympathetic terrain, that of poetic influence. And, what might follow from that, is the

ironic “conclusion” that aesthetic considerations, or “the heart” – and we notice that one effect of Bowles’s writing was to make Coleridge more alert to the sufferings of others, “not callous to a Brother’s pain” (4) – finds more persuasive articulation than political ones, “the head”.

The next sonnet, to Mrs. Siddons, contains a note by the editor Ernest Hartley Coleridge, explaining that it is really the work of Charles Lamb, essayist and close friend of Coleridge, and that the sonnet was given by Lamb to Coleridge. Later on, Coleridge would admit that the sonnet is Lamb’s, and Lamb in turn would affirm that it was the work of Coleridge. Whatever the case may be, this sonnet seems to me to be somewhat out of place among the other sonnets in Coleridge’s collection. True, it is well crafted and perhaps was written by Coleridge, but the subject matter hardly fits in with the rest of the cycle, seeing as Coleridge focuses on the actress Siddons. Yet she was an eminent character, although perhaps not as hugely influential as some of the other characters in Coleridge’s series.

The ninth sonnet of the series concerns William Godwin (1756-1836), political and religious thinker, and the author of novels such as *Caleb Williams*. Coleridge’s sonnet is entitled “To William Godwin, Author of ‘Political Justice’”, and for the first time in the cycle, Coleridge, in the title of this sonnet, acknowledges the influence of one of his eminent characters by giving the title of one of the characters’ works. The character and his work are combined in this title, and perhaps reflect the influence Godwin had, or his contemporary popularity.

O FORM’D t’ illumine a sunless world forlorn,
As o’er the chill and dusky brow of Night,
In Finland’s wintry skies the Mimic Morn
Electric pours a stream of rosy light,

Pleas’d I have mark’d OPRESSION, terror-pale,
Since, thro’ the windings of her dark machine,
Thy steady eye has shot its glances keen-
And bade th’ All-lovely ‘scenes at distance hail’.

Nor will I not thy holy guidance bless,
And hymn thee, GODWIN! With an ardent lay;
For that thy voice, in Passion’s stormy day,
When wild I roam’d the bleak Heath of Distress,

Bade the bright form of Justice meet my way-
And told me that her name was HAPPINESS.

Coleridge seems to praise Godwin for linking justice with happiness. Robinson points out that “Coleridge detested Godwin’s atheism, and thus, he infuses subtle irony in his reverent praise” (98). Coleridge was first and always a religious thinker, and stood in opposition to atheism. We have already noted the deep, characteristic vein of biblical allusion in Coleridge’s sonnets. Godwin’s atheism might have been a bitter pill for Coleridge to swallow, but in this sonnet he nonetheless praises Godwin. Nevertheless, we should keep in mind the point Robinson makes of the sonnet containing a certain amount of irony. Robinson continues, saying, “Though he (Coleridge) would later publicly attack Godwin in his Watchman essays, he confessed to Southey as early as September 1794 a distaste for Godwin’s beliefs” (98). Even before he wrote the sonnet, Coleridge had already disapproved of Godwin’s religious ideas. That he wrote the kind of sonnet that he did write, might suggest that Coleridge is paying his ‘respects’ to an important, though for Coleridge questionable, social figure. Certainly one sees a willingness to praise a friend of liberty and justice, even if Godwin’s atheistic rationalism was anathema to Coleridge.

The tenth sonnet is “To Robert Southey, Of Baliol College, Oxford, Author of the ‘Retrospect’, and Other Poems”. This rather long title, as is the case with the previous sonnet on Godwin, focuses the reader’s thoughts on the works that these figures have produced. In Southey’s case, Coleridge also states his social standing, being employed at Oxford University. In this sonnet, Coleridge praises the poetical work of Southey, rather than his social and political role in society. Coleridge and Southey had worked together on an idea of Pantisocracy, a form of communism, and had wanted to set up such a society in America. The plan never materialised due to Coleridge changing his mind about the philosophy behind Pantisocracy and its practical feasibility. He nevertheless wrote two sonnets on Pantisocracy in 1794, before writing the one collected here.

The sonnet on Southey continues the tradition of the earlier one on Bowles, in that Coleridge is talking less about politics and social concerns, than about the influence of a poet’s work on his own literary production. Coleridge seems to balance these two opposing qualities: on the one hand we have Coleridge praising the political actions

and thoughts of people such as Burke and Erskine, and on the other hand he writes about literature and the voices we find in literature. This reinforces the idea that Coleridge took the political sonnet of Milton and rewrote the traditions of the form. He combines, like Hazlitt in *The Spirit of the Age*, both literary and political figures. Both are equally important, Coleridge seems to say. By including politicians and poets and even an actress in his series, Coleridge strives in some way to combine his head with his heart. We only need to look at these lines from the sonnet to Southey to see how it corresponds to the sonnet on Bowles:

SOUTHEY! Thy melodies steal o'er mine ear
 Like far-off joyance, or the murmuring
 Of wild bees in the sunny showers of Spring-
 Sounds of such mingled import as may cheer

The lonely breast, yet rouse a mindful tear (1-5)

There is not only a melodious and lyrical quality to the verse, but also a sense of something more profound. The “sounds of such mingled import” are capable of “rousing a mindful tear” (4-5). Coleridge is saying that the poetry of Southey can often cause joy and cheerfulness, but is also capable of producing deeper and profounder thoughts. Here is that combination of thought and feeling that Coleridge often sought. Once more, as in the sonnet on Bowles, the Romantic commitment to the healing, redemptive power of verse is alluded to, as Southey’s melodies will “cheer / The lonely breast...” (4-5). The form of the sonnet provides Coleridge with a measured structure within which to express his faith, felt on the pulses, in the consolatory power of verse.

The last sonnet of the series concerns Sheridan. Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816) was a playwright and satirist now best known for his comedy *The School for Scandal*. That Coleridge would choose to write a sonnet on Sheridan, who is regarded as a satirist of the school of Pope and the Neoclassical tradition, may seem odd if we think that most of Coleridge’s eminent characters are representative of the Romantic age. Coleridge probably admired the satiric quality of Sheridan’s work, and if we keep in mind the ironic and even satiric sonnet on Godwin, we can easily see why Coleridge chose Sheridan as one of his eminent characters. What Sheridan also

provides to the series of sonnets is a character that is able to satirise political institutions, as well as the usual “folly” of life.

Political satire has a history that stretches back to the ancients, for example the play *The Wasps* by Aristophanes, which satirises the Athenian government for its constant buzzing over deciding on public issues. Sheridan was primarily a playwright, so this also lends a different aspect of the public life of a writer, where previously Coleridge focussed mainly on poets and politicians. One can also add that Sheridan was involved in politics, but as Sanders points out, it was “a moderately successful career as a politician and parliamentary orator” (328). Although Sheridan’s plays are mostly written along the lines of the morality play, Coleridge might nevertheless be thinking that a comic playwright such as Sheridan might be able to satirise the political climate in which he lived.

It was some Spirit, SHERIDAN! That breath’d
O’er thy young mind such wildly-various power!
My soul has mark’d thee in her shaping hour,
Thy temples with Hymettian flow’rets wreath’d:

And sweet thy voice, as when o’er LAURA’S bier
Sad Music trembled thro’ Vauclusa’s glade
Sweet, as at dawn the love-lorn Serenade
That wafts soft dreams to SLUMBER’S listening ear.

Now patriot Rage and Indignation high
Swell the full tones! And now thine eye-beams dance
Meanings of Scorn and Wit’s quaint revelry!
Writhes inly from the bosom-probing glance

The Apostate by the brainless rout ador’d,
As erst that the elder Fiend beneath great Michael’s sword.

The sonnet to Sheridan is titled “To Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Esq.”, which highlights some of the public influence Sheridan had. Coleridge declares the influence that Sheridan had on him: “My soul has mark’d thee in her shaping hour, / Thy temples with Hymettian flow’rets wreathed” (3-4), in the same way that Coleridge acknowledges the influence of Bowles. Coleridge focuses on the political in the lines, “Now patriot Rage and Indignation high / Swell the full tones!” (9-10) Again in line 5 we find Coleridge alluding to Sheridan’s “voice”, a recurring theme in this series of sonnets. Coleridge would no doubt also have found the “wildly-various power” that

influenced Sheridan appealing. The sonnet to Sheridan then stands as a kind of summation of the themes in the *Sonnets on Eminent Characters*. There is the combination of head and heart, of politics and lyricism, as well as illustrating the kind of public and political obligations a famous writer or politician has. Coleridge pays his respects to a writer who, like Bowles, had an influence on the development of his artistic thinking. Most significantly, though, Coleridge emphasises the power of language, intelligently wielded, to effect cultural and political correction: Sheridan's "full tones" (10) and "bosom-probing glance" (12), a look at once lingual and visual, are likened to the power of "Michael's sword" (14) putting Satan and his rebel angels to flight. While Coleridge's writing here is often tortuous, the claims it is making for the literary artist are notably large.

Conclusion

How do we then read these early political sonnets of Coleridge? As I have pointed out, there is a strong link with Milton's political sonnets. We have also noted, most recently in the last of the series, the abiding intertextual references to Milton's work. Yet whereas Milton wrote his sonnets from the perspective of the public, Coleridge was interested in the response of the individual to the political circumstances of the day. Coleridge had also softened the kind of language and register used by Milton, so that his sonnets often became more lyrical and more in line with the aesthetics of the Romantic Movement. Coleridge also included poets and other artistic figures in his series of political sonnets, emphasising the role that the artist plays in the social and public world, and also on Coleridge's own self-conception as poet.

Coleridge continues to use the traditional form of the sonnet to express his thoughts on politics, yet it is with a radical re-reading of the kind of language that is used, as well as the perspective from which the sonnet is written. In a word, Coleridge continues the tradition of Milton, but he rethinks the possibilities of the form, and by infusing his political sonnets with lyricism, created a personal response to politics in the form of the sonnet. This is something that Carl Woodring, in *Politics in English Romantic Poetry*, has also remarked: "The Romantic accomplishment was in drenching political attitudes with emotion and imagery drawn from deep wells of non-political and quasi-political experience" (10).

Coleridge was ambivalent about the quality of his work. In a letter to Robert Southey he says, “My Sonnets to Eminent Contemporaries are among the better Things, I have written” (Coleridge in Robinson, 99). As a counterpart to this, Coleridge says, “My poetic Vanity & my political Furore have been exhaled; and I would rather be an expert, self-maintaining Gardener than a Milton, if I could not unite both” (Coleridge in Robinson, 99). This might imply some of the anxiety of influence, of not matching Milton in quality of thought and technique. Sure enough, these early sonnets are not perfect compositions. William Christie, in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge, A Literary Life*, sums up the *Sonnets on Eminent Characters* as follows:

The style was declamatory, the sentiments clichés, and the diction and syntax often forced and awkward. Coleridge’s poetry at this time oscillated between this oratorical rant and a Bowlesian personal voice: nostalgic, sentimental, and self-pitying. Neither was distinctive or especially accomplished and Coleridge at different times expressed his reservations with both. (51)

Whatever the case, Coleridge’s political sonnets represent a remarkable return to the examination and discussion of politics using the form of the sonnet in English literature, and one that would show the way forward for Coleridge’s great friend, William Wordsworth.

Chapter Two

Politics and Dwelling in Wordsworth's *Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death*

William Wordsworth's creative career fits almost neatly in between two important revolutions in Europe, namely the French Revolution of 1789, and the widespread revolutions that swept over Europe in 1848. Between these dates Wordsworth produced most of his creative work, and became an iconic English literary figure. Unlike Coleridge, who had already died in 1836, and most of the second generation of young Romantics who were also dead by the 1830's, Wordsworth remained as a symbolic figure not only for English literature, but also for Romanticism, which by the time he died in 1850, was already outmoded and being steadily replaced by Victorian notions and ideas of art and literature. After Wordsworth died, Lord Tennyson took over the title of poet laureate from Wordsworth, and England had a new figure representative of its culture and literature.

In this chapter, I will focus on the impetus behind some of Wordsworth's sonnets and the ways in which various influences shaped his poetic thinking in relation to the form and thematic content of the sonnet. In this chapter, I will also look more closely at issues of form, with the aid of William Kerrigan's article on Wordsworth's sonnets, in which Kerrigan argues that the sonnet offered Wordsworth a 'dwelling' in which to work and explore various themes ("Wordsworth and the Sonnet: Building, Dwelling, Thinking", 57). I will furthermore focus some attention on Wordsworth's friendship with Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the influence that Coleridge had on the literary thought of Wordsworth.

I will principally look at two collections of Wordsworth's sonnets, namely the *Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty and Order*, and the *Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death*, in which I would like to show that Wordsworth, in these two collections, focuses less on the public figures of politics as Coleridge had done, and more on two abstract concepts, both pertinent to the politics of the time, namely, liberty and death. I will focus in particular on the *Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death*, written late in Wordsworth's career.

Romantic Politics

One of the first things one notices about Wordsworth's sonnet output is that he organised and assembled his sonnets in large collections or series. We can point out that this is by no means a new practise. Dante, Petrarch, Sidney and Shakespeare, to mention only the best-known examples, had already followed this practise. Wordsworth might have felt, as his earlier Italian and English colleagues did, that the form of the sonnet is too short and concise to stand on its own and that it needs to be grouped with other sonnets on the given theme or topic that the poet is exploring. Thus in the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* and many of his other collections, Wordsworth assembled sonnets on a specific theme. Of course, sonnets like "England, 1802", or "The World is too Much With Us" are striking enough to stand on their own, but the form seems not long enough for Wordsworth to exhaust his thoughts on the subjects of liberty and death. Therefore Wordsworth sustains his argument by means of interconnecting sonnets assembled into a large collection, such as the *Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty and Order*. This seems to highlight the problems the Romantics faced in fully expressing their thoughts while using the confines of a traditional form.

To say that Wordsworth and Coleridge provided England with its first poetic manifesto of Romanticism would be to recall numerous arguments made by scholars and critics over the years that have by this time become a recognised fact (Purkis, *A Preface to Wordsworth*, 120-121). The *Lyrical Ballads*, written jointly by Coleridge and Wordsworth, defined the literary aspirations of the era in its use of new forms and language. The very title of the collection already illustrates the experimentation that characterises the volume. Ballads are no longer merely ballads; they have become lyrical as well. This hybrid form points to a new way of writing and literary thought. Wordsworth and Coleridge chose not to follow traditional forms of verse, but rather to create new forms in which they could more clearly express themselves and their thoughts on the age in which they lived than would perhaps have been possible using old forms and structures. It is however worth pointing out that the new forms are of course not completely original. "Lyrical ballads" are after all a combination of two pre-existing forms. Yet it nevertheless illustrates some measure of formal experimentation in the Romantic era, and particularly the interplay between the old and the new.

English Romantic poetry by the time of the appearance of the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 had evolved from old and traditional forms to new forms of expression by the rereading, rethinking, and rewriting of traditional forms. The verse of the *Lyrical Ballads* is, however, not completely new. What we have is a new way of writing by using adapted forms of traditional structures. In terms of the sonnet, the poet seems to fuse the traditional structure and form of the sonnet with his own experimentation with the possibilities of the form. The sonnet has come down to Wordsworth as a traditional form that has more often than not contained the lyrical effusions of disappointed love. What Wordsworth does, as Coleridge did before him, is to use this predominantly lyrical form to express his feelings and thoughts on the political situation of the day. Wordsworth and Coleridge took the old forms of the loco-descriptive poem, such as used by Cowper, and infused them with something more than Cowper displayed. I have already related in Chapter One how M. H. Abrams argues that Coleridge took the older forms of Cowper and Thomson, and by his reading of Bowles's sonnets and his assimilation of Bowles's poetic ethos, produced what Abrams calls the "greater Romantic lyric". Yet the *Lyrical Ballads* are still characterised by experimentation, as Mary Jacobus observes in *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads 1798*: "The experimentalism of *Lyrical Ballads* is at once a critique of the poetry Wordsworth saw round him, and a manifesto of his own. It was this experimentalism...that for Wordsworth and Coleridge themselves, as for subsequent readers, came to be central to the volume as a whole" (7). This is a crucial insight, because Jacobus focuses on the central characteristic of the *Lyrical Ballads*, namely that of experimentation. It is after all a theme contained in the title of her book, "Tradition and Experiment". We can also turn to T. S. Eliot's essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", in which Eliot speaks of tradition in works of art. Eliot says, "The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them" (*Selected Essays*, 15). The individual artist might modify tradition, but it does not altogether disappear.

English Romantic poetry seems to rely to a certain extent on the traditions of the past. Byron, for example, was a devout admirer of the poetry of Alexander Pope. Byron also wrote a sonnet, which I will look at later on. All the major Romantic poets, from the first generation through to the second generation, tried their hand at the form. If

we find this to be surprising or interesting, it may have been a case of adhering to the expectations of the reading public, used as they are to the form. Or, as William Kerrigan suggests, the form may have provided some safe foundation in which to work. I would like to think that in the case of the English Romantic political sonnet, a clue to the recurring use of the sonnet to express ideas and feelings about politics might lie in the safety and security that the old form lends to its practitioners. This can be related to the point that Hillier made, that the form of the sonnet provides a “secure foundation” for poets within which to work (*Poems of the Elizabethan Age, An Anthology*, 1).

As we know, the aftermath of the French Revolution was by no means a peaceful affair. The Reign of Terror that ensued might well have forced many revolutionary figures to rethink their attitude and stance to the Revolution. This goes back to the case of Burke and Paine. On the one hand you have Paine, in his *Rights of Man*, advocating revolution and the obtaining of liberty by any means possible. The end justifies the means. Burke, however, clearly saw the bloodshed of the Revolution, and condemned it. The bloodshed and violence of the Revolution forced many people to adopt more conservative outlooks to politics and social issues. Shelley proclaimed the French Revolution to be the great theme of the age, yet had he seen what happened in France after the Revolution in the Great Terror, as Wordsworth had done, he might have been a little more reluctant to view Wordsworth as a “slave” (*Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, 92).

In this atmosphere of conservatism and paranoid control by the governments over their countries (a good example would be the rule of Metternich in Austria after Napoleon's defeat in 1815), it is hardly surprising that Wordsworth and other poets would have returned to the traditional and secure form of the sonnet in which to express themselves regarding uncomfortable political issues. It is almost as if politics had become far too dangerous to talk about, and that one had to approach it with caution. To the reading public and political censors, a sonnet on politics would perhaps seem less risky than another kind of poem on politics. The sonnet offers some sort of traditional reading of politics. By writing about politics using the sonnet as one's form, there is less risk involved, and a poet can rely on the old form to present his argument with a measure of old-world sense and logic. The sonnet in this case

represents a voice of reason and tradition that is taken by the poet from the past. By writing a sonnet, a poet immediately calls to attention that the form he is using is an old, much practised and even revered poetic creation. In the minds of readers this is an act of linking the form to days gone by, when the world was a less revolutionary and hectic place, and when, notionally, the voice of reason prevailed. One might also be reminded of Coleridge's characteristic use of capitalization and exclamation marks in his sonnets and other poetry, which perhaps represents the poet's emotive force pushing against the sonnet's conservative and constraining form. At all events, the sonnet allows for a measure of measured control over the politically disquieting and challenging thoughts and emotions thrown up at the time.

In the preface to the 1802 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth claims that, "It is assumed, that by the act of writing in verse, an Author makes a formal engagement that he will gratify certain known habits of association" (*The Major Works*, 596). Wordsworth clearly states that by writing in a certain form, his readers will have pre-conceived notions about what they are about to read. This might be read as a Wordsworthian gloss of the Neoclassical prerequisite of decorum and good manners. If he writes a sonnet, he expects that his readers will have ideas about what they expect to find in the sonnet that is before them. In other words, the form of literary works has a history behind it. The history of the form is well known and established, and what Wordsworth does is to experiment with the historical traditions and associations of the form. This certainly seems to anticipate the theories of the 20th century formalists in their inquiries about the nature of form in literary works. The form of a literary work seems to demand that the writer will follow a set of conventions, whether they are linguistic, structural or thematic. As readers, we expect to find these conventions appearing when we read the work the writer sets before us. Although Wordsworth is talking about verse in general, we can apply his argument to different forms of verse, such as the sonnet or the loco-descriptive poem, to name but two forms.

Wordsworth's output of sonnets stands in direct opposition to that of his contemporaries and followers with regards to the prolific nature of their composition. Compared to Coleridge, who wrote some fifty sonnets, and Blake, who only wrote one, Wordsworth's prolific sonnet production seems to put his two contemporaries

very much in the shade. Wordsworth literally wrote hundreds of sonnets, from his first publications to the collections of *Miscellaneous Sonnets*, *Memorials of a Tour in Scotland, 1803*, *The River Duddon*, *Yarrow Revisited*, the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* and *Poems Dedicated to National Independence and Liberty*, to name the most important of Wordsworth's collections. J. B. McNulty, in "Milton's Influence on Wordsworth's early Sonnets", points out that Wordsworth wrote some 523 sonnets, which amounts to 7,332 lines (745). The only collection Coleridge attempted was the *Sonnets on Eminent Characters*, and this already contained a fair amount of his total output in its fourteen pieces. Stuart Curran, in "Wordsworth and the Forms of Poetry" from *The Age of William Wordsworth*, also makes the observation that Wordsworth's first printed work was in fact a sonnet, the "Sonnet on Seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress" (115). Curran also points out that the poem was signed "AXIOLOGUS", which translated from the Greek means, "deserving mention" (119).

