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BLAKE, WORDSWORTH AND LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY RADICALISM

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to locate the work of two poets, William Blake and William Wordsworth, within the spectrum of late eighteenth century radicalism. The first section of the thesis examines the radicalism of the 1790s. It contrasts the radicalism of bodies such as Grey's Association of the Friends of the People with mass organisations such as the London Corresponding Society, and its Sheffield and Norwich counterparts, rooted among the country's artisans. It traces the politics and composition of this popular radicalism, and its retreat into conspiratorial activity, in the face of repression, in the second half of the decade.

It then considers the two poets. For Blake, the thesis first of all examines his conditions of production as an engraver, and the constraints he faced because of the characteristics of the eighteenth century art establishment and art market. It then considers his poetry; firstly, tracing Blake's revolutionary politics in early poems relating to the American War of Independence through to works dealing with the French Revolution and the European wars of the mid-1790s. Secondly, Blake's poetry is looked at as a response to certain changes in the ideological apparatuses of his day.

The section on Wordsworth is ordered differently: a strict chronological account of Wordsworth's development is given which enables us to trace the rise and fall of his radical sentiments during the decade. An examination of his well-to-do Cumberland background and education is followed by a consideration of his visit to France in 1792 and its impact. His 1793 republicanism and his retreat from it in the following years is detailed, and the section ends with a reading of the political implications of Wordsworth's

contributions to Lyrical Ballads. A final chapter contrasts the radicalism of the two poets, placing them within different strands of 1790s radical thought.

Note on Periodisation

A few words should be said about the periodisation of the work. For both poets the key period chosen for investigation is the 1790s. But since history does not divide itself neatly by decades, it has, of course, been necessary to overflow in both directions. This is more so in Blake's case than in Wordsworth's. It has been consciously decided to leave the great bulk of Wordsworth's poetry outside the scope of this thesis. This is because the political curvature that this thesis deals with was completed by 1798: most of Wordsworth's poetry is after this date. It is not my intention to trace Wordsworth's future and consistent development towards the right, up to his death as a High Tory in 1850. The examination of this political descent, and its accompanying poetical decline, would be out of place here.

Blake, however, some thirteen years older than Wordsworth, wrote most of his mature poetry in the 1790s; but since Blake does not have a clearly defined radical period, but remained a radical throughout his life, it is not possible to establish any definite cut-off date. No detailed reading is given of the major Prophetic texts (The Four Zoas, Milton and Jerusalem) - such a task is quite beyond the scope of the present work. But material from the first decade of the nineteenth century is used, particularly to illustrate Blake's relationship to the artistic establishment of his time. Examples are also drawn from later works, such as Milton, of Blake's attitude towards industrialisation and war.

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used:

Add. Mss. - Additional Manuscripts in the British Museum

H.O. - Home Office Papers in the Public Records Office

P.C. - Privy Council Papers in the Public Records Office

T.S. - Treasury Solicitor's Papers in the Public Records Office

All references to the writings of William Blake are taken from the Oxford University Press edition of the Complete Writings, edited by Geoffrey Keynes (London 1966) and are indicated by the letter K followed by the page number.

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1. LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY RADICALISM

i) Introduction

This chapter analyses late eighteenth century radicalism, and attempts to distinguish two major strands in the phenomenon - which I have labelled 'respectable' and 'plebeian' radicalism. The former has its major political locus in bodies such as Grey's Association of the Friends of the People, the latter in the Corresponding Societies. A few words are appropriate here as to the choice of the terms 'respectable' and 'plebeian'.

I use these terms essentially because other possibilities seem highly unsatisfactory. To describe the Friends of the People and similar phenomena as 'middle class' radicalism (as opposed to a 'working class' radicalism in the Corresponding Societies) seems quite slipshod. 'Middle class' is in itself an undesirable term whose very vagueness allows its user to avoid analysis. If it means anything, it must refer to social groups whose position is intermediate between the ruling class, or the power bloc, and the most oppressed sectors of society. These middle strata in late eighteenth century England would clearly include small masters, a considerable section of the artisanate, and a case could be made out for extending the term to cover at least some sectors of industrial capital, not yet integrated into a ruling bloc still essentially based on land.

This, however, is not the class picture of Grey's association, nor of similar phenomena: instead we find in such bodies a large number of liberal landed gentry, peers of the realm, MPs of considerable substance - all of whom clearly have class allegiances within the ruling bloc. Of course, people from the middle strata do play a role in this form of radicalism: but many of them are also to be found, taking up far more advanced positions, in the ranks of the Corresponding Societies. Outside London, even some representatives of industrial capital - particularly in Birmingham

and Manchester - were to be found in these societies.

Even stronger objections can be raised against using the term 'bourgeois radicalism', partly because the phenomenon is far from the exclusive work of the bourgeoisie, partly because some personnel from the most dynamic sector of the bourgeoisie - industrial capital - are to be found in the Corresponding Societies, but most important of all, because in terms of their political programmes both forms of radicalism can be described as 'bourgeois'. The Corresponding Societies did not, contrary to their opponents' propaganda, advocate the overthrow of private property: at most they argued for a redistribution and, like the Montagnards in France, against excesses of wealth. There is very little that can be described as 'socialist' in their writings and demands: one or two of their members, notably Thomas Spence, occasionally wrote works of a proto-socialist nature. But these were very much the exception.

Of course, to say that both types of radicalism were 'bourgeois' is not to obliterate the vitally important distinctions between them. To take a parallel from France, all the successive groupings during the Revolution - the Feuillants, the Girondins, the Montagnards, the Hebertistes, and even the Enragés - can, by virtue of their demands and political programmes, be described as 'bourgeois'. None of them advocated serious measures of socialisation, and the only challenge to capitalist relations of production was a regressive one - a utopian demand for a commonwealth of small producers. Only with Babeuf's Conspiracy of the Equals does socialism finally enter the French Revolution. What differentiates, say, the Montagnards (and even more so the Enragés) from the Feuillants, is the former's democracy - that is, their involvement with and frequent reliance on the popular masses of Paris.

Similarly in England, the essential difference between Grey's Association

and the Corresponding Societies was that the latter were mass phenomena, and as such were intensely democratic. The form of State desired by the Societies may still have been under the domination of the bourgeoisie - but it would have been a democratic republic with universal suffrage, and not a conservative monarchy with the popular masses excluded from the political process. For political organisations are not simply 'representatives' of one or other economic class, nor do political struggles simply emanate from the ever-present economic class struggle (crucial though that is). Significant changes can occur without any major challenge to the system of production, and it is not a matter of indifference to the labouring classes what mode of bourgeois rule they happen to live under.

Likewise, the term 'working class radicalism' does not adequately describe the Corresponding Societies, and this is so whether, as the present author would argue, the working class is defined as productive wage-labour (ie as direct producers of surplus value appropriated by capital), or whether a broader definition is adopted whereby all those who live by the sale of their labour power are considered as working class⁽¹⁾. An examination of the membership of the Societies reveals a class heterogeneity: a heterogeneity in which the dominant element was the artisanate, with significant minorities of both wage earners and small masters⁽²⁾. Artisans still owned their own means of production: the complete separation between the labourer and the means of production (tools, machinery etc.) needed for the creation of a proletariat had not yet occurred in the artisan trades.⁽³⁾ Strictly speaking then, these artisans formed an urban petty bourgeoisie engaged in small scale commodity production. It would be quite wrong to blur the distinction between them and the working class proper.

In effect, the Corresponding Societies functioned as a bloc of classes, all of whom were politically dispossessed and had no say in how the nation was run, but who occupied differing and sometimes conflicting economic positions.

Common political goals, expressed most clearly in the demand for universal suffrage, overrode economic differences between small property owners, even some elements of the industrial bourgeoisie, and wage-earners. To use eighteenth century terminology, this was a grouping of 'the lower orders': I propose to refer to it as 'plebeian' or 'popular' radicalism.

Grey's Association, however, functioned from within the ruling bloc. So did most of the radical dissenters. They formed a long left tail to the Foxite Whigs, lacked a mass base, and never really desired one. Their perspective of gradual modifications to the power bloc from within led them to a break with the popular societies. Faced with a choice between opting for mass support, and operating as a parliamentary pressure group, Grey's Association chose the latter. This eventually hopeless attempt to win significant support from within the power bloc leads me to adopt the term 'respectable' radicalism when writing of this phenomenon.

FOOTNOTES

1. For the debate between these two points of view, see the collection of essays Class and Class Structure (London 1977), especially Alan Hunt 'Theory and Politics in the Identification of the Working Class', and Nicos Poulantzas 'The New Petty Bourgeoisie'.
2. This is the interpretation which the available figures would seem to bear out. See pages 25-27 for more detail.
3. But the process had, of course, begun: by the 1790s in the case of outwork trades (and weaving is the classic example) entrepreneurs had gained possession of the tools and machinery and now farmed work out to increasingly pauperised labourers.

ii) Respectable radicalism

The respectable radicals constituted part of the political nation, but saw a need to alter parts of the political structure, either because they were themselves discriminated against (eg Dissenters), or because they saw such timely reform as the best means of preserving existing property relations, or of averting revolution. Naturally, they theorised their activity in positive terms - they were restoring the Constitution to its pristine splendour, removing abuses and so on.

Occasionally the respectable radicals raised the same slogans as the popular societies - universal suffrage and annual parliaments, for instance - but they certainly never envisaged the mass of the people, the unrepresented labouring population, acting as an independent force. For them, the propertied classes, of which they formed part, were still the natural leaders of society. They expected deference from the lower orders, in conformity with an ideological model of society as organised hierarchically, in a sequence of descending ranks. They did not expect the lower orders to act for themselves. The interests of 'the people' were to be equated with their own interests. Indeed, at certain points the two might coincide, but it was far from inevitable that they should do so.

It was sometimes useful to wheel the people on as a stage army to back up politicians who lacked a firm base within the ruling class (eg Wilkes), but they were never expected to take action on their own, in defence of their own interests. And when 'the mob' escaped from the control of propertied elements, those who had previously not scrupled to use it for their own ends, turned on it: that 'friend to liberty', Wilkes, during the Gordon Riots, symbolised the chasm that lay between his form of radicalism and the inchoate mob radicalism of the streets when, gun in hand, he defended the Bank of England from the rioters.

Parliamentary reform meant something quite different for the plebeian radicals and for the respectable radicals. For the former it was the mechanism whereby the great majority of the British people could become part of the political nation, and could wield power on their own behalf. For the latter, it was a way of reducing the Treasury's power, and ensuring that political power could be wielded by the whole of the propertied classes and not merely a fragment centred on the Court. They were therefore always prone to temporize with their supposed opponents, to water down their programme for short-term gains. Wyvill's movement, for instance, despite its strong support among the Yorkshire freeholders, was soon reduced to tailing Burke's proposals for 'economical reform'. John Jebb dismissed Wyvill's emphasis on these paltry measures thus: 'Moving the people of England to carry so small a reform would be tempting the ocean to drown a fly' (1).

Wyvill ended up by pinning all his hopes on the extremely small measure of reform proposed by Pitt in the House of Commons in 1785, which would have extinguished 36 rotten boroughs (with compensation for their electors) and distributed the resulting 72 seats among London, Westminster, the counties and the large unrepresented towns. Wyvill described this as 'a plan of reformation, the most extensive and effectual, and at the same time the most mild and practicable which had been devised.' (2) Wyvill's concept of reform was wholly tied to the existing system of property relations as a 1786 letter makes clear:

The plan proposed by Mr. Pitt has indeed offered a new system of representation....as near to theoretical perfection as in the actual state of property, public manners and other material circumstances would be practicable, or perhaps desirable. (3)

When, in the 1770s and 1780s various sections of the propertied classes raised the cry for universal suffrage, it was quite safe for them to do so. There was no chance that such a demand might be granted, and it could prove

a useful ploy to attract popular support. The City Whigs in July 1771 drew up articles which included the demand for 'full and equal representation of the people.' (4) Very radical - but Junius was not far wrong in assuming that this was a posture, and that they would only press for the disfranchisement of rotten boroughs and for separate representation for the large commercial and manufacturing towns.

Major John Cartwright argued stridently in favour of universal suffrage and annual parliaments in his 1776 pamphlet, Take Your Choice ! Cartwright, who was to have a long history of involvement with radical movements, was well to the left of most of the reformers of the 1770s and 1780s: but his position was that of an individual, and not of a movement. His pamphlet was not taken seriously: but when, in the 1790s, his fellow reformers from this period abandoned their earlier beliefs, Cartwright retained his. The Duke of Richmond, for instance, won popular acclaim for his championing of the cause of universal suffrage - only to line up solidly with Pitt's government when the French Revolution threatened to remove that question from the realm of theory to that of practice.

But it is worth noting that even in his radical days, Richmond took care to point out that when everyone had the vote, it did not follow that there would be equality of power. Men of superior fortune would always exercise a superior weight and influence

and I think that as education and knowledge generally attend property, those who possess them ought to have more weight and influence with the more ignorant. But the essential difference will be that, though the people may be led, they cannot be (5) driven.

Richmond is quite explicit: reform is necessary in order that the people, 'the more ignorant', may be led by the men of property. There is no hint of any threat to the power of the men of property, nor of any independent organisation of the masses. Indeed, that is precisely what Richmond wishes to avoid: for the people 'cannot be driven', and any

attempt to do so may result in just that independent organisation. Certainly this is an advance on the earlier thinking that would not concede any political rights at all to the masses, and it is an improvement on the position of the more conservative sectors of the eighteenth century power bloc, but it could hardly be described as 'popular' politics. An element of democracy has been introduced, but a very limited and circumscribed element. The direction of political affairs - and Richmond is quite specific here - is to remain with the propertied.

Much the same position can be detected among the 'moderate' reformers of the 1790s. The basic position of Grey's Association of the Friends of the People, when stripped of all rhetoric, is that concessions should be granted now in order to defuse any revolutionary movement and ensure the continued ideological dominance of the propertied classes. Never is any part of the property relations of the late eighteenth century challenged, nor the right of the propertied (and particularly the landed) classes to lead society, nor their expectations of deferential treatment from the 'lower orders'.

In the final analysis, the position of many of the radical Dissenters is very similar, although here matters are complicated by the existence of a major piece of discriminatory legislation, the Test and Corporation Acts. The Dissenting interest operated within fairly narrow limits. It did not attempt to convert the landed oligarchy, who paid a lazy lip-service to the established church (or occasionally dallied with a fashionable atheism). Nor did it, despite an occasional mention of 'tradesmen and mechanics' in dissenting congregations, have much impact among the labouring classes. Here it was Methodism and other 'enthusiastic' creeds that established themselves: these phenomena were poles apart from the rationalism of Dissent. The bias against the 'lower orders' was clearly shown by a preacher in 1782 who defended the constitution of the Ordination ceremony

on the grounds that 'it tends to prevent unlearned, conceited, pragmatical persons and mechanics of the lowest station from intruding into societies under the character of Gospel ministers.' (6) Dissent seems to have drawn its support from some of the urban propertied strata, involved in trade and industry. This solid respectability was to evolve into the non-conformity of the Victorian mill and factory owners and their ideologues. (7)

Dissent's strong intellectual tradition found its most concrete expression in the dissenting academies. These were far from a hot-bed of revolution. (8) Lectures drew heavily from Locke and Blackstone. Doddridge's lectures (edited by Kippis in 1763) presented not the remotest threat to authority with the explicit statement that 'virtue requires that obedience should be paid to civil rulers in those things in which the authority of God is not apprehended to contradict their commands.' (9) Mixed government, on the English model, was acknowledged as the best possible.

The two dissenters who became most notorious in the eyes of the 1790s establishment were Richard Price and Joseph Priestley. Yet their credentials as fiery democrats do not withstand much examination. Price, when approached by Irish volunteers in 1783 and asked how best to reform the Irish parliament, replied that although theoretically every independent man should have a vote, even in America it had been found desirable to limit the franchise to those who paid taxes and possessed property. For his part, he would be content with an English reform that transferred a hundred borough seats to the counties (as Wyvill's Yorkshire Association was proposing). (10)

Priestley's Essay on the First Principles of Government and on the Nature of Civil and Religious Liberty, although containing a justification of tyrannicide (which was to cause problems for Priestley in 1791), also argued that in large states the highest offices should go to 'persons of

considerable fortune'. Such people will be better educated than their social inferiors and 'as they will necessarily have the most property at stake....will therefore be most interested in the fate of their country.' (11)

Priestley modified his position in the 1790s. When he came to write his 1791 Political Dialogue (which, perhaps wisely, he published anonymously) he rejected the House of Lords: the Essay on the First Principles of Government had merely objected to the presence of Bishops in that house. Claiming inspiration from the constitutional changes in America, Poland and France, where all titles of nobility had been abolished, Priestley abandoned the schema of mixed government. (12) Instead he proposed that a single Assembly of 1,000 people should govern. But this was not to be directly elected: a sifting process was to operate whereby districts of ten to twenty thousand people would each elect an electoral college, and these colleges would then elect the Assembly. (13) Priestley was not opposed in principle to a second chamber - merely to a hereditary one. He did consider the possibility of a second chamber containing some hundred members, all noted for their 'superior wisdom'. However, the radicalism of these proposals is quite undermined, and the whole work rendered merely speculative, by Priestley's declared intention not to attempt any alteration in existing institutions. His democratic form of government was only for a nation that did not have a government already in existence. As there was no such nation, the exercise took on a somewhat vacuous character. In practical terms, Priestley merely advocated 'respectable' gradualism: a reform of the House of Commons. 'Things once established', he wrote resignedly, 'should be respected by speculative politicians, because they will be respected by the people at large.' (14) Later Priestley was to back-track on his anonymous Dialogue, and deny that he had ever proposed an alternative to the King-Lords-Commons structure. (15)

The radical dissenters, along with the other currents of respectable

radicalism, welcomed the initial phase of the French Revolution. They were joined by many of the mainstream Foxite Whigs. 'How much the greatest event it is that ever happened in the world ! and how much the best !' (16) exclaimed the sentimental Charles James Fox himself. Indeed many further to the right in the political spectrum rejoiced at the end of French absolutism. Samuel Romilly shared a general enthusiasm when, writing to a French correspondent, he stated that:

I am sure I need not tell you how much I have rejoiced at the Revolution which has taken place. I think of nothing else and please myself with endeavouring to guess at some of the important consequences which must follow throughout all Europe. (17)

Coleridge wrote an ode on the destruction of the Bastille (18); and another poet, William Cowper, thought the revolution to be 'a wonderful period in the history of mankind' in which the hand of God was to be discerned:

That nations so long contentedly slaves should of a sudden become enamoured of liberty, and understand, as suddenly, their own natural right to it, feeling themselves at the same time inspired with a resolution to assert it, seems difficult to account for from natural causes. (19)

But significantly Cowper also believed passionately in inequality - that differences of rank were 'of God's appointment, and consequently essential to the well-being of society.' In other words, the abolition of absolutism was fine - after all, in this the French were only following the example of the English who had kicked out James II a century previously - but any idea of the introduction of popular rule, either in France or in England, was anathema, and the French would find that:

Princes and peers reduced to plain gentlemanship, and gentles reduced to a level with their own lackeys, are excesses of which they will repent hereafter. (20)

It was the London Revolution Society that provided the immediate impulse behind the most brilliant of all manifestos of counter-revolution - Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France. The Society itself was a mild enough body. It had been founded in 1788 to celebrate the centenary of the Glorious Revolution, and decided to keep itself in being in order to continue annual celebrations of that event. The committee elected for

1789 contained 37 members, among them the liberal Whig peer Earl Stanhope, three MPs, the Lord Mayor elect (the Right Hon. William Pickett) and a number of leading dissenters such as Richard Price, the Rev. Kippis, Joseph Towers and Thomas Brand Hollis.⁽²¹⁾ It did not set out to attract mass support. Like most political societies prior to the flowering of popular radicalism from 1792 onwards, its membership fee was relatively high (half a guinea)⁽²²⁾, and therefore automatically cut most of the working population off from any chance of membership.