"Dwelling" and the Sonnet

Of the three major second generation Romantic poets, the one who wrote the most sonnets was John Keats, with some sixty sonnets, followed by Shelley and Byron, who only wrote a handful of sonnets. Wordsworth, therefore, stands as the most important and prolific of the Romantic sonnet writers, the one poet whose sonnets stood before his reading public throughout most of his career and the careers of his fellow writers. Yet why would Wordsworth write sonnets so often and use the form with so much confidence when compared to the other Romantic poets? To answer this question we must turn to William Kerrigan's important article, "Wordsworth and the Sonnet: Building, Dwelling, Thinking", which first appeared in *Essays in Criticism* in 1985.

To briefly sum up the main line of thought in the article, Kerrigan states that Wordsworth found in the form of the sonnet a structure within which he felt at ease to write, and one that provided Wordsworth with some sense of security in going about writing. Kerrigan draws on the theories of Martin Heidegger, which Heidegger outlines in his book *Poetry, Language, Thought*. In the chapter of his book on "Dwelling", Heidegger outlines his theory on what constitutes homeliness and a sense of homely comfort. Heidegger says, "We attain to dwelling, so it seems, only by means of building. The latter, building, has the former, dwelling, as its goal" (145).

Kerrigan draws on these theories to locate the form of the sonnet as a structure for Wordsworth within which to “dwell”. The sonnet becomes for Wordsworth not just a mere “building” or abstract formation, but a home, a “dwelling” within which to work. Importantly, Heidegger also draws on theories of language as a form within which to dwell: “Man acts as though *he* were the shaper and master of language, while in fact *language* remains the master of man” (146). Language, and the forms of language, acts as dwellings the same way as a physical building does.

While looking at some lines of Book 5 of the 1805 version of *The Prelude*, Kerrigan says, “with Wordsworth...it seems quite natural for the text of a poem to be part of the frame of the edifice that it praises” (57). Kerrigan quotes the following lines to illustrate his argument:

...Visionary power
 Attends upon the motions of the winds,
 Embodied in the mystery of words.
 There darkness makes abode, and all the host
 Of shadowy things do work their changes there,
 As in a mansion like their proper home:
 Even forms and substances are circumfus'd
 By that transparent veil with light divine;
 And through the turnings intricate of Verse,
 Present themselves as objects recognised,
 In flashes, and with a glory scarce their own. (619-29)

Kerrigan says, “This is where I would locate Wordsworth and the Sonnet. He not only writes about building and dwelling in his sonnets, obsessively returning to clouds and cottages...but finds the form itself a homely, rooted thing” (57). Kerrigan continues saying, “Wordsworth - as he insists in the ‘Prefatory Sonnet’ of *Poems, in Two Volumes*, finds the fourteen-line structure a uniquely comforting abode in which to dwell. Wordsworth composed this text in 1802 or 1803, shortly after his marriage to Mary Hutchinson, in the middle of the great decade” (57). Wordsworth, having settled down in Grasmere in Dove Cottage, married, and working on his great autobiographical “Poem to Coleridge”, now finds a form of poetry in which he can dwell as he does physically in Dove Cottage. Wordsworth had found his physical home in the Lake District, has his sister Dorothy Wordsworth, Coleridge, and his wife, daily around him. Now he has found an abstract form of verse in which he can be poetically at home, just as he is mentally and physically at home in Grasmere.

It will be useful to briefly look at the sonnet that forms Wordsworth's introduction to the *Poems, in Two Volumes*:

Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room;
 And hermits are contented with their cells;
 And students with their citadels;
 Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,
 Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom,
 High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells,
 Will murmur by the hour the foxglove bells:
 In truth the prison, unto which we doom
 Ourselves, no prison is: and hence to me,
 In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
 Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;
 Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)
 Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,
 Should find short solace there, as I have found.

This sonnet clearly states Wordsworth's attitude to the form of the sonnet and why he felt at ease while using the form. Wordsworth says that each person or living being has their structures within which they dwell. Nuns find a home in the convent, students are at home in citadels, and bees as well might soar high into the sky, but ultimately find their dwelling in the beehive. Line 11 of course recalls *Hamlet*, "a little patch of ground" (Act 5, Scene 1, 18). In short, each creature might roam around the world, but all have their dwellings as well, that physical form that assumes a more personal and emotional meaning of homeliness. The confines of a small space, then, become reassuringly homely and comfortable.

Wordsworth also points out that the physical buildings we inhabit are often not very big or spacious: the nuns have narrow rooms; the hermit sits in his cell. This is a crucial comparison to the form of the sonnet. The sonnet is admittedly not a very large form in which to express one's thoughts and feelings, yet it lends to the writer some added sense of security. Our prisons, says Wordsworth, become less confining exactly because of the fact that they provide a form in which to work. The "scanty plot of ground" of the sonnet (11) forces one to become used to the scantiness thereof. In this line we also find a direct reference to rural life. Indeed, the better part of this sonnet focuses on rural or agricultural life. We might almost call this verse husbandry. There is of course a pun on the word "plot", referring to both the metaphorical plot of ground of the form of the sonnet, as well as to some kind of plotting that might go on

in the creative faculty of the poet when dealing with the constricting space of the form of the sonnet.

It might be easy to say that the constriction of the form might prove to be monotonous and that the writer of a sonnet might become bored with the form, and by implication, write uninteresting verse. Yet the very constraints of the sonnets paradoxically force the poet to become inventive, to “plot” and “build”, if he is to construct a true sonnet. This is where the plotting of the poet comes into play. Kerrigan says, “Wordsworth, dwelling on the sonnet’s ‘plot of ground’...spins and weaves the intricate octave and sestet, so difficult to finish...yet so consoling” (58). Wordsworth might find the form a challenge in its brevity and rule-bound world, yet because the form had become more than a home for him, because it had become a dwelling, Wordsworth is able to find comfort in the “prison” of the sonnet. The prison becomes more of a home. Kerrigan observes, “The ‘narrow room’ of the Miltonic Sonnet charmed Wordsworth all his life, and he stuck firmly to its limits and conventions” (63). The poet then is pleased to use the traditional form of the sonnet and even to work within its confines, but as always there is experimentation taking place, or plotting, when using the constricting form.

In the final couplet, Wordsworth says that poets who have been too free and expansive in their verse might find some sense of “solace” in the brevity of the form. Liberty in verse composition, Wordsworth seems to be saying, can be a burden on the shoulders of the poet. Too much gushing in verse might lead to poetic and literary exhaustion. Yet we can also read “liberty” in a more political vein. The liberty and revolution of the past decade or so might for Wordsworth have become too much to handle emotionally, and as a cure, he uses the constricting yet comforting form of the sonnet. We find parallels here with the retreat to selfhood and domesticity registered at greater length in *Tintern Abbey*. The 1790’s had been a decade in which liberty and revolution figured predominantly in the social and public world. Things took a turn for the worse, however, with the bloody aftermath of the French Revolution known as the Reign of Terror, where thousands of people had lost their lives, and a new tyrant posing as a liberator emerged in France, Napoleon Bonaparte.

I believe the form of the sonnet offered a safe space and structure for Wordsworth to retreat from the bloodshed and brutalities of the aftermath of the French Revolution, and the threat of too much liberty as we have seen in the above sonnet. Kerrigan says, “Wordsworth built his sonnets precisely for dwelling’s sake. The sonnet was a space in which being, for him, declared itself by being radically at home” (58). Sharon M. Setzer observes, “By casting his defense of capital punishment in the conspicuously “literary” sonnet form, Wordsworth not only distanced himself from the populist literature of reformers but also aligned his voice with the tradition he had earlier epitomized in, “Scorn not the Sonnet,” a tradition including Shakespeare, Petrarch, Tasso, Camoens, Dante, Spenser, and Milton” (“Precedent and Perversity in Wordsworth’s *Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death*”, 431). Michael O’Neill observes, “In Wordsworth’s hands, the Romantic sonnet fuses inwardness and public concern” (“The Romantic Sonnet”, 194). This is an important observation for any study of the Romantic political sonnet. As always, the sonnet contains the lyrical and emotional expressions of the poet, or his inwardness, yet at the same time the form is also capable of providing the poet a vehicle for expressing his concern with public or political situations. Wordsworth adheres to the lyrical tradition of the form of the sonnet and at the same time voices his thoughts and feelings on contemporary social and political events.

The Historical Context

As I have pointed out in the previous chapter on Coleridge, Coleridge was not a writer who shied away from the outside world. He was actively part of the social and political world of his time. Wordsworth, one might argue, was even more so, having spent time in France around the time of the French Revolution, during which he also fathered his first child. That Wordsworth was in France around the time of the Revolution must be taken seriously and requires some closer attention.

Born in 1770, Wordsworth at the time of the French Revolution in 1789 was a young man just entering adulthood. Nicholas Roe, in his study, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* observes, “In 1792 Coleridge was drinking negus in his rooms at Jesus College, and discussing political pamphlets with other undergraduates. At the same time Wordsworth was witnessing the French Revolution at first hand, meeting individuals actively participating in ‘that great change’” (38). This seems to echo the

thoughts of William Hazlitt when he wrote his piece on Coleridge in *The Spirit of the Age*, where he observes that the age is one of thinkers, not of active participants. Yet Wordsworth would not easily fall into this category of inactivity. Roe continues, saying, “For Coleridge the Revolution was an ideal cause only; he never crossed the channel to see it for himself. But to Wordsworth in 1792 France offered an opportunity for personal action and involvement, and an experience that was to reverberate through his poetry of later years” (38). Coleridge might have been politically involved in social issues and arguments in England at the time of the Revolution, yet he was never in France, as Wordsworth was.

Wordsworth had arrived in France in late 1791, and was back in England in late 1792. This twelve-month period impressed upon Wordsworth more than just the ideals of liberty and freedom. What he saw in his year of residence in France provided an impetus to his outlook on the Revolution itself. As Roe remarks, “That year was marked by a change in the character and direction of the Revolution: from non-violent constitutional reform to the bloodshed of the September Massacres; from peaceful co-existence to war with Austria and later with Britain after February 1793” (38). Wordsworth would no doubt have witnessed this crucial change in the Revolution. It was originally heralded as an event that would change the social make-up of Europe, yet its outcomes were far from peaceful. The Revolution had become representative of the overthrow of one regime by replacing it with another equally bloody and inconsiderate of liberty and the hopes of the people who instigated it. Roe sums this up saying, “unlike France in 1790, where ‘joy of one’ had seemed to be ‘joy of tens of millions’, all things in Paris in December 1791 appeared ‘loose and disjointed’” (42). Stephen Gill, in *William Wordsworth, A Life*, also echoes these sentiments when he says, “On Wordsworth’s return in 1791 the atmosphere in France was very different. Hopes that progress towards needed constitutional, fiscal, and social reform would be peaceful were dimming, as groups struggled for power in the vacuum created by royal vacillation” (59). Having been in France in 1790 with a “personal wish / To speak the language more familiarly” (*The Prelude*, 1805, Bk. IX, 36-37), Wordsworth now saw what had happened to the ideals of the Revolution. William Doyle, in *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, says, “Altogether the true total of those under the Terror may have been twice the official figure – around 30,000 people in just under a

year” (258). This illustrates the enormous social upheavals taking place in France and the human cost thereof.

What was Wordsworth’s relationship with politics? Firstly we must turn to one of his more intimate friends during his early years in Grasmere, Thomas de Quincy. De Quincy, in his *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets*, says, “Wordsworth, it is well known to all who know anything of his history, felt himself so fascinated by the gorgeous festival era of the Revolution...that he went over to Paris” (175). De Quincy clearly states that the impulse that drove Wordsworth was in fact the Revolution, and that Wordsworth was “fascinated” by what was happening in France. For a young man just stepping into manhood, the events in France would no doubt have been extremely interesting and would perhaps provide some driving force behind a rethinking of his own preconceived ideas about politics and the social circumstances in a country. Wordsworth states in *The Prelude*, “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very heaven!” (Bk. X, 692-693) In a broader context, Alan Liu states in *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*, “Wordsworth’s largest, most sustained theme is the realisation of history” (39).

As is the case with many arguments about the formation of Romanticism in English literature, I would also like to point to the notion that the Revolution provided an intellectual impetus to the rethinking of theories about art and literature that took place in the late 1790’s. George Woodcock, in his article “The Meaning of the Revolution in Britain, 1770-1800” from *The French Revolution and British Culture*, says, “It was this encouragement to look forward rather than backward that was to distinguish the influence of the French Revolution...in Britain” (5). Unlike his great contemporary Coleridge, Wordsworth not merely discussed politics and reform, but he actually saw them up close and personal, and was fully aware of the extent of the influence of the Revolution. If Coleridge relied on reports in newspapers and pamphlets about what was happening in France, Wordsworth was there and saw for himself the unfolding of events. I would like to think that what Wordsworth saw in France would have given him more reason to revert to the traditional form of the sonnet, in that he found more security in the form during a time of intense political upheaval. For Coleridge, as Roe points out, the Revolution was an ideal; but for Wordsworth it was a reality.

In his article, “Politics, History and Wordsworth’s Poems” in *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*, Roe points out the case of Leonard Bourdon, and quotes Bourdon saying he felt “a sense of exquisite satisfaction” being a “martyr for liberty” after he was nearly killed by hot-headed revolutionaries (205). Bourdon was a staunch believer in the original cause of the French Revolution. “Bourdon’s ideals represented everything Wordsworth hoped the revolution might achieve” (205). Bourdon was very nearly killed by a group of men who stood in opposition to his ideals, and twenty-six of the assailants stood trial for the attempted murder of Bourdon. Nine of the men were sentenced to death. It was obvious Bourdon was a popular figure: “When sentence of death was pronounced the whole court, except for Bourdon, was in tears” (206). The nine condemned men were guillotined on 13 July 1793. One of the accused at the trial had been Wordsworth’s landlord, a certain Jean-Henri Gellet-Duvivier.

Roe makes an interesting observation in his article when he says,

In July 1793 Wordsworth spent some weeks in the Isle of Wight...although what he was doing there remains one of the mysterious ‘gaps’ in his early life. Could he have crossed the Channel, made his way to Paris, and sat in the tribunal as a helpless ‘eye-witness of the process’ – an eye-witness who for years afterwards would plead in his dreams on behalf of the accused? (208)

This passage seems crucial to me for an understanding as to why Wordsworth undertook the composition of the *Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death*. Why would Wordsworth have written those sonnets, if there had not been some personal incentive and background to do so? It may be easy to say that the sonnets in this collection represent Wordsworth’s thoughts on the beheadings of the French Revolution, but in this case we must bear in mind the possibility of what Roe points out, that Wordsworth might have personally seen the beheadings of men that he thought did not deserve it, and to have witnessed the trial even of some of his personal acquaintances, in this case his landlord in France.

Roe says, “This outrage, one of many reported in London newspapers, was (and is) so uniquely dismaying that we can understand how for anyone sympathetic to France news of it would have stirred feelings of ‘treachery and desertion’” (208). This is

exactly the sort of response that people would have had to news of the growing troubles in France. The death sentence of the nine men involved in the Bourdon trial is representative of the direction that politics was taking in France. The initial hopes of revolution and liberty were gone, and were being replaced by cruel beheadings of men who believed in their cause, and did indeed die for it. In the case of Bourdon, we see an enlightened man who stood for the ideals of liberty and freedom condemning his assailants to death, without even showing any emotion when the verdict was pronounced. This may have been the nail in the coffin for Wordsworth's ideals of liberty and freedom, especially when it came from a "martyr of liberty" such as Bourdon.

In *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years*, Roe mentions further evidence of Wordsworth's dissatisfaction with the way things were turning out in France, and his witnessing of other executions, as related by Thomas Carlyle:

He had been in France in the earlier or secondary stages of the Revolution; had witnessed the struggle of *Girondins* and *Mountain*, in particular the execution of Gorsas, 'the first *Deputy* sent to the Scaffold;' and testified strongly to the ominous feeling which that event produced in everybody, and of which he himself still seemed to retain something: 'Where will it *end*, when you have set an example in *this* kind?' (40)

It is obvious from this example that Wordsworth witnessed more public executions than merely a few unrelated incidents. The punishment of death was no doubt at the time strongly etched in his mind and his response to the Revolution. This feeling of alienation from the ideals of the Revolution is also similarly echoed in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, where Edmund Burke condemned the tyrannical law exercised by the new government upon its citizens.

Moving forward to the 1840's when Wordsworth was a revered poetic figure and already Poet Laureate, although still ridiculed by other poets such as Shelley for his conservatism, we arrive at the *Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death*. There is perhaps a link in these pieces to the past history of Wordsworth if we remember the Bourdon trial that he had witnessed and the beheadings of the French Revolution. How much of this would have remained in Wordsworth's memory is perhaps speculative, but of all the Romantics, Wordsworth is the only major poet to have

attempted a cycle of poems on the punishment of death. It is within this context that I would like to place this late collection of sonnets by Wordsworth, arguing that his physical residence in France led to an acute realisation of the nature of revolutionary politics, and that he sought in the form of the sonnet some relief from the brutality of revolutionary France, and that he found in the sonnet a form in which he could safely “dwell” in homely peace or “Gemütlichkeit”. It is as though Wordsworth uses a conservative form to contain his horror at the excesses that had followed on the great revolutionary zeal of his earlier years. It is in this combination of safe dwelling and political argumentation that I would like to place Wordsworth’s *Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death* in the line of English Romantic political sonnets in which the poet found in the form the ability to write about problematic politics from an individual or lyrical point of view. In this way, Wordsworth continues the precedent set by Coleridge in his *Sonnets on Eminent Characters*.

Two Further Sonnets

Before analysing Wordsworth *Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death*, I would like to briefly look at two of his more famous sonnets, “Scorn not the Sonnet; Critic”, and “London, 1802”. In many ways the former sonnet resembles the sonnet that introduces the *Poems, In Two Volumes*, in that Wordsworth is talking about the nature of the form of the sonnet. Wordsworth, in this sonnet, recalls some of the more famous practitioners of the form from the past, and gives a reason for his own continued use of the form and why he felt at home in the form.

Scorn not the Sonnet; Critic, you have frowned,
 Mindless of its just honours; with this key
 Shakespeare unlocked his heart; the melody
 Of this small Lute have ease to Petrarch’s wound;
 A thousand times this Pipe did Tasso sound;
 With it Camöens soothed an Exile’s grief;
 The Sonnet glittered a gay myrtle leaf
 Amid the cypress with which Dante crowned
 His visionary brow: a glow-worm lamp,
 It cheered mild Spenser, called from Faery-land
 To struggle through dark ways; and when a damp
 Fell round the path of Milton, in his hand
 The Thing became a trumpet; whence he blew
 Soul-animating strains - alas, too few!

It is clear from reading the sonnet that Wordsworth is defending the sonnet against criticism, perhaps even criticism levelled against his own sonnets. Wordsworth identifies the critics of the sonnet as “Mindless of its just honours” (12). The critics of the sonnet seem forgetful of the possibilities and history of the form, and on the whole this sonnet is a defence of the sonnet. Wordsworth identifies the major past writers of sonnets, and says that in each case the writer seems to have been distressed or anxious to some extent. Thus Shakespeare could write about his love using the form, Petrarch’s “wound” (4) could be healed, and Spenser, lost in “dark ways”, could find some solace or “cheer” (10-11) from using the form. The lines, “the melody / Of this small Lute have ease to Petrarch’s wound” (3-4) contains in essence a marvellously condensed history of the sonnet, demonstrating amplitude in the constriction of the form. We can relate this back to the sonnet, “Nuns fret not”, in which Wordsworth offers arguments for the creative possibilities that lie in the supposedly constricting form of the sonnet. Wordsworth also stresses the form’s ability to express emotion, by making reference to the love sonnets of Shakespeare and Petrarch. For Milton, “The Thing became a trumpet” (13), a reference to the magical transformation of the sonnet in Milton’s hands. The sonnet becomes an instrument of protest, if we read into the traditional associations of the trumpet. It is an instrument of protest, liberation and judgement, as we find in the “Tuba mirum” section of the Requiem Mass in which the trumpet summons the whole of humanity to Judgement Day.

The other sonnet, more relevant to Wordsworth’s political outlook, is “London, 1802”:

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
 England hath need of thee: she is a fen
 Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
 Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
 Have forfeited their ancient English dower
 Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
 Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
 And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.
 Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart;
 Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
 Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
 So didst thou travel on life’s common way,
 In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
 The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

Wordsworth was a great admirer of Milton, and wrote the following lines in a letter of November 1802: "Milton's sonnets I think manly and dignified compositions, distinguished by simplicity and unity of object and aim, and undisfigured by false or vicious ornaments" (*The Major Works*, 710). In 1838 Wordsworth published the following note to a volume of his sonnets: "My admiration of some of the Sonnets of Milton, first tempted me to write in that form. The fact is...mentioned...as a public acknowledgement of one of our innumerable obligations, which, as a Poet and a Man, I am under to our great fellow-countryman" (Wordsworth in McNulty, "Milton's Influence on Wordsworth's Early Sonnets", 745). Wordsworth clearly illustrates a tradition into which he happily places himself. We also find again the conflict between the inner and the outer worlds of the poet: The "inward happiness" (5) of the English people has been lost in the political atmosphere of England in 1802. Yet there is also an unmistakable patriotism in these lines, especially when we consider that a certain kind of critique, such as Wordsworth employs, might be considered patriotic. In line 10 Wordsworth emphasises the importance of Milton's voice: "Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea". Wordsworth seems to find a distinctive timbre in Milton's use of the sonnet, perhaps one as powerful and all encompassing as the sea.

With regards to the political and social set up of the London of 1802, Wordsworth notes the following: "After my return from France to London, when I could not but be struck...with the vanity and parade of our own country, especially in great towns and cities, as contrasted with the quiet, and I may say the desolation, that the revolution had produced in France" (*Major Works*, 710). Wordsworth is no doubt reflecting on the importance of Milton as a political thinker when England had been in revolution over a century before, and the example that Milton had set for other political figures. Milton becomes for Wordsworth a poet figure as an agent of political change in the current political climate. In England around the year 1802, Wordsworth felt that England was in need of a great and sensible figure like Milton. The world Wordsworth saw was full of vanity, pride, and pompousness, in contrast to what was going on in France. Milton's influence, Wordsworth suggests, might show the people of England their own hubris and vanity. Milton, at the end of this sonnet, is also represented as a Christ-like, redemptive figure, especially when one considers the politically redemptive elements that can be found in his sonnets and with which

Wordsworth so keenly identified. In line 7 we also find a call from Wordsworth for Milton to “raise us up” and to “return to us again”. Wordsworth calls for a resurrection of the ideals of Milton, drawing on the Christian associations of the resurrection and the second coming.

Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death

The *Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death* was first published as a collection in December 1841 in the *Quarterly Review*, and had been composed between 1839 and 1840. By the time Wordsworth wrote these pieces nearly all of the important Romantic poets were dead. Coleridge, his great friend, and Blake, who with Wordsworth form the first generation, had died, and the younger generation of Byron, Shelley and Keats had all died tragically early deaths, leaving Wordsworth as the grand old man of English letters. Robert Southey, an important contemporary, was still alive and held the title of Poet Laureate, yet he was often ridiculed by Byron as a conservative poet, and would in any case be dead within the next two years. Tennyson had already published his first few volumes of verse, and English literature was steadily heading towards what we today call Victorianism. In a sense Wordsworth at this time seems almost an anachronism, a writer who had lived for far longer than he perhaps should have. Not that his poetic career was over. Apart from the late works, he was also busy revising his great autobiographical poem *The Prelude*, which was to be published shortly after his death. It is in this context that the sonnets he wrote in the late 1830's and early 1840's should be read.

Wordsworth still seems to have had something to say. More importantly for the present study, he still had something political on his mind. The punishment of death had perhaps long resounded in his mind, ever since he first set foot in France and witnessed some of the public executions. That he would return to the subject so late in life proves that he still felt strongly about the death penalty.

This sequence of sonnets starts with the piece, “Suggested by the View of Lancaster Castle, (On the Road from the South)”, and this very precise description of the location that Wordsworth provides reminds one of the longish title of *Tintern Abbey*, where Wordsworth also gives a detailed time and place reference for his readers. Lancaster Castle, from the South, suggests to Wordsworth what is to follow in his

sonnet. This is quite a Wordsworthian method of writing. There seems to be a traveller, perhaps the poet himself, and as he reaches the castle, he recollects past memories and impressions. This is a typical device of Wordsworth's earlier poetry, in which we find a traveller who comes to a stop, and surveys the surrounding area, which has made a particular impact on him, or that perhaps has awakened memories. Two well-known examples of this are "The Solitary Reaper" and "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." This is also what Geoffrey Hartman points out in *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814*, in the section on the "halted traveller" in Wordsworth's poetry (22).

This Spot – at once unfolding sight so fair
Of sea and land, with yon grey towers that still
Rise up as if to lord it over air –
Might soothe in human breasts the sense of ill,
Or charm it out of memory; yea, might fill
The heart with joy and gratitude to God
For all his bounties upon man bestowed:
Why bears it then the name of 'Weeping Hill'?
Thousands, as toward yon old Lancastrian Towers,
A prison's crown, along this way they past
For lingering durance or quick death with shame,
From this bare eminence thereon have cast
Their first look – blinded as tears fell in showers
Shed on their chains; and hence that doleful name.

This first sonnet in the series is divided into two parts, illustrating the innate dramatic quality of the sonnet, a recurring characteristic in this series of sonnets. In the first part Wordsworth reflects on the beauty of the prospect, and the ways in which the "sense of ill" (4) in humans might be soothed by looking on the scene. In the second part Wordsworth gives us an explanation of the reason why the scene is called "Weeping Hill". In the first seven lines Wordsworth provides us in miniature some of his favourite themes, such as the restorative effect that nature has on people, and also how one's memory might be cleared of the sense of ill that is stored up in it. There is also a religious element in the first part that illustrates something of Wordsworth's beliefs.

Yet in the last seven lines the tone of the poem turns to something more ominous. The fair prospect or "spot" (1) awakens in the mind of the poet different thoughts to the happier ones he mused on in the first seven lines. Wordsworth asks why, if this scene is so beautiful and it has such restorative powers for an ill memory and soul, does it

have the name, “Weeping Hill”. The last six lines explain why: prisoners on their way to the scaffold cry and the tears fall “on their chains” (14). The beautiful scene no longer has any healing qualities. Like the Tower of London, the Lancaster towers represent prison life and the death penalty. Wordsworth almost seems to show two sides of the coin when he opens his cycle with this sonnet. On the one hand there is a calm and healing scene, yet at the same time that scene is the backdrop to prisoners on their way to prison and inevitable death. Underneath the beautiful scene there lurks something far more sinister. This sonnet is not merely about delighting in the picturesque. There is both an element of man’s perverseness, and the need for an historical consciousness on the part of the poet and reader.

After setting the scene, both in terms of the natural world and the political world in the first sonnet, Wordsworth continues with the following:

Tenderly do we feel by Nature’s law
For worst offenders: though the heart will heave
With indignation, deeply moved we grieve,
In afterthought, for Him who stood in awe
Neither of God nor man, and only saw,
Lost wretch, a horrible device enthroned
On proud temptations, till the victim groaned
Under the steel his hand had dared to draw. (1-8)

In the first part of the second sonnet of the series, Wordsworth takes us closer to the feelings of the condemned men as they approach the scaffold. There seems to be a “natural” reflex of sympathy for the condemned man, as there is for the person whom he murdered. Yet it is necessary for the condemned man to be punished appropriately. Wordsworth goes back to what he was saying in the first sonnet about “Nature’s law”. Nature and the human world are here opposed to one another, as was the case in the opening sonnet. That the “horrible device” is “enthroned” (6) provides more evidence that the penalty of death is man-made, and not natural. We have enthroned the horrible device of death; it is not a natural occurrence. Yet it seems justified: the condemned man had “dared to draw” the “steel” (8), which one can read as an act of murder that the man had committed. He drew his knife and killed someone, which is not a natural occurrence, and as a result, has to be punished in an unnatural way. In the last six lines of the sonnet, Wordsworth seems to justify this unnatural act, saying that we should put aside our feelings of compassion, and perform the necessary task:

But O, restrain compassion, if its course,
 As oft befalls, prevent or turn aside
 Judgements and aims and acts whose higher source
 Is sympathy with the unforewarned, who died
 Blameless – with them that shuddered o’er his grave,
 And all who from the law firm safety crave. (9-14)

The closing lines of this sonnet seem to deftly attempt to show “culture” correcting “nature”. Our compassion must be restrained, so that we rightly, according to Wordsworth, have sympathy with the allegedly innocent victim, with the victim’s family and friends, and with a wider social order that seeks safety from the law.

In the third sonnet of the series, Wordsworth turns to historical examples, such as the “Roman Consul” who “doomed” his sons because they had betrayed their country (1). Wordsworth is perhaps looking for some historical evidence and justification for the death penalty in his contemporary world:

The Roman Consul doomed his sons to die
 Who had betrayed their country. The stern word
 Afforded (may it through all time afford)
 A theme for praise and admiration high.
 Upon the surface of humanity
 He rested not; its depths his mind explored;
 He felt; but his parental bosom’s lord
 Was Duty, - Duty calmed his agony. (1-8)

The Roman consul, although he is troubled by the fact that he must kill his sons, is nevertheless calmed by duty. This is no small matter to him. He explores the depths of humanity, and goes beyond the mere surface. Above all, it is his obligation to duty that sees him through the worst of his mental troubles and agonies over having to kill his sons. For Wordsworth the sentence “afforded...a theme for praise and admiration high” (3-4). Although the consul might wrestle with the ritualistic death of his sons, the “theme” of punishment by death is admirable. It is interesting that the sonnet finds in its subject matter the need to regulate “feeling” through the structure and structural imposition of the of its form, almost a parallel to what the poet is looking for in the form of the sonnet.

And some, we know, when they by wilful act
 A single human life have wrongly taken,
 Pass sentence on themselves, confess the fact,

And, to atone for it, with soul unshaken
 Kneel at the feet of Justice, and, for faith
 Broken with all mankind, solicit death. (9-14)

In the last section, Wordsworth again looks at the opposite of what he had been discussing in the first part. This is a feature of the sonnets in the series so far. In the first part, Wordsworth examined the fate of the consul who had to give up his sons to death because of their betrayal. Now the focus is on the condemned man himself. Some people “we know” (9), Wordsworth says, have an obligation to admit their faults or betrayal. They are willing to die because they have ruptured the social contract. This section perhaps does not follow directly on from the consul section, in that it might not be one of his sons who are admitting his guilt. Wordsworth is generalising here, not focussing on the particular case. The last six lines do seem to have a more universal message about the duty of the condemned man. The language and tone of this third sonnet seems at times almost stern and formal, yet Wordsworth is not seeking pity, he is concerned with duty on the part of both parties. Wordsworth seems to evade scorn by suggesting that the guilty party should solicit death as a just punishment.

In the fourth sonnet, Wordsworth turns his attention to the abstract notion of death:

Is *Death*, when evil against good has fought
 With such fell mastery that a man may dare
 By deeds the blackest purpose to lay bare-
 Is Death, for one to that condition brought,-
 For him, or any one, - the thing that ought
 To be *most* dreaded? Lawgivers, beware,
 Lest capital pains remitting till ye spare
 The murderer, ye, by that sanction to that thought,
 Seemingly given, debase the general mind;
 Tempt the vague will tried standards to disown;
 Nor only palpable restraints unbind,
 But upon Honour's head disturb the crown,
 Whose absolute rule permits to withstand
 The weakest love of life his least command.

In this sonnet Wordsworth seems to be attacking the notion that death is horrible, and that it is to be “most dreaded” (6) to kill someone else. Wordsworth is saying that the “lawgivers” (6) should be wary of doing away with capital punishment. Wordsworth importantly italicises the words “Death” and “most” (1-4), asking the question with

added emphasis on the concept of death. We can also look at the “tried standards” of line 10, and the way it is opposed to the “vague will”. The “tried standards” are the cultural and social forms that Wordsworth believes should be adhered to, just as Burke, representative of the older system, had insisted they.

Since the cycle of sonnets concerns the abstract concept of death, it is somewhat surprising that it is only at this point that Wordsworth introduces the theme of death. In the first three sonnets Wordsworth focussed on the setting and the personal reactions of people to death. In this sonnet we are plunged headlong into the real questions surrounding the death penalty. Yet Wordsworth has been building up to this point by talking first about the setting, our feelings on the death penalty, and in the third sonnet, given an example of a man’s duty to uphold the punishment. Now Wordsworth capitalises and italicises the word “death” to focus the reader’s attention on the main concern of the collection.

Wordsworth, in the fifth sonnet, explains the position of the “lawgivers”, saying that the ultimate goal of the death penalty for the government is goodness:

Not to the object specially designed,
Howe’er momentous in itself it be,
Good to promote or curb depravity,
Is the wise Legislator’s view confined. (1-4)

The “wise Legislator’s” view of the death penalty is not merely “confined” (4) to what he thinks is the ultimate goal thereof. The “object” (1), if we take this to be the death sentence itself, is not the most important aspect for the legislator. What he is concerned with seems to be the promotion of goodness. Is Wordsworth criticising the government, saying that they don’t have sympathy with the condemned man? Wordsworth is certainly casting a critical eye on the way in which the death penalty is formulated by the government, and how it is viewed. Wordsworth continues analysing the role of the legislator, saying:

His Spirit, when most severe, is oft most kind;
As all Authority in earth depends
On Love and Fear, their several powers he blends,
Copying with awe the one Paternal mind. (5-8)

“The one Paternal mind” (8) may refer to the role that God plays in all of this, yet Wordsworth also shows us how the lawgiver has become God’s representative. Wordsworth sidesteps the notion of God being the only one to give and take life. The lawgiver assumes the role of the omnipotent God to enforce his authority and ensure that the people will obey his rule. Words like “Spirit” and “Authority” (5-6) enforce Wordsworth’s view that the lawgiver assumes an almost deistic role in the social world. By balancing love and fear, the lawgivers are both to be admired for their persecution of capital crimes, and feared by criminals who commit unlawful acts.

Uncaught by processes in show humane,
He feels how far the act would derogate
From even the humblest functions of the State;
If she, self-shorn of Majesty, ordain
That never more shall hang upon her breath
The last alternative of Life or Death. (9-14)

The concluding six lines of the sonnet are divided into two parts that balance each other. On the one hand is the lawgiver, and on the other hand there appears to be the figure of Justice, balancing the scales. There is of course a pun on “hang” in line 13. Is Wordsworth illustrating the balance that the state has to find between life and death? The lawgiver seems to hold fast to his ideas of the death penalty, yet also saying that showing too much empathy for the victims of the gallows is not part of the functions of the state. Yet if Justice, without “Majesty” (12) might view the world differently, it would be one where the choice is no longer between life and death.

In the fourth and fifth sonnets Wordsworth turns from being merely descriptive as is the case in the first sonnet, and analysing our responses to the death penalty, as we saw in the next two sonnets, to becoming much more politically oriented in the two sonnets I have just examined. I would also like to relate this first group of sonnets to what I said in the first chapter on Coleridge. I argued that Coleridge had lyricised the political sonnet following on from the example set down by Milton and with the influence of William Bowles. In this collection of sonnets by Wordsworth, we arguably see the same elements of lyric poetry emerging from what is a very serious cycle. In effect, Wordsworth’s personal and inward voice emerges from the social concerns that he discusses. In the first sonnet, Wordsworth describes the setting, presenting us with a very Romantic and Wordsworthian reading of the landscape.

This reading of nature also seems to be related to elements of the “greater Romantic lyric”, developed by Coleridge. Wordsworth seems to be able to provide in miniature, in the first seven lines of the first sonnet, the essence of a Romantic sensibility in relation to the landscape. In the second sonnet, Wordsworth is talking about our personal responses to the question of the death penalty. We feel “tenderly” (1) for the captives on their way to being executed. Even the Roman consul, though bound by duty, would not have found killing his sons an easy responsibility. Wordsworth eloquently captures his feelings with the phrase “He felt” (7). Wordsworth might have written these sonnets for the reading public, but they are very much from a personal and un-Miltonic perspective. Wordsworth continues with:

Ye brood of Conscience - Spectres! that frequent
 The bad man's restless walk, and haunt his bed –
 Fiends in your aspect, yet beneficent
 In act, as hovering Angels when they spread
 Their wings to guard the unconscious Innocent –
 Slow be the Statutes of the land to share
 A laxity that could not but impair
Your power to punish crime, and so prevent.
 And ye, Beliefs! Coiled serpent-like about
 The adage on all tongues, ‘Murder will out’,
 How shall your ancient warnings work for good
 In the full might they hitherto have shown,
 If for deliberate shedder of man's blood
 Survive not Judgement that requires his own?

Wordsworth's focus in this sonnet is on man's consciousness and the burden of consciousness that hangs on the shoulders of the criminal. Interestingly, Wordsworth compares conscience with spectres represented by “Angels” (4), saying that human morality or conscience acts like guardian angels to prevent the criminal or would-be criminal from committing crimes deserving capital punishment.

Yet Wordsworth again shows the two sides of the coin in this sonnet. We trust in man's conscience to prevent crimes, yet this is not always effective. In this sense, the above sonnet can be related to the fifth sonnet of the series with its comparison of lawgivers to “Paternal” or God-like figures. Perhaps the world today needs a different set of judgements if one is to deal with the punishment of murder. God asks forgiveness of sinners, yet in this sonnet, Wordsworth seems to be saying that we now require punishment. It is also useful to note that this is the first instance of the use of

the word “punishment” in Wordsworth’s collection. Although we trust in the power of man’s conscience to help prevent murder, Wordsworth in this sonnet is saying that in the modern age we need murderers not to merely fear God and his judgement and punishment, but also the laws of the country as laid out by the government. Here we see Wordsworth agreeing with the government that the wrath of God is not enough to stop murder.

In the seventh sonnet of the series, Wordsworth gives us a new historical angle from which to view the question of punishment by death:

Before the world had past her time of youth
 While polity and discipline were weak,
 The precept eye for eye, and tooth for tooth,
 Came forth – a light, though but as of daybreak,
 Strong as could then be borne. A Master meek
 Proscribed the spirit fostered by that rule,
 Patience *his* law, long-suffering *his* school,
 And love the end, which all through peace must seek. (1-8)

In these lines Wordsworth neatly sums up the way that the world worked before the introduction of the kind of government we know today. “Polity” (2) is a kind of ad-hoc institution of politics. There were fewer rhetoric and rules to be enforced, but to make up for that we had the biblical notion of an eye for an eye. Wordsworth, in this sonnet, is talking about the fundamental shift that takes place from the Old Testament to the New Testament. The precept of “an eye for an eye” has been replaced with the love of the “Master meek” (5), Christ.

But lamentably do they err who strain
 His mandates, given rash impulse to control
 And keep vindictive thirsting from the soul,
 So far that, if consistent in their scheme,
 They must forbid the State to inflict a pain,
 Making of social order a mere dream. (9-14)

In the second section of the sonnet, Wordsworth turns his attention to those people who try to enforce the biblical way of social control. Wordsworth’s distinction here is between the Old and New Testaments. In Christ we find a figure that proscribed the notion of an eye for an eye. Wordsworth says “social order” will be a “mere dream” (14) if we do not uphold the death penalty. If we are to forgive every crime, no one

will be punished for his or her misdeeds, and the dream of a social order will collapse. Again Wordsworth endorses the death penalty. Wordsworth focuses his attention on the anti-death penalty lobby. The poet realises that the death penalty is a necessary evil, and that mere forgiveness is not enough to prevent further murders.

In the eighth sonnet, Wordsworth says,

Fit retribution, by moral code
Determined, lies beyond the State's embrace,
Yet, as she may, for each peculiar case
She plants well-measured terrors in the road
Of wrongful acts. (1-5)

The state has the ability to plant “well-measured terrors in the road / Of wrongful acts” (4-5), in other words, the state has the ability to impose the death penalty and to let it serve as a deterrent to other would-be murderers and criminals. Again Wordsworth seems to commend the government. The government does not have the ability to enforce our conscious moral code, yet they do have the power to place the death penalty in the way of murderers and criminals deserving capital punishment for their crimes, to act as both a warning and deterrent, and to serve as punishment. The “terrors” are “well-measured” (4), indicating that the government seems to be fair in its allocation of punishment. Wordsworth goes as far as to say that in the face of these punishments, “Crime might better lie hid” (9), and as such shows the effectiveness of the government’s methods of crime prevention. In “well measured” (4) we hear again the voice of Burke and of tradition, with an emphasis on decorum, the need for restraint and constraint. Social life and cultural norms are themselves little rooms in which he might have, for the alleged greater good, to fret.

In the ninth sonnet, Wordsworth warns us against adopting a narrow view and stance regarding the death penalty:

Though to give timely warning and deter
Is one great aim of the penalty, extend
Thy mental vision further and ascend
Far higher, else full surely shalt thou err. (1-4)

Wordsworth, in the tone and register of his language, seems to be addressing not only his general readers, but also more importantly, the government, warning them that they will “err” (4) if they don’t try to understand the true nature of the death penalty. Wordsworth then continues examining the nature of the state:

What is a State? The wise behold in her
 A creature born of time, that keeps one eye
 Fixed on the statutes of Eternity,
 To which her judgements reverently defer.
 Speaking through Law’s dispassionate voice the State
 Endues her conscience with external life
 And being, to preclude or quell the strife
 Of individual will, to elevate
 The grovelling mind, the erring to recall,
 And fortify the moral sense of all. (5-14)

Wordsworth is speaking of the “wise” (5) that seem to hold this view of the state. Ultimately the goal of the state is to “fortify the moral sense of all” (14), but in achieving that aim the state speaks through the “dispassionate voice” (9) of the Law and in so doing seems to assume some kind of conscience. Again at this point we hear the voice of Burke and the need for “constraints”. As this is one of the key points in my discussion on the use of the sonnet, we can perhaps see in these sonnets an interplay for the argument of the constraint of “the strife / of individual will” (11-12) by the larger cultural norm, embodied in the “Law’s dispassionate voice” (9).