The declarations of the Society on the French Revolution were hardly more radical than those of Cowper: though perhaps the address adopted on 4 November 1789 may have caused shudders to run down a few spines when it expressed hopes that the 'glorious example' of France would

encourage other nations to assert the inalienable right of Mankind, and thereby to introduce a general reformation in the government⁽²³⁾ of Europe, and to make the World Free and Happy.

But clearly the Revolution Society was committed to constitutional monarchy, and, in common with Lafayette, Barnave and other leading figures of the revolution in its early period, assumed that, having destroyed most of French feudalism, the revolution would come to an end. Louis XVI was seen, not as a despot scheming for the restoration of his lost powers, but as

justly crowned with the title of RESTORER OF FRENCH LIBERTY. This elevates him to the highest pinnacle of glory. The despots of the world must now see their folly. This example must show them that they can never be so great, so happy or truly powerful as by renouncing despotic power and being placed (like the Kings of France and England) at the head of an enlightened people and free constitutions of government. ⁽²⁴⁾

George III had nothing to fear from this. Nevertheless the enemies of reform lost no time in attacking the Revolution Society. Burke made Price's sermon to the Society the starting point for his Reflections on the Revolution in France, and it was widely assumed that the Society, originally formed to celebrate the 1688 Revolution, was in fact the Society for the French Revolution.

Almost the only activity carried on by the Revolution Society was an exchange of correspondence with various of the French political clubs. Most of this consists of high-flown rhetoric and back-slapping with much abstract talk of 'liberty' and 'happiness', and on the French side glowing eulogies for Price, who on one occasion was described as 'at once the Socrates and the Euclid' of England.⁽²⁵⁾ This correspondence was certain to arouse the hostility of Burke and his supporters, but in fact it contained nothing that could be remotely construed as treasonable or Republican. The Revolution Society never intended to gain support from among the mass of the people, and so never bothered to engage in any political campaigning. It was deprived of its leading figure by the death of Price in 1791, and the last we hear of it is on 5 November 1792, when a small remnant met under the presidency of Dr. Towers to celebrate the 1688 Revolution.⁽²⁶⁾

Dissenters not only led the Revolution Society, but were also active in Grey's Association of the Friends of the People.⁽²⁷⁾ Many of the names from the Revolution Society crop up here as well. Active dissenters among the Friends of the People included Rev. Kippis, Thomas and Samuel Rogers, Joseph Towers, J.H. Stone, Thomas Brand Hollis, William Smith MP, Richard Sharpe, Rev. C. Powlett, William Belsham, John Redman and J.T. Rutt. The membership fee was much higher than that for the Revolution Society. It cost two and a half guineas to join, plus an annual subscription of a further two and a half guineas,⁽²⁸⁾ which ensured that nobody from the lower orders would be able to join, even if they wanted to. As a result the society was swamped with MPs, peers, baronets and sons of peers.⁽²⁹⁾

Like the other manifestations of respectable radicalism, the Friends of the People saw no need to organise politically among the labouring classes. For them, the battlefield was solely inside parliament: their address of 15 December 1792 stated that abuses should be remedied through Parliament

and warned other would-be reformers not to try any different paths.⁽³⁰⁾
The Society had no commitment to universal suffrage or to annual parliaments
- in this respect it had retreated from the positions of the Duke of
Richmond and the City Whigs in the 1770s. The Society preferred to use
much vaguer formulations, and stated its objectives as being

First, To restore the Freedom of Election and a more equal
Representation of the People in Parliament. Secondly, To Secure
to the People a more frequent exercise of their Right of
electing their Representatives. (31)

The Society also explicitly dissociated itself from Tom Paine (falling over
itself to make this point clear in the debate on Grey's motion for parlia-
mentary reform in 1792)⁽³²⁾, and from France: in capital letters its
publications shouted that

WE DENY THE EXISTENCE OF ANY RESEMBLANCE WHATEVER BETWEEN THE CASES
OF THE TWO KINGDOMS, AND WE UTTERLY DISCLAIM THE NECESSITY
OF RESORTING TO SIMILAR REMEDIES. (33)

The Friends of the People researched the corruption and anomalies of the
electoral system, showing, for example, that 154 patrons returned a
majority of MPs (307) to the House of Commons⁽³⁴⁾ - but this was common
ground for all reformers. The proposals put forward by the Friends of the
People in 1793 did not cover the two crucial demands of the popular move-
ment, universal suffrage and annual parliaments. A demand was made 'to
shorten the duration of parliaments', but no specific time span was
suggested. The right of voting was to be regulated on 'an uniform and
equitable principle'. What that principle should be was not outlined.
Other proposals were to remove 'the unequal manner in which the different
parts of the kingdom are admitted to participate in the Representation' (so
that, for instance, Yorkshire would no longer have the same number of
representatives as Rutland), and 'to correct the partial distribution of
the Elective Franchise, which commits the choice of Representatives to
select bodies of men of such limited numbers as renders them an easy prey
to the artful, or a ready purchase to the wealthy.'⁽³⁵⁾

These proposals did not mark a great advance over those made by Pitt in 1785. But in the war year of 1793 even the mildest proposal for reform was likely to evoke a hysterical response. Grey's petition was overwhelmingly defeated. The reaction of the Friends of the People was muted, to say the least:

We are not deterred or disappointed by the present decision of the House of Commons, for neither is this decision final, nor is it a question in which we were particularly entitled to expect that truth or reason would be supported by superior numbers. We are not dismayed by this defeat.

The Society went on to call for petitions and declarations of support from all over the country, saying that

These are the means and the only means, by which we expect our desire to succeed. If the country in general will unite with us in demanding a Reform of Parliament, we have no doubt of it being obtained in a regular Parliamentary way, without a hazard (36) of any kind.

but by refusing all alternatives to Parliamentary action, the Friends of the People disarmed themselves. They told their enemies in advance that they had no intention of mobilising and using mass support. Activity external to Parliament would consist solely of petitioning. But since most local posts of authority were staffed by opponents of reform, the prospect for a national bout of petitioning was bleak. Indeed it was far easier for supporters of the government to use the weapon of the petition: ever since the May 1792 Proclamation against Seditious Writings they had been organising loyal petitions up and down the country.

The basic political strategy of the Friends of the People - that of winning majority support within the ruling bloc for acceptance of at least some measures of parliamentary reform - was quite unrealistic. Their organisation was born in 1792, at the very time when the rulers of Britain were moving rapidly away from the idea of any change at all. The constituency within which they hoped to operate was rapidly disappearing. The problem for the Friends of the People was that the idea of reform was inexorably linked to events in France. But the French Revolution had not turned out

as a repeat performance of 1688. The course of the revolution had conferred upon Burke the status of a prophet, and many of the respectable supporters of the revolution in 1789, now drifted into opposition. The journée of 10 August 1792, the September massacres, the execution of the King, and the Revolutionary Government of Year II all drove erstwhile friends of the revolution into the arms of Pitt. To refer only to those quoted earlier, Samuel Romilly changed his tune drastically: in 1792 he was writing of France that 'one might as well think of establishing a republic of tigers in some forest in Africa as of maintaining a free government among such monsters.'⁽³⁷⁾ As for William Cowper, after the execution of Louis XVI he wrote these lines:

Alas, poor Louis ! I will tell you what the French have done.
They have made me weep for a King of France, which I never thought
to do, and they have made me sick of the very name of liberty, (38)
which I never thought to be. Oh, how I detest them !

As the hysteria mounted it was the popular societies alone who, by and large, continued to defend the French Revolution. The Friends of the People capitulated to the hostility to the revolution that now held almost complete sway in the ruling class, and they chose to distance themselves from the revolution, insisting that their pleas for reform had absolutely nothing to do with France. This sort of behaviour did nothing to halt the flow of MPs away from the opposition and over to Pitt, and it helped earn the Friends of the People the scorn of the popular societies.

Eventually the Friends of the People's proposals for reform came to include equal electoral districts, one member constituencies, wages for MPs, holding all electoral contests on one day, and shorter parliaments (exact time limits unspecified). But the central popular demand of universal suffrage was missing - instead it was proposed to enfranchise all householders paying parish taxes. There was, of course, no chance of getting this programme through parliament. Quite incapable of appealing outside

parliament to the labouring masses (who would want rather more than the Friends of the People were prepared to concede), the Society decided on 9 April 1794 to halt temporarily all petitioning activity. They therefore did nothing during the treason trials of that year. The following year this 'temporary' halt became permanent. At a meeting on 30 May 1795 the Society declared that it still believed in a reform of Parliament, but that rather than risk disturbing public order, and to help present a united front to the foreigner (a chauvinist statement the like of which was usually avoided by the popular societies), they would cease all political activity. (39)

On the whole respectable radicalism was a fairly cosy phenomenon: nobody from the Friends of the People spent months in damp and dirty prison cells, although the unfortunate Joseph Priestley had his house in Birmingham sacked by a Church and King mob in 1791. These radicals, some of them rich men with large estates, had no concept of mass action and preferred to keep the 'lower orders' at arms length as objects for sermons and sympathy. In the final analysis their economic interest lay more with the rest of the propertied order than with the labouring classes, thus making any lasting conjunction between respectable and plebeian radicalism unlikely. The fragile commitment of the respectable radicals to certain measures of democratization of English politics was more than enough, in the political climate of the 1790s, to frighten the bulk of the propertied, but was never sufficient to win the full confidence of the plebeian societies.

FOOTNOTES

1. Quoted in Eugene Charlton Black The Association - British Extra-Parliamentary Organisation 1769-93 (Cambridge, Mass. 1963) p. 74.
2. Wyvill's Memoir, 6 April 1796, Wyvill Papers IV, p. 60. Quoted in G.S. Veitch The Genesis of Parliamentary Reform (London 1965) p. 101.
3. Wyvill Intended Letter to the Yorkshire Committee 8 January 1786. Quoted in S. Maccoby English Radicalism 1786-1832 (London 1953) p. 13.
4. Quoted in H.W. Carless Davis The Age of Grey and Peel (Oxford 1929) p. 61.
5. Richmond Letter to Lieutenant-Colonel Sharman (1783). Quoted in Carless Davis op. cit. p. 85.
6. Quoted in Anthony Lincoln Some Political and Social Ideas of English Dissent 1763-1800 (Cambridge 1938) p. 14.
7. See, for instance, John Foster's remarks on non-conformity in Oldham in the second quarter of the nineteenth century in his Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution (London 1974).
8. Although the Hackney Academy did incur establishment wrath when it invited Paine to a college dinner. This event caused Burke to describe the Academy as 'the new arsenal in which subversive doctrines and arguments are forged', and contributed to the demise of the institution in 1796. See W.H.G. Armytage Four Hundred Years of English Education (Cambridge 1964) p. 70.
9. Quoted in Lincoln op. cit. p. 89.
10. Carless Davis op. cit. p. 56.
11. Priestley Essay on the First Principles of Government and on the Nature of Political, Civil and Religious Liberty (London 1768) pp. 20-21.
12. Priestley Political Dialogue in Theological and Miscellaneous Works Vol. XXV, pp 105-107.
13. Ibid pp 87-96. This process of sifting may derive from certain seventeenth century English Republican writings. See, for instance, Milton's The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth where the possibility of three or four siftings is raised.
14. Ibid. p. 107.
15. C.C. Weston English Constitutional Theory and the House of Lords 1556-1832 (London 1965) p. 191.
16. Fox to Fitzpatrick, Memoirs of C.J. Fox, II, p. 341.
17. Romilly to Dumont, 28 July 1789, in Memoirs of the Life of Sir Samuel Romilly written by Himself, with a selection from his Correspondence, Edited by his sons (London 1840), I, p. 356.
18. Coleridge Poetical Works (London 1969) p. 10-11

19. Cowper to Joseph Hill, 18 December 1789, in The Correspondence of William Cowper (1904). Quoted in Veitch op. cit. p. 120.
20. Cowper to Lady Hesketh, 7 July 1790 Correspondence, III , p. 474 Quoted ibid.
21. An Abstract of the History and Proceedings of the Revolution Society in London (London 1789) pp. 13-14.
22. Ibid. p. 2.
23. Proceedings of the Revolution Society, Nov. 4, 1789 pp. 10-11.
24. Undated, but in a reply to a letter from the Archbishop of Aix of 5 December 1789. Correspondence of the Revolution Society in London with the National Assembly and with Various Societies of the Friends of Liberty in France and England (London 1792) pp. 10-11.
25. At a dinner given by the Societe des Amis de la Constitution de Nantes on 4 October 1790. See Veitch op. cit. p. 157.
26. Veitch op. cit. p. 229.
27. The majority, however, were Anglicans, and there were a couple of Roman Catholics, Sir John Throckmorton and Henry Clifford, involved.
28. Regulation XV in the Society's rules. Proceedings of the Society of Friends of the People Associated for the Purpose of Obtaining a Parliamentary Reform in the Year 1792 (London 1793) p. 9.
29. eg. of the 149 people who signed the original declaration of 11 April 1792, no less than 23 were MPs.
30. Proceedings of 1792 pp. 55-56.
31. Ibid. p. 4
32. Parliamentary History, XXIX, 1339.
33. Proceedings of 1792 p. 16.
34. Authentic Copy of a Petition praying for a Reform in Parliament, Presented to the House of Commons by Charles Grey Esq. on Monday 6th May 1793, and signed only ny the Members of the Society of the Friends of the People, associated for the purpose of obtaining a Parliamentary Reform p. 7.
35. Ibid. p. 10.
36. Address adopted by the Society of the Friends of the People at a Meeting at the Freemasons Tavern, May 25, 1793 (London 1793) p. 15.
37. Romilly to Dumont op. cit. II, p. 5
38. Cowper to William Hayley, 29 January 1793 Correspondence IV, pp 363-364
39. Veitch op. cit. p. 324.

ii) Plebeian Radicalism

Respectable radicals, propertied men, had held complete sway over the reform agitation of the 1780s, organised in bodies such as the Yorkshire Association. But in the 1790s, with inspiration coming, not from America, but from France, and from Tom Paine's Rights of Man, this radicalism was challenged from the left. For the first time since the crushing of the Levellers in the mid-seventeenth century, significant sections of the urban lower orders entered the political stage. They did so not as the inchoate crowds that had figured so prominently in the Wilkite agitation and in the Gordon Riots, but in well-defined organisational forms, as reform clubs and associations, composed predominantly of artisans and wage-earners, sprung up in almost every major town in the country.

The first of these came into existence in Sheffield towards the end of 1791. One of its members described its formation as follows: the Sheffield Constitutional Society began

in an assembly of some 5 or 6 mechanicks who by their frequent meeting at some one of their houses and conversing about the enormous high price of provisions and the gross abuses this nation labours under from the unbounded authority of the monopolizers of all ranks, from the King to the Peasant, the waste....of public money by Placemen, Pensioners, Luxury and Debauchery, sources of the grievous burden under which this nation groans, together with the mock representation of the People, these being the subjects of the conversation, they concluded that nothing but darkness and ignorance in the people could suffer the natural rights of every free man to be thus violated and this excited them to invite and visit their neighbours, whence a small society of 20 or 30 soon commenced and kept increasing so that they were obliged to divide into separate bodies that at this time they have formed 8 of the smaller societies which meet at their different houses all on the same evening. (1)

Of particular interest is the fact that these 'mechanicks' started their political association out of economic grievances - 'the enormous high price of provisions' - which they then attributed to 'monopolizers'. This economic inequity they connected to a political problem - 'the mock representation of the people'. Parliamentary reform and a more just system of distribution were thus inseparably linked in the eyes of these Sheffield radicals.

The Sheffield society grew rapidly. By March the Society, in its correspondence, was claiming 'nearly 2,000' members⁽²⁾, and in late May 2,400⁽³⁾. Some doubt, however, is thrown on these figures by the claim made by William Broomhead, the society's secretary, before the Privy Council in 1794 that the Society only had 600 members⁽⁴⁾ (but even 600, it should be remembered, would be a substantial figure for a town the size of Sheffield). Perhaps some confusion over membership figures arises from whether or not the clubs in the villages around Sheffield are counted as part of the Sheffield society. By February 1792, the Sheffield society was in communication with radicals from such neighbouring places as Rotherham, Stannington, Attercliffe, Norton and Ecclesfield, and in March they were writing to Daniel Adams, secretary of the Society for Constitutional Information in London, that

not only this large and populous town, but the whole neighbourhood for many miles round about have an attentive eye upon us, most of the towns and villages indeed are forming themselves⁽⁵⁾ into similar associations.

The situation at Sheffield in 1792 looked extremely alarming to Colonel De Lancey, the government's trouble-shooter sent on a tour of the north to report on the manufacturing towns. He found that in Sheffield

the seditious doctrines of Paine and the factious people who are endeavouring to disturb the peace of the country had extended to a degree very much beyond my conception, and indeed they seem...to have chosen this as the centre of all their seditious⁽⁶⁾ machinations.

De Lancey's explanation for Sheffield radicalism is rather interesting: he puts it down to the fact that Sheffield industry consisted largely of small workshops employing two or three men each who received relatively high incomes (he gives a figure of three shillings to four shillings and six pence a day). Although we can dismiss as typical ruling-class prejudice the statement that 'it is pretty generally the practice for them to work for three days in which they earn sufficient to drink and riot for the rest of the week'⁽⁷⁾, De Lancey has picked on an important feature: the leading

role of articulate, skilled artisans, not immersed in the depths of poverty, in the radical movement.

Two days before De Lancey sent off this report, the administration had suffered a striking rebuff at Sheffield when a public meeting at the Town Hall refused, by an overwhelming majority, to send a humble address of thanks to the King for the May Proclamation against Seditious Writings⁽⁸⁾. The promoters of this had to be content with getting a resolution passed at the Cutlers' Hall before an altogether more select audience⁽⁹⁾.