In the tenth sonnet, Wordsworth turns his attention to the concept of life and the value of life:

Our bodily life, some plead, that life the shrine
 Of an immortal spirit, is a gift
 So sacred, so informed with light divine,
 That no tribunal, though most wise to sift
 Deed and intent, should turn the Being adrift
 Into that world where penitential tear
 May not avail, nor prayer have for God’s ear
 A voice – that world whose veil no hand can lift
 For earthly sight. ‘Eternity and Time,’
 They urge, ‘have interwoven claims and rights
 Not to be jeopardised through foulest crime:
 The sentence rule by mercy’s heaven-born lights.’
 Even so; but measuring not by finite sense
 Infinite Power, perfect Intelligence.

“Some” (1) people call life a “gift” (2) that has been given us by God, and to stand up against its divine laws seems to be to go against the grain of Christian love. These sorts of sentiments have been proclaimed by Wordsworth in earlier sonnets in the series, yet he now focuses our attention on the question of life.

The second part of the sonnet seems to contain a quote from some anti-death penalty lobbyist regarding the death penalty. It seems interesting that Wordsworth would go as far as to include this kind of statement in the form of the sonnet. Does it not signify some external interference in his safe and homely form of the sonnet? Perhaps he felt the need to include it in his sonnet to give weight to his argument about the lesser role that politicians play in relation to divine law. Perhaps he also felt that the extent to which statements and propaganda from the outside world influence man’s conscience need to be given proper weight and due course in this series of sonnets. He no doubt chose to include those words to illustrate the kind of rhetoric that members of the political world employed and how they influence or attempt to influence the mind of the general public. The anti-death penalty lobbyists proclaim that the sentence of death or punishment by death is guided by “mercy’s heaven-born lights” (12).

At the same time, in the eleventh sonnet of the series, Wordsworth focuses our attention on the feelings that the imprisoned man awaiting execution must feel:

Ah, think how one compelled for life to abide
 Locked in a dungeon needs must eat the heart
 Out of his own humanity, and part
 With every hope that mutual cares provide (1-4)

These are frightening lines about the way in which imprisonment before execution takes away one’s humanity. Wordsworth also seems to say that the advantages of death outweigh the disadvantages of long imprisonment or exile. Wordsworth urges us to contemplate the condemned man’s thoughts and feelings as he awaits his punishment. Who is to blame? Wordsworth might argue that the state is at fault here, forcing a man to undergo this horrific shunning of hope. Even “mutual cares” (4), the basis of brotherhood, can no longer be relied upon in one who is deprived of it.

And, should a less unnatural doom confide
 In life-long exile on a savage coast (5-6)

These two lines illustrate the fate of English criminals. If you are not executed, then you are sent away from home to live as an exile in Australia. They also introduce a new political theme into Wordsworth's series, namely that of colonialism. At the time Wordsworth was writing, the British Empire was expanding, and even such far away territories such as New Zealand and Australia being explored and colonised. Yet the colonialists of Australia are criminals, people who have been exiled to the other side of the world because of their deeds. Wordsworth sharply focuses his attention on the state. Criminals, if they are not executed, are sent thousands of miles away from home to colonise a supposedly "savage coast" (6). At the end of the sonnet, Wordsworth returns to a recurring theme in this series. He states that the "final issue", in other words, that of repentance and mercy, are left in "*His hands*" (11).

The twelfth sonnet continues Wordsworth's analysis of the prisoner in his cell. We are invited to look at the condemned man awaiting his fate, while sharing in his repentance and admission of guilt:

See the Condemned man alone in his cell
And prostrate at some moment when remorse
Stings to the quick (1-3)

The word "prostrate" (2) is particularly important, implying that the man is now on his knees before God and the judgement of God, accepting his lot and at the same time perhaps asking forgiveness. His inward confession of guilt is not so much toward the state as it is before God:

The crime confessed, a kneeling Penitent
Before the Altar, where the Sacrament
Softens his heart, till from his eye outwell
Tears of salvation. Welcome death! while Heaven
Does in this change exceedingly rejoice; (6-9)

The condemned man admits his guilt and prostrates himself before the "Altar" (7), and this ultimately leads to his salvation. In this sonnet Wordsworth moves further away from his concerns with the state and its legitimacy in punishing crime and rather focuses on the mind of the criminal as he repents in his cell. Wordsworth now is concerned with the fate of the man not as it is understood by the laws of the land, but rather as it is represented by God's forgiveness. The mention of "Heaven" in line 8

further reinforces some kind of supernatural sanction for the death penalty. This is a somewhat ghastly “justification” for the death penalty, trying to bring into alliance the sanction imposed by man and the heavenly corroboration of it.

The last two sonnets of the series, “Conclusion” and “Apology” could be read as a pair. In the “Conclusion” Wordsworth seems to be saying that the death penalty would appear to be a necessary evil, and that it occupies an important place in the make-up of the social world and its need of order. Yet he also says “But hopeful signs abound” (8). Wordsworth is looking forward to an age where, “The social rights of man breathe purer air” (9). This statement underpins the message behind these sonnets: The state seems to understand the necessity of preventing and punishing crime, yet they are also unaware of the effect this has on the mind and humanity of the condemned man awaiting death. This line also seems to resonate the sentiments of Paine in his *Rights of Man*, where he argues for liberty at any cost. Yet it is not as straightforward as that. Religion still plays a very important part in the set up of the social world, and as we saw in the twelfth sonnet, it is ultimately religion that restores humanity to the criminal.

In the “Apology”, which continues the tradition of the apologia, Wordsworth stands back and examines his cycle of sonnets on the punishment of death. In this final piece Wordsworth seems to apologise to his readers for having written about the death penalty, and for having examined such an uncomfortable topic. In this sonnet, Wordsworth says that whatever we think of the death penalty, we are all cheered by God’s assurance of a hopeful future: “all may move / Cheered with the prospect of a brighter day” (13-14). At the very end of *The Prelude*, there are some interesting lines to illustrate Wordsworth’s faith and his growing belief. In the last book of the 1805 version Wordsworth says, “Prophets of Nature, we to them will speak / A lasting inspiration, sanctified / By reason and by truth” (442-444). In the 1850 version this becomes “sanctified / By reason, *blest by faith*” (445-446, my italics). Perhaps this is an internal dialogue between political hope and political oppression, and also between progress and retrogression, the two key themes distilled in Wordsworth’s experience of the French Revolution.

Conclusion

In the sonnets “Nuns fret not”, “Scorn not the Sonnet, Critic” and “London, 1802” we find Wordsworth praising and even defending the poetic creativity that can be found in the constricting form of the sonnet. We also see the liberal potential of the form per se, and in stark contradiction to this we read the *Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death*, in which Wordsworth seems to have become something of a conservative in relation to his political outlooks and poetic creations. At the end, this sonnet sequence could be read as evidence of Wordsworth’s defection from the liberal line of thought and history he awards the form of the sonnet in his three earlier sonnets. Wordsworth seems to illustrate in his late series the ability of the sonnet to take on a role that is different from his earlier works. The sonnet has now become a means for Wordsworth to express his thoughts on the death penalty, but in doing so, seems to go against the grain of his earlier arguments of the possibilities of the form of the sonnet and the almost heroic liberal nature of the form. It is almost as if Wordsworth is accepting the political realities of this later part of his career. Perhaps there is an element of fear running through the series. The unfettered will and the confinements of sanctions, or cultural norms, are underpinned by fear. The will to fight seems to have disappeared, and is now replaced with an argument for the ultimate redemption of the criminal not through the progressive nature of man, but rather through the influence of God and religion. Wordsworth might be critical of the government in some sections of the series of sonnets on the death penalty, but ultimately he agrees on the subject of the death penalty and its legitimacy. What this series of sonnets shows are the two sides of Wordsworth’s political mind. In the earlier phase of his career, Wordsworth praises the liberty of man. In the sonnets of the late 1830’s and early 1840’s Wordsworth’s outlooks changed from liberty to conservatism. All the while, Wordsworth uses the form of the sonnet to express his political thoughts. This is important, as Wordsworth seems equally at home in the form when praising both the liberal possibilities of the sonnet and its great politically open-minded practitioner, Milton, as well as the role that the form seems to assume in Wordsworth’s more conservative phase of poetic creation and political thought.

Chapter Three

Shelley And The 1819 Peterloo Massacre

In the first two chapters of this dissertation I have examined the politically influenced sonnets of the first generation of English Romantic poets, namely those by Coleridge and Wordsworth. In the next two chapters I will focus on the political sonnets by two of the most important second generation poets, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats.

The French Revolution of 1789 provided one of the most important creative stimulants to the first generation poets, and I have already examined this point in the first two chapters. Coleridge and Wordsworth, although different in temperament, could both benefit from the change of the cultural and political climate engendered by the Revolution, and draw their inspiration from it in order to turn English poetry on its head in the late 18th century.

However, the second generation seems to have been working for much of the time without this sort of direct and immediate creative stimulus. Of course there had been the ongoing war against Napoleon Bonaparte, one of the figures who best represents the example of the initial overthrow of a monarchy, merely to be replaced with another monarch. The Napoleonic Wars culminated in the Battle of Waterloo of 1815. Yet this instance of national triumph and pride for England was gradually to be forgotten and dimmed by the Peterloo Massacre that took place in 1819, where innocent people lost their lives, and which represents a culminating point in British politics and public awareness of the state of the nation.

It is within this historical context that I would like to locate Shelley and the political sonnet, arguing that the events of 1819 provided a stimulus for him to produce some of his most radical verse, and at the same time also some of his most forward-looking. I will trace, with the help of P. M. S. Dawson's invaluable *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley and Politics*, a history of Shelley's political thought, and show that Shelley was perhaps not so radical as was previously thought. Together with this, I will examine some of Shelley's best-known sonnets, such as "England in 1819", to illustrate his political and philosophical engagement with some of the most important

social questions of the day. In this respect, *The Mask of Anarchy* will also prove useful in that it highlights some of Shelley's thoughts on the meaning of the Peterloo Massacre. Furthermore, using the arguments of critics such as Karen Weisman, I will show that the sonnet and the traditional Petrarchan and Shakespearian use of the form of the sonnet, fits neatly with the disenchanted sentiments of the second generation Romantics.

The Influence of the French Revolution

One of the best places to start would be with one of the best-known sayings by Shelley. He remarked that the French Revolution was the “master theme of the epoch in which we live” (*Letters*, I, 504). In one sentence, Shelley seems to try to sum up the impetus behind the advent of Romanticism, even though he was not part of the generation who lived through that era, and wasn't even born when the French Revolution took place. Although he didn't live through some of the most turbulent times of the Revolution in the early 1790's, Shelley was still aware of the importance that this event had for the formation of the Romantic Movement and for the ongoing importance that politics played in artistic production. As Gerald McNiece points out in, *Shelley and the Revolutionary Idea*, “The history of the French Revolution was still strongly imprinted on the public mind” (55) around the time Shelley lived and worked. Whereas Wordsworth, who was in France at the time of the Revolution, could provide first-hand evidence of the happenings taking place, and Coleridge could read some of the most important pamphlets and discuss the meaning of the Revolution with his university friends, the second generation had to rely on other means of experiencing the effects of the French Revolution. There was a lot less direct engagement with the Revolution, and by the time that Shelley, Byron and Keats were writing their most important works, the Revolution seems to have become a dim memory, perhaps with a good reason.

One only needs to mention some of the consequences of the Revolution to realise why Wordsworth, for example, retreated from the social world and sought refuge in the Lake District: There had been the Great Terror of the 1790's, which claimed tens of thousands of lives, and the emergence of Napoleon Bonaparte who had set his sights on conquering the world, whose disastrous invasion of Russia claimed hundreds of thousands of human lives and ended with the fire that destroyed Moscow. Small

wonder then that Wordsworth preferred the peace of the Lake District to the bustle of London. For Shelley, however, the Revolution still seems to be *the* event of the last century that not only gave birth to Romanticism, but also continued to influence the poetic and philosophical thinking of the first several decades of the 19th century.

The second extract from Shelley's letters I would like to highlight is the following: "I consider Poetry very subordinate to moral & political science, & if I were well, certainly I should aspire to the latter" (*Letters*, II, 71). This seems to continue the line of thought from the first quote about the importance of the Revolution as a theme for the age, and at the same time Shelley seems to admit that poetry is of less use than political and moral science. We might well recall Oscar Wilde's famous line that, "All art is quite useless" (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 4), and this seems to be what Shelley is implying. Yet why go on writing poetry? I believe that Shelley found in poetry a means of expressing himself regarding political and social problems and debates, in much the same way that Wordsworth and Coleridge found in their use of the lyricised political Miltonic sonnet. Shelley's own sonnets, especially "England in 1819", "Political Greatness", and "To Wordsworth", continue the tradition as laid out by Milton, and further developed by Coleridge and Wordsworth. Looking again at the above extract from Shelley's letter, one notices that he capitalises the word 'poetry', but not 'science', which perhaps illustrates the overriding and important role that poetry played in the mind and thinking of Shelley.

England in 1819

The 1819 Peterloo Massacre, then, could be seen to have inspired some of the notable work of the second generation Romantics, and especially Shelley, to look at politics anew. Yet how does one change society by means of poetry? Shelley admits that if he were in the right state of mind, he would rather study political science and perhaps, by means of that, inspire change in society. Poetry takes on a secondary and subsidiary role to politics, yet as Milton and the first generation have shown, politics and art are interconnected, and by means of art, we might aspire to lay bare the social conditions of England and, by implication, the readers of these poems might be able to change their perspectives on the state of the country and its politics. Poetry might be a kind of disease, but Shelley nevertheless goes on to write his politically influenced poems in the style of Milton, Coleridge, and Wordsworth, having found in the Romantic

political sonnet a form with which he can tackle some of the political and social issues of the day.

In her article, “The Lyricist”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, Karen Weisman looks at the importance that the form of the sonnet had for Shelley, and how certain elements of the sonnet might relate to the aftermath of the French Revolution. Weisman says, “The sonnet brings to the fore his facility with compression and concision even while sustaining the dialectical tensions evident in his longer lyrics” (53). Weisman seems to speak about the “solid foundation” (Hiller, *Poems of the Elizabethan Age*, 1) that Wordsworth and Coleridge found in the form of the sonnet. Shelley, then, seems at home in the sonnet, being able to compress his ideas into the brevity of the sonnet’s fourteen lines. Crucially, Weisman says, “The sonnet comes to Romanticism freighted with a history of the recording of disappointment and unease” (53). Weisman seems to say that the sonnet is a form that has traditionally been associated with disappointment. We can easily see this in the sonnets of Petrarch and Shakespeare, poets whose yearning and idealisation of their beloved women inevitably remained unfulfilled and unrequited. Yet the “disappointment” in this instance is clearly a political disenchantment consequent upon the bloody aftermath of the French Revolution. The affect is analogous though its cause is far different.

Weisman continues, “Shelley frequently gestures in the direction of its various Petrarchan associations...he exploits the sonnet form’s singular suitability for negotiating both the conditions of defeat and the parodying of its rhetorical procedures” (53). But what sort of ‘defeat’ are we dealing with here? Weisman illustrates her point with the following: “His sonnet ‘To Wordsworth’, which laments the transformation of Wordsworth’s early revolutionary and left-leaning fervour into a sterile conservatism that infected, in Shelley’s view, not only his politics but also his poetry” (53).¹

It is worthwhile to briefly examine the sonnet, “To Wordsworth”, to illustrate Weisman’s point:

¹ I have already mentioned the “conservatism” for which Wordsworth was ridiculed by Shelley in the previous chapter.

Poet of Nature, thou hast wept to know
 That things depart which never may return:
 Childhood and youth, friendship and love's first glow,
 Have fled like sweet dreams, leaving thee to mourn.
 These common woes I feel. One loss is mine
 Which thou too feel'st, yet I alone deplore.
 Thou wert as a lone star, whose light did shine
 On some frail bark in winter's midnight roar:
 Thou hast like to a rock-built refuge stood
 Above the blind and battling multitude:
 In honoured poverty thy voice did weave
 Songs consecrate to truth and liberty,-
 Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve,
 Thus having been, that thou should cease to be.

Reading this sonnet one can easily enough understand the feelings of loss and disappointment that Shelley felt. He also laments the losses of Wordsworth, not merely the loss of revolutionary zeal, but also personal losses that he and Shelley seem to share. Shelley is thus not completely damning in his sonnet. Like Wordsworth, he is a human being who has also lost friends and the like, and thus equates Wordsworth, at least in the opening lines, to himself. Yet Wordsworth's loss of revolutionary fervour is a bitter pill for Shelley to swallow.

"To Wordsworth", published in 1816, is representative of Shelley's use of the form of the sonnet to represent emotions and feelings of loss and disappointment, which Weisman argues for and which are eloquently set forth in the above sonnet. Shelley continues the traditional use of the form to express loss as used by poets such as Petrarch and Shakespeare. The references to a "frail bark" and "lone star" (7-8) are somewhat tired and characteristic images resorted to by England's Elizabethan sonneteers. Yet Shelley goes further than this and relates the tradition of the form of the sonnet to political concerns. In line 12, he uses the words, "truth and liberty", a popular catchphrase, which nevertheless illustrates Shelley's own political ideals. We might well remember that Shelley had the words, "Liberty and Free Election", engraved in his snuffbox. We again see the concision of the form of the sonnet in this example by Shelley. In the brief span of the form, Shelley is able to offer an admirable, though obviously biased, account of an entire poetic oeuvre, and one that was moreover to become a commonplace of much Wordsworthian criticism through later years. Although Shelley honours Wordsworth's achievement, it is exactly this admiration that makes the impact of the feeling of desertion in the last two lines even

more keenly felt. Through this, we also see the dramatic character of the sonnet, in that Shelley opposes two different views of the character and poetry of Wordsworth in the space of fourteen lines.

Weisman continues with her argument to include what is perhaps the finest of Shelley's political sonnets, namely, "England in 1819". Weisman says, "Shelley exploits further the sonnet's elegiac associations.... Here he makes use of the sonnet's necessary brevity precisely to signal the infinite range of his hopes and the long extension of his disappointments about his country's political ills" (55). Again we find Weisman talking about the short space that the sonnet provides, and how Shelley rises to the challenge of compressing an event as momentous as the Peterloo Massacre into fourteen lines. Weisman says the sonnet, "produce[s] an effect of agitation: this is a condition of political adversity poised to burst its chains...yet it is the very chain of the sonnet's structure which enables any kind of defining coherence to be articulated in this morass of national calamity" (55). Weisman makes the crucial point that the sonnet's structure is that which allows Shelley to make sense of the turbulent social and political world around him:

An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying King;
Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow
Through public scorn,- mud from a muddy spring,-
Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know,
But leechlike to their fainting country cling,
Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow.
A people starved and stabbed in the untilled field;
An army, which liberticide and prey
Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield;
Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay;
Religion Christless, Godless – a book sealed;
A Senate, Time's worst statute unrepealed -
Are graves from which a glorious Phantom may
Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.

This is powerful verse, unremittingly examining the social and political conditions of England at the time of the Peterloo Massacre. Shelley is very much writing about the present state of England, forcing his readers to re-examine their points of view with regards to the government of England. Shelley masterfully builds up his sonnet to the last two lines, and the enjambment leading to the word "burst" still makes a powerful impact. McNiece says, "In March 1818 Shelley left England. But his interest in purely

English issues did not diminish. As exiles, the Shelleys were, as Mary told Leigh Hunt in 1821, almost ultrapolitical” (*Shelley and the Revolutionary Idea*, 58).

Weisman points out that, “Shelley offers a catalogue of the sorry state of his country, a technique that recalls an epic cataloguing, or a taxonomical categorization of sickness” (55). Shelley seems to need to make clear to his readers just how bad things are in England, and what led to the Peterloo gathering and later massacre. Weisman continues, saying, “Like the earlier sonnet “To Wordsworth”, this poem too sees its objects of lament as “graves”. Unlike the earlier poem, however, it concludes with a triumphant couplet that transforms death into birth” (55). Weisman might just have been carried away a little at this point. The tentative nature introduced by the word, “may”, offered as an enjambment, is crucial both to the form and the point of the sonnet. Looking again at the former sonnet Shelley wrote in which he regrets Wordsworth’s loss of revolutionary inclination, we see that in that sonnet Shelley ends with the words, “Thus having been, that thou shoudst cease to be” (14). This is of course a figurative death that Shelley imagines for Wordsworth, of his ideals. The monosyllabic tread with which the poem ends assures us that Shelley does not see a Wordsworthian political or poetic renaissance. In the later sonnet on the condition of England, Shelley is, despite the gloom and despair of the first twelve lines, positive about the future of his country, yet he is also cautious: the word “may” in line 13 seems to hover between the concluding two lines of the sonnet.

“In the extraordinary lyric concision of ‘England in 1819’, triumph is marked as an effort of the imagination to grasp wholly the monumental defeats and insults of the age and to give them a defining and limiting order. The clarity of that realization is what prepares for the concluding couplet’s apocalypse of hope” (Weisman, 56). While Weisman overstates the optimism of the poem, she offers a succinct and altogether accurate reading of the role that the form of the sonnet had for a poet such as Shelley. We might be used to his long poems such as *Prometheus Unbound* and *Queen Mab*, and we might as a result be sceptical of Shelley’s ability to transfer his epic vision to a form as tight and concise as that of the sonnet. However, paradoxically, it is the very conciseness of the form of the sonnet that provides Shelley with the necessary tools with which he might analyse and catalogue, as it were, the condition of England in 1819. And, as Weisman points out, the brevity of

Shelley's first twelve lines is exactly that which mentally prepares one for her flamboyant remark about the "apocalypse" of hope in the concluding couplet.

Another way of reading the poem is to say that Shelley seems to want to make sense of the chaos that England experienced in 1819. To this end, Shelley uses the traditional and highly ordered form of the sonnet. We might well say that this is true of all the Romantic poets who used the form to write about politics. After the initial hopes and aspirations of the French Revolution, things took a turn for the worse, and in the case of England, this culminated in the 1819 Peterloo Massacre. In order for poets to come to terms with the drastic political and social change that overtook Europe in the late 1700's and early 1800's, a safe and secure form was needed to explore themes of disappointment and fear.

The sonnet neatly fits the bill, and Shelley's "England in 1819" is one of the best examples of a Romantic poet using the form in order to find some sense of security while at the same time expressing feelings of loss and disappointment for the disappearance of the original fervour of the Revolution. Weisman concludes her reading of Shelley's political sonnets, saying, "As in the poem "To Wordsworth", Shelley's masterful use of the sonnet form transforms brevity into the long reach of lyric assertion. It also turns the moment of loss into the endless catalogue by which it is known. The dialectic, then, is not merely of thought: it is integrally absorbed into the fabric of his formalism" (56). In terms of the other sonnets written by the Romantics that deal with disappointment, perhaps the most famous example would be Coleridge's, "Work Without Hope", a shorter version perhaps of the themes of "Dejection: An Ode".

Continuing with the theme of disappointment, we might usefully turn to Thomas MacFarland's excellent study, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin*. In this book, MacFarland analyses some of the key features and characteristics of Romantic poetry, and foremost among these is the ruin or incompleteness of many poets' work. Coleridge, for example, never completed "Kubla Khan" and never wrote his great epic that would have supposedly taken him twenty years to complete. Wordsworth never finished *The Recluse*. Similarly, Shelley never completed *The Triumph of life*, Keats didn't complete his revised version of *Hyperion*, and Byron was still working

on *Don Juan* by the time he died. This incomplete state of the major poets' work is compared to ruins, and the reason MacFarland gives for this is that the French Revolution never really lived up to its ideals, and as such, the Romantics often felt a sense of desolation and disappointment in their revolutionary ideals as well (39). This theory fits in with what Weisman was previously saying about Shelley and the sonnet.

If we place Shelley's poetry, and specifically the political poems of 1819, into a historical and social context, the most important facet of the condition of England at the time must be the Peterloo Massacre of 1819. Why did this event have such an impact on the poetic thinking of Shelley? In *A Preface to Shelley*, Patricia Hodgart says that the massacre was the culmination of a history of political unrest in England. The background of the event is as follows: "It was occasioned by the continuing post-war slump in the cotton trade...Henry Hunt...called a demonstration on 16 August at St Peter's Fields in Manchester...it was the most important meeting ever called in the cause of Reform" (46). The scene was therefore set for a political protest against unemployment and continued decreasing of workers' salaries. "The magistrates, who had declared it illegal and seditious, over-reacted in the face of such a huge assembly, sent in troops and as a result eleven were killed, four hundred injured and military casualties were put at sixty-seven" (Hodgart, 46). The actual civilian casualties, eleven, seems relatively small compared to those the troops sustained, yet it was a feeling of betrayal perhaps more than anything else that evoked such a response from the public and from poets such as Shelley.

Yet did Shelley and others perhaps look at the situation too narrowly? Hodgart says, "It is likely that the resulting debacle came from confusion and miscalculation rather than from the desire for the brutal repression that Shelley evokes" (46). However, by this time it was too late for the government to reverse the situation. Perhaps it really was a case that the government just wanted to maintain peace, and that the magistrates completely lost their heads in the heat of the moment. Whatever the case, the killing and wounding of English citizens were not to be tolerated by Shelley. He responded by using verse, the medium perhaps best suited to him.

A Defence of Poetry

It is Shelley's very use of language and, more specifically, verse, that gave him the means with which to speak out against the seemingly conservative and repressive English government. If we look at his most famous prose work, *A Defence of Poetry*, it contains one of his most memorable phrases: "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World" (*Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, 535). Shelley seems to be saying that a poet, by means of his poetic powers, is more capable than other people to legislate for the world. In the context of the *Defence*, Shelley is talking about the way the poet is able to assimilate the world around him, and not necessarily about politics and judicial legislation as such. However, the phrase is a telling one, and one that can be read in different ways. The fact that Shelley wrote this work after the Peterloo Massacre can also be applied to a reading of it.

One only needs to look at Section Four of *A Defence of Poetry* to see the effect that contemporary political events had on the mind of Shelley: "Poets...are the institutors of laws and the founders of civil society and the inventors of the arts of life and the teachers" (512). And if we turn to the last section, we read, "For the literature of England, an energetic development of which has ever preceded or accompanied a great and free development of the national will, has arisen as it were from a new birth" (535). These are but two examples from *A Defence* that illustrate the thoughts of Shelley regarding politics.

Poetry becomes a tool for political change: "The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is Poetry" (535). Poetry itself, at the end of Shelley's work, becomes a means of awakening and guiding a nation to greatness. It is in this poetic context of Shelley's thinking that we must read his political poems and sonnets of 1819, as less of an expression of disappointment, and more of a means to steer and guide his nation to political greatness. Poetry assumes a role of working for the public good, and becomes less about the feelings and thoughts of the poet, and more about changing the social landscape that he sees around him.

In his aptly titled book length study of Shelley and politics, *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley and Politics*, P. M. S. Dawson takes a broad critical view of the

different political causes and philosophies that Shelley was involved with. “No poet”, Dawson writes, “can stand outside his own history and that of the human community of which he is part, but this involvement may be more explicit at certain periods than at others” (1). In the case of Romanticism, the “master theme” of the French Revolution would no doubt have been a momentous and life-changing event about which more will have been written than other political events that took place in Europe previously. The very idea of the people toppling an established and God-appointed monarch would have sent shock waves through Europe, not only to the common man, but perhaps especially to other kings and queens. It is only natural that in this context writers would have seriously engaged with the theme of politics, be they political theorists such as Burke and Paine, or poets such as Wordsworth and Shelley.

Dawson points out that the original wording of Shelley’s claim that, “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World”, was in fact, “Poets and Philosophers are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (218). The original comes from Shelley’s pamphlet *A Philosophical View of Reform*. That Shelley came up with the phrase is probably due to the influence of William Godwin. Dawson says, “The change is of some significance. Godwin would have written the sentence as it originally stood, for he declared himself ‘persuaded that the cause of political reform, and the cause of intellectual and literary refinement, are inseparably connected’” (218). Here we see the influence of Godwin, who together with Fox, might be reasoned to be one of the most important political influences on Shelley. Dawson also remarks, “It was probably Godwin who provided Shelley with his famous slogan by his description of the poet as ‘the legislator of generations and the moral instructor of the world’” (218). Thus we see that Shelley’s political ideas were not completely snatched out of the air. Godwin in many ways shaped the way Shelley read the role of the poet in his most memorable phrase from *A Defence of Poetry*.

Dawson also usefully elucidates the term “legislator”, pointing out that the way we read the word is different from its original meaning, and how it was understood in the England of the 19th century. Dawson says, “In the English political tradition a ‘legislator’ is thought of as being a representative, or even a delegate of the governed, rather than a ruler or the aide of a ruler” (221). Was Shelley, when he penned his

famous line, perhaps thinking in these terms? Perhaps not, as Dawson says, “Since 1817 Shelley had been actively involved in a movement which aimed to make the legislators of England even more directly responsible to the people as a whole. It would seem reasonable to associate his definition of poets as ‘unacknowledged legislators’ with the democratic constitutional theories of the Reformers” (222). Shelley therefore does seem to have been thinking of the word “legislator” more in terms of accountability to the people or the governed than a mere representation of the people. Crucially, it is through Shelley’s own campaigning that the word starts to change its meaning. Therefore, Shelley’s use of the word at the end of *A Defence of Poetry* seems justified and makes more sense if we read it in the context of the tradition of English politics.

It is within this historical and social context that we should read *A Defence of Poetry* as well as the political poems of 1819. Shelley was not merely thinking about the poetic nature of verse in the *Defence*. The events of the Peterloo Massacre would no doubt still have been in his mind as he wrote the piece, and as such the instances of poetry being compared to a vehicle for social and political change should be taken seriously. So, too, should we read his political poems of 1819. “England in 1819” is not so much about the cataloguing of what was wrong with England at the time as it was a call for people to actively change their social conditions. With this in mind, we should briefly turn to another of Shelley’s most important political poems, *The Mask of Anarchy*.

The Mask of Anarchy

The Mask of Anarchy carries the subtitle, “Written on the Occasion of the Massacre at Manchester”, and this is a direct reference to the events of the Peterloo Massacre. Its history of publication was a sign of the times: “Mary Shelley recopied it for the press and mailed it to Leigh Hunt...Hunt, fearful of prosecution because of the volatile temper of the country and the new repressive legislation passed late in 1819 and 1820 – refrained from publishing the poem until 1832, after the Reform Bill had won the battle for which Shelley had intended his poem as a kind of rallying hymn” (Reiman and Fraistat, *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, 315). Obviously it was not easy for Hunt, who had also been imprisoned once because of his political beliefs, to publish a poem that so openly attacks the English government.

Stuart Curran, in *Shelley's Annus Mirabilis: The Maturing of an Epic Vision*, points out that Shelley, in *The Mask of Anarchy*, rewrites the tradition of the masque, in much the same way that Shelley further contributed to the possibilities of the political sonnet. Curran writes, "If a seventeenth-century antimasque can be seen as a temporary, limited violation of the decorum established by the masque, in the nineteenth century all is reversed" (191). Shelley's *Mask* is then an antimasque, a reversal of the pageantry of the masque, but unlike the older antimasque, Shelley attacks with full force the government and the masks that it wears.

The theme of the mask is the pageantry of anarchy. Curran says, "Its source is elevated from religious dogma to mythological symbol, its purpose is to suggest how humanity may wrest the millennium out of God's hands, purge the Antichrist from its midst, and establish the one true corporate body of human fellowship" (185). Curran sums up this theme of apocalypse, and goes on to say: "The central figure in the pageant of contemporary England is Anarchy, a pervasive and pernicious lawlessness" (185). Shelley seems to put his faith in humanity's ability to evade a destructive apocalypse, and also its ability to form a new brotherhood out of the overthrow of the figure of anarchy.

Curran continues, saying,

The pageant is morally an antimasque, even as it embodies all the literary conventions. The disjunction in mode between the two parts of Shelley's poem represents not a simple change of course, but a purposeful transcendence of the black humor of the beginning...there will ensue the main masque, the codification of true authority and harmony through the stripping of the masks of power that conceal its abuse. The masks are ubiquitous, worn not only by the ministers of state but by those who oppose them with their very tactics. (191)

From this reading of the poem we become aware of the power of politics to change the mindset and poetic outlook of a writer. It is due to the political and social condition of England that Shelley rewrites the tradition of the masque and the antimasque, taking the forms beyond what was previously used, and infusing them with a political theme. Shelley's poem then represents several sides of the poet: his shock and hatred of the state and government's handling of the events of Peterloo; his rereading and rewriting of a genre and form because of the influence of politics; and

his mistrust of those politicians who oppose the state and their methods that seem to be very similar to those of the state.

The Mask of Anarchy is representative of Shelley's use of an established form in order to critique the political situation of his country. Along the way, Shelley rewrites the form and tradition of the masque, in much the same way that he renovates the use of the sonnet form. In terms of Shelley's formalism, it might then be argued that it is because of political upheavals such as the Peterloo Massacre that Shelley was inspired to rewrite the form he inherited from past traditions. Politics seem to be present even in poems such as *Prometheus Unbound*, and assume a critical source of inspiration for the poems of 1819 and the poems examining the impact of the events of 1819. Had it not been for the Peterloo Massacre, Shelley probably would not have engaged with the form of the masque in a new and original way, and he might also not have continued the tradition of the sonnet as a form representative of loss and disappointment.

Further Sonnets

Shelley wrote more sonnets on politics than merely "England in 1819". Perhaps his most famous sonnet, even better known than the one on the Peterloo Massacre, is "Ozymandias". Published by Hunt in 1818, the sonnet is often cited as a supreme example of Shelley's ability to write concise lyrical poetry. Yet this sonnet clearly contains political undertones:

I met a traveller from an antique land
 Who said – "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
 Stand in the desert...Near them, on the sand,
 Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
 Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
 The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
 And on the pedestal these words appear:
 My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
 Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
 Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
 The lone and level sands stretch far away."

Firstly, we might remark on the theme of imperialism and colonialism. At the time Shelley wrote this poem, the British Empire was expanding, and eventually consisted of a quarter of the whole world. The fact that the narrator of the poem meets a traveller from an “antique land” might point to some element of colonialist power.

It is Shelley’s focus on the nature of the monarch and the monarchy that draws our attention to this poem as a political sonnet. Shelley focuses on the collapse of the monarch Ozymandias, a “King of Kings” (11), which reflects some of the hubris of this ruler. Yet now there is almost nothing that remains of his power and his reputation. What we have left are a few ruins, and two “vast and trunkless legs of stone” (2). The word “trunkless” is a good summation of the fate of the monarch. There are signs that remain, even “vast” ones, but the legs no longer support the ruler. There are signs that he has been, but we would not know who it was had there not been the engraved epitaph in which Ozymandias speaks. Again the importance of the voice and language is highlighted here. Language has the ability and suppleness to record a variety of perspectives simultaneously. The monarch, the implication runs, has been defaced, and for generations, it has been the face of the monarch that symbolises his or her power and presence, stamped as it routinely is, on coins. That the currency of monarchy, so to speak, is no longer tenable is implied by Shelley’s representation of the “King of Kings”. Furthermore, Shelley’s claim for the poet as legislator is endorsed in that it is not only this poem that points to the demise of monarchies, but also within the poem is writing that wryly records the ironic message about the claims of monarchy.

In “Ozymandias” we can perceive some of the most important aspects of the nature of political thought around the time that Shelley wrote the poem. The word “level” in line 14 can of course have a number of meanings. The hubris of the fallen monarch has been levelled. In a democratic age, the word “level” can point to the push by reformers to level the inadequacies of the monarchy and so provide a more egalitarian world. Yet there is also the eerie sense that “level” refers to Death, the great leveller of all men and the leveller of the vanity and pride of a monarch. The reformers can celebrate the fall of a monarch, yet death affects everyone. In this poem we also see the recurring dialectic of loss and gain, of disappointment and the resurgence of hope. The monarch has been ruined. The ruin of the monarch is contained, restructured, and

reordered in Shelley's poetic insight, an insight that perceives the nature of hubris and foresees the inevitable levelling of the hubristic ruler. We might lose something in the death and defacement of the monarch, yet we also have insight into the nature of his rule, its shortcomings and inadequacies. The word "despair" in line 11 is crucial to a political understanding of the poem. There is despair over the ruin and failing of the revolutionary zeal of the later part of the 18th century, yet ironically, the despair in this poem is vital to the insight that is also contained in Shelley's verse.

The sonnet, "Ozymandias", somewhat eerily precedes the events of 1819. Shelley's reading of Ozymandias is plainly that of the fallen ruler, and this might hold a reference to Napoleon Bonaparte. Phrases such as "Nothing beside remains" (12) and "colossal Wreck" (13) clearly emphasises the emptiness of Ozymandias' rule and at the same time the vastness thereof. He was a great ruler, but now there is nothing left but the ruins that stand among the desert. We can relate this theme to MacFarland's ideas about the ruins of Romanticism. Ozymandias and Napoleon, after their rule, have left nothing but ruins, both physical and psychological. Yet Shelley, as in "England in 1819", uses the form of the sonnet in order to bypass these ruins. Shelley might be somewhat disappointed in Ozymandias, as he was with Napoleon, but he cunningly contains the ruins of their rule within the finished state of the form of the sonnet.

Before the composition of "Ozymandias", Shelley had already written a sonnet on Napoleon in 1816, titled "Feelings of a Republican on the Fall of Bonaparte"²:

I hated thee, fallen tyrant! I did groan
To think that a most unambitious slave,
Like thou, shouldst dance and revel on the grave
Of Liberty. (1-4)

Interestingly, Shelley writes in the past tense. Instead of hating Napoleon, he "hated" him. Like "England in 1819" and "To Wordsworth" Shelley uses the word "graves", an indication perhaps of his feelings of disappointment in Napoleon and others who have let the people down. In this sense the sonnet continues Shelley's tradition of

² This sonnet does not appear in my primary source for Shelley's works, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. For this poem I have used the Oxford edition of Shelley's *Poetical Works* edited by Thomas Hutchinson and G. M. Matthews

using the form of the sonnet to express his disappointment. It might also refer to Shelley's sense of the futility of further action against these tyrants. Liberty has been buried, and seems not to be able to be resurrected. Shelley continues writing about what might have been and what is now reality:

...Thou mightst have built thy throne
Where it had stood even now: thou didst prefer
A frail and bloody pomp which Time has swept
In fragments towards Oblivion. (4-7)

Like *The Mask of Anarchy*, Napoleon's rule is compared to a procession of "pomp" (6). Like "Ozymandias", time has begun to sweep over the ruins of Napoleon's achievements, leading his reputation towards "Oblivion" (7). Napoleon might have been a child of the French Revolution and a representative figure for what man could achieve in the modern age, but ultimately he is defeated by his own human nature.

...Massacre,
For this I prayed, would on thy sleep have crept,
Treason and Slavery, Rapine, Fear, and Lust,
And stifled thee, their minister. I know
Too late, since thou and France are in the dust,
That Virtue owns a more eternal foe
Than Force or Fraud: old Custom, legal Crime,
And bloody Faith the foulest birth of Time. (7-14)

As in "England in 1819" Shelley lists his series of misfortunes that Napoleon was responsible for and which Shelley now wants Napoleon to experience. Yet in the last few lines we realise why Shelley no longer hates Napoleon. There are more dangerous enemies to liberty and virtue than the "Force and Fraud" (13) of a tyrant. Shelley then goes on to list these in the concluding couplet. They are the traditions that people still adhere to, and as such the disaster of the Russian campaign of 1812, or of Waterloo in 1815, were not completely the doings of one man. They are the effects of our mindsets and our collective cultural outlook on life. We have "legal Crime" and "bloody Faith" (13-14): Shelley juxtaposes the true nature of these institutions in order to show what they really represent. "Old Custom", in line 13, would have been intended as a swipe at Burke and the followers of Burke. Written in 1816, Shelley had time to reassess his view of Napoleon after the battle of Waterloo.

The last of Shelley's overtly political sonnets to discuss is "Political Greatness", first published in 1824. Shelley seems to muse on the nature of the political leader and the effect this has on politics:

Nor happiness nor majesty nor fame,
 Nor peace nor strength nor skill in arms or arts,
 Shepherd those herds whom Tyranny makes tame;
 Verse echoes not one beating of their hearts,
 History is but the shadow of their shame-
 Art veils her glass, or from the pageant starts
 As to Oblivion their blind millions fleet,
 Staining that Heaven with obscure imagery
 Of their own likeness. - What are numbers knit
 By force or custom? Man who man would be,
 Must rule the empire of himself; in it
 Must be supreme, establishing his throne
 On vanquished will,- quelling the anarchy
 Of hopes and fears,- being himself alone.-

Shelley begins by saying that the people are really only dumb sheep who are guided by a shepherd, and that tyranny makes them "tame" (3), a scathing critique of the English government and the English people. Yet Shelley goes on to say that the people are not as easily lead or governed as might seem the case. The first ten lines of the sonnet are concerned with the role of the government and perhaps the inefficiency of the government. But it goes deeper than this. The last four lines, including the volta in line ten, give us an argument for the independence of the people, and more specifically, the individual: "What are numbers knit / By force and custom? Man who man would be, / Must rule the empire of himself" (9-11). Shelley is really focusing on the individual and the autonomy of the individual mind and will. The individual rules the empire of himself, not the nation state or the people. Shelley then goes on to say that he must shun the "anarchy / Of hopes and fears" and at the end of the day be "himself alone" (13-14).