The most important (or notorious) of the popular societies, the London Corresponding Society, was born in the minds of the shoemaker Thomas Hardy and three of his friends some time in October 1791, and the meeting to form the Society took place on 25 January 1792, with nine people present⁽¹⁰⁾. At the time Hardy and his friends were unaware of the existence of the Sheffield society:

We flattered ourselves that no other societies in the nation were formed upon the same principles, but in two or three weeks afterwards we were most agreeably informed of our Brethren in Sheffield having taken the lead in so glorious a cause. We immediately wrote to them and was answered without delay expressing a wish to unite⁽¹¹⁾ with us for promoting the ends we have in view.

The LCS asked for advice from their Sheffield colleagues who recommended the mode of organisation already adopted in Sheffield to cope with the rapid growth of the society, namely the creation of a number of branches or 'divisions' (the 'smaller societies' referred to in Alcock's letter quoted above). Each division then appointed delegates to a 'General Committee' responsible for the overall running of the society.

In early April 1792, when the plan to split into divisions was adopted, the LCS was approximately 70 strong⁽¹²⁾. At the beginning of October membership topped 300⁽¹³⁾, and by the end of November the society had 27 divisions⁽¹⁴⁾. By this time membership was accelerating at a remarkable rate: according to a government spy in November, Division 10 was attended by over 100

people, Division 3 by over 200, and Division 1 (Hardy's diivision) by 120⁽¹⁵⁾. In the week prior to November 24, the society was alleged to have recruited 350 members. At that rate by the end of 1792 membership would have been between one and two thousand⁽¹⁶⁾.

London and Sheffield were the two major growth points for this radicalism, but by the end of 1792 there were also societies in at least the following towns: Portsmouth, Derby, Stockport, Liverpool, Birmingham, Leicester, Warrington, Newton (Cheshire), Bath, Coventry, Shrewsbury, Chester, Leeds, Manchester, Yarmouth, Ipswich, Norwich and its periphery, not to mention the thriving reform movement in Scotland⁽¹⁷⁾. For some of the societies we possess very little material: but what we do know suggests that where initially respectable and plebeian radicals existed in the same society, with the passing of time and the increase in government repression, the former tended to drop out. In Norwich there were two distinct organisations the Revolution Society and the Norwich Society for Constitutional Information. Despite their names, the latter would seem to have been more radical and more plebeian than the former⁽¹⁸⁾. At the end of March 1792 this society consisted of 'some hundreds'⁽¹⁹⁾. One informant in November gave the number of associated clubs in the society as 40 with a membership (which would seem considerably exaggerated) of 'upwards of 4,000'⁽²⁰⁾. The society had spread to the villages surrounding Norwich - to places such as Cauxton, Wroxham and Hingham. Norwich gained a considerable reputation as a hot-bed of democracy, even in the demure world of the Royal Academy. In January 1794 the painter and academician Joseph Farington wrote in his diary:

From various acct's. I receive I believe there is a considerable ferment prevailing in the minds of many people, which has a democratic tendency. Norwich is particularly mentioned as being very violent. (21)

Who were these plebeian radicals ? By and large the government and its

agents and informers looked on them with contempt as the 'lower orders'. One venomous description of them, written in fury after the acquittals of Hardy, Horne Tooke and Thelwall, refers to them as

men of no mark or likelihood, consisting chiefly of bankrupt tradesmen, abandoned attorneys, desperate adventurers, profligate mechanics, cadaverous dissenters, and a few misled political maniacs. (22)

The same work later refers to them as 'the populace of no property' (23). The Norwich societies are said to consist of persons of 'the lowest description' - specifically mentioned are a grocer, a dyer, and a servant to a woolcomber (24). In Ipswich it is 'the common, ignorant people' who are invited to the radical clubs (25). In Manchester the Constitutional Society consists of men 'not quite of the lowest order', while the Reformation and Patriotic Societies are made up 'of mechanics and the lowest class' (26). One Captain Munro visited Division 15 of the LCS in November 1792 and reported to the government that 'the whole of them except the Delegate appeared to me to be the very lowest tradesmen' (27). Another letter of Munro's specifically mentioned 'Scotch shoemakers' as being present in the Society in large numbers (28). Metcalfe, a government spy in the LCS, claimed that his Division (no. 6) 'consists mostly of the lowest order of people' (29). Groves, the spy who managed to insert himself onto the secret executive set up by the LCS after Hardy's arrest, gives the following description of the committee of delegates:

There are some of decent tradesmen-like appearance who possess strong, but unimproved faculties and tho' bold, yet cautious - the Delegates of this description are but few. There are others of an apparent lower order - no doubt Journeymen, who though they possess no abilities and say nothing, yet they appear resolute and determined and regularly vote for every motion which carries with it a degree of boldness. The last description among them, and which is the most numerous, consists of the very lowest order of society - few are even decent in appearance, some of them filthy and ragged, and others such wretched looking blackguards that it requires some mastery over that innate pride which every well-educated man must naturally possess even to sit down in their company.....they appear very violent and seem ready to adopt everything tending towards Confusion and Anarchy. (30)

These are fairly clear class responses to a phenomenon that seriously frightened Britain's rulers - the phenomenon of that part of the nation

which possessed no substantial property, which played no part in the official structure of power, forming its own autonomous political organisations. This mobilisation of 'the common ignorant people' was automatically classed as 'seditious': there was no place for it in the structures of politics as they existed at the end of the eighteenth century. It was one thing for the Duke of Richmond to talk about universal suffrage and annual parliaments in 1780: it was something quite different when the same demands were raised a decade later by 'the very lowest order of society' - especially with the example of France to remind the Pitt government of the dire fate which could overtake a monarchy and its supporters.

However the terms 'very lowest order' and 'common ignorant people' are more useful for what they tell us about the mentality of the government and its spies than for concrete information on the membership of the Corresponding Societies. But this is not too difficult to unearth. We know the occupations of many of the leading figures in the LCS - Hardy, a shoemaker; Lovet, a hairdresser; Franklow, a tailor; Pearce, a clerk; Spence, a bookseller; Richard Hodson, a hatter; Le Maitre, a watch case maker; John Baxter, a silversmith; Place, a journeyman breechmaker; Thelwall, a silk-mercer turned writer and lecturer; Ashley, a shoemaker; Martin, a lawyer; Richter, an unemployed 'gentleman'. (31)

Such a list in itself suggests a membership composed predominantly of artisans and shopkeepers, with a smattering of professional people, intellectuals (notably Thelwall) and wage-earners. This is borne out in the more detailed lists that have survived. A membership list for Division 7 lists 103 new members from 27 November 1792 to 21 January 1794 with their occupations. The artisans predominate. There are eight cordwainers, eight watchmakers, seven tailors, five cabinet-makers, four shoemakers, three case makers, three carpenters, three hairdressers, two bedstead-makers, two dyers, two hatters, two hosiers, two glaziers, two ribbon dressers, a

tinplate worker, a glover, a perfumer, an upholsterer, an engraver, a mercer, a wire worker, and a japaner. For the non-artisans there are two shopkeepers (a stationer and a bookseller), two bakers, two butchers, a surgeon and a merchant. Those who in all probability are genuine wage-earners are the eight weavers, three framework knitters, two bricklayers, two warehousemen, a labourer and a founder ⁽³²⁾. Of course, from such a list it is not always easy to distinguish between artisans and wage-earners and usually impossible to distinguish between journeymen and masters (arguably these distinctions were becoming increasingly less important as the economic condition of the artisanate deteriorated and many of its component parts were pushed down to the level of proletarians - culminating in the appalling conditions in the mid-nineteenth century sweated trades investigated by Mayhew).

Other lists show much the same spread of professions. A list for Division 30 gives 34 names - there are three shoemakers, three linen drapers, three lace and fringe makers, two tailors, two stocking weavers, a staymaker, an enameller, a carpenter, a rag dealer, a painter and glazier, a mercer, and, on the definitely non-artisan side, two booksellers, a publican and an accountant. ⁽³³⁾

Division 23 has 23 names on its list including six shoemakers, six smiths, one clockmaker, one sailmaker, one hairdresser, one carpenter, one tailor, one butcher, three bricklayers, a clerk and a broker. ⁽³⁴⁾

For Division 12 there are 32 names, 24 of which have their professions given - namely, three shoemakers, three hatters, two silversmiths, two gunmakers, three clockmakers, a miller, a tailor, a plasterer, a muslin draper, a cooper, two curriers, one victualler, two 'gentlemen' and a 'gentleman steward'. ⁽³⁵⁾

The same source provides us with lists of names for Divisions 6, 25, 29, 3, 10, 11, 7 and 8⁽³⁶⁾ - unfortunately, for none of these are the occupations of the members given.

Information of this nature for the provincial societies is rather scanty, but there is little reason to suppose that there was anything markedly different in their composition. As far as Sheffield is concerned, we know the occupations of some of the leading figures there (largely because of their arrest and interrogation in 1794) - Joseph Gales was a printer, and co-founder of the Sheffield Register; William Broomhead was a cutler; Moody, a joiner; Camage, an ink-pot maker; Davison, a journeyman printer;⁽³⁷⁾ Hill, a metalworker⁽³⁸⁾, and so on.⁽³⁹⁾

Thus the radical societies possessed a mass membership among the English equivalent of the Parisian sans-culottes. This 'menu peuple' looked much the same in its composition on both sides of the channel - predominantly artisans, but also including wage-earners, small masters, shopkeepers, a sprinkling of professionals. Notable for their absence were, on the one hand any significant sections of the bourgeoisie proper (with the possible exception of some Birmingham and Manchester merchants and businessmen), and on the other (despite abuse from the government and its spies) the real dregs of society. According to Colquhoun it was a 'generally assumed fact' that 'above twenty thousand individuals arise every morning in this great metropolis, without knowing how, or by what means they are to be supported during the passing day, or where they are to lodge on the succeeding night'⁽⁴⁰⁾ These people seem to have taken no part in the popular societies. Beggars, prostitutes, thieves, vagrants, the unemployed - the completely pauperised underbelly of late eighteenth century society does not feature heavily in either the British radical societies, or the movements of the French sans-culottes⁽⁴¹⁾. The comparison with the sans-culottes undoubtedly occurred to some of the English radicals - Thelwall, for example, referred to himself

as 'a Republican, a downright sans-culotte'⁽⁴²⁾, and even signed himself as 'a true sans-culotte'⁽⁴³⁾. Certainly the government took the similarities very seriously indeed.

Some consideration has to be given here to the Society for Constitutional Information. The SCI worked closely with the LCS and was, in consequence, classed together with the Corresponding Society by the government, and leading figures of the SCI, such as John Horne Tooke and Daniel Adams, were arrested in 1794 along with the LCS leaders. But the SCI was essentially an anomaly, an organisation left over from an earlier period of reform agitation. It had been formed in April 1780 by a number of MPs and reformers such as Major John Cartwright, Capel Lofft and John Jebb, men who were willing to cooperate with Wyvill, but who were well to his left (Wyvill expressed scepticism, for instance, as to Jebb's programme, which he considered too advanced). According to Cartwright, who drew up the Society's original declaration, the SCI existed because Englishmen owed it as a duty 'thoroughly to inform themselves what the Constitution is; what is its present danger; and by what means it may be placed in safety.' Not all Englishmen, however, would have the opportunity to inform themselves in this way, for members were to be elected by ballot, and subscription cost a guinea. This was not, and had no intention of being, a mass organisation⁽⁴⁴⁾.

By October 1791, the SCI had 153 members⁽⁴⁵⁾. This membership, including as it did eight peers or sons of peers, fifteen MPs and several magistrates, was basically 'respectable'. It was also largely a paper membership. The Society had become virtually defunct in the 1780s. The minute-book records that from 1785 onwards attendance at meetings (which were usually weekly) rarely exceeded ten, and more frequently attracted six or fewer of the members. From mid-1786 meetings were held once a fortnight - with an attendance of three or four, they were continually adjourned. Long periods

began to elapse with no meetings at all. By winter 1788 the Society was barely in existence⁽⁴⁶⁾.

The French Revolution came to the SCI's rescue, and it showed flickers of life from Spring 1789 to May 1790. Then there was another collapse - no meetings were held from 7 May until 22 October (and that one and the two succeeding meetings were adjourned⁽⁴⁷⁾). During 1791 meetings were still very sparsely attended, the number of those present rarely climbing into double figures - but this year saw an end to the decline. For during 1791 the SCI took the fateful step of commending a work written by one of its members - Part One of Tom Paine's Rights of Man⁽⁴⁸⁾. An address was also drafted which called upon the people of England

to be on their guard against that wicked system of resistance to the still further extension of the blessings of Freedom which has been for some time so unremittingly pursued by the usurping Aristocrates of this Country; who are at once so jealous, so active and so profligate as daily and at a vast expense to poison the currents of public intelligence with the most shameful misrepresentations⁽⁴⁹⁾ of the conduct of the lovers of liberty both at France and at home

Such statements did not represent the opinions of a good number of the society's paper members - rather, they were the views of John Horne Tooke and a few of that gentleman's close friends and associates. Many members were purely nominal and had not paid their subscription to the Society for years. In 1792 twelve members were seven years in arrears, and thirty members eight years (including Sheridan, the Duke of Norfolk, Lord Mountmorris and the Dean of St. Asaph⁽⁵⁰⁾). These members were deeply shocked as the SCI made increasingly radical statements.

1792 saw the SCI meeting regularly and from March onwards a relatively large number of members were attending. Paine was frequently present. The Society welcomed the overthrow of the French monarchy: this inspired a glowing message (perhaps written by the American, Joel Barlow) from the SCI to the National Convention which stated that:

the glorious victory of the 10th August has finally prepared the

way for a constitution which we trust you will establish on the basis of reason and nature....From bosoms burning with ardour in your cause we tender you warmest wishes for the full extent of its progress and success....The sparks of Liberty, preserved in England for ages, like the coruscations of the Northern Aurora, served but to show the darkness visible in the rest of Europe; the lustre of the American Republic, like an effulgent morning, rose with increasing vigour, but still too distant to enlighten our hemisphere, till the splendour of the French Revolution burst forth upon the nations in the full fervour of a meridian sun. (51)

A subscription was opened 'for the purpose of assisting the efforts of France in the cause of freedom' (52). These fulsome praises were followed by election to honorary membership of the SCI of three members of the National Convention - St. André on 18 January 1793, and Roland and Barrère a week later, on 25 January (53).

These events scared the respectable sleeping membership of the SCI.

Having evidently forgotten the Society's very existence for many years, these people began to write angry letters to its secretary, Daniel Adams, protesting that the SCI had changed its character, and that they therefore wished to cancel their membership. 'It appears to me', wrote William Smith in his resignation letter in May 1792, 'that on a variety of occasions the Society for Constitutional Information have deviated from the pursuit of their original proposed object viz. to obtain a Parliamentary Reform.' (54)

One member resigned in April on discovering that Paine would be a steward at an SCI dinner, claiming that Paine's works 'are neither calculated or intended to promote any real reforms, but are meant to create Anarchy and Confusion.' (55)

Lord Saltoun waited until February 1793 before resigning because of 'the change of principle of late so apparent in the proceedings of the Society.' (56) Others, not so forthright, produced different reasons for withdrawing their names. Sir Joseph Mawbey protested that 'being now out of Parliament and living much in the country, it is impossible for me to attend, and I therefore beg on that account, and others, that my name, as a Member, may be omitted in future.' (57) For a Mr. Aspinall it was 'not at present convenient to me to continue a member of that Society.' (58)

What was happening was a desertion, either through fear, or through strong political disagreement, of much of that portion of the Society that was closer to Wyvillite politics than to the new phenomenon of mass radicalism.

The SCI from 1792 to 1794, therefore, became a group of relatively well-off radicals who had not allowed the September massacres to diminish their enthusiasm for the French Revolution, and who were prepared to work closely with the plebeian societies. The political positions they adopted, over reform, towards the Pitt administration, towards the war, were frequently indistinguishable from those of the popular societies. But this political agreement hid very profound organisational differences. Crucially, the SCI excluded most wage-earners and artisans from its ranks through its membership fee of a guinea a year. In contrast, the popular societies charged virtually nominal amounts. At first, it cost a penny a week to be a member of the LCS (later raised to sixpence a month). The Sheffield society charged twopence a week, while the Birmingham Society for Constitutional Information set a maximum subscription of threepence a week, and in the Leeds society radicals had to pay an admission fee of threepence, and then a penny a week⁽⁵⁹⁾.

What followed from this was that the popular societies were mass organisations - in the words of the original LCS rules 'unlimited in its members'⁽⁶⁰⁾. The structure of popular radicalism - the splitting into divisions, and occasionally into groups of ten, or tythings (a concept imported from Anglo-Saxon times, and part of the radical mythology according to which a pristine, democratic constitution had been destroyed by the Norman invasion and its consequences) - was well suited for ongoing political work among the 'lower orders' and provided a framework that encouraged participation from the entire membership. The SCI had no conception of such agitational work: its role was mainly propagandist, centring on the publication of pamphlets and the holding of annual

dinners. Between April 1791 and May 1794 there were 133 new members admitted to the SCI⁽⁶¹⁾ - a very small figure to compare with the membership of the LCS. Of course, many fewer than 133 were active in the Society - it was an unusually well-attended SCI meeting if forty were present. A government note of September 1792 lists only 23 active members of the SCI⁽⁶²⁾ (though admittedly at this stage government intelligence was still rather shaky).

The 'unlimited' membership of the popular societies implied a demystification of politics. The affairs of the nation were no longer seen as the exclusive preserve of the propertied: instead the societies declared that the mass of the people had the right and the duty to intervene in the political life of the country. This in its turn meant that popular agitation was not necessarily restricted to 'political' issues in the narrow sense of the term. Where the Rockingham connection and most of Wyvill's Yorkshire Association had been anxious to pare down their demands for reform, and refused to link them to the distress in the country, popular radicalism saw nothing incongruous in yoking together political and economic demands. Thus the Derby Society's declaration of principles included this:

we see the continuation of oppressive game laws and destructive monopolies; we see the education and comfort of the poor neglected ...we see burdens multiplied, the lower classes sinking into Poverty, disgrace and excesses....Is the condition of the poor never to be improved? (63)

And the LCS had this to say about the bounties on the export of corn:

The Corn Act is a grievance immediately resulting from the restriction of the choice of representatives to men of landed property - by it the price of bread is in general doubled and sometimes much more than doubled: for whenever this country happens to be blessed with an abundant season, a part of the taxes under which we groan is applied to encourage the exportation and advance the price of corn. Thus we pay one tax to Government, to give the landed men the opportunity of laying on another. (64)

Similarly the Sheffield Society intended to include 'an abstract of the iniquitous Cornbill of last year' (1791) in its sixpenny edition of Rights of Man⁽⁶⁵⁾. Tithes, the Game Laws, and above all the wealthy

parasitism of courtiers, placemen, pensioners and the like also came under attack. The inspiration for much of the social and economic thinking of the radical societies seems to have derived from the 'social chapter' in Part II of Paine's Rights of Man⁽⁶⁶⁾.