Shelley seems almost less interested or concerned with politics than with the nature of the individual and the individual's establishment of his or her own autonomy. Again there is a combination of the public and the private in the form of the sonnet. Is this a reflection of his Romantic beliefs, or perhaps a guideline for rulers around the world? Shelley does imply that political greatness, to use the sonnet's title, is obtainable when following the advice of the last five lines of the sonnet. Yet the sonnet is both a

meditation on the role of the individual in society and the individual's realisation of his ego, as well as a guide for rulers who want to achieve political greatness. As such, this sonnet is concerned with personal and public politics, and the combination of these two elements. In this sense, "Political Greatness" represents yet another original step forward for the English Romantic political sonnet. In lines 9 and 10, we find an interesting observation not only on polity, but on the nature of the form of the sonnet, "What are numbers knit / By force or custom?" On the one hand Shelley dismisses a nation state glued together by force or custom, and the power of the words lie, in part, in their reworking of the standard phrase, "force of custom". Yet the lines apply as well to the form of the sonnet itself. Shelley is writing about the metrical nature of the form of the sonnet, where "numbers", or verse, is "knit" by "custom" or tradition, and importantly in terms of formal and political theories, by "force". The poet, in his acknowledgement of the formal requirements of a traditional genre, poetically enacts the very thing he is writing about, namely the interaction of "tradition and the individual talent", to use T S Eliot's phrase from his essay of that title. Crucially, then, the poem links that which is required by the poet with that demanded of the citizen, the man who would in fact *be* a man. The poet's deft workings within the confines of the sonnet form illuminate for us, legislate on, if you like, the means whereby the citizen can reclaim his full being, or humanity.

Ode to the West Wind

The "Ode to the West Wind" must surely rank among the greatest of Shelley's shorter lyrics. Yet it can also be easily be overlooked in a study of the form of the sonnet. Structurally, the poem is made up of five terza-rima sonnets. The West Wind is symbolic of change and of being the bringer of change. We can see this in the opening five lines of the poem:

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
Pestilence stricken multitudes...(1-5)

Here we find a reference to perhaps the social, economic and material conditions of the population of England at the time of the Peterloo Massacre. The "Pestilence

Stricken multitudes” (5), according to Reiman and Fraistat, the four colours in line four, “are not only actually found in dead leaves, but represent the traditional four races of humans – Mongoloid, Negroid, Caucasian, and American Indian” (*Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, 298). Shelley, therefore, seems to have in mind not only the people of England, but of the whole of humanity. We should remind ourselves that this poem was written in October 1819, after the Peterloo Massacre of 16 August 1819.

In the second and third sections of the poem there are more political references. In line 28 we find that, “Black rain and fire and hail will burst”, perhaps mirroring the argument of “England in 1819”, where the word “burst” also occurs in the last line. In lines 33-34 Shelley talks about “old palaces and towers / Quivering within the wave’s intenser day”, perhaps a reference to the destruction of the ancien régime. The most important section of the poem is however the last section:

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse

Scatter, as from an extinguished hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be thou my lips to unawakened Earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind? (57-70)

Reiman and Fraistat note, “The final stanza is a prayer or request to the West Wind, as moreover of the seasonal cycle, to assist the poet’s aims by spreading his message and, thereby, helping him to contribute to a moral or political revolution paralleling the seasonal change” (*Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, 298). More than this, Shelley asks that by the “incantation of this verse” (65) his words be scattered throughout the world. Poetry becomes a vehicle for Shelley to inspire change. He also says his words, like “sparks” (67), may help to ignite the “unawakened Earth” (68) and the minds of people. The interplay between the cultural and the natural, the domestic and

political is crucial here: his words are like ashes from an “extinguished hearth” (66), yet they are also seeds that will spout, though they fall on what looks like unpromising soil. The sub audire “heart” heard pulsing beneath the word, “hearth”, also contributes to the interplay between the personal and the public in the poem. In both its personal and public nuances, the word “extinguished” plays a crucial role, implying externally imposed obliteration and yet the “ashes and sparks” (67) remain capable of revival. So, by the time we get to the religiously laden “trumpet of prophecy” (69), Shelley has, to a large extent, naturalised and humanised the supernatural implications contained in the Biblical allusion.

The “trumpet” of line 69 can also be read in relation to the sonnet “London, 1802”, in which Wordsworth stresses the point that the sonnet became a trumpet for Milton, who protested against repressive politics and called to judgement the people with the aid of his instrument. At the very end, we also find a parallel with “England in 1819”. Shelley, in that sonnet, had looked forward to a possibly better England. Similarly, in the “Ode to the West Wind”, the concluding lines, “O Wind, / If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?” (69-70), suggest that despite the dreariness and cold of winter, spring and its possibilities and promises of rejuvenation will inevitably come. Crucially, the wind is responsible for the change of the seasons, just as it is for the spread of Shelley’s political and social words. The wind is a metaphor for poetic creativity and also for Shelley’s hope to be the legislator or representative of the world.

The Friendship with Lord Byron

The great friendship of the first generation of Romantic poets was that of Coleridge and Wordsworth, a remarkably fruitful and complex collaboration that led to the *Lyrical Ballads*. Yet the second generation can also boast of an important friendship, namely that of Shelley and Lord Byron. George Gordon, 6th Baron Lord Byron (to give him his full name) was one of the most colourful and famous figures of the whole Romantic Movement in Europe, as well as one of the best poets. Yet there were also some less attractive rumours flying around that Byron and the Shelleys had set up a pernicious house of pleasure in Italy. Whatever the case, the close connection between Byron and Shelley (memorably if perhaps inaccurately recorded by that

shady figure Trelawny) is of seminal importance for the development of both men's artistic endeavours.

Patricia Hodgart says, "Their [Shelley and Byron's] relationship was one of equals, of aristocrats in exile with much in common although their modes of life were very different" (*A Preface to Shelley*, 110). Byron also seems to have had admiration and respect for the poetry of Shelley. Hodgart continues, "For Shelley...he had a special admiration springing from their association in Italy...He told Medwin, 'he is one of the most moral as well as amiable men. I know, I have been intimate with him for two years, and every year has added to my regard for him'" (110). From Byron's own pen we read that he valued Shelley not only as a man but also as an artist. Yet references to Shelley's poetry seem to be a bit scarcer. We know that he thought Shelley's *The Cenci* to be "a work of power, and poetry" (in Hodgart, 110), but there are few other references. Whatever the case, he nevertheless had respect for Shelley, and might even have been influenced by Shelley when he came to write his best-known sonnet.

This sonnet in particular shows the effect that Shelley had on Byron. This is the piece that Byron sent his publisher, John Murray, in a lively letter of 12 August 1819, the same year Shelley wrote his important, "England in 1819". After discussing "Donny Johnny" (*Letters*, 226), Byron turns his line of thought to politics. In particular he focuses on Lord Edward Fitzgerald, who had been charged with high treason. Byron writes, "So the Prince has been repealing Lord Ed. Fitzgerald's forfeiture? *Ecco un' Sonnetto!*" (*The Letters of Lord Byron*, 227). Byron then gives Murray the following sonnet, as bitter and satirical a short poem as he had ever written:

To be the father of the fatherless,
 To stretch the hand from the throne's height, and raise
 His offspring, who expired in other days
 To make thy Sire's Sway by a kingdom less, -
This is to be a Monarch, and repress
 Envy into unutterable praise.
 Dismiss thy guard, and trust thee to such traits,
 For who would lift a hand, except to bless?
 Were it not easy, Sir, and is't not sweet
 To make thyself beloved? And to be
 Omnipotent by Mercy's means? For thus
 Thy Sovereignty would grow but more complete,
 A despot thou, and yet thy people free,

And by the Heart, not Hand, enslaving us.³

Byron then adds, “There you dogs: there’s a Sonnet for you” (228). In a sense Byron is conforming to his audience’s readerly expectations, even if the audience at this point in time is perhaps only John Murray. Having read the political sonnets of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley, the reader would naturally expect Byron to write about politics in the way he does. This goes back to what Wordsworth had said in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, that an author must satisfy certain known habits of association when writing verse. The reader familiar with the political sonnets of Coleridge in particular, expects Byron to write a sonnet in this manner when using the form to express himself about politics.

The first six lines make clear Byron’s feelings toward the position and role of the Prince Regent. However much Byron might have been joking with Murray about the fate of Fitzgerald, for the tone of the letter does suggest this, the sonnet is nevertheless a very critical piece on the English upper class. In this manner, it is not far away from Shelley’s “England in 1819” in its scathing critique of the politics of England. Yet Byron also states that it is by the “heart” and not by the “hand” (14) that the children of Edward Fitzgerald are suppressed. The children are not so much beaten into submission as they are psychologically enslaved by Fitzgerald’s influence. The Prince Regent restored the estate of the deceased and disposed Fitzgerald to his children. In a broader sense, this sonnet shows Byron’s thinking about how rulers could elicit love from their children or followers and not be disposed. This is very much a case of what could have been had those in power behaved differently.

That Byron was very much aware of the formal nature of a sonnet, and what writing one entails, is illustrated in the following poem, which in its mocking tone, seems almost a throwaway piece when compared to the rest of Byron’s oeuvre:

Thy verse is ‘sad’ enough, no doubt:
A devilish deal more sad than witty!
Why we should weep I can’t find out,
Unless for *thee* we weep in pity.

³ I have used the text for this sonnet as it appears in the edition of Byron’s letters titled, *The Letters of Lord Byron*, edited by R. G. Howarth

Yet there is one I pity more;
 And much, alas! I think he needs it;
 For he, I'm sure, will suffer sore,
 Who, to his own misfortune, reads it.

Thy rhymes, without the aid of magic,
 May *once* be read – but never after:
 Yet their effect's by no means tragic,
 Although by far too dull for laughter.

This poem is titled “To the Author of a Sonnet, Beginning ““Sad is my verse” you say, “And yet no tear””. Composed in 1807, this poem belongs to Byron’s earlier works, but even in his mocking tone, one senses that Byron is already aware at this stage of the implications of the form of the sonnet for a writer. Byron specifically points out that the poem is “To the Author of a Sonnet” thereby focussing our attention on the formal aspects of the sonnet and how the writer Byron ridicules seems to be no master of the form.

The key word in the poem is “magic” (9), which paradoxically is rhymed by Byron with the word “tragic” (11), perhaps implying some lack of poetical magic on the part of the criticised poet. The form of the sonnet is adequate enough Byron seems to say for us to read the poem once. Yet because of the missing magic, we won’t read it again. Byron seems to poke fun at the revival of the sonnet in the Romantic age and how various authors tried their hand at one. The poet in question perhaps tried to write a sonnet in the Petrarchan mode, and seems to have failed miserably, at least to Byron’s thinking. While Byron gently pokes fun at the poet, one nevertheless takes away from reading Byron’s verse a sense that Byron was aware of the possibilities and revival of the form of the sonnet in the Romantic Movement. The mocking of the melancholy tone that so much Romantic literature seems to adopt might be a tonal leftover from the Petrarchan versifier’s comment on lost love. Byron wittily offers but 12 lines in his dismissal of the sonnet, a form demanding 14 lines. In this way he implies how little space is required to demote a particular example of a short poem and also avoid using the form himself.

Conclusion

Shelley was a key poet in the evolution of the English Romantic political sonnet. Having learned from Coleridge and Wordsworth the new possibilities of the form of the sonnet, Shelley, given the creative impetus of the 1819 Peterloo Massacre, created his own politically charged sonnets. "England in 1819" is one of the finest political sonnets in the whole English Romantic Movement. Its conciseness and mastery of language represent a highpoint in Shelley's output of smaller lyrical poems. Yet the piece is also dramatic in its denunciation of the tragedy of the Peterloo Massacre. This drama is also carried over into *The Mask of Anarchy*, which in turn represents Shelley's rethinking of the form of the medieval tradition of the masque.

Not that Shelley was inspired only after 1819 to write political poems. Throughout his career, from his earliest days at university (where he wrote *The Necessity of Atheism* for which he was expelled) through to his mature adult life, Shelley was constantly concerned with social and political issues and problems. Although Shelley was not part of the generation that witnessed the tumult of the French Revolution, he was nevertheless politically engaged from his earliest days. By the time of the Peterloo Massacre, Shelley had all the necessary formal and technical skills with which to write about politics using the form of the English Romantic political sonnet.

Shelley thus continues the tradition of the English Romantic political sonnet as laid down at the very start by Coleridge. Even before the Peterloo Massacre Shelley had already composed some political sonnets, the most notable being the one on Napoleon after his defeat at Waterloo. If Shelley had been a radical, he still recognised the tradition of the political sonnet stemming from Milton and reshaped by Coleridge and Wordsworth. In much the same way his friend Byron also conformed to the sonnet's concise form when he wrote his sonnet on the fate of those in power who don't love their followers of children.

Chapter Four

Keats and the Dilemma of Form

In this chapter I will analyse various sonnets by John Keats in order to come to an understanding of his formalist concerns and poetic grappling with the form of the sonnet, while at the same time paying attention to the political element occurring in some of his sonnets. I will also focus on some of the most important friendships of his life, in particular that with Leigh Hunt, the radical writer and public figure, who spoke at the Peterloo Massacre. I will also highlight Keats's understanding of the politics of the day by analysing several extracts from his fascinating letters that he wrote to his family and friends. Finally, I will argue that Keats's political sonnets represent an important part not only of his creative life, but also of Romantic literature as a whole. I will analyse the effect that the tradition of the political sonnet had on Keats when he came to write his own politically influenced sonnets, and what might have caused Keats to engage with the form of the sonnet focussing on political themes.

Keats lived a tragically short life, and for most of it was exploring the possibilities of poetry from his early fascination with "poesy" through to his mature works such as the odes and the *Hyperion* fragments. As was the case with virtually all the Romantics in England, Keats seemed to balance his work between short lyrics and longer, more epically infused, works. For example, there is the four thousand line *Endymion*, along with *The Eve of St Agnes*, the *Hyperion* fragments, and his early long works such as *Sleep and Poetry* and *I Stood Tip-Toe Upon a Little Hill*. Like the other Romantics, Keats also produced a play, *Otho the Great* which, like nearly all Romantic plays, was a failure. If the longer works today seem a bit over written and creaky in places, then in the shorter lyrics Keats admirably shows his poetic powers.

Keats's sonnets number some sixty pieces altogether. Despite his short life, he wrote more sonnets than either Byron or Shelley, or Blake and Coleridge. In fact, only the number of Wordsworth's sonnets overshadows Keats's own output in the form. One wonders if Keats might have equalled Wordsworth had he lived longer. As it is, what the numbers show us is that among the Romantics, with the obvious exception of Wordsworth, Keats engaged with the form of the sonnet on a much larger and more regular scale than the other Romantics. We might also argue on a more intimate and

meaningful scale than the others. Keats's first masterpiece is perhaps his sonnet, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer", and the sonnet again closes his life's work in the masterful "Bright Star".¹

Keats, Form and Literature

It might be easy to dismiss Keats as a kind of prototypical Romantic poet with regards to form. He did, after all, follow most of the traditional forms associated with the English Romantic movement. He composed epics such as *Hyperion*, odes such as those of the great year 1819, long romances such as *Endymion*, and even a play with the language closely resembling that of Shakespeare, typical of Romantic plays. Yet it is his constant exploration of the possibilities of these forms and his mastery of some of them, such as the 1819 odes, that lifts Keats out of the ordinary. Nowhere are Keats's formal concerns more markedly present than in his series of sonnets.

As I have earlier pointed out, the sonnet experienced increasing popularity with the Romantics following a century of neglect. Coleridge, through his reading of the sonnets of Bowles, almost single-handedly reintroduced the form to English letters. All the great poets attempted at least a few sonnets, even Blake. Yet the form seems to have receded a little into the background with the second generation of Romantics. Shelley, despite his important contributions to the form, wrote only a handful, and Byron almost only used the form on one or two occasions as a means of expressing satire, and as prefatory pieces to some of his longer poems. However, with Keats the form of the sonnet found an eager practitioner unafraid of the confines and strict formality of the form.

Two sonnets expressing Keats's formal issues with the sonnet are, "The Human Seasons" and, "If by Dull Rhymes our English must be Chained". The first of these, "The Human Seasons", neatly uses the metaphor of the seasons to illustrate the rigidity and even the predictability of the form. Keats talks about the structure of the human mind, saying that our characteristics are comparable to the four different seasons of the year. This reading of the structural quality of the mind of man can also usefully be applied to the form of the sonnet:

¹ It has been argued that the "Bright Star" sonnet belongs to an earlier period, perhaps 1819, as John Barnard points out in his explanatory note to the poem in his edition of Keats's complete poems, 708.

Four seasons fill the measure of the year;
 There are four seasons in the mind of man.
 He has his lusty Spring, when fancy clear
 Takes in all beauty with an easy span.
 He has his Summer, when luxuriously
 Spring's honeyed cud of youthful thoughts he loves
 To ruminate, and by such dreaming nigh
 His nearest unto heaven. Quiet coves
 His soul has in its Autumn, when his wings
 He furlleth close; contended so to look
 On mists in idleness – to let fair things
 Pass by unheeded as a threshold brook.
 He has his Winter too of pale misfeature,
 Or else he would forego his mortal nature.

This is perhaps not great poetry, but it does give us some indication of Keats's reading of the formal structures of the mind's workings, comparing the moods and characteristics of humans with the four seasons. The phrase, "threshold brook" (12), is interesting in that we can relate it to another of Keats's poems concerning autumn, the masterful, "To Autumn". In that poem Keats uses the phrase "And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep / Steady thy laden head across a brook" (19-20), referring not only to death and the passage across the river Styx, but also about the boundaries we must cross. Keats, in "The Human Seasons", specifically characterises the brook as something that marks a boundary. If we relate this imagery to a formalist reading of the passage, we might well say that the brook is indicative of the conciseness and confines of the form of the sonnet.

The concept of the four seasons has become a traditional metaphor for the structure of the year, as well as for the different moods of humans. In the arts the seasons have been used many times. James Thomson's long poem, *The Seasons*, was a popular work in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. John Clare, and before him Edmund Spenser, had written collections of pastoral poems called *The Shepherd's Calendar* in which the seasons feature prominently. Even in music Antonio Vivaldi's four violin concertos that make up *The Four Seasons* remain extremely popular in their musical depiction of the character of each season. This seems to be first and foremost what Keats is saying in his sonnet. Yet it is the very fact that he writes about the seasons in the form of a sonnet that I have selected this poem as an introduction to Keats and form. The four seasons, like the sonnet form, combines sequential regularity and formal suppleness, a blend of sameness and difference.

The sonnet, “If by dull rhymes our English must be chained”, is perhaps Keats’s most famous statement about the form and nature of the sonnet:

If by dull rhymes our English must be chained,
 And, like Andromeda, the sonnet sweet
 Fettered, in spite of pained loveliness,
 Let us find out, if we must be constrained,
 Sandals more interwoven and complete
 To fit the naked foot of Poesy:
 Let us inspect the lyre, and weigh the stress
 Of every chord, and see what may be gained
 By ear industrious, and attention meet;
 Misers of sound and syllable, no less
 Than Midas of his coinage, let us be
 Jealous of dead leaves in the bay wreath crown;
 So, if we may not let the Muse be free,
 She will be bound to garlands of her own.

Keats, in a letter of 3 May 1819, writes, “I have been endeavouring to find a better sonnet stanza than we have. The legitimate [Petrarchan] does not suit the language over-well from the pouncing rhymes – the other kind [Shakespearian] appears too elegiac – and the couplet at the end of it has seldom a pleasing effect. I do not pretend to have succeeded” (*Selected Letters*, 238). The inner rhyming structure of the Petrarchan sonnet appears not to have been an effective means for Keats to express himself within the form of the sonnet. Likewise, Keats finds Shakespeare’s use of the form too sad and elegiac.

In Keats’s argument he focuses mainly on the different rhyme schemes that are used for the sonnet, and he proposes to invent his own that is more suitable to the form of the sonnet. Keats is tackling the issue of the relationship of the internal structure of a poem to the form of the poem, arguing that the structure needs to be appropriate to the form for the expression of poetic ideas and emotions. If this is obvious enough, the distinguishing feature of the above sonnet is Keats’s preoccupation with the form of the sonnet in his poetic output. Keats admits that the Petrarchan and Shakespearian rhyme schemes of the sonnet are perhaps somewhat old, and that in order for him to continue engaging with the form of the sonnet he must rewrite it. Keats says that poesy is still “naked” and that he needs to order his ideas in “sandals more interwoven” (5-6). “Naked” could of course also refer to some ideal of freedom, of being unrestricted by some form of footwear. Since the sonnet is a restrictive form,

Keats wants to find a suitable way to “enclose” the foot of poesy without making its constrictions too obvious, too limiting, that is, he aims for a perfect fit, since fit there has to be. Keats has his material, and now needs a better structure within which to order his thoughts. The last two lines of the poem sum up Keats’s argument in the sonnet. Keats says that his inspiration will be bound to the structure of the rhyme scheme of the sonnet. We notice how the relative “freedom” that Keats wants for the sonnet is achieved here with Keats avoiding the “unpleasing” effect of the Shakespearian concluding couplet, and with the slant rhyme, visually signalled, of “own” and “crown” (12-14), showing the poet’s “attention meet”. Even if Keats may have been struggling with the structure of the sonnet, he is nevertheless determined to continue working with the form. This is a self-reflexive sonnet, with Keats offering a meta-critical account of the sonnet in much the same way as, for example, we saw Wordsworth doing in “Nuns fret not” or “Scorn not the Sonnet, Critic”.