The extension of the political sphere to include aspects of the economic is by no means a fully worked-out theory on the part of the popular societies, nor is it fully consistent, and it is still true to say that the stress was normally laid on the purely 'political' - 'a more equal representation'. Nevertheless, we can detect the beginnings of a challenge to more than political privilege. Society was now seen increasingly as a whole, where a certain set of determinate political relations implies particular social and economic relations, and where radicalism in one sphere implies radicalism in the others. One consequence of this was the beginnings of a conception of society in class terms. To be sure, this analysis was fairly crude - a case of the idle rich versus the industrious poor. As one Sheffield pamphlet put it:

Why is one of this great fraternity distinguished by the ostentatious title of Duke, Earl, Lord, Count etc. with the super-additional epithet of Noble, prefacing the grand appellation? Whilst another who is perfectly useful to Society, with his utmost industry and economy, is still branded with the odious and degrading terms of vulgar, common, peasant and the like; Or, if he receives the most trivial pittance from the public, to eke out the burdensome charge of a numerous family, by way of relief, he is instantly stigmatized with the opprobrious language of pauper, or if he craves a farthing at your hands, or asks a morsel of bread, he is thenceforth stiled vagrant, a term full as disgusting (67) as that of a thief.

Following in Paine's footsteps, the radicals attributed the huge burden of taxation to the expense of keeping a monarchy and a nobility. America and France were pointed to as examples of what was seen as an abolition of aristocratic class oppression. Joseph Gerrald, a few months before Lord Braxfield sentenced him to fourteen years transportation for his part in the British Convention, wrote this panegyric on America:

The poor are not broken down by taxes to support the expensive trapping of royalty, or to pamper the luxury of an insolent nobility. No lordly peer tramples down the corn of the husbandman,

no proud prelate wrings from him the tythe of his industry. The community is not there divided into an oppressed peasantry and an overgrown aristocracy, the one of whom lives by the plunder of the state, while the others are compelled to be the objects of it. (68) Plenty is the lot of all, superfluity of none.

The ideal strived towards was an abolition of 'extremes' of wealth and poverty (similar to Jacobin economic thinking in France), and not the abolition of private property itself. The popular societies often protested that they were not 'Levellers', which, although strictly speaking it was true⁽⁶⁹⁾, in no way mitigated the hatred of the propertied classes for their activities. It was plain enough that the societies aimed at the abolition of political privilege, and of any economic benefits that flowed from this privilege. To a class which maintained that it had the right to buy and sell representation in the House of Commons, this was an invasion of their property and amounted to 'levelling'. In fact, to the Pitt administration and its supporters the LCS attitude towards property must have seemed highly ambiguous. How were they to understand, for example, the statement in an LCS declaration of November 1792 that 'we desire to overthrow no property but what has been raised on the Ruins of our Liberty !' - even if this was qualified with a gesture of respect towards 'the landed and commercial interests of our country'⁽⁷⁰⁾ ?

Some radicals made attempts to redefine property. Joseph Gerrald extended the definition of the term to include 'the manual labour of the peasant, the ingenuity of the artist, the talents of the scholar', and since these provided their owners with 'the means of their livelihood and convenience' they were therefore 'fit objects of protection'⁽⁷¹⁾, every bit as much as were the mansions and estates of the aristocracy. Such a revolutionary interpretation of 'property' was a direct challenge to the landed class that dominated parliament: it also stripped that class of its hollow argument that parliament represented property, not people: 'Persons and property are in fact so indissolubly connected that if all persons are

not represented, all property cannot be⁽⁷²⁾.

Initially, not all the societies accepted that there was an opposition between their interests and those of the propertied classes. But the pressure of events in the 1790s, the hardening of ruling class opinion behind Pitt and Dundas, and the repressive measures taken to stamp out popular radicalism, eventually drove most of them to this conclusion. Particularly interesting in this context is a draft letter from the Norwich societies to Maurice Margarot (who acted as their delegate to the Edinburgh Convention as well as for the LCS). It reads:

You say, sir, that we have the monied and landed interest against us. It may be true with respect to some parts of Great Britain, but it is not the case with us. We reckon amongst our friends in this town many opulent citizens. Placemen and place expectors excluded, we are bound to say that the number (word illegible) of the rich is on our side.

But this has been deleted, and the corrected draft reads with the opposite sense: 'You say, sir, that we have the monied and landed interest against us - which we fear is too true.'⁽⁷³⁾ We cannot be sure of the reasons behind this change of heart - but a reasonable surmise would be that the 'opulent citizens' of Norwich failed to take the side of the radicals when the British Convention was broken up and its leaders arrested.

France was perhaps the most accurate dividing line between respectable and plebeian radicals. By 1792 the French Revolution no longer looked like a repeat performance of 1688. As the revolution took increasingly severe measures to defend itself from internal and external foes, respectable radicalism quite forgot that it had once considered the Fall of the Bastille 'the greatest event....that ever happened in the world', and either fell in behind Pitt and his war policies, or restricted their opposition to gestures in the House of Commons. The popular societies, however, had a more lasting sympathy for revolutionary France - a sympathy that survived the September massacres, the execution of the King, and the declaration of war against England. The LCS showed almost no signs of

perturbation at the events of September. To them, they were a regrettable 'act of an enraged populace', which had been directly caused by the 'conflict with military assassins and domestic traitors'⁽⁷⁴⁾. The LCS saw the issue at stake as the right of the Revolution to defend itself, and was not afraid to defend this right.

The address which the LCS sent to the National Convention in October 1792 was forthright to the point of violence:

Frenchmen, you are already free, and Britons are preparing to become so...we, instead of natural enemies, at length discover in Frenchmen our Fellow Citizens of the World, and our Brethren by the same Heavenly Father, who created us for the purpose of loving and mutually assisting each other, but not to hate, and to be for ever ready to cut each other's throats at the Commands of weak and ambitious Kings and corrupt ministers:- seeking our real enemies, we find them in our Bosoms, we feel ourselves inwardly torn by, and ever the victims of an all consuming Aristocracy, hitherto the Bane of every nation under the Sun. Wisely have you acted in expelling it from France.

As if this were not enough to chill the blood of every member of the government, the LCS continued with a scarcely veiled threat against the monarchy itself:

With unconcern therefore we view the Elector of Hanover join his Troops to Traitors and Robbers - but the King of Great Britain will do well to remember that this country is not Hanover. (75) Should he forget this distinction, we will not.

As for the execution of Louis XVI, it was proposed in April 1793 that the LCS publish a document justifying it. This was rejected, not because anyone actually believed that the execution should not have taken place, but because 'our enemies might infer from our vindicating the death of Louis Capet in France that we wished for a similar event in this country'⁽⁷⁶⁾. Thus for reasons of political expediency, the LCS made no public statement on the execution.

Their feelings, however, can hardly have been unknown to the government: and certainly 'our enemies' were told in emphatic manner what the popular

societies thought of England's crusade against revolutionary France. At the LCS General Meeting of 8 July 1793, it was declared that 'British gold now subsidises armies of Continental Slaves and the blood of half Europe is pledged for the destruction of France'⁽⁷⁷⁾. Thelwall, in March 1793, was writing: 'The loaf that should feed the useful labourer is set to supply the destroying soldier - English, Hessian, Austrian, Hanoverian, Sardinian or Prussian'⁽⁷⁸⁾. Gerrald defiantly wrote in defence of the French and pointed to the difference between this war and previous Anglo-French conflicts:

Over the fleets and armies of the tyrants of France, the people of Great Britain have repeatedly triumphed. Recollect, however, that it is not upon the satellites of despotism, but upon the whole French nation that you are now making war. France is no longer a den of tyrants and a dungeon of slaves. Six millions of armed men, determined to die or be free, present to you a lofty and impregnable rampart, over which the eagles of despotism will in vain attempt to soar. (79)

These anti-war feelings were not confined to London. The Sheffield society passed a strongly worded resolution against the war in April 1793:

that the present war is obstructive of the happiness, commerce and liberties of this country; that our Manufacturers and Merchants already deplore its wretched effects; and that nothing short of an immediate peace can save this country from ruin.

The men of Sheffield voiced the feelings of most members of the popular movement when they demanded a renversement des alliances, and resolved

That as an alliance with the Kingdom of France was considered by W. Pitt as of the greatest importance to the Commerce and Happiness of this country, it is the opinion of this Society that it ought to be renewed with the Republic of France - more especially to prevent the ambitious views of those confederated despots who, at Pilnitz and Pavia, agreed to share the remnant of Poland, the spoils of France and of European Turkey. (80)

Sheffield suffered badly from the war. Its manufacturing business slumped and the Sheffield radicals claimed that the war had deprived many of them of their employment, and had reduced by half the earnings of most of those fortunate enough to keep a job⁽⁸¹⁾. In addition to their political beliefs, there was thus a strong material incentive for artisan radicals to oppose the war.

The government must have been further alarmed by anonymous manifestations of anti-war feeling. For instance, at Norwich 'seditious and treasonable papers' were pasted up over the city in November 1793, one of which read:

Friends, further news of joy we've heard ! The Prince Coburg is defeated ! with the loss of Five Thousand men ! Ostend and Neuport is taken ! And the numberless successes which our brave Friends of Liberty the French have gained over the Combined Tyrants is inconceivable !

This one went further than most, with an exuberant final call to

Let us all join and Rebel down with the Present Government ! Off with King George's Head ! And a REPUBLIC in Great Britain ! Hurra ! (82)

The radicals rejoiced at French victories and mourned at allied ones. Thelwall wrote a satirical piece ridiculing the English attempts to seize Toulon (83); and we have no reason to doubt the spy Groves' statements that when extracts from The Courier were read at LCS meetings

Every article of news that either gave a seeming serious account of French success or an ironical statement of the disposition of our fleet, afforded the utmost pleasure. (84)

Hardy, writing to the Norwich radicals at the beginning of 1794, waxed most enthusiastic over French military prowess:

Now is the time for us to do something worthy of Men. The brave defenders of Liberty South of the English Channel are performing wonders, driving their enemies before them like chaff before the whirlwind. (85)

And the LCS Address to the People of Great Britain and Ireland, adopted on 20 January 1794, included this defiant attack on English militarism:

We must now choose at once either liberty or slavery for ourselves and our posterity. Will you wait till barracks are created in every village and till subsidized Hessians and Hanoverians are upon us ? (86)

Words such as these could quite easily be interpreted as treasonable, and Pitt's administration came to believe that the popular societies represented a potential pro-French fifth column inside the country. The revolutionary defeatism preached by the plebeian societies drew strength from the reverses suffered by Pitt's First Coalition against France, and from the lack of any foreseeable end to the war. The first report from the 1794 Committee of Secrecy laid stress on the 1792 correspondence between French and British political clubs: even though war had not been declared at the time, this was considered as evidence of a clear propensity towards treason.

Not only did popular radicalism sympathise with French armies, but it also adopted French procedures. While the custom of addressing each other as 'Citizen' did not unduly worry the authorities, the decision to imitate the French by setting up a 'British Convention' threw them into a panic. For the very calling of a Convention was a threat to the power of Parliament. According to Paine, the purpose of a Convention should be to bring a constitution into existence on which legitimate government could then be founded. As such, a British Convention could logically claim far greater authority than the Westminster Parliament. The British propertied classes realized the implications of calling a Convention more fully than did many of the radicals themselves. As the Committee of Secrecy put it:

From a review of these Transactions, your Committee feel it impossible not to conclude that the Measures which have been stated are directed to the object of assembling a meeting which, under the name of a General Convention, may take upon itself the Character of a General Representative of the People. However at different periods the Term of Parliamentary Reform may have been employed, it is obvious that the present view of these societies is not intended to be prosecuted by any application to Parliament but on the contrary by an open attempt to supersede the House of Commons in its Representative Capacity and to assure to itself all the Functions and Powers of a National Legislature. (87)

This should not be dismissed as mere paranoia on the part of the government and its supporters. Although the nascent British Convention possessed no real power whatsoever, its very existence was a challenge. It looked very much like an alternative to Parliament - an alternative established by the unrepresented masses, by those who had no spokesmen in the House of Commons. It was to be clearly distinguished from concepts such as the Grand Association proposed by James Burgh in his 1775 Political Disquisitions. The latter originated within establishment circles, at a time when organised and autonomous action by the labouring classes was not occurring, and perhaps more important, it never left the printed page to become reality. But the British Convention of 1793, small though it was, challenged the legitimacy of the British state. As such, its proceedings could not be tolerated beyond a short period of time, and after fourteen days it was forcibly closed down by the Edinburgh magistrates and its leaders were arrested. The activities of the Convention had been moderate on the whole - but there were certain revolutionary overtones, such as dating the

minutes as 'First Year of the British Convention'. And a conspiratorial motion was passed which stated that should Habeas Corpus be suspended, or legislation be passed against reformers, then an emergency Convention should be immediately convened at a secret rendezvous.

As for the 'Representative Capacity' of the House of Commons, it was clear by mid-1794 that most members of the popular societies treated this as a standing joke. They were increasingly tired of bemoaning the corruption of the administration, the system of rotten boroughs, the bribery and fraud at elections, and then going to ask the very assembly that resulted from this system to reform itself. At the two mass open-air meetings of April 1794 the tactic of appealing to Parliament was rejected. At Castle Hill in Sheffield Henry Yorke dismissed Parliament with the prophecy:

When, by the incessant thundering from the press, the meanest cottager of our country shall be enlightened, and the sun of reason shall shine in the fullest meridian over us, then the commanding voice of the whole people shall recommend the 558 gentlemen in St. Stephen's chapel (88) go about their business.

Thelwall, at the LCS meeting at Chalk Farm on 14 April 1794, was considerably more caustic than Yorke. When Richter read out a series of resolutions he used the term 'British Senate'. Thelwall objected, saying that the word 'Senate' meant a body of wise and respectful men, and suggested instead the phrase 'His Majesty's Parliament'. An approach to petition Parliament was specifically rejected in favour of petitioning the King - and it was made clear that this was because the LCS regarded the House of Commons as beyond redemption. (89)

FOOTNOTES

1. Letter of John Alcock to the Editors of the English Chronicle, 15 January 1792. T.S. 11.952.3496 (1).
2. Sheffield Constitutional Society to LCS, 19 March 1792. Appendix to the Second Report of the Committee of Secrecy (1794) p. 49.
3. Sheffield Constitutional Society to LCS. T.S. 11.952.3496 (1)
4. Broomhead's examination before the Privy Council, 28 May 1794. T.S. 11.963.3509 p. 395. But Broomhead's evidence is not necessarily reliable. According to Camage, another Sheffield radical arrested in 1794,

he had been suspended from the Society some time in 1792, for preaching armed violence (Camage's examination before the Privy Council, 29 May 1794. T.S. 11.963.3509 p. 428). On his own admission, Broomhead had only agreed to become secretary because his business as a cutler had been damaged by the war, and the Society's secretary received the substantial allowance of eight shillings a week (Broomhead's examination *op. cit.* p. 394).

5. Ashton to Adams, 14 March 1792. T.S. 11.952.3496 (1)
6. De Lancey to Home Office, 13 June 1792. H.O. 42.20.
7. Ibid.
8. Ashton to Adams, 12 June 1792. T.S. 11.952.3496(1). See also G.P. Jones 'The Political Reform Movement in Sheffield' in Transactions of the Hunter Archaeological Society Vol IV p. 61 (Sheffield 1930).
9. Crowds gathered outside the hall and made it very difficult for the loyalists to get in. Ashton to Adams, 3 July 1792. T.S. 11.952.3496 (1).
10. Veitch, op. cit. p. 192.
11. Hardy to Manchester Society for Constitutional Information, 7 April 1792. Add. Mss. 27811.
12. Hardy to Brand Hollis, 10 April 1792. Add. Mss. 27811
13. LCS Minute Book, 1 October 1792. Add Mss. 27812.
14. Hardy to Sayers, 27 November 1792. Add. Mss. 27811.
15. Munro's information, 15 November 1792. T.S. 11.959.3505 (1).
16. Information of 24 November 1792. T.S. 11.959.3505 (1).
17. See W.A.L. Seaman British Democratic Societies in the Period of the French Revolution (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, London 1954) pp. 24-25.
18. The Norwich Society for Political Information which was in correspondence with the LCS (see letter of 11 November 1792, in Appendix to the Second Report of the Committee of Secrecy (1794) p. 56) may have been a separate, third organisation, or it may have been another name for the Revolution Society. See T.S. 11.952.3496 (1).
19. Resolution from meeting of delegates from the United Constitutional Societies of Norwich to the Society for Constitutional Information, 24 March 1792. H.O. 42.22.
20. 'Information concerning the societies formed at Norwich. Rec'd from Mr. Alderston, 17 Nov. 1792'. H.O. 42.22.
21. Entry of 17 January 1794 in The Faringdon Diary ed. by James Grieg (London 1922-28) p. 34.
22. Anon. Treason Triumphant-over Law and Constitution Address to both Houses of Parliament (1795) p. 2.
23. Ibid p.7.
24. Alderston's information of 17 November 1792. H.O. 42.22.

25. Information from Ipswich to Home Office, 8 November 1792. H.O. 42.22.
26. T.S. 11.892.3035.
27. Letter of Munro, 14 November 1792. T.S. 11.959.3505 (1).
28. Letter of Munro, 15 November 1792. T.S. 11.959.3505 (1).
29. Metcalfe's examination before the Privy Council. T.S. 11.963.3509 p. 98.
30. Information of Groves, 12 June 1794. T.S. 11.965.3510A.
31. Lovet, Richter, Franklow, Pearce - examinations before the Privy Council
T.S. 11.963.3509 pp 108, 111, 273, 485.
Hodson - P.C. 1.21.A35 (a).
Le Maitre - High Treason - Narrative of the Arrest, Examination before the Privy Council and Imprisonment of P.T. Le Maitre (1795) p. 7.
Thelwall - Charles Cestre John Thelwall - A Pioneer of Democracy and Social Reform in England during the French Revolution (London 1906) p. 18.
Baxter and Ashley - Gwyn A. Williams Artisans and Sans-Culottes (London 1968) pp. 71 & 73.
32. T.S. 11.951.3495.
33. P.C. 1.23.A38. Nine names do not have their occupations listed.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. This list is dated 5 July 1792, and is for the original Division 7 - the Division 7 whose membership breakdown is given above was formed in a reorganisation out of the old Division 23.
37. Examinations of Moody and Camage before the Privy Council. T.S. 11.963.3509 p. 374.
38. Examination of Henry Hill before the Privy Council. T.S. 11.957.3502(1).
39. In Manchester, the radical societies seemed to have a wealthier composition. The Manchester Constitutional Society (set up in opposition to the Church and King Club) was founded in October 1790. It was joined by two other bodies - the Manchester Patriotic Society, and the Reformation Society founded on 24 May and 6 June 1792 respectively. All three societies worked closely together. Their public pronouncements were very moderate but this did not prevent legal proceedings from being started against them in 1793. Thomas Walker, their leading figure, was a merchant, owned several warehouses and was at one time Borough-reeve. According to Walker the founders of the Constitutional Society were 'several merchants and manufacturers in Manchester together with some members of the local professions'. This seems to have been a case of a section of mercantile and industrial capital, without representation in Parliament, throwing its lot in with the radicals. See Thomas Walker A Review of some of the Political Events which have Occurred in Manchester during the last Five Years (London 1794)
40. Colquhoun A Treatise on the Police of the Metropolis (London 1796) p. 39.
41. For France, see in particular George Rudé Paris and London in the Eighteenth Century (London 1969) and The Crowd in the French Revolution (London 1959) and Gwyn A. Williams Artisans and Sans-Culottes (London 1968)
42. Thelwall to Allum, 13 February 1794. T.S. 11.960.3506 (1).
43. Thelwall to Oakham, 10 March 1794. T.S. 11.951.3495. One of Thelwall's

doggerel poems, 'A Sheepshearing Song' refers to 'we British sans-culottes'. T.S. 24.3.169.

44. Veitch op. cit. pp. 71-75.
45. Membership list in the SCI minue book (the total is 160, but seven names have been struck off - presumably these had resigned or died). T.S. 11.961.3507
46. Ibid. 47. Ibid. 48. 23 March 1791. Ibid.
49. 29 April 1791. Ibid. 50. T.S. 11.952.3496 (1).
51. SCI Minute Book, 9 November 1792. T.S. 11.962.3508 pp. 116-117.
52. Ibid. p. 117 53. Ibid. pp. 131-133.
54. William Smith to Adams, 25 May 1792. T.S. 11.952.3496 (1).
55. Letter to Adams (signature illegible), 4 April 1792. T.S. 11.952.3496 (1).
56. Lord Saltoun to Adams, 8 February 1793. T.S. 11.953.3497.
57. Mawby to Adams, 19 December 1792. T.S. 11.952.3496 (1).
58. Aspinall to Adams, 15 December 1792. T.S. 11.952.3496 (1).
59. LCS - Add. Mss. 27811.
Sheffield - Rev. W. Hunter to Fitzwilliam, 12 December 1791. Quoted Seaman op. cit. p. 61.
Birmingham - Address of the Birmingham Society for Constitutional Information, 20 November 1792.
Leeds - Rules of the Constitutional Society of Leeds. H.O. 42.32.
60. Add. Mss. 27811. 61. T.S. 11.956.3501.
62. T.S. 11.959.3505 (2).
63. State Trials Vol 22, 955 (the declaration was printed in the Morning Chronicle in 1793 and occasioned the trial of John Lambert, James Perry and James Grey).
64. Report of the Committee on the Constitution of the LCS, 1794. Add. Mss.27813
65. Appendix to the Second Report of the Committee of Secrecy (1794) pp. 10-11.
66. i.e. Part II, Chapter 5.
67. Benjamin Damm An Address to the Public on the True Representation and Unity of Man (Sheffield Constitutional Society, 1792) p. 7.
68. Joseph Gerrald A Convention the Only Means of Saving us from Ruin (London 1793) p. 73.
69. Indeed a motion from one LCS Division (number 20) recommended the expulsion of 'persons who shall be found guilty of propagating levelling principles'. LCS Minute book, 10 October 1793. Add. Mss. 27812.
70. LCS Minute book, 29 November 1792. Add Mss. 27812.
71. Gerrald op. cit. p. 108. 72. Ibid. pp. 109-110.
73. Norwich Societies to Margarot, 16 December 1793. T.S. 11.953.3497.

74. LCS Minute book, 29 November 1792. Add. Mss. 27812. In passing one odd fact should be noted, and that is how apparently scanty was English radical knowledge of the actual course of events in France. The popular societies by and large championed the cause of France regardless of the nature of the different regimes that wielded power in Paris in the 1790s. The war was followed closely, but the internal development of France was virtually ignored. In all the papers of the popular societies that this author has examined there is scarcely a reference to, for example, the fall of the Girondins, to the execution of the Hebertists, or of Danton and his associates, nor even to the 9th Thermidor itself. Even the imprisonment of Tom Paine by the Montagnards seemed to make no impact on the popular societies. The French Constitution was widely praised: but it seems doubtful whether many radicals knew that France had drafted three very different Constitutions, in 1791, 1793 and 1795. Gironde, Montagne, the Thermidorian reaction, the Directory - English plebeian radicals seemed astonishingly indifferent to the form of political power in Paris. An obvious parallel could be drawn with today's revolutionary movements throughout the world, most of which have retained a loyalty to the Soviet Union, regardless of domestic changes in Soviet governments.
75. Address of the LCS to the French Convention, 11 October 1792. Appendix to the Second Report of the Committee for Secrecy (1794) pp. 25-26.
76. LCS Minute book, 4 April 1793. Add. Mss. 27812. Before the Privy Council Hillier admitted that his division generally approved of the execution and that a toast had been given 'May all kings be really toasted'. T.S. 11.963.3509 pp. 229-232.
77. LCS Minute book, 8 July 1793. Add. Mss. 27812.
78. Thelwall The Tribune, No. 1, 14 March 1793.
79. Gerrald op. cit. pp. 56-57.
80. Resolution of Sheffield Society, 12 April 1793. T.S. 11.953.3497.
81. Sheffield Society to the SCI, 1 November 1793. Appendix to the Second Report of the Committee of Secrecy (1794) pp. 90-91.
82. Information received by the Home Office, 16 November 1793. H.O. 42.27.
83. 'News from Toulon' T.S. 24.3.169
e.g. : 'The burthen of my song is a wondrous transformation
That late (by hocus pocus sure) befel a neighbouring nation
For while Bastilles were tubling down and palaces of Neroes
Lo ! a whole Swinish Multitude were changed to men and heroes '.
84. Groves' account, 5 June 1794. T.S. 11.965.3510A.
85. Hardy to Norwich, 11 January 1794. Appendix to Second Report of the Committee of Secrecy (1794) p. 6.
86. LCS Address to the People of Great Britain and Ireland 20 January 1794.
87. First Report of the Committee of Secrecy (1794) p. 20.
88. The Trial of Henry Yorke for a Conspiracy (Sheffield 1795) p. 12. Frith, a witness against Yorke, claimed that Yorke had said 'they might apply for eternity to Parliament and they would never have redress...he said the idea was absurd to petition a corrupt body to remove itself and appoint another in its place'. Ibid. p. 53.
89. T.S. 11.953.3497.

iii) Violence, the Constitution and the Popular Societies

We have seen how the plebeian societies began to erect an alternative to the Westminster Parliament and rejected the traditional approach of petitioning the House of Commons. But they were far from consistent in these positions. In the British Constitution, and what attitude they should adopt towards it, they encountered a major stumbling block.

That Constitution was one of the most powerful ideological weapons in the arsenal of the Pitt government. All the anomalies and absurdities of the eighteenth century electoral system were defended as parts of 'the Constitution' which had been formed over centuries and had reached final perfection in 1688. Lord Braxfield summed this position up succinctly during the Scottish treason trials of 1793:

The British Constitution is the best that ever was since the creation⁽¹⁾ of the world, and it is not possible to make it better.

The attack on radicals throughout the 1790s was presented as a defence of the constitution. In the correspondence of the Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers, we find letter after letter signed by 'A friend to good order and the British Constitution', 'Friends to the King and Constitution', etc.⁽²⁾ Informers used the Constitution to justify their activities - e.g.:

A sincere attachment to our happy Constitution and the present Royal Family compels me to inform your lordship that there is now at Woolwich a French Jacobin of the name of Augulles de Petit. ⁽³⁾

But equally opponents of the administration from 1760 on had been agreeing that the Constitution was indeed the best in the world, but that it had been corrupted and needed to be restored to its original condition. To the Whig opposition this quickly resolved itself into demands to limit the influence of the crown with sometimes a small measure of parliamentary reform thrown in - such as an addition to the number of county members. For Wyvill it was a case of restricting the power of the Treasury and arranging parliament so that it repres-

ented more completely the whole of the propertied classes and not simply the great aristocratic families. For the Wilkites too it was a question of the redistribution of powers between the legislature and the executive. All the oppositional groupings made their demands in the name of the Constitution - in the name of the lost rights of the 'free-born Englishman', a harking back to a largely mythical past. Such an emphasis on the Constitution meant that the basic structure of King, Lords and Commons was not challenged: their respective powers might be altered somewhat, but their existence was not called into question. Flowing from this position was the strategy of applying pressure for changing Parliament upon Parliament itself - usually the House of Commons found itself quite free to ignore such pressure.

The great breakthrough achieved by Tom Paine, acting as the most notorious spokesman of Plebeian radicalism, was the abandonment of all the platitudes about the Constitution. He cut through all the sophistic arguments of Burke and other traditionalists by defining the constitution of a nation as 'not the act of its government, but of the people constituting a government' (4). Paine then denied that any such thing had ever existed in Britain. The appeal to tradition, in either its reactionary or its radical form, has disappeared. What remains is a rallying cry against the entire old order:

When we survey the wretched condition of man under the monarchical and hereditary systems of government, dragged from his home by one power, or driven by another, and impoverished more by taxes than by enemies, it becomes evident that these systems are bad and that a general revolution in the principle and construction of (5) governments is necessary.

The bluntness of Paine's prose strips centuries of mystification off Parliamentary institutions:

It is not because a part of the government is elective that makes it less a despotism if the persons so elected possess afterwards, as a Parliament, unlimited powers. Election, in this case, becomes separated from representation, and the candidates are candidates for despotism. I cannot believe that any nation, reasoning on its own rights, would have thought of calling these things a constitution, if the cry of constitution had not (6) been set up by the Government.

As for reforming Parliament by petitioning Parliament:

I consider the reform of Parliament by an application to Parliament to be an out-worn, hackneyed subject....The right, and the exercise of that right, appertains to the nation only, and the proper means is a national convention, elected⁽⁷⁾ for the purpose by all the people.

But although Paine had shrugged off the ideological chatter about 'King and Constitution', many of his followers had not; and this crucial, revolutionary position of Paine's does not find much echo within the popular societies. Far from reiterating the Paineite position that the Constitution did not in fact exist, the LCS retreated to the earlier radical position in statements such as this, taken from an address of May 1792:

We find that the constitution of our country (which was purchased for us at the expense of the lives of our ancestors) has by the violence and intrigue of designing men, been injured and undermined in its most essential and important parts, but particularly in the House of Commons, where the whole of the supposed representation of the people is neither more nor less than a usurped power, arising from abuses in the mode of election and duration of Parliaments, or from a corrupt property in certain decayed corporations by means of which the liberties of this nation are basely bartered away for the private profit of members of⁽⁸⁾ Parliament.

This position meant that, despite their radicalism, the popular societies ceded certain ideological terrain to their opponents. They risked being trapped in the same problematic as their more genteel precursors. Acceptance of, or concessions to, such keystones of the dominant ideology as the Constitution led, not in the direction of the new society desired by most of the Plebeian radicals, but towards merely touching up what was conceived of as already an essentially sound system.

It is ironic that those who avidly read and distributed Paine's works should frequently break from his conclusions. The LCS retained a certain amount of quite unmerited confidence that maybe the House of Commons would in fact do something about reform - despite the Society's own open and repeated acknowledgement that Parliament was the mere instrument of a

corrupt clique. Thus the LCS declaration of November 1792 states: 'The House of Commons may have been the source of our Calamity, it may prove that of our deliverance'. However: 'Should it not, we trust we shall not prove unworthy of our forefathers, whose exertions in the cause of mankind so well deserve our imitation.'⁽⁹⁾ Thus the appeal to constitutional means concludes with a threat that should these prove ineffective, the LCS will not hesitate to use other methods. In fact, such a formulation could only ensure that the LCS got the worst of both worlds: on the one hand they disarmed themselves by agreeing to play by the constitutional rules, and on the other any hope of gaining respectability was thrown away by what could easily be interpreted as threats to re-enact 1688 (or, even worse, 1649).

But the LCS never made any serious preparation for the eventuality of implementing such threats. As Thelwall said: 'The pen is the only artillery, and ink the only ammunition that the London Corresponding Society must ever use.'⁽¹⁰⁾ Furthermore the following sentence is included in the first resolutions recorded in the LCS minute-book:

Resolved - that this Society do express their abhorrence of tumult and violence, and that as they aim at reform, not anarchy, but reason, firmness and unanimity are the only arms they themselves will employ, or persuade their fellow citizens to exert⁽¹¹⁾ against the abuse of power.

At the very least this was a serious underestimation of the forces that were arrayed against popular radicalism.

When Pitt's repression was already at a highly advanced stage, the LCS reconsidered this attitude towards violence. A distinction was drawn between 'resistance of oppression and promotion of tumults':

The former they profess as solemnly as they abjure the latter; and they trust that the Nation at large is equally sensible of the distinction, and that if the dire necessity should ever arise when the liberties of Britain must be asserted not by the voice and the pen, but by the sword, Britain will rally round the standard of liberty, not like a band of deprecators and assassins, but like a Spartan phalanx, prepared and resolved to a man rather to die at their posts, than to abandon their principles and betray the liberties of their country.

But this declaration lost some of its force through being preceded by a vehement denunciation of 'the equalization of property or the invasion of personal rights and possessions.' Levelling principles, the Society stated, would 'subject the nation to the brutish and ferocious tyranny of the most ignorant and worthless of mankind.'⁽¹²⁾ Burke himself rarely used more intemperate language. This attack on 'levelling' can be read as a defensive reaction to Government propaganda: but it is also a logical position to be found in a radical society where small property-owners such as artisans predominate.

Furthermore, the LCS's distinction between types of violence was not really tenable: after all, resisting oppression could very well in itself provoke a tumult. In any case, the distinction was highly academic, since the main body of the LCS never seems to have made contingency plans for violence of any sort. Their weapon was agitation among 'numbers unlimited', and when that failed to shake the foundations of the Pitt administration, they were at a loss.⁽¹³⁾

By and large the provincial societies also steered clear of activities which could be pointed to as evidence of 'violent' inclinations. The Norwich United Constitutional Societies wrote in March 1792: 'The greatest care has been taken to preserve Order and Regularity at our meetings to convince the world that Riot and Disorder are no part of our political creed.'⁽¹⁴⁾ The Leeds Constitutional Society described themselves as 'Friends to Liberty, but enemies of Anarchy.'⁽¹⁵⁾ The Birmingham Society wrote of themselves: 'We are orderly, peaceable and abhor Tumults and Riots, whether for Church or King, or anything else.'⁽¹⁶⁾

However, not everyone in the popular societies was convinced of the efficacy of peaceful protest and petitioning. The stories of drilling and of arms caches which so alarmed the 1794 Committee of Secrecy were not purely fictional. Richard Hodgson, active in the LCS secret executive

committee set up after Hardy and the other leaders had been imprisoned, was probably the author of the provocative placard:

The Ins tell us that we are in danger of invasion from the French.
The Outs tell us that we are in danger from the Hessians and
Hanoverians. In either case we should arm ourselves; get arms (17)
and learn how to use them.

Some members of the societies, however, needed no urging and had been practising with pikes and muskets for some months before this outspoken declaration. In Sheffield a number of pikes were undoubtedly manufactured for use by 'the Patriots'. A letter to Horne Tooke mused that it would be:

of great use to the cause of liberty to learn the use of arms....
should it become general for the people of England to know the use (18)
of arms it would succeed to frighten our governors into honesty.

But when interrogated by the Privy Council, Sheffield radicals claimed that their eventual production of pikes in 1794 was 'on account of the opposite party getting them - alluding to the raising of volunteer companies without the authority of Parliament in the neighbourhood.'⁽¹⁹⁾ According to George Widdison of the Sheffield Society:

There had been much conversation in the town about the Aristocrats arming and the necessity for the friends of freedom being (20)
armed in their own defence.

The radical Camage, on being asked by the Privy Council why he thought he needed to defend himself, explained that he had had his windows broken one night and that he intended to protect himself 'against any violent person that might come to attack him or molest him.' Similarly he considered that the Sheffield Society had the right to use arms to defend themselves if their meetings were disrupted.⁽²¹⁾

According to the evidence of the Sheffield radicals at least 130 pikes were made between April and May 1794, and production was only stopped when William Davison, a journeyman printer on Joseph Gales' Sheffield Register, who had provided the money for the iron, fled.⁽²²⁾ The pikes were offered for sale to at least the LCS and the Norwich Patriotic Societies. The letter to Hardy ran:

A plan has been hit upon; and, if encouraged sufficiently, will, no doubt, have the effect of furnishing a quantity of Pikes to the Patriots; great enough to make them formidable.....The Blades... will be charged One Shilling. Money to be sent with the Order. As the Institution is in its Infancy, immediate⁽²³⁾ encouragement is necessary.

The objective of making the Patriots 'formidable' does not necessarily contradict the declared aim of self-defence, but at the very least it poses that objective in a highly aggressive form. It is difficult to discern whether offering the pikes for sale to other radical societies was merely a business enterprise hit upon by Davison, or was policy of the Sheffield society itself. At any rate, the evidence before the Privy Council made it fairly clear that a number of leading Sheffield radicals, including the spellbinding orator, Henry Yorke, were well aware of these transactions.

Similar developments inside the LCS thoroughly alarmed the Government.

One panic-stricken memorandum of May 1794 read:

The language formerly holden in these societies was confined to Parliamentary reform and the correction of abuses - if ever it went further it was only in hints. Now the intention to overturn the Government of the country is openly avowed - The most desperate and treasonable declarations are uttered every night of their meetings. The conversation generally turns on the practicability of suddenly seizing the Royal Family, the King, the Ministers, and the members of both Houses of Parliament, and of putting them all to Death if they cannot obtain their ends by any other means... The Delegates and others are privately but earnestly endeavouring to persuade all the members to furnish themselves with arms,⁽²⁴⁾ those who can with Muskets, those who cannot, with Pikes.