Stuart Curran, in, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, devotes some time to analysing the sonnet output of Leigh Hunt. This writer’s influence on Keats will be discussed more fully later, but it is important that Hunt also practised the form, a form that Keats was so engaged with throughout his career. Curran says, “Like Milton’s sonnets...Leigh Hunt’s sonnets center on his household, the friends who visit, the art and politics they discuss. [They] are addressed to such friends not as public figures but as genial associates within a protected domestic circle” (51). Curran points out that the Miltonic sonnet is not merely a politically charged form, but that it can also represent the domestic life of family and friends, such as that which Hunt writes about. Yet there is nevertheless discussion about politics within this homely setting, as Curran suggests. Once more, the crucial – one might say definitive – intersection between the domestic and the political, the “personal” and the “private”, is apparent.

Curran continues, saying, “Though he is programmatic about domesticating the sonnet, Hunt is nonetheless making a determined political statement, one directed at the poet whom he follows” (51). This poet is Wordsworth. Curran says, “Hunt, in fact, is claiming not only the honor of the Miltonic succession, which Wordsworth has abdicated, but also to represent the Wordsworthian vision with an accuracy and thoroughness never adumbrated by the older poet” (51). For Hunt, Wordsworth seems to be lacking something in the way of tradition, and Hunt directs his sonnets to

Wordsworth, telling him what he thinks the older poet is missing. Curran sums up Hunt's sonnets by saying that, "To Hunt's mind, he and his friends reconsecrate a faith abandoned by its founder" (51). Curran notes that one way of doing this is to write sonnets.

Curran now turns his attention to the sonnets of Keats, and he shows that Hunt had an important influence on the work of the young Keats: "Fully half of his sixty-two sonnets bear the indelible imprint of Hunt in style and treatment: They are primarily exercises, bagatelles" (52). Yet Curran points out that, "There is another, far reaching aspect to Keats's literary exercise outside a prescribed program. Constrained neither by Milton's, Wordsworth's, nor finally Hunt's conception of decorum in subject, Keats slowly came to an independent perspective of the form" (52). If we read such sonnets as, "If by dull rhymes our English must be chained", we see the poetic struggle Keats went through in order to arrive at his own method of writing in the form of the sonnet.

There were few writers more literary in their inspiration than Keats. What I mean is that Keats was above all a bookish writer, who drew his inspiration from the literature of the past and the present. Keats described himself in a letter to Reynolds of 27 April 1818 as, "one who passes his life among Books and thoughts on Books" (*Selected Letters*, 85). His first masterpiece, the sonnet, "On first looking into Chapman's Homer", is about the effect that Chapman's verse translations of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* had on him. Similarly, Keats's sonnet, "On sitting down to read *King Lear* once again" is about the powerful effect that Shakespeare's works had on him, and especially Shakespeare's tempestuous tragedy *King Lear*. One only needs to look at the preserved copies of Shakespeare's plays owned by Keats to appreciate his intense engagement with The Bard. Nearly every page has some passage of the text underlined, and some are very heavily underlined. There are also the very first books Keats loved, from his years at school, among them *The Pilgrim's Progress* and Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary*. In *A Life of John Keats*, Dorothy Hewlett remarks, "He soon exhausted the school library" and "Every minute snatched from his lessons or enforced exercise was devoted to reading, even at meals" (29-30).

The reason why it is important to look at Keats's literariness is because it distinguishes him to a large extent from the other Romantic poets. Whereas Wordsworth would stumble across a field of daffodils or revisit Tintern Abbey and write about his experiences that the scenes awoke in him, Keats would have his nose buried in a book. Wordsworth even remarked in "The Tables Turned":

Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:
Come, hear the woodland linnet,
How sweet his music! on my life,
There's more wisdom in it. (9-12)

Coleridge could write such magical poems as "Kubla Khan" after a large enough dose of opium, but Keats would read up on the subject first. This immersion in books and the ideas contained in books represents the extent to which Keats was absorbed in literature. We might say that thinking for Keats was done by means of literature. Keats's responses to events, scenes and emotions were poetic, and perhaps it was his aim to find a better sonnet such as he expresses in "If by dull rhymes" in order to express his literary thoughts and nature better within the form. Keats, literature, and form seem inextricably bound together.

Political Critique in Keats's Letters

Keats's letters remain among the most remarkable ever penned by any English writer. It has even been said that Keats's letters are greater works of literature than his poems. Their regular reissue even in paperback form is a testament to their enduring popularity and status. It is within this intimate and domestic setting that we find some of Keats's more direct comments upon the politics of the day. Keats's letters often swiftly change from the mundane and everyday to philosophical discussions on the nature of poetry. Once again, we note the intertwining of the mundane and the profound, the quotidian and the philosophically laden. Understandably enough, the mundane is often neglected in favour of the philosophical. For this study, I will look at some of Keats's more everyday observations on political events.

Like Shelley and Byron, Keats and his generation lived through the era of the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 through to the Peterloo Massacre in 1819. Keats was poetically much more restrained in his response to the events of 1819. In

fact, that year marks a turning point in Keats's work that signifies the start of a tragically short-lived mature period. 1819 for Keats was more about the composition of among other things the famous odes, as well as the attempts at *Hyperion*. Keats even found time to write *Otho the Great*. Keats's creative life fits almost neatly in between the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the upheaval of the Peterloo Massacre; in much the same way Wordsworth's career fits in between the years following the French Revolution and the European revolutionary uprisings of 1848. Keats might at first seem an unpromising subject of study with regards to politics, but as I would like to show, he was very aware of the historical and political context within which he lived.

One of the earliest of Keats's letters to show what he thought of politics is that of 13-14 October 1818 to his brother George. Keats says, "As for politics they are in my opinion only sleepy because they will soon be too wide awake – Perhaps not – for the long and continued Peace of England itself has given us notions of personal safety which are likely to prevent the reestablishment of our national Honesty" (*Selected Letters*, 153). There is a kind of bitterness in Keats's words that hints at a critique of the government and the people of England. England had never seen any of the conflict that engulfed Europe after the French Revolution and the emergence of Napoleon. True, it had been threatened by invasion (anxieties which are well illustrated in Coleridge's "Fears in Solitude"), but it had never had any conflict on its own soil. Now, Keats says, the people have lost something of their national pride.

In the same letter Keats says, "There are many Men like Hunt who from a principle of taste would like to see things go on better...many ...who like to sit at the head of political dinners - but there are none prepared to suffer in obscurity for their Country – the motives of our wo[r]st Men are interest and of our best Vanity" (153). Again Keats is very critical of the kind of men who are in charge of politics. On the one hand we have Hunt, who Keats seems to praise for his hopes, and on the other hand men whose ambition is to sit at the head of the table at some "political dinner". Keats laments the fact that there is no one prepared to offer his life for the betterment of his country. For Keats, the men who are in government are concerned only with their own personal interests, and as such are extremely self-interested in their actions and character.

The above two extracts offer evidence that Keats is not an apolitical poet, or someone merely lost in poesy and fancy. These sound almost like the words of Shelley in their scathing critique of the state of England and the vanity of the people in charge of the country. In the same letter, Keats makes the observation, “We have no Milton” (153). By saying this, Keats follows in the footsteps of Wordsworth, who in his sonnet “London, 1802”, praises the astute qualities of Milton, the politically involved poet. Keats also follows in the footsteps of most of the other Romantics who also saw in Milton an example of reason when it comes to political questions. And, crucially, there is the Shelleyan conviction of the need for the “philosopher-King”, or the poet-King, the politically involved poetic consciousness.

Continuing with the same letter Keats wrote to his brother George, we find the following observation: “A Man now entitlerd Chancellor has the same honour paid to him whether he be a Hog or a Lord Bacon. No sensation is created by Greatness but by the number of orders a Man has at his Button holes” (154). Again Keats is very critical, even satiric about the state of politics in his day. The men who achieve power and greatness are anything but great. Instead, they are of little consequence, and the only thing that distinguishes a man of power with a common man seems to be the amount of decorations he has received. Vanity and hubris again play a part in Keats’s views of the political leaders of his day. The outward appearance of political leaders is more important than the work they actually do for the country.

A few lines later Keats turns his attention to Napoleon Bonaparte. Keats says, “Notwithstanding the part which the Liberals take in the cause of Napoleon I cannot but think he has done more harm to the life of Liberty than anyone else would have done...The worst thing he has done, that he has taught them how to organize their monstrous armies” (154). Writing in 1818, Keats is analysing the continuing influence of Napoleon in European statecraft and theories of waging war. Keats of course feels much the same way that most people felt about Napoleon at this stage and even earlier on in the 19th century. Napoleon had proclaimed himself the liberator of the people and the bringer of democracy, toppling monarchies as he went along on his campaigns throughout Europe. Yet people soon found out that his real aim was not the spread of liberty, but rather the glorification of his ego and accumulation of power. The composer Ludwig van Beethoven memorably scratched out the dedication to

Napoleon of his *Third Symphony* when he learned that Napoleon had crowned himself emperor. The destroyer of kings had now made one of himself. Keats also wrote a sonnet on Napoleon, which I will discuss later.

The letter of 14-31 October 1818 to George Keats is a remarkable document in that it contains much of Keats's thinking about politics and his attitude towards politicians. We see Keats as a cynical and astute observer of the true meaning of power and the role played by politicians in the England of the 1810's. Yet Keats also looked at politics in other letters. In a letter to George and Georgiana of September 1819, Keats examines the Peterloo Massacre. This is significant because his friend Leigh Hunt was to be a speaker at the assembly at St Peter's Field on the day of the massacre. No doubt Keats would have looked at the political situation with new eyes as most of the public had done.

Keats traces the sources of the Peterloo Massacre with an uncanny insight. He says, "The example of England, and the liberal writers of France and England sowed the seed of opposition to this Tyranny – and it was swelling in the ground till it burst out in the French Revolution" (290). This is a condensed reading of the history of the French Revolution. Crucially, Keats says, "This had an unlucky termination. It put a stop to the rapid progress of free sentiments in England; and gave our Court hopes of turning back to the despotism of the 16th century" (290). Keats makes the important insight that many of the Romantics made, that the French Revolution, with its promises and hopes of freedom and liberty, was followed by a descent into conservatism on the part of the English government. Further on Keats says, "They have made a handle of this event in every way to undermine our freedom. They spread a horrid superstition against all innovation and improvement – The present struggle in England of the people is to destroy this superstition" (290-91). For Keats the condition of England is one of the suppression of liberal thinking and independent thought.

Keats also voices his sentiments in a letter to Dilke from 22 September. Keats makes the wry joke that he has an "aristocratic temper". In the same breath Keats says, "I cannot help being very much pleas'd with the present public proceedings" (281-82). The public proceedings that Keats is talking about are the aftermath of the Peterloo

Massacre, and the ways in which this event helped to make people look at the government of England in a new light. Keats' joke isn't really funny: The aristocratic people of England had been as afraid of the French Revolution and the possibilities of such an event taking place in England as they were of the aftermath of the Peterloo Massacre.

What these few extracts from Keats's letters illustrate is that Keats is far from being a poet merely concerned with "poesy" and the imagination. Keats was very aware of the political climate within which he and others lived in the aftermath of Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo leading up to the Peterloo Massacre. Keats may not have been as radical as Shelley in denouncing the Peterloo Massacre, but he was nevertheless far from being an apolitical poet.

The Influence of Leigh Hunt

Among Keats's most important friendships that he formed throughout his life, that with James Henry Leigh Hunt stands out for its impact on his political thinking. Hunt occupies much the same role in Keats's life that Coleridge had assumed for Wordsworth, or even Godwin for Shelley. Hunt was in a sense a mentor for Keats, an older man who provided Keats with guidance in his literary and political thinking. Keats first came into contact with Hunt through his other friend Benjamin Haydon. In *A Life of John Keats*, Hewlett says, "In person Hunt was handsome, dark and vivid...He made graceful verses, wrote lively prose, and savoured life in an elegant way...He talked amusingly on many subjects, he criticized acutely and was that rarity, a good listener" (64). Hewlett also adds that Mrs Carlyle called him, "the talking nightingale" (64).

In 1816 Hunt published an article in *The Examiner* in which he discussed three young poets, Keats, Shelley, and Reynolds. Although Hunt was somewhat critical in his reading of Keats's sonnet, "On first looking into Chapman's Homer", the praise Hunt had for the poem was nevertheless an important motive for Keats to get to know Hunt better. After this, Keats and Hunt engaged in the famous sonnet-writing contest, in which the two poets were to write a sonnet within a certain amount of time. Keats emerged victorious with, "On the Grasshopper and the Cricket". This contest and the

review Hunt had written on Keats's poetry shows the importance of the form of the sonnet at this early stage of Keats's poetic career.

Hunt's influence on Keats's poetic output and thinking is illustrated by yet another sonnet by Keats, "On the Story of Rimini". Hunt's *The Story of Rimini* is perhaps the one work of his that has survived, even though it contains possibly some of the worst lines in English poetry. Yet any serious Keats scholar cannot ignore the writing of Hunt. One only needs to look at Keats's "Calidore" to appreciate the influence of Hunt, something Miriam Allot so rightly observes. Allot says, "The influence of Leigh Hunt's "The Story of Rimini"...is apparent in the poem's diction, loose heroic couplets and sentimental eroticism, but description is substituted for Hunt's narrative energy" (*The Poems of John Keats*, 16). If Hunt's works no longer command much critical attention, they nevertheless proved an important example for the young Keats.

According to Watts, Keats had been influenced by, "The liberalism of Hunt's *Examiner*, which offered sharp and lively criticism of the Prince Regent and the Tory Government of Liverpool, Sidmouth and Castlereagh" (*A Preface to Keats*, 14). Hunt's views on the politics and the politicians of the day seemed to chime with Keats's own views. As we have seen, Keats in his letters is quite critical of the political situation in which he lived, and like Hunt, Keats's criticisms are sharp and lively. Hunt was of course imprisoned for his political beliefs, and it was on his release from prison that Keats wrote one of his better-known sonnets, "Written on the day that Mr Leigh Hunt left Prison":

What though, for showing truth to flattered state,
 Kind Hunt was shut in prison, yet has he,
 In his immortal spirit, been as free
 As the sky-searching lark, and as elate.
 Minion of grandeur! Think you he did wait?
 Think you he nought but prison walls did see,
 Till, so unwilling, thou unturned'st the key?
 Ah no! far happier, nobler was his fate!
 In Spenser's halls he strayed, and bowers fair,
 Culling enchanted flowers; and he flew
 With daring Milton through the fields of air:
 To regions of his own his genius true
 Took happy flights. Who shall his fame impair
 When thou art dead, and all thy wretched crew?

Hunt had finished a two-year sentence for libel against the Prince Regent in *The Examiner*. Keats wrote this sonnet on 2 February 1815, and thus before he met Hunt. The precise title of the sonnet is an indication of the importance of the event for Keats. We also note the sustained trope of freedom in captivity, as has been noted in Keats's account of the sonnet form, "If by Dull Rhymes". "To regions of his own genius true / Took happy flights" (12-13) consolidates, very early on, Keats's commitment to the Romantic nexus of genius and originality ("of his own") and yet, ironically, we note the inevitable interplay between formal constraints (prison, poetic precursors) and the assertion of originality. Furthermore, in an anticipation of the later, more pronounced scepticism that Keats harboured about poetry, the ambiguity contained in, "happy flights", just hints at the circumscription that attaches even to poetry and poetic genius.

The reference to Milton is of course one of the more important aspects of this sonnet, which otherwise seems to focus too much on Hunt's fame than on his true political character. Keats also focuses on the consolations that reading can provide; yet there might be a hidden message in the reference to Milton. Reading Milton, Hunt would perhaps have been ready and better equipped to tackle the political world when he left prison. Milton, after all, had been an example for Coleridge and Wordsworth, to name only the best known-examples. These older writers had, as we have noted, both paid tribute to Milton's political example in their own sonnets. Keats might have been contrasting the different styles of Spenser and Milton in Hunt's reading while in prison, but the use of Milton's name has decidedly political reverberations. But, the need for caution and the dismissive commentary on the status quo resound as well: now, at that moment, it might be necessary to curtail praise for the convicted man, Hunt. But this will not be so after the demise of the present oppressors: "who shall his fame impair / When thou art dead...?" (13-14) And, significantly, "wretched crew" (14), harks back to Milton's reference to Satan and his "horrid crew" (*Paradise Lost*, Bk.1, 51).

Keats would later on in his life come to regard Hunt less and less favourably, criticising him for his vainness and patronising nature. Even if the two men's friendship broke up and they drifted apart, the influence of Hunt on Keats cannot be ignored. Keats learned new poetic possibilities and tones from the example of Hunt,

and Hunt also provided Keats with a political figure to follow and extol. Keats called Hunt “Libertas” (Hunt similarly, if less flatteringly, called Keats “Junkets”), a small but telling illustration of the importance of Hunt in the life of Keats. Watts says, “All who value Keats’s poetry should value Leigh Hunt, who first printed it, who established Keats’s reputation, and who gave the grateful young man the warmest of welcomes to the public realms of literature” (18).

History in Keats’s Sonnets

It is a sign of the changing perception in the critical response to Keats’s work that Nicholas Roe compiled a collection of essays on Keats’s historical and political views in his book *Keats and History*, first published in 1995. Critics have often classified Keats as a poet of the senses and of pleasure. Lionel Trilling, for example, in the introduction to his edition of Keats’s letters, sees Keats as the poet of sensual experience and luxury (*Critics on Keats*, 17-25). This is a well-established view of Keats and his poetry, and a reading of a poem such as *Endymion* only reinforces these perceptions. Yet Keats wrote on a wide variety of topics, and his general poetic outlook and method underwent an important change in 1818, moving away from his earlier preoccupation with “poesy” to a more intense engagement with the imagination. One only needs to read poems such as either of the *Hyperion* fragments or the odes to appreciate that Keats was much more than merely a poet of luxury and the senses.

Roe, in his introduction to *Keats and History* says, “The idea of his minimal worldly presence was accepted throughout the nineteenth century and has continued to influence critical approaches to Keats and his poems for the greater part of the twentieth” (1). I have already mentioned that Keats seems to have been mainly literary in his poetic inspiration, and this view of Keats as a predominantly bookish poet of course does not help to debunk the myth that Keats had only minimal contact with the outside world. Roe argues that three of the most important critics of the twentieth century – de Man, de Selincourt and Brooke – were still representing Keats as a “de-historicised” poet, thus continuing the traditions of nineteenth century criticism on Keats (2). F. R. Leavis, in *Revaluation*, states that, “The current placing of him seems, in essentials, likely to stand...For Keats has become a symbolic figure, the type of poetic genius, a hero and martyr of poetry” (241). Vincent Newey flatly

states, “Keats has in general been given a low profile, or no profile at all, in accounts of Romanticism and politics” (“‘Alternate Uproar and Sad Peace’: Keats, Politics, and the Idea Revolution”, 265).

Yet by the 1980’s, the critical climate was changing. For Roe, critics such as Marilyn Butler, in *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries*, heralded an important change in the perception in Keats studies concerning the poet’s worldliness. Yet even as early as 1931, Clarence DeWitt Thorpe, in his article, “Keats’s Interest in Politics and World Affairs”, started to argue the case for a more historical and political reading of some of Keats’s major poems (1228). It would however take more time for critics to come to a fuller understanding of Keats’s historicism. By 1986, in the summer publication of the journal *Studies in Romanticism*, some of the leading Keats scholars of the day discussed Keats’s historicism and a historical reading of his poems. This was an important event in Keats scholarship, and ultimately led to Roe’s book *Keats and History*. Bearing in mind these more important criticisms of Keats and history in recent times, I will look at Keats and the political setting of his day, and will furthermore look at several of Keats’s sonnets to illustrate his continuation of the tradition of the political sonnet.

As I have noted, Keats’s career fits almost neatly in between the fall of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815 and the Peterloo Massacre of 1819. The context of Keats’s literary output thus falls in between two of the more momentous events of the early 19th century. Morris Dickstein in “Keats and Politics”, observes that Keats was active,

...when England was abuzz with working-class unrest, middle-class agitation for reform, an economic crisis, a crushing burden of taxation left over from the Napoleonic wars, frequent public demonstrations, the suppression of Habeas Corpus, the arrest of booksellers, treason trials and executions, and finally the lethal assault on peaceful petitioners at St. Peter’s Field near Manchester in 1819. (175)

As I have already pointed out, Keats was very aware of the social and political context within which he lived, as is illustrated by the above quotation. Keats in one of his earliest sonnets, “On Peace”, also illustrates this awareness of politics. He wrote the poem in 1814, in the early stages of his poetic career. Barnard notes that this sonnet was written to celebrate the Peace of Paris, thus written before the Hundred

Days that signified the return and eventual defeat of Napoleon. Barnard also says, “This irregular Shakespearian sonnet echoes the tone of the editorials written for the *Examiner* by Leigh Hunt, who hoped that the Peace might bring constitutional monarchy to Europe” (*The Complete Poems*, 555-556). Jeffrey N. Cox also echoes this view in his edition of *Keats’ Poetry and Prose*: “Keats probably wrote this poem sometime after Napoleon’s first abdication on April 11, 1814, and his subsequent departure for Elba” (3). Again the influence of Hunt should be noted here. Although the sonnet might be among Keats’s first surviving works and perhaps therefore less developed than some of his later sonnets, it still represents not only Keats’s acute awareness of the political context in which he lived, but also the importance that the form of the sonnet had for Keats even at this early stage of his career, and Keats’s assimilation of the tradition of the political sonnet as pioneered by Milton and later developed by Coleridge. Keats starts his sonnet with the customary exclamatory “Oh!”:

Oh Peace! And dost thou with thy presence bless
 The dwelling of this war-surrounded Isle;
 Soothing with placid brow our late distress,
 Making the triple kingdom brightly smile?
 Joyful I hail thy presence; and I hail
 The sweet companions that await on thee;
 Complete my joy – let not my first wish fail,
 Let the sweet mountain nymph thy favourite be,
 With England’s happiness proclaim Europa’s liberty.
 O Europe! Let not sceptred tyrants see
 That thou must shelter in thy former state;
 Keep thy chains burst, and boldly say thou art free;
 Give thy kings law – leave not uncurbed the great;
 So with the horrors past thou’lt win thy happier fate!