This alarmism, though scarcely an accurate account of debates inside the LCS, was not without factual foundation. Apart from the violent language which undoubtedly characterised the meetings of some LCS divisions, there were groupings within the Society that had taken up, or were preparing to take up, arms. The Government spy Gosling testified that Division 11 included several radicals determined to arm themselves (in particular Richard Hodgson, the delegate, Wright, the stationer, Hiller, and one Edwards). It seems that the spur to these men's thinking had been the

Government's dispersal of the British Convention. Hillier saw the proposed division of the society into tythings, or groups of ten, as an essential prerequisite for any serious arming: the smaller numbers and tighter organisation involved would make penetration by Government agents more difficult, and a meeting of ten people would attract less attention than one of thirty. Hillier told Gosling that many members already knew the use of arms and would teach others 'as soon as the plan of Tythings was adopted.'⁽²⁵⁾ Although we can dismiss some of the more extravagant details in Gosling's evidence-- for example, his claim that there existed a plan to kidnap the royal family, and members of both Houses of Parliament - it would be unwise to dismiss the whole story as merely the invention of a disreputable spy. Especially since some of it was corroborated by one of the radicals mentioned by Gosling. Edwards, when hauled before the Privy Council, admitted that many members had already supplied themselves with muskets, and that there was a place in the Borough where men could subscribe to get arms.⁽²⁶⁾

Another 'arming society' associated with the LCS was the so-called 'Loyal Lambeth Association': the name seems to have been a deliberate attempt to confuse this organisation with the loyalist bodies whose formation the Government was encouraging all over the country. Francis Polydore Nodder, another Government spy, penetrated this Association, whose leading figures were the tailor Franklow, and the bookseller Thomas Spence. Military exercises were held on Mondays and Thursdays at Spence's home in Little Turnstile, and at a house in Petty France on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Initially these exercises do not seem to have been very formidable. Nodder reported on 7 April 1794 that the exercising at Spence's involved two mop sticks and an old musket. Later reports reveal the acquisition of more weapons: the Committee of Secrecy eventually traced eighteen stand of arms actually purchased by the Association and commented: 'This number, purchased by persons apparently in very indigent circumstances, is a

Sufficient proof of their Earnestness in the Design in which they had engaged.⁽²⁷⁾ The Committee also believed that the Association was preparing to buy 60 more muskets.

A ticket of admission had been printed reading: 'Liberty to those who dare defend it'⁽²⁸⁾; and a copper-plate engraving of the military manual exercise had been printed and sold, accompanied with a book of directions to aid with the drilling.⁽²⁹⁾ The Association seemed to draw its members from the LCS, but was an autonomous and separate body. Supposedly it had already adopted a Tything system - or at least that was what Franklow and the shoemaker Williamson told Nodder when he asked why more members did not attend. Nodder was also told that the 'Arming Society' had 32 Divisions - however, evidence for the existence of the other 31 is almost totally lacking.⁽³⁰⁾

The Committee of Secrecy saw the activities of Franklow and Spence as most alarming: indeed, it may well be the case that it was the increase in reports of arming, from Nodder and Gosling in particular, that precipitated the Government decision to seize Hardy and other leading radicals. The Committee imagined the Loyal Lambeth Association to be the military wing of the LCS. Apart from the dubious claim by the apprentice gunmaker who had made muskets for Franklow that Hardy had applied to Franklow with respect to supplying the LCS with arms⁽³¹⁾, there is no evidence for this. And the assumption that similar bodies to the Lambeth Association existed throughout the capital also falls for want of evidence.⁽³²⁾

This episode, bungling and amateurish though it undoubtedly was, does at least show that some radicals were contemplating the abandonment of peaceful protest in preference for conspiratorial methods. The Loyal Lambeth Association is thus the predecessor of such bodies as the United Englishmen and Despard's conspiracy of 1802. Spence's connection with the organisation is worth noting - it was to be groups of Spenceans who were to

prove most dedicated to conspiratorial modes of struggle between 1815 and 1820, culminating in the disastrous Cato Street Conspiracy. (33)

FOOTNOTES

1. State Trials XXIII
2. Add. Mss. 16919 and 16920
3. J.G. Ellis to Portland, 11 January 1794 H.O. 42.28
4. Paine Rights of Man (Pelican edition, London 1969) I, p. 93.
5. Ibid I, p. 165.
6. Ibid II, p. 215
7. Paine Letter addressed to the Addressors (1792) p. 56
8. Address from the LCS 'to the Nation at large', 24 May 1792
Add. Mss. 27812
9. LCS declaration of 29 November 1792 Add. Mss. 27812. Earlier in the declaration the LCS had made this protestation of respectability: 'Whoever shall attribute to us (who wish only to restore the lost liberties of our country) the expression of No King ! No Parliament ! or any Design of invading the Property of other men is guilty of a wilful, an impudent and a malicious falsehood.'
10. Quoted P.A. Brown The French Revolution in English History (London 1918) p. 139.
11. LCS Minute Book, 12 April 1792 Add. Mss. 27812
12. Declaration of the LCS, 23 November 1795 Add. Mss. 27817
13. As E.P. Thompson puts it, the English Jacobins were faced 'with the choice between defiant rhetoric and capitulation. Again and again between 1792 and 1848 this dilemma was to recur. The Jacobin, or Chartist, who implied the threat of overwhelming numbers but who held back from actual revolutionary preparation, was always exposed at some critical moment both to the loss of the confidence of his own supporters and the ridicule of his opponents' (The Making of the English Working Class London 1963 p.176)
14. Norwich United Constitutional Societies to SCI, 24 March 1792. Appendix to Second Report of the Committee of Secrecy (1794) p. 50. Also TS.11.952.3496(1)
15. Leeds Constitutional Society to LCS, 30 May 1793. Ibid p. 76. Also TS. 11.953.3497
16. Kilminster to Adams, 25 March 1793. TS.11.953.3497
17. Quoted Brown op. cit. p. 144.
18. Letter from Sheffield to Horne Tooke, 7 July 1793. TS. 11.951.3495
19. Henry Hill's examination before the Privy Council. TS. 11.957.3502(1)

20. George Widdison's deposition. TS. 11.957.3502(1)
21. Camage before the Privy Council, 27 May 1794. TS. 11.963.3509
pp. 380-388.
22. Hill's examination. TS. 11.957.3502(1)
- 23.
24. Substance of Several Informations on the views and proceedings of the different Republican Meetings known by the name of Corresponding Societies - particularly those at the Eastern end of the town and in the City 6 May 1794. TS. 11.965.3510A (2)
25. Gosling's examination before the Privy Council, 18 May 1794.
TS. 11.963.3509 pp. 148-206.
26. Edwards' examination before the Privy Council, 26 May 1794. Ibid.
Ibid. p. 332.
27. Second Report of the Committee of Secrecy (1794) p. 6
28. Ibid. p. 6
29. Ibid. p. 5.
30. PC 1.21.A35 (a)
31. Samuel Williams' evidence before the Privy Council, 23 May 1794.
TS. 11.957.3502 (1)
32. Second Report of the Committee of Secrecy (1794) p. 7
33. One question remains to be answered - why did the Government not bring Franklow and Spence to trial? After all, it had a much stronger case against them than against Hardy, Horne Tooke or Thelwall. It seems, however, that the star witness refused to testify in public against them. Nodder had already complained in April that spies and informants were in great danger, and demanded that his name be kept secret (PC. 1.21.A35 a). And on 2 June 1794 we find him writing: 'I rely upon your word given that I am not to be brought forward on the trials of these men. I have, sir, suffered much in this business for my loyalty to King and Country and likely to suffer more. If I was brought forward against these men it would be my ruin' (TS. 11.953,3497)

v. From Mass to Conspiratorial Radicalism

Conspiratorial methods were to gain in attraction as the government implemented further repressive legislation. The suspension of habeas corpus, used as a prelude to the 1794 trials, was followed by the Two Acts of 1795. The immediate inspiration for these was the massive demonstration that greeted the opening of parliament on 29 October, in which the King's carriage was mobbed and all its windows broken. The Two Acts, broadening the definition of treason to include spoken or written words even though these might not be followed by any overt treasonable act, and forbidding all meetings of fifty or more people without a magistrate's permission, were clearly designed to stamp out plebeian radicalism - in particular, this legislation was designed to put an end to the radical tradition of mass open air public meetings. The LCS held two such meetings with huge attendances at Copenhagen Fields in Islington in late 1795 - on 26 October and 12 November, immediately before the passage of the Acts at Westminster.

Unfortunately, having got enormous numbers of people together (an audience of 200,000 was claimed for the 12 November meeting⁽¹⁾), the LCS was not able to do very much with them. All it could offer these gigantic crowds was the diminutive opposition of the Foxite Whigs to the Two Acts, and bucketfuls of rhetoric:

Bring forth your whips and racks, ye ministers of vengeance.
Produce your scaffolds.....Erect barracks in every street and
bastilles on every corner ! Persecute and banish every innocent
individual, but you will not succeed....The holy blood of
patriotism, streaming from the severing axe, shall carry with⁽²⁾
it the infant seeds of liberty.

This, from a speech by John Gale Jones, was inspiring stuff: but in itself, of course, it was powerless.

When the Two Acts were passed, the LCS was stronger than ever. Members flooded into the society throughout the summer and autumn of 1795. Government spies reported a regular recruitment of between one and two hundred

new members a week from July, and the number of divisions grew from 35 in mid-July to 53 by the second week in August and to 64 by early September. By the end of October there were 73 divisions. Just before the passing of the Two Acts the Society was in a state of feverish activity - at the General Committee meeting of 26 November it was reported that 485 new members had joined the previous week and that the divisions that week had registered a total attendance of 3,576⁽³⁾. Corresponding activity had revived as well - the LCS was now in contact with societies in places such as Jedburgh, High Wycombe, Whitchurch (Salop), Rochester and Carlisle, as well as the regular correspondence with established radical centres such as Norwich and Sheffield⁽⁴⁾.

But the Two Acts proved effective, and struck a lethal blow at the LCS. The Society was thrown into disarray: by 7 January 1796, barely more than a month after the Acts had been passed, the spy Powell was able to report to Dundas that few divisions were meeting, and that sixteen had not met since the passing of the Acts.⁽⁵⁾ Morale was evidently extremely low: hopes that the massive opposition demonstrated in the autumn meetings would force the government to reconsider had proved ill-founded. A reorganisation of the Society was mounted, but does not seem to have been particularly effective.

The LCS avoided a showdown with the government, and by doing so perhaps added to its members' demoralisation. It was decided not to defy the Two Acts, but an ambiguous circular letter was sent to divisions urging them:

to remember that we are not yet deprived of Trial by Jury - that English Juries have long been celebrated for their opposition to cruel laws; and that it is particularly unreasonable to fear that they will give much support to the edicts in question, because their existence is not only a contempt of the public voice, but a violation of the fundamental principles of the Constitution. You are told that Civil Liberty is annihilated and that your only hope is in Arms - We pretend not to say at what degree of depravity on the part of Government actual insurrection becomes the duty⁽⁶⁾ of the people.

Politically, this was the worst kind of statement the LCS could have chosen

to make: it certainly did nothing to placate the authorities, and it offered no leadership to the society's members. The last sentence should be noted, however, as the nearest the LCS was to come to an explicit approval of insurrection.

Despite its apparent faith in English juries, the LCS decided that it would work within the confines of the new laws; but in order to rally provincial radicals and to strengthen its ties with the provincial societies, it also decided to send deputies to visit a number of the other societies. John Binns was sent to Portsmouth (where he found the rumour gone before him that 'some delegate from London' was coming 'to set fire to the dockyards and liberate the prisoners'⁽⁷⁾); and John Gale Jones was sent to the Medway towns. Jones found a society of nine or ten divisions in Rochester, but this was 'diminished and disorganised in consequence of the fears caused by the Two Acts.'⁽⁸⁾ He helped set up new societies at Gillingham and Gravesend, and one was also established at Maidstone.⁽⁹⁾ At Chatham Jones learnt that when the workmen of the royal dockyard had been called together to sign a loyal address to the King, petitioning him to pass the Two Acts, they had all refused and signed their own petition against the Bills.⁽¹⁰⁾

Binns and Gale Jones were next sent to Birmingham. The Government, however, was watching this new LCS tactic, and moved to stop it. In March 1796, Binns and Gale Jones were arrested in Birmingham - and this setback put a stop to the practice of sending out roving delegates (despite a letter from Binns and Jones to the LCS urging that it be continued⁽¹¹⁾).

With this personal link to other societies now cut, the LCS entered a period of continual decline. By 17 November 1796 only 209 members were meeting in their divisions,⁽¹²⁾ and the society was wracked by a series of bitter personal disputes.

The last attempt by the LCS to restore the tradition of open air meetings took place at St. Pancras field on 31 July 1797. It was quashed by the magistrates, and in a sad and pathetic note, William Stather and Thomas Evans, President and Secretary of the Society declared: 'it is our intention still to persevere in the same peaceable manner, while there remains any law to which we can look for protection.'⁽¹³⁾ But the peaceful road to reform had turned into a cul-de-sac - and as if to rub this point home, in the following year the LCS executive was all arrested, and in 1799 the LCS was outlawed by name.

By 1797 the mass base for radicalism was no longer readily available: government repression had successfully removed it. Other tactics were now tried as groups of conspirators tried to substitute for it. The relation between the LCS and the conspiratorial groups operating in the late 1790s is murky. Some individual members of the LCS, notably John Binns were also members of the London organisation of the United Irishmen; while reports from the spy John Tunbridge certainly link the declining LCS with the shadowy United Englishmen. According to Tunbridge, all but two or three members of an LCS division meeting at the Ben Jonson tavern in Pelham Street, Spitalfields, were also members of the United Englishmen.⁽¹⁴⁾ A second spy, Gent, also indicates clear links between the LCS and the United Englishmen. According to his reports, Blythe and Eastburn, two prominent United Englishmen, were also active in the LCS. Indeed, after the seizure of the LCS executive in 1798 there seems to be less and less distinction between the two organisations. However, it is evident from the reports of the two government spies that the organisation of the United Englishmen was much tighter, and much more resistant to penetration by Home Office agents, than that of the LCS. The government was never able to penetrate to the ruling committee of the United Englishmen, to the 'head committee' that was sometimes referred to.⁽¹⁵⁾

The Government did not wait for its agents to uncover the full extent of United English organisation in the capital. A series of arrests was made in 1798 and 1799, after which we hear no more of the United Englishmen in London. Either their organisation was completely disrupted by the arrests, or it continued, without much perceptible effect, but was now totally impenetrable to government spies.

A little more is known of United English activity in the north. Their activities in Manchester alarmed army officers, one of whom wrote:

The principal acting magistrate here has received information that there are a set of people in Manchester who call themselves United Englishmen whose plans are exactly the same as the Irish, with oaths, signs etc. The numbers who are associated in town under this description are said to be considerable, but the chief object of the leaders of these people is to seduce the Soldiery, which attempt they have begun in several different regiments.... I understand that the Lancashire Militia, the Lancashire Supplementary Militia, one corps of Artillery and some others (16) are tampering with.

They seem to have enjoyed a considerable degree of success: according to one report, 200 soldiers in one regiment had taken the United English oath. (17) The phrase in use was that the soldiers had been 'put up' - this does not appear to be the same as actually joining the society. But according to a defector, not only were there at least a hundred soldiers who were actually members of the United Englishmen, but the society had eighty divisions in Manchester, and was in communication with Bury, Bolton, Oldham, Fieldsworth, Royton, Stalybridge, Matham, Ashton, Stockport, and further afield, with Glasgow, Edinburgh, and St. Austell in Cornwall. There was talk in the society of a general uprising 'in about eight or ten weeks'. (18)

One Sergeant Tankard was infiltrated into the United Englishmen, and was told that 'If anything is to be done, it must be by the military assisting us with arms', and that 'they had no doubt but the French would make their landing soon upon the coast and then they would all turn out to a man to assist them in freeing this country.' (19) Information from both Tankard

and a second spy, Grey, suggests that many leaders of the Manchester United Englishmen were weavers. In a list of 29 divulged by Grey, there are the names of eight weavers, and both the men who initiated Tankard into the society were weavers. (20)

Historians have questioned the importance and sometimes even the existence of the United Englishmen, writing them off as a fantasy engendered in feverish Home Office brains by over-imaginative government spies. But the reports that exist, however, even making allowances for exaggerations by spies and infiltrators, are too substantial to be dismissed in this fashion. At the very least, it is clear that their organisation was considerable in Lancashire particularly in the two major cities of Manchester and Liverpool (21)

(where the large Irish immigrant population must have provided fertile soil for radicalism), and that cells under what appears to have been fairly close discipline were being organised and given military training. We do not have to accept the unlikely figure of eighty divisions in Manchester (which would imply over a thousand members); but the existence of a significant secret society seems indisputable.

These men saw themselves as a brother organisation to the United Irishmen, who were also active in their own right in England. The 1799 Committee of Secrecy regarded the branches of the United Irishmen established in England as the most formidable of the clandestine societies. The Committee believed that there had been a conspiracy in 1798 whereby a great number of United Irishmen would have landed on different parts of the coast, divided into small units, and made their way, suitably disguised, to London where they were to have cooperated with the LCS in staging an insurrection. This was to be simultaneous with the great Irish rebellion, and would help prevent reinforcements being sent to crush the Irish rebels. Timidity on the part of the LCS is supposed to have caused this plan's failure. (22) Another alleged plot concerned the United Irishmen employed on the Thames: as soon as the

French attacked the English coast, these Irishmen were to be armed with daggers, split into three divisions, and lead attacks on the Houses of Parliament, the Tower and the Bank of England. (23)

Regardless of whether any of the details of such plots were ever seriously entertained, there were certainly a large number of United Irishmen in London. One informant claimed that 'there are now at the least computation 15,000 United Irishmen in London and its immediate environs.' They met in pubs run by Irishmen - but never in numbers great enough to cause alarm. They were alleged to have 'sworn in' a large number of guardsmen to the organisation. (24)

Further evidence of the attention paid by the United Irishmen to the armed forces comes from the court martial of 24 seamen and a marine from HMS Defiance for mutiny in September 1798. In July the sailors had sworn the following oath:

I swear to be true to the free and United Irishmen who are now fighting our cause against tyrants and oppressors, and to defend their rights to the last drop of my blood, and to keep all secrets, and I do agree to carry the ship into Brest the next time the ship looks out ahead at sea, and to kill every officer and man that shall hinder us except the Master, and to hoist a green ensign with a harp on it, and afterwards to kill and destroy the Protestants. (25)

The same oath was sworn on board HMS Gladiator⁽²⁶⁾, and a rather less blood-thirsty one on HMS Cambridge: viz. 'To be United Irishmen, equal to their brethren in Ireland and to have nothing to do with the King or his Government,'⁽²⁷⁾ The intention of the mutiny, however, was apparently the same - to murder the officers, seize the ship and head for France. United Irishmen were also active at Portsmouth, helping soldiers desert. (28)

Thus by the end of the 1790s mass radicalism had disappeared. It had been replaced by revolutionary organisations operating along conspiratorial lines, and drawing heavily from the Irish community. They concentrated a great deal of their activity on infiltrating the armed forces, and had shed whatever

illusions they had once had in the Constitution. They were avowedly Republican, identifying themselves with rebellion in Ireland, and seeing taking power as a matter of staging an uprising timed to coincide with a French invasion. But reliance on external agents was to prove ill-founded. Of their two major hopes, one, the great Irish rebellion of 1798, was drowned in blood, and the other, French invasion, never materialised apart from a derisory landing on the Pembrokeshire coast, also in 1798.