The tone of the sonnet echoes that of the first political sonnets by Coleridge in that it is perhaps somewhat overwritten and laden with unnatural emotion. Yet this is significant: Keats’s language is very much that of the individual proclaiming his happiness over the peace that Europe has finally won. In this sense Keats follows the tradition of the lyricised political sonnet as established by Coleridge, and combines his own emotions about the peace of Europe with a hope for the public world that this peace may last. The personal and the public become intertwined in Keats’s sonnet, the same effect we see in the political sonnets of Coleridge and Wordsworth.

However, Keats is a bit cautious. The first quatrain is a question posed to the new state of peace. Is it really peaceful now in Europe, and will the “war-surrounded Isle” (2) of England at last be free of the Coleridgean, “Fears in Solitude”? In the first four lines Keats addresses the state of the world without peace. Peace is as yet unattained, and is a state that is hoped for. In the next five lines Keats says that the wish of peace has been fulfilled. The opening nine lines thus contrast the two states of Europe: of war and uncertainty under the rule of Napoleon, and that of a long-awaited political peace heralded by the Peace of Paris. If Keats is doubtful about the peace of Europe in the opening quatrain, he is right in being so. In 1815, the year after Keats wrote this sonnet, Napoleon was back from exile, gathering as much support as he had previously done, and had brought with him political fears that the Peace of Paris was supposed to have suppressed. Keats could perhaps not have foreseen this turn of events, but was careful enough in his sonnet not to celebrate a state of political peace from the first line of the poem onwards and taking it for granted.

In each very different instance, we see the poets trying to make peace with the form they inherit. Keats’s “On Peace”, is far from being the finest example of the English Romantic political sonnet. Yet in its way it encapsulates precisely the battle with form and the battle with political structures. The “bless” “distress” rhyme (1-3) captures the dramatic tensions at the heart of politics and the sonnet, the verse form chosen in this study. The political and the formal challenges are embodied in the poem’s echoing of “hail” and “fail” (5-7), where the praise is deep but the anxiety of unsuccessfulness ever-present. The persistent paradox of freedom and curtailment is present in Keats’s exhortation that peace should “leave not uncurbed the great” (13). In the negotiation between appropriate constraint and fitting freedom, in the search for that fit, the political sonnet in the English Romantic tradition finds its most characteristic note.

In an early chip from the master’s bench, Keats’s, “Lines Written on 29 May, the Anniversary of Charles’ Restoration, on Hearing the Bells Ringing”, the poet’s engagement with history is unmistakable and can be read in opposition to what Barnard had said about Hunt in *The Examiner* in his analysis of “On Peace”. For Cox, the poem could have been written during the Hundred Days (3), thus explaining Keats’s somewhat bitter tone:

Infatuate Britions, will you still proclaim
 His memory, your direst, foulest shame?
 Nor patriots revere?

Ah! when I hear each traitorous lying bell,
 'Tis gallant Sydney's, Russell's, Vane's sad knell,
 That pains my wounded ear.

Although this is only a short snatch of poetry from the young Keats, it illustrates something of the betrayal Keats might have felt when Napoleon re-emerged from exile to take up his egotistical domination of Europe once again. In the sonnet "To Peace", Keats was celebratory, if somewhat cautious about the peace of Europe in 1814. Now that Napoleon was back on the continent and seemingly repeating history, Keats would no doubt have felt bitter about the state of politics and political efficacy in promoting and proclaiming peace. Keats had followed the thinking of Hunt, who thought that the Peace of Paris would install constitutional monarchies to the thrones of Europe. Now Keats saw that this wish was not only premature, but that self-proclaimed monarchs such as Napoleon were really only thinking about themselves. Keats is critical of England's celebration of the Restoration, and the English people's pride in their monarchy. Keats, having seen Napoleon come back to take up his conquest of Europe again, would no doubt have been sceptical about the role that monarchies play in the social and political set-up of a country.

In his article, "Keats Literary Tradition and the Politics of Historiographical Invention", in *Keats and History*, Greg Kucich outlines Keats's sense of literary tradition and contemporary politics: "Keats was aware of this relation between literary history and material politics, frequently aligning his intense preoccupation with poetic influence and his responses to the political crises developing around him" (240). One such example of Kucich's argument would be Keats's use of the form of the sonnet in addressing political questions, the same as the first generation Romantics had done, and the same as Milton had pioneered over a century previously. Kucich also cites Harold Bloom and his important study, *The Anxiety of Influence*, saying that Bloom already notices in Keats a distinct awareness of Milton (239-40). The influence of Milton would no doubt have stood before Keats as he composed his political sonnets, together with an anxiety of living up to the example of Milton. In fact, Kucich contrasts two different readings of the burden of history on Keats: "If Bloom is right

to find the ghosts of antiquity paralysing Keats, Curran is equally justified in arguing for their enabling tendency to spring his imagination free” (240). Keats might have been intimidated by the example of Milton, but he might also have been inspired by that example to try his hand at a literary tradition as specific as the political sonnet. The Miltonic intertext cited above in my reading of, “Written on the day that Mr Leigh Hunt left prison”, is a good example of a subtle Miltonic presence enabling Keats to make a political point, via Milton, of a distinctly literary kind. In this case we can label Keats’s perception of literary tradition and historical influence not so much as the anxiety of influence, but perhaps the anxiety and inspiration of historical and literary influence.

It is with this theory in mind that one should read the political sonnets of Keats, and indeed the political sonnets of all the great Romantic poets. From a formal point of view, political events seem to need to be addressed by means of the form of the sonnet, and Keats is no exception. For the Romantics, Milton had been the poet who liberated Satan from his narrow biblical portrayal, and also the man who took a firm stance against the politics of the Revolution in England, telling politicians such as Cromwell how to go about their business. The Romantics then had an example as to how to address politics in their poetry, and as it turned out, the form of the sonnet suited the Romantics as much as it had been useful for Milton in his political poetry. With Coleridge reintroducing the form and practice of the political sonnet in the 1790’s, the second generation Romantics had yet another influential figure showing them how to use the form in relation to historical events.

Keats clearly followed the example of Coleridge when he came to write his sonnet on Kosciusko, the same military and patriotic figure whom Coleridge had addressed in one of his sonnets in the series *Sonnets on Eminent Characters*. Coleridge had praised Kosciusko for his patriotic selflessness, and Keats now follows not only the footsteps of Milton, but also Coleridge. Written in late 1816, Keats celebrates Tadeusz Kosciusko, who fought against the Russians for Polish liberation. In the Battle of Dubjenka, he seems to have held off 16,000 Russian troops with only 4,000 of his own. It is perhaps also significant, as Barnard notes, that Hunt had a bust of Kosciusko in his study (*The Complete Poems*, 578). Keats further addresses him in

Sleep and Poetry, and Hunt also wrote a sonnet to him. The year after Keats wrote his sonnet, Kosciusko would be dead.

Good Kosciusko, thy great name alone
 Is a full harvest whence to reap high feeling;
 It comes upon us like the glorious pealing
 Of the wide spheres – an everlasting tone.
 And now it tells me, that in words unknown,
 The names of heroes burst from clouds concealing,
 And change to harmonies, for ever stealing
 Through cloudless blue, and round each silver throne.
 It tells me too, that on a happy day,
 When some good spirit walks upon the earth,
 Thy name with Alfred's and the great of yore
 Gently commingling, gives tremendous birth
 To a loud hymn, that sounds far, far away
 To where the great God lives for ever more.

The last six lines have something about them of the same tone and sentiment that we find in Shelley's great sonnet, "England in 1819". Phrases such as "tremendous birth" (12) and "loud hymn" (13) and the earlier, "heroes burst from clouds" (6) seem almost to anticipate the kind of language and register Shelley would use in his sonnet some three years later. Keats also identifies a certain "high feeling" (2) for the plight and achievements of Kosciusko. The words "high feeling" are important: It is exactly the type of language Milton would never have used in one of his sonnets and which the Romantics would use to lyricise the political sonnet. Along with the role nature imagery plays in the sonnet (a Keatsian "full harvest" in line 2) and the importance placed on the first person narrator, the lyrical quality of the piece makes it very much a Romantic political sonnet, continuing the tradition of Coleridge and Wordsworth. Although Keats has the whole of humankind in mind when he wrote this sonnet, his relationship with the hero Kosciusko could be argued to be a very personal one.

Coleridge's sonnet on Kosciusko focuses more on the fall of Kosciusko, yet it also contains hopes for a future that will learn from his example. Coleridge for example writes, "Oh what a loud and fearful shriek was there, / As though a thousand souls one death-groan pour'd!" (1-2). Keats seems to echo this kind of language at the start of his sonnet in his praise of the Polish patriot. Coleridge and Keats ultimately focussed on different themes in their sonnets on Kosciusko, yet the basic recurring line of thought is that the figure of Kosciusko represents a single man fighting against

oppression and sacrificing himself for the cause of liberty. The figure of Kosciusko and the ideals he stood for seem to have elevated him to iconic status. In this sense the sonnet becomes a poem of praise for elevating patriots such as Kosciusko, and also politically astute figures such as Milton. Kosciusko was held in high regard in England as a martyr of freedom. As I have tried to illustrate before analysing this sonnet, Keats follows the tradition of Coleridge, who in turn followed the tradition of Milton. Keats's engagement with Kosciusko is representative of the influence history and literature had on the young Keats, and how he ultimately used the anxiety of influence as a means of inspiration.

Two further sonnets I will briefly examine are, "Happy is England! I could be content" and "On first looking into Chapman's Homer" in order to illustrate how history and politics can often remain overlooked in Keats's poetry, and Keats's ongoing use of the sonnet as a vehicle for the expression of his thoughts on politics. In "Happy is England!" Keats writes about his homeland in the same manner that Wordsworth had done in, "I wandered among unknown men". Wordsworth writes:

I travelled among unknown men,
In lands beyond the sea;
Nor England! did I know till then
What love I bore to thee.

'Tis past, that melancholy dream!
Nor will I quit thy shore
A second time; for still I seem
To love thee more and more. (1-8)

This poem is one of the Lucy poems composed in early 1801, and ultimately focuses on Lucy and her role in the narrator's life, yet the opening quatrains are quite patriotic in feeling. In the same way Keats writes:

Happy is England! I could be content
To see no other verdure than its own;
To feel no other breezes than are blown
Through its tall woods with high romances blent. (1-4)

The sentiment is very much the same in that Keats, like Wordsworth, in very simplistic verse seems to reinforce his love of his homeland. In both Wordsworth and Keats, the very simplicity of the language may at first seem to imply that these are

merely commonplace poetic expressions that live up to Wordsworth's ideal of composing verse that is akin to the language of the common man. Yet it does go deeper: both Keats and Wordsworth are very direct about their allegiance to England and their love of their homeland. This is just one instance of Keats's historicism being overlooked. We also see the literary nature of Keats's attitude to place. The woods are associated with a literary tradition with which Keats would battle hugely, that of "Romance".

Another instance is the great sonnet, "On first looking into Chapman's Homer". This remarkable piece, written when Keats was 19, is often regarded as his first mature sonnet and his first mature poem of any kind. The reference to Cortez is another example of Keats's sense of history:

Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He stared at the Pacific – and all his men
Looked at each other with a wild surmise-
Silent, upon a peak in Darien. (11-14)

Keats uses Cortez's conquest of South America as a metaphor for his own poetic awakening after reading George Chapman's translations of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Yet there is also a historical sense of the spreading imperialism of European explorers such as Cortez. Keats is a little mistaken about the historical facts of the situation. Miriam Allott says, "The substitution of Cortes for Balboa is the result of Keats's confusing Robertson's account of Balboa's emotion with his description of Cortes's feelings on first seeing Mexico City" (*The Complete Poems*, 62). In this error, one could argue, lies yet another modality of the tradition/innovation nexus: Keats has made a reading of history his own with the past serving his own present purposes. Keats's sense of history is nevertheless acute and he works it into a sonnet that celebrates a poetic awakening on his part after the experience of reading Chapman's translations of Homer.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the historical and formal concerns of Keats in his sonnets have been analysed to argue for a more historical and political appreciation of the poetry of Keats. Keats in the past has been labelled the poet of the sense, or the poet of luxury

and sensuality, and true, most of his early verse seems to live up to this classification and reading. Yet even at the very beginning of Keats's poetic career, he was already involved in writing political sonnets, such as illustrated by the sonnet, "On Peace". A rereading of Keats's historicism is necessary, and various critics have in fair measure achieved this in the last few years. Books such as *Keats and History* certainly point toward a new appreciation of Keats's political concerns. For this, one only needs to look at the letters, which reveal a very politically aware Keats. And of course, there are the poems themselves, which often contain poetical and historical allusions, which have too readily been passed over. Keats's dilemma with the form of the sonnet resulted in an ongoing experimentation with the form. Part of this experimentation was Keats's furthering and continuation of the tradition of the English Romantic political sonnet.

Conclusion

How does one read the English Romantic political sonnet? In the four chapters of this dissertation I have attempted to show that a merely formalist reading is not enough to come to an appreciation of the role that the form of the sonnet played for the Romantics. The context, whether it be social, political or even literary is important for an understanding of the revival of the tradition of the political sonnet in English literature. Often formal readings or critiques of any given piece of literature will tend to ignore, or at least minimise, the importance of the context within which it is written. Fair enough, what is being studied is the writer's engagement with the forms of literature. Yet often, as is the case with the English Romantic political sonnet, in order to appreciate the importance of the form, we have to look at the political and social context within which the Romantics lived. It is this revolutionary context that inspired the first practitioner, Coleridge, to reintroduce the form of the political sonnet to English literature after a hundred years of neglect. And it is on this seeming paradox, the interplay between a conventionally highly demanding form, and a revolutionary age, that I have focussed much of our attention.

Coleridge was first in a number of things: the revival of the sonnet and the development of the Romantic lyric, to name but two. During his younger years, Coleridge read with enthusiasm the sonnets of Bowles. Bowles's sonnets provided the impetus for Coleridge to reread the form of the sonnet and to start practicing it himself. Bowles's sonnets, often lyrical in their expression and use of language, focussed largely on the natural world. Given the Romantics' preoccupation with Nature, it is hardly surprising that both Coleridge and Wordsworth appreciated Bowles's sonnets.

Yet there was trouble brewing across the Channel in France. The French Revolution of 1789 shook the whole of Europe to its very core. Monarchies across the continent and in England took notice of what was happening in France: the common man taking hold of the present political situation and by his own hands shaping his future. In the process, heads would roll, more often than not those of the royalty and nobility. In this revolutionary epoch, Coleridge and Wordsworth tried to come to terms with what was

happening in France. Wordsworth even visited France several times in order to experience events first hand. The initial hopes of liberty, equality and freedom were soon broken to pieces. With a new revolutionary government instated, there commenced one of the darkest periods in the history of France, with the Great Terror of the mid 1790's killing tens of thousands of people in an effort to retain power. It seemed to many people that the Revolution was fruitless, that life was even worse under the new regime than it was under the old regime.

In this climate, Coleridge brought the political sonnet back to life. In doing so, he continued the tradition of the political sonnet initiated by Milton over a century before. This in itself constitutes one of the significant points of Romantic preoccupation with Milton, their great precursor. It is very likely the pressures and fears of the political and social system that prompted Coleridge to re-use the form, to seek some sort of solidity and safety in the form. There is, in the engagement with Milton, a kind of formal and ideological sodality for the younger poets. Milton, after all, had been a model of the reasonable and levelheaded politically involved writer in his handful of political sonnets, in which he cautioned the politicians of the rather stormy England of the mid 1600's with regards to how they should go about their business. In the *Sonnets on Eminent Characters*, Coleridge continues the tradition of the Miltonic political sonnet because, like Milton, he now also faced a revolutionary world in which traditional structures seemed to be pulled down all around him. In addition, Coleridge, with the influence of Bowles, lyricised the political sonnet, making it a more personal expression of his thoughts on politics, instead of the more public sonnets of Milton.

Wordsworth also engaged with political problems and the political set-up of Europe and England as Coleridge had done, but not quite as early as Coleridge. Wordsworth was the most prolific sonneteer of all the Romantics and wrote more political sonnets than any of the others. The *Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty and Order* are but one example of his prolific output. In Wordsworth's case the concept of the form of the sonnet as a home or dwelling for the poet in which to freely express his ideas has been persuasively put forth by William Kerrigan. This is an important insight I believe for coming to an understanding of the political sonnet. The sonnet thus provides a kind of safe haven for the poet in which to express either his agreement or opposition to

political questions. This we see in the relatively neglected series of Wordsworth's sonnets, the *Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death*. Although this is late Wordsworth (and by implication "lesser" Wordsworth), we nevertheless see the old man astutely criticising and praising the death penalty. In his series he traces the emotions of the condemned man as well as his own thoughts and emotions on the topic.

Shelley seems to belong to a different order from either Coleridge or Wordsworth. In his sonnet, "England in 1819", he openly criticises the monarchy of England, and specifically the King in the first few lines. This is done with a poetic vehemence unknown to the language of Coleridge and Wordsworth. Yet Shelley had good cause to do so. The Peterloo Massacre of 1819 caused such a stir in the social and political life of 19th century Britain that a radical poet such as Shelley would have been hard pressed not to voice his thoughts. Continuing the tradition of Milton and Coleridge, he used the form of the sonnet. Shelley somehow manages to contain his rage and hope in the space of fourteen lines, a remarkable achievement for a poet who more often than not was accustomed to cover much larger canvasses. The reason behind Shelley's use of the form of the sonnet probably lies in the fact that he felt it necessary to continue the tradition of Milton and Coleridge. While doing so, he also found the sonnet and its constraints a source of inspiration, as all the Romantics seem to have done.

Keats is the last of the great Romantics to use the sonnet regularly and was also one of the more prolific sonnet writers of the Romantics. In his sixty or so sonnets, spread reasonably evenly over his creative career, Keats from the very beginning used the form to express his thoughts on politics. In "To Peace" he praises the Peace of Paris, yet he is also cautious enough not to exclusively sound praise. And he had good reason to do so. The year after he wrote this sonnet Napoleon Bonaparte, the liberator turned tyrannical monarch escaped from his exile to return to Europe. The Hundred Days ensued, with Napoleon finally defeated at Waterloo.

Keats also benefited from the influence of his radical and politically engaged friend Leigh Hunt, to whom Keats wrote a further sonnet the day that Hunt was released from a two-year period of imprisonment. In the chapter on Keats, I have also tried to show, with the help of recent criticism and Keats's own letters, that Keats was very

aware of the political situation in which he lived. In the past critics have tended to concentrate on Keats as the poet of luxury and sensation, a dehistoricised Romantic in an age of revolutionaries. Yet looking at some of Keats's sonnets easily enough refutes this, and even the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" has historical overtones. Keats might not always have represented history and politics in his poetry, but that doesn't mean he wasn't aware of what was going on around him. Looking again at the sonnet "To Peace", one appreciates how well the tradition of the political sonnet was impressed on the mind of the young Keats, and how much he knew of the political climate around him.

Although there were various poets who practiced the political sonnet, among them the reasonably well known Southey and Hunt, the major contributors were Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats. Between the four of them nothing short of a renaissance took place in the form of the sonnet, and the tradition of the English political sonnet. Between Milton and the Romantics the sonnet started to become popular again by slow degrees, and after the Romantics the sonnet would have such notable practitioners as Tennyson, Hopkins and D. G. Rossetti. Yet the Romantics seem to occupy a special place in the history of the sonnet, not so much for the reintroduction of the form to English letters, but for the assimilation of the tradition of the political sonnet and for the continuance of that tradition. The formal engagements the Romantics had with the sonnet speak not only to their alertness to the political situation of the day, but also politicises the sonnet in a very precise way. It shows the blend of evolution and revolution that cuts to the core of the political dilemma then as now. By means of a combination of historical contextualisation and formalist critique, I hope to have illustrated the sense of tradition running through English literature regarding that most practiced of poetic forms, the sonnet.

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