FOOTNOTES

1. E.P. Thompson op. cit p. 159.
2. Address presented to meeting at St. George's fields
3. The defection of a large number of Methodists the previous month (after they had failed in a bid to expel 'Atheists and Deists' from the Society) does not seem to have seriously damaged the LCS. Powell's reports, PC. 1.23.A38.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Circular letter dated 31 December 1795. PC. 1.23.A38.
7. Binns Recollections of the Life of John Binns (Philadelphia 1854) p.64.
8. John Gale Jones Sketch of a Political Tour through Rochester, Chatham, Maidstone, Gravesend etc. (London 1796) p. 8.
9. Ibid pp. 38, 64-5, 84.
10. Ibid p. 81.
11. PC. 1.23.A38,
12. Ibid
13. Add. Mss. 27,817.
14. Tunbridge's reports, 18 July 1798. PC. 1.42.A144.
15. See especially Gent's reports of 21 August and 31 August 1798 (PC. 1.42.A144) and Tunbridge's reports of 27 March and 5 April 1799 (PC. 1.43.A153 and PC. 1.44.A155).
16. Col. McDowell to Lieut. General Greenfield, Manchester barracks, 1 April 1798. PC 1.42.A140.
17. Bayley to Lord Stanley, 3 April 1798. PC. 1.42.A140.
18. Examination of Robert Gray at Whitehall. Ibid.
19. Tankard's report, 2 April 1798. Ibid.
20. Gray's information of 12 April 1798. Ibid.

21. See PC. 1.44.A161 for reports of United English activity in Liverpool.
22. Report of the Committee of Secrecy to the House of Commons 1799 p. xxxvii
23. Ibid. pp. xxxviii-xxxix.
24. PC. 1.43.A152. Another estimate put the figure at 40,000 (PC. 1.44.A158)
25. Ibid.
26. Appendix 19, Report of the Committee of Secrecy 1799 p. 18.
27. Ibid. Appendix 18, p. 16.
28. Colonel Brownrigg to Major General Fox. Undated, probably January 1799.
PC. 1.43.A152.

vi. Relations between Respectable and Plebeian Radicalism

Relations between the plebeian societies and the respectable radicals in the Association of the Friends of the People were initially cordial, but soon deteriorated. In the months following its foundation, the Sheffield society communicated enthusiastically with the Friends of the People. But the revived SCI, under John Horne Tooke, always had reservations about Grey's organisation:

A strong impression still remains upon the minds of the People that in general persons who have long been accustomed to hold seats in the House of Commons under the present Abuses in the Representation and whose connections are all aristocratic, must be almost more than Men, at once and completely to sacrifice both Prejudice and (1) unwarranted Power at the Altar of Freedom.

The SCI's enthusiastic championing of Tom Paine proved too much for the Friends of the People, and was the issue which ruptured relations between the two bodies in May 1792. Horrified by Paineite politics, and the threat that it implied of depriving the handful of parliamentarians of their monopoly on the nation's political life, Lord John Russell, then Chairman of the Friends of the People, wrote to the SCI:

We profess not to entertain a wish "that the great plans of public benefit which Mr. Paine has so powerfully recommended will speedily be carried into effect" nor to amuse our fellow Citizens with the magnificent promise of obtaining for them the "Rights of the People in their full extent", the indefinite language of delusion which by opening unbounded prospects of political adventure tends to destroy that public opinion which is the support of all free governments and to excite a spirit of innovation of which no wisdom can foresee the effects and no skill direct the course. (2)

Russell went on to accuse the SCI of mistrusting the designs of the Friends of the People, of doubting their sincerity and spreading suspicion of their motives. His letter ended by declining all future correspondence with the SCI (3).

News of this altercation soon reached the provincial societies and on 26 May 1792 we find Sheffield writing to the SCI in support of its position. Russell's letter was 'in no way compatible' with the name 'Friends of the

People? (4) Nevertheless the Sheffield radicals did not immediately cut off their correspondence with the Friends, but their statement: 'We believe the most likely and effectual plan will be to establish a Convention in London by deputies from each County or District, by which means the sentiment of the many may be obtained without any confusion or disorder' (5) evidently alarmed their correspondents. The Friends of the People wrote back a wordy reply which evaded the whole question of a Convention, merely saying: 'we do not feel ourselves yet prepared to decide' (6).

Horne Tooke himself violently distrusted the Friends of the People, and even suspected them of being a cunning Pittite conspiracy. He wrote to William Smith MP that:

It is not certain that the majority of those calling themselves the Committee of the Friends of the People are not the disguised agents of the Ministry, to defeat the measures they intend (7) to promote.

In February 1793 the LCS inquired of the Friends of the People what they were going to do about Parliamentary Reform. A cautious reply came back from which it was not difficult to discern that the Friends' enthusiasm for Parliamentary Reform was on the wane: they would exercise

our own discretion with respect both to the Plan which we deem most effectual for the purpose and the time which we think most favourable for offering it to the public; at present we think that to make public our views on these subjects would be to furnish Arms to our Enemies and to (8) injure the Cause in which we are engaged.

The letter deplored the persecution of the Plebeian societies - but, claimed the Friends of the People, there was nothing they could do. 'It seems scarce necessary', continued the Friends (which indicated

that they thought that it was very necessary) 'to represent to the London Corresponding Society the peculiar necessity for Circumspection and Moderation at a moment when the most venial indiscretion of the Friends of Reform is remarked with such malignant watchfulness and converted into an argument against the Cause of Reform itself. He must surely either be a secret enemy or an unsafe and pernicious friend of that cause who could prompt you to anything that could be construed into Indiscretion'. (9)

The LCS did not take kindly to this awkward mixture of lecturing and evasion. They replied:

The business we are engaged in is of too important a nature to admit of Reserve or disguise ... our Country Correspondents did not desire us to inquire of you what you meant to do, but fairly asked us whether we thought you were honest? Whether we thought you meant to serve a Party or the Nation? Whether we imagined you intended a compleat or a partial Reform? (10)

The people, said the LCS, have 'an undoubted right to scrutinize the Character and Principle of those who call themselves their friends'.

The activities of the Friends of the People were by and large irrelevant to the popular movement. A timid group of Parliamentarians, whose opposition to the Pitt administration remained ineffective, they failed completely in the crisis of 1794. The LCS attempted to secure their co-operation in the plans for holding another Convention: predictably the Friends of the People declined:

They fear that it will furnish the Enemies of Reform with the means of calumniating its advocates, and so far from forwarding the cause will deter many from countenancing that which they approve. For these reasons the Friends of the People must decline to send Delegates to the Convention proposed by the London Corresponding Society. (11)

This letter was read out to the LCS public meeting at Chalk Farm on April 14, 1794. A witness at Hardy's trial recalled that the audience

received it 'with universal silence I believe; I do not recollect any approbation of it ... there was some few fell hissing'. (12)

The last word on the Friends of the People should be left to the SCI: historical experience fully endorsed this sceptical passage in a letter probably drafted by Horne Tooke:

It is not, Sir, the first time that members of that House (of Commons) have professed themselves as reformers. It is not the first time that they have entered into popular associations. But should they, on this occasion, prove faithfully instrumental in effecting a substantial reform in the representation of the people, and the duration of parliaments, it will be the first time that the Nation had not found itself in error when it placed confidence in associated members of Parliament for the recovery of the constitution and inestimable rights of the people. (13)

FOOTNOTES

1. Appendix to Second Report of Committee of Secrecy 1794 p. 15
2. Russell to SCI, 12 May 1792. TS.11.952.3496 (1)
3. Russell and several others in fact evidently regretted that they had dabbled in any sort of radical politics and, using the membership of Major Cartwright as their excuse, left the Friends of the People on 9 June 1792.
4. Sheffield to SCI, 26 May 1792. TS. 11.952.3496 (1)
5. Proceedings of the Society of the Friends of the People Associated for the Purpose of Obtaining a Parliamentary Reform. in the Year 1792 (London 1793) pp 41-2
6. Ibid. p. 46
7. Horne Tooke to William Smith MP, 3 June 1793. TS.11.951.3495
8. Society of Friends of the People to LCS, 15 Feb 1793. Appendix to Second Report of the Committee of Secrecy 1794 p. 63
9. Ibid.
10. Draft letter of LCS to Society of Friends of the People. Ibid. pp 66-7

11. Friends of the People to LCS, 4 April 1794. First Report from Committee of Secrecy 1794 pp 16-7
12. State Trials xxiv p. 737
13. SCI 1792. Quoted in E.C. Black The Association p. 202

2. BLAKE

i) Blake and the Art Market

Consideration of Blake's output must start from the fact that he was not primarily a poet at all. He was first and foremost an artisan, an engraver. But he was a visionary engraver at a time when visions were not fashionable; he was a linear engraver, when tonal engravers won all the accolades; and above all, he was an artist who prized imagination and 'the poetic genius' at a time when the cash nexus and commodity production⁽¹⁾ had come to dominate the art establishment. Prevailing conditions inside the art world of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century should be examined if we are to understand Blake's anger, frustration - and poverty: all of these were important factors in his radicalism.

The old feudal concept of the artist as a requisite part of the court retinue, or of a noble's household, or of the church establishment, had long since died in Britain. Court patronage of authors and painters was largely shattered during the 17th century: 1688, for instance, marks the death knell of the professional court author.

For a time political parties took over the role of the court. But the assumption of power by Walpole, and the long supremacy of the Whigs ended this form of patronage; the ruling party no longer needed its artists, the Tories in opposition could no longer afford them. Private patronage lasted somewhat longer, but even this was all but extinct by 1780.⁽²⁾

A transition took place from patronage to public subscription, to circulation on the open market. The first relationship, patronage, was the aristocratic form - a purely personal nexus between patron and artist; this link was loosened by public subscription, but this still retained certain features of the personal relationship. But publication on the market implied a general public, the members of which need in no way be known to the author. The products of the writer or artist now circulated anonymously, like any other commodity. This relationship is typical of the capitalist mode of production. (3)

Literary and artistic products were now commodities to be sold on the open market: for the author or painter this change meant that instead of a personal servant he was now a 'free' labourer - free to dispose of his labour power as he likes. Unfortunately if no-one purchased the product of his labour power then he was in danger of starving.

The market in art dates from about 1750: for the first time art was seen as an investment, and art collecting became fashionable among the wealthy. Art prices climbed steeply in the second half of the 18th century, only to fall again with the start of the war against France. (4)

Undoubtedly the most lucrative source of income for an English artist was portrait painting. Sir Joshua Reynolds was by far the most successful and well-known of portrait artists and when he died in 1792 left a fortune of over £100,000 - a fabulous sum for the period. This had been acquired through the execution of a prodigious number of pictures. Almost 4000 paintings have been identified as at least partly by Reynolds: in other words he was producing pictures at the rate of 100 a year or one every three days. As early as 1759 Reynolds was charging

60-100 guineas for full-length portraits; in 1764 the price was up to 150 guineas; and by 1782 it had reached 200. This proved to be a ceiling for Reynolds - more than 200 guineas could only be charged if more than one person was in the picture .⁽⁵⁾

It was not as if Reynolds even painted the pictures himself; like many another 18th century painter he employed apprentices, who filled in large areas of the canvas. Reynolds was thus being paid 200 guineas for no more than a few hours original work. Reynolds was certainly not the worst offender in this respect: that title is probably earned by Alan Ramsay - 'a man of cold and narrow mind' who 'possesses so little professional ardour that he has said he never painted but two pictures that were not for money'.⁽⁶⁾ As King's Painter in the 1770s Ramsay had commissions for 90 pairs of full-length portraits of the King and Queen, at 200 guineas a time. Ramsay, however, spent most of his time in Rome, while his assistant, Philip Reinagle, did all the actual painting. Reinagle picked up 25 guineas a canvas - the rest was pocketed by Ramsay.⁽⁷⁾

Ramsay overdid it somewhat and gave Burke a good excuse to cut the retaining fee for the office of King's Painter from £200 to £50 a year. Reynolds, who succeeded Ramsay, bemoaned this fall in the office's price-tag:

The place which I have the honour of holding, of the King's principal painter, is a place of not so much profit, and of near equal dignity with His Majesty's rat-catcher. The salary is £38 per annum, ⁽⁸⁾ and for every whole-length I am to be paid £50 instead of £200 which I have from everybody else. Your Grace sees that this new favour is not likely to elate me very ⁽⁹⁾ much.

It is in this context that one must view Blake's remarks about the use of apprentices e.g. 'All Rubens' Pictures are painted by Journeymen,

and so far from being all of a Piece, are the most wretched Bungles'.⁽¹⁰⁾ Reynolds could theorize the use of journeymen by drawing a distinction between 'invention' and 'execution' - a distinction that Blake refused to accept: 'He who admires Rafael Must admire Rafael's Execution. He who does not admire Rafael's Execution Cannot Admire Rafael'.⁽¹¹⁾ And again, quite explicitly, in his most definitive statement of artistic principles, the 1810 Public Address :

'I have heard many People say "Give me the Ideas. It is no matter what Words you put them into" and others say "Give me the Design, it is no matter for the Execution". These People know enough of Artifice, but Nothing of Art. Ideas cannot be Given but in their minutely appropriate Words, nor can a Design be made without its minutely Appropriate Execution. The unorganized blots and blurs of Reubens and Titian are not Art, nor can their Method ever express Ideas or Imaginations any more than Pope's Metaphysical Jargon of Rhyming. Unappropriate Execution is the most nauseous⁽¹²⁾ of all affectation and foppery'.

Portraiture continued to be lucrative after Reynolds' death. Thomas Lawrence inherited Reynolds' mantle - at the tender age of 24 he was able to charge 160 guineas, and as he grew older so his prices rose. After 1810 when Hoppner's death eliminated Lawrence's only serious rival, he raised his whole length fee to 300 guineas; and by the 1820s he was charging the staggering sums of 200 guineas a head, 400 for a half-length and 6-700 for a full-length.⁽¹³⁾ But Lawrence was able to recognize that he had spent his life in hack work, devoid of real artistic merit - and regretted it. In 1827, after looking at his picture Satan, executed before his rise to fame as a portraitist, he wrote to a friend : 'I am returned most heavily Depressed in Spirit from the strong impression of the past dreadful waste of time and improvidence of my Life and Talent'.⁽¹⁴⁾

Blake's attitude to portraiture was one of scathing dismissal. Against

Reynolds' remark 'if a portrait painter is desirous to raise and improve his subject ... he leaves out all the minute breaks and peculiarities in the face, and changes the dress from a temporary fashion to one more permanent', he wrote 'Folly! Of what consequence is it to the Arts what a Portrait Painter does?':⁽¹⁵⁾

Perhaps the greatest insult Blake and other artists of genius had to put up with was the standing of Benjamin West. West was an American royalist who dominated British painting for the quarter-century after Reynolds' death in 1792. Known, as 'the American Raphael', West's ability never exceeded the mediocre. He too became fabulously rich: from 1768 to 1801 he painted 64 pieces for George III which earned him the sum of £34,187.⁽¹⁶⁾ Given that at the same time West was engaged on much more work for other people, his complete income must have been fabulous. From Joseph Farington we learn that for one large picture in the chapel at Greenwich West received £1300, plus five guineas for each of the 25 drawings he had made for it - making the sum up to over £1430.⁽¹⁷⁾

West revelled in the production of gigantic, overblown 'historical' pieces. One of these, Christ Healing the Sick, he sold for 3000 guineas - at that time the highest price to be fetched by any British painter in his own lifetime.⁽¹⁸⁾ Nowadays the picture is generally thought to be an abomination. Yet at the time it was possible for the British Institution to sell 840 indifferent prints of the picture at what was then the remarkably high price of five guineas each - thus recouping the engraver's fee of 1500 guineas and most of the cost of the picture itself. West went on to produce further gargantuan monstrosities. His Christ Rejected by Caiaphas has no less than 120 figures in it, measures 3½ feet by 16, and was exhibited in a frame modelled after the gate of Theseus at

Athens (but somewhat larger!)(19) Hazlitt, confronted with this sort of lunacy, registered strong disagreement with current critical orthodoxy, declaring West to be 'great only by the acre'. Meaningless giantism and the trite allegory which accompanied it drew from Blake the angry remark 'Bloated Gods, Mercury, Juno, Venus and the rattle traps of Mythology, and the lumber of an awkward French Palace are thrown together around Clumsy and Ricketty Princes and Princesses higgledy piggledy!'.(20)

A picture could be guaranteed to sell if it had a famous name attached to it: a painting was therefore not seen in terms of a work of art at all, but in terms of exchange value, in terms of a certain amount of money invested in that picture. This, of course, opened the door for fraud and deception on a very large scale. Gullible art collectors in England bought alleged 'old masters' without a second thought. But James Barry had pointed out in 1775 that 'the great models of perfection are in Italy, but these are not now to be purchased. The pope has officers appointed to inspect every picture, statue etc. going out of Rome, and admitting the possibility of bribing these officers ... even the 3rd or 4th rate things are too well known to be moved without making a noise. The state of Venice have also set their seal on all the pictures they thought worth the keeping; so that this ill-fated country of ours is to be crammed with nothing but rubbish from abroad; and our artists at home must necessarily, to avoid risking the displeasure of their patrons, honour this mockery and cheat that is put upon them'. The various importations and picture sales that took place, claimed Barry, could only be seen 'as a common cloaca and sink through which all the refuse and filth of Europe is emptied into this country!'.(22)

One caustic 19th century commentator remarked that skilful dealers

finding that knowledge of art was not invariably the companion of the wealthy collector, introduced to him besides originals of rare merit, pictures of another sort of originality, some of which had been so frequently repaired by repainting, cleaning and varnishing, that the various processes of restoration conferred upon them an originality very different from that for which they were sought; and besides this variety, there was another, more extensive still of original copies, made abroad and at home, which found their way into collections as the works of certain great artists, whose names appear to have been luxurious appendages, indispensably necessary, in one way or another, to the mansions (23) of the wealthy.

Nevertheless wealthy Englishmen insisted on spending large sums of money on grimy, indistinguishable daubs that were passed off as the work of Raphael, Michaelangelo, Corregio, and even da Vinci. In 1771 Horace Walpole wrote of the painting Venus, Cupid and Satyr 'Mr. Hamilton's Corregio is arrived. I have seen it. It is divine - and so is the price, for nothing but a demi-god or a demi-devil, that is, a Nabob, can purchase it. What do you think of £3000? (24) It was in fact sold for £1500 to the dealer Vanderguilt, (25) but it was not a Corregio. Likewise when the Orleans gallery reached England in 1792 it contained ten paintings labelled as Corregios, not one of which is nowadays accepted as genuine. (26)

At the apogee of the cultural establishment was the Royal Academy. Founded in 1769, the Academy rapidly became a sterile enclave of establishment pomposity and tedium. Engravers were excluded from membership from the very start, (27) thus creating a false divide between painting - 'drawing on canvas' - and engraving - 'drawing on copper'. (28)

The Royal Academy's statutes specifically mentioned the arts of painting,

sculpture and architecture only. Shortly after the Academy's foundation, however, it was decided that six engravers could be admitted as associate members, but were unable to hold any RA office, or vote in the Academy's assemblies. Britain's leading engravers considered this an insult and refused to become associates:

it was intimated to the world that six engravers were merely worthy of standing at the door of the Royal Academy, whilst the professors of every other kind of art were eligible to enter and participate in all the advantages that might result from being therein. (29)

Not until 1855 did this attitude come to an end and engravers were admitted as full members of the Academy. This contrasted with the position in various European artistic establishments: engravers were eligible for full membership of, for example, the Imperial Academy at Vienna, the National Institute in France, and the Imperial Academy of the Arts at St. Petersburg. (30)

The Academy drew much of its importance from the fact that there existed no permanent exhibition building in London. Until the foundation of the National Gallery in 1824, London also lacked any public collection of masterpieces available for art students. This produced some ludicrous effects. For instance in 1787 a set of pictures attributed to Poussin were smuggled from the Vatican to England. Reynolds wanted to show them to the King - but the Council of the Academy refused to allow their showing at the summer exhibition, and Reynolds was eventually forced to show them in the Council Chamber itself. (31) The need for a National Gallery was stressed time and again by men such as Barry, but these appeals fell on deaf ears.

The Academy exercised a form of artistic blackmail - only those who were neither members of, nor exhibited in, other societies were eligible for

membership.⁽³²⁾ Given the prestige attached to the Academy, due to the monarch's favour, this amounted to a death warrant for the other London art societies, the Free Society of Artists and the Incorporated Society of Artists. The former ceased to exist in 1775, seven years after the RA's foundation; the latter was moribund from 1780 onwards, and finally expired in 1810.⁽³³⁾

Furthermore, artists who exhibited at the RA did not reap any financial reward for their pains; the profit all went to the academy. From 1771 onwards, works of non-members vastly outnumbered those of the Academicians themselves: yet it was the latter, not the former, who gained materially from the exhibition. For the Academicians, the exhibition slotted into a highly elitist view of the function of art, as the advertisement for the first RA exhibition, held in Spring 1769, shows:

As the present exhibition is a part of the institution of an Academy supported by royal munificence, the public may naturally expect the liberty of being admitted without expense. The Academicians, therefore, think it necessary to declare that this was very much their desire, but that they have not been able to suggest any other means, than that of receiving money for admittance, to prevent the room from being filled with improper persons, to the entire exclusion of those for whom the exhibition is apparently intended. (34)

Art for the well-to-do, not for the 'improper'.

The Academy was dominated by its Council who possessed considerably greater powers in practice than did the General Assembly of all academicians. For instance, in 1798, the Council voted £500 to the Government 'towards the exigencies of the state' - a fairly blatant political act.⁽³⁵⁾ However when the General Assembly attempted to make a similar donation in 1803 - a contribution of £500 for 'those

who may suffer of distinguish themselves in the present war' - the Council objected. The matter was referred to the King who eventually decreed that the General Assembly could make no financial decisions without the consent of the Council and that none of the funds should be applicable to any purposes but those of the Academy itself. (36)

The one critical voice from within the Academy was that of James Barry who held the post of Professor of Painting. Barry was acutely aware of the lack of good pictures available as examples for students, and objected to the nepotism of the Academy when it established a pension fund for its members and their widows rather than use the money to acquire pictures. (37) His artistic views were at variance with those of most other academicians, and after 1776 he did not exhibit at the academy. According to one hostile witness 'In his lectures ... much information is not to be expected for he took less pain to instruct the pupils than to rail against his fellow members of the Academy'. (37)

In 1799 Barry's dissenting voice was crushed. The Keeper, Joseph Wilton, wrote to the President and Council of the Academy complaining of

the dangerous tendency of a practice, frequently adopted by the present Professor of Painting, of making long Digressions from the Subject, on which he is bound exclusively to Discourse, in order to utter the most virulent abuse, on the established laws, the Acts and Government of the Academy. And calumniating its actual and even its deceased members ... And proclaiming to many strangers then present, particularly to the Students, that the Academy possessed £16,000; but Alas, Alas, he lamented and feared that no part thereof would ever be employed in the purchase of a few pictures for their advancement in the Art. (38)

Also taken as evidence against Barry was his Letter to the Dilettanti Society, first published in 1797. Here he had argued powerfully for the establishment of a National Gallery 'which whilst it would complete

the views of the Academy with respect to the education of its pupils, would also no less beneficially extend to the improvement and entertainment of the nation at large.⁽³⁹⁾ But Barry also alleged, at considerable length, that 'there does exist an undue, low, paltry combination in the Academy'.⁽⁴⁰⁾ This 'combination' acted vigorously against Barry: an 11-man court was set up to look into the matter, while Barry himself was refused a copy of the charges against him. On 13 April, 1799, the General Assembly voted to sack Barry, a move that had the backing of the King, and earned Barry the distinction of being the only person expelled from the Academy in its history.⁽⁴¹⁾

Blake's personal experience of the Academy was limited to a brief stay in the Royal Academy School which he entered in 1779. Here he conceived his violent dislike for Reynolds and his artistic doctrines. Already, at the age of 23, Blake had acquired his love of Raphael and Michaelangelo (even though he had very few originals of the great Italian, but only prints, to study) and his scathing contempt for Titian and for Rubens. His forthright dissent from accepted critical opinion led to difficult relations with George Michael Moser, then Keeper of the Academy. Blake relates one encounter between them:

I was once looking over the Prints from Rafael and Michael Angelo in the Library of the Royal Academy. Moser came to me and said "You should not Study these old Hard, Stiff and Dry, Unfinished Works of Art - Stay a little and I will show you what you should Study". He then went and took down Le Brun's and Rubens' Galleries. How I did secretly Rage! I also spoke my Mind ... I said to Moser "These things that you call finish'd are not Even Begun; how can they then be Finsih'd? The Man who does not know The Beginning never can know the End of Art".⁽⁴²⁾

Presumably it was also at this time that Blake came under Barry's influence - he admired Barry for the rest of his life, and contrasted Barry's poverty to Reynolds' riches.⁽⁴³⁾ At one point Blake even

considered writing a poem on Barry (which seems, however, to have got no further than a few doggerel lines scribbled in Blake's notebook).⁽⁴⁴⁾

Barry and Blake had shared views on the inconsequentiality of much eighteenth century painting. Barry, in a letter of 29 August 1773 to the Duke of Richmond, contrasted 'historical pictures' to

our trifling, contemptible passion for the daubing of little, inconsequential things - portraits of dogs, landscapes etc - things in which the mind, which is the soul of true art, having no concern, have hitherto only served to disgrace us all over⁽⁴⁵⁾ Europe.

Conditions in Blake's own branch of art, engraving, were perhaps even more dominated by commodity production and its demands than was painting. To make a living an engraver either produced popular prints of the stilted historical paintings of Benjamin West and Co., or illustrations for books, poems etc. And, like painters, engravers could become fabulously wealthy. William Woollett, for instance, made £15,000 in 14 years out of his engraving of West's The Death of Wolfe. In 1829, J.T. Smith commented that this engraving 'has been sold for more money, in this and every other country, than any modern print whatever'.⁽⁴⁶⁾

As for book illustration this depended crucially on the middle man - the publisher, the bookseller - who was interested not in talent but in money. Print publishers such as Macklin had considerable influence in the art world. In producing his illustrated Bible Macklin disbursed £30,000 in fees alone to painters and engravers.⁽⁴⁷⁾ In this sort of work it was not unusual for the engraver to be paid as much, and sometimes more, than the painter.

However not very much of this lucrative work came Blake's way. Blake's

style was not in favour at the time - he was a linear engraver, while Woollett and the other fashionable engravers were tonal. In Blake's artistic theory this difference is very important, and it parallels the distinction Blake draws between Raphael and Michaelangelo on the one hand and Titian and the Venetians on the other. For Blake the crucial element in any work of art is the line, the defining boundary: 'Every Line is the Line of Beauty; it is only fumble and Bungle which cannot draw a line'.⁽⁴⁸⁾ It was drawing then that Blake saw as the basic component of visual art: and a scientific knowledge of drawing was essential for the production of good paintings or good engravings: 'I request the Society to inspect my Print, of which Drawing is the Foundation and indeed the Superstructure: it is drawing on copper, as Painting ought to be drawing on canvas or any other surface and nothing Else'.⁽⁴⁹⁾

Blake maintained that those who stressed tone or colour rather than outline simply could not draw. What they produced were blots and blurs, which might be financially lucrative, but which degraded and damaged art: 'In a work of Art, it is not fine tints that are required, but Fine Forms. Fine Tints without, are loathsome. Fine Tints without Fine Forms are always the Subterfuge of the Blockhead'.⁽⁵⁰⁾ In painting Blake saw the main danger as from the Venetian school: 'Venetian attention is to a Contempt and Neglect of Form itself and to the Destruction of all Form or Outline Purposely and Intentionally'.⁽⁵¹⁾ And again 'Why should Titian and the Venetians be named in a discourse on Art. Such Idiots are not Artists'.⁽⁵²⁾ In the field of engraving Blake attacked, for much the same reasons Woollett, John Hall and Robert Strange.⁽⁵³⁾

Blake's apprenticeship to James Basire, the most distinguished topographical and antiquarian engraver in London, had given him a solid grounding in linear engraving, and a lasting respect for the work of such engravers as Marc Antonio, Goltzius and, above all, Durer.

Woollett and Strange used to visit Basire's workshop where Blake came to detest them as 'heavy lumps of Cunning and Ignorance'.⁽⁵⁴⁾ Blake also accused Woollett and Strange of using journeymen, and of sheer incompetence - 'a single leaf of a tree is never correct' in Woollett's work he alleged. 'Such prints as Woollett and Strange produced will do for those who choose to purchase the Life's labor of Ignorance and Imbecillity in Preference to the Inspired Moments of Genius and Animation'.⁽⁵⁵⁾ Blake traced the degeneration of English engraving back to 'the Entrance of Vandyke and Rubens into this Country, since when English Engraving is lost.'⁽⁵⁶⁾

Now the point at issue here is not simply a vigorous and bitter attack on a rival school of art. It is not merely that Blake disagreed with the principles by which Titian painted his pictures or Woollett engraved his prints, but that the conditions of artistic production in the 18th century meant that the acceptance of Woollett implied poverty for the artist who painted like Barry or Blake. For the mode of sale and distribution of works of art was not under the control of the artists, nor was it in any sense under the democratic control of society at large. Rather it was determined, and thus the lives of artists were determined, by the whims of a few men. That dimension transforms the question of whether or not Woollett could draw, from an obscure artistic controversy into a political question. Given the way in which art was organized in England, matters of talent and ability became wholly secondary:

The Enquiry in England is not whether a Man has Talents and Genius, But whether he is Passive and Polite and a Virtuous Ass and obedient to Noblemen's Opinions in Art and Science. (57)
If he is, he is a Good Man. If not, he must be Starved.

The glaring contrast between Reynolds' wealth and the poverty and obscurity suffered by Blake and the men he admired spilled over into angry annotations of Reynolds' Discourses:

While Sir Joshua was rolling in riches, Barry was Poor and Unemployed except by his own Energy; Mortimer was called a madman, and only Portrait Painting applauded and rewarded by the Rich and Great. Reynolds and Gainsborough blotted and blurred one against the other and Divided all the English World between them. Fuseli, indignant, almost hid himself. (58)
I am hid.

And Blake is quite clear as to why this is so - it is because of the commodity nature of the work of art. It becomes important only in its exchange, in the money that it can fetch: in annotating Reynolds Blake expressed this, writing:

The Rich Men of England form themselves into a Society to Sell and not to Buy Pictures. The Artist who does not throw his Contempt on such Trading Exhibitions, does not know either his (59)
own Interest or his Duty.

For Blake the whole question of the status of art was tied up with wider political questions. Firstly, Blake's exalted view of art led him to see it as a possible force for revolutionary change. Just as the artist-figure, or 'prophet', Los, is the agent of renovation in the Prophetic Books, so in his own country Blake looked towards the arts for a renovation of public life. And where the arts are degraded, society will suffer in its other aspects: 'Poetry Fetter'd Fetters the Human Race. Nations are Destroy'd or Flourish in Proportion as Their Poetry, Painting and Music are Destroy'd or Flourish! (60)
War and art are intimately related - 'Art Degraded, Imagination Denied, War Governed the Nations'. (61) The degraded, fallen state of art was

thus seen as a factor in the English crusade against revolutionary France. The relationship works both ways - corrupted art corrupts society and reduces it to a condition where it will engage in war as a substitute for art - 'mental war' is suppressed and 'corporeal war' fought in its stead⁽⁶²⁾ - and a warlike state is unable to produce art. In his usual uncompromising way Blake used this argument to dismiss the Classics:

Virgil in the Eneid, Book VI, line 848, says "Let others study Art, Rome has somewhat better to do, namely War and Dominion". Rome and Greece swept Art into their maw and destroyed it; a Warlike State never can produce Art. It will rob and Plunder and accumulate into one place, and Translate and Copy and Buy⁽⁶³⁾ and Sell and Criticize, but not Make.

The relation between art and politics is made quite explicit in the 1808 Public Address:

The wretched State of the Arts in this Country and in Europe, originating in the Wretched State of Political Science, which is the Science of Sciences, Demands a firm and determinate conduct on the part of Artists to Resist the Contemptible Counter Arts Established by such contemptible Politicians as Louis XIV and originally set on foot by Venetian Picture traders, Music traders, and Rhime traders to the destruction⁽⁶⁴⁾ of all true art as it is today.

Bad artists therefore have a political effect - a harmful political effect. Hence Blake, infuriated by a footnote to the introduction to Reynolds' Discourses extolling the wealth and prosperity of England - wealth and prosperity appropriated by a tiny minority while most of the population lived in misery and squalor - could exclaim 'This Whole Book was Written to Serve Political Purposes'.⁽⁶⁵⁾ Blake dismissed Reynolds as a paid lackey - 'This Man was Hired to Depress Art'.⁽⁶⁶⁾

At first sight this and the almost immediately following reference to

'Sir Joshua and his Gang of Cunning Hired Knaves' are almost ludicrous statements. But the point is that Sir Joshua was hired (and for very large sums of money). Ostensibly he was hired to paint pictures, but on Blake's reading of the situation the objective result of Reynolds' work was to depress art. The subjective intentions of Reynolds are of no great interest to Blake - the statement that Reynolds was hired to depress art is a graphic description of objective reality as it appeared to Blake, not a consideration of what went on in the minds of Reynolds and his employers.

Contributing to the bitterness in much of Blake's writing on art are his own commercial failures - resulting partly from his dislike of commodity production, partly from his own lack of business acumen and partly through sheer misfortune. The first such venture was a print shop in Broad Street where, in 1784, Blake set up in business with James Parker, who had also been apprenticed to Basire. Blake sunk the modest sum (perhaps as much as £100) which he had inherited on his father's death into the shop.⁽⁶⁷⁾ The shop sold new and second-hand prints, mostly by others, but evidently its finances failed and in 1785 the firm of Parker and Blake ceased to exist.

In order to break out of the poverty that engulfed him for most of his life Blake needed a major breakthrough into the public eye - which could only come about through his being commissioned for engraving a popular work, one that was assured of sales. The first real chance of such a breakthrough occurred when the bookseller Edwards of Bond Street employed Blake to engrave designs for a new edition of Young's gloomy mid-eighteenth century poem, Night Thoughts. Blake designed no less than 537 pages for the work from which Edwards was to select 200 for engraving.

For this massive labour Blake was to be paid a mere twenty guineas - he had asked for a hundred but Edwards had claimed that he could not afford such a sum.⁽⁶⁸⁾ Blake was therefore being paid something in the region of ninepence per design. This may not have disheartened him much as considerably more money was to be earned in engraving the designs.

By 1797 the designs were complete and 43 of them had been engraved on copper for the first instalment of the work (the first four 'Nights' of the poem). Blake had probably been paid at the rate of a guinea each for these engravings.⁽⁶⁹⁾ But there the venture stopped. The three other parts proposed were not published. For 1797 was a year of crisis. The Bank of England had been worried about its specie position for some time (and had in fact warned Pitt of the situation 14 times between December 1794 and February 1797). Invasion scares in the winter of 1796-97, coupled with the uneasy situation in Ireland, led to a flight away from paper money, which was rapidly converted into gold. The Bank of England's position was critical, and on February 26 an order from the Privy Council forbade further payments in gold until the matter had been considered by Parliament. Two days later Pitt had to ask for a Commons Committee to consider the indefinite suspension of gold payments.⁽⁷⁰⁾

In the economic crisis that followed this many businesses went bankrupt. And one victim was Edwards' new edition of Night Thoughts. People were no longer willing to spend relatively large sums of money to buy finely engraved works of poetry. The arts had been reduced to an 'abject and almost expiring state'.⁽⁷¹⁾ Not only did this failure mean that much of two years intensive labour on Blake's part was virtually

wasted - it also deprived him of the audience and the breakthrough he had been hoping for. Some idea, perhaps, of Blake's disappointment at the failure of Night Thoughts and of the general depression in the art world can be judged from the fact that in the following year, 1798, he only published eight commercial prints. (72)

Another opportunity was not to occur until 1808 when the bookseller Cromek engaged Blake to design engravings for a new edition of Blair's The Grave. This time Blake was foiled not by any crisis in the economy, but by the unscrupulous behaviour of his employer, and by his own naivety. (73) Blake undertook the task on the explicit understanding that he was to do the engraving himself. He wrote to William Hayley:

Mr. Cromek the Engraver came to me desiring to have some of my Designs; he nam'd his Price and wish'd me to Produce him Illustrations of The Grave, A Poem by Robert Blair; in consequence I produced about twenty Designs which pleas'd so well that he, with the same liberality with which he set me about the Drawings, has now set me to Engrave them. (74)

A letter from the sculptor Flaxman, a friend of both Blake and Cromek, to Hayley corroborates Blake's account: 'Mr. Cromek has employed Blake to make a set of 40 drawings from Blair's poem of the Grave 20 of which he proposes [to] have engraved by the Designer'. (75)

However, nowhere was it laid down in contract form that Blake was to do the engraving. This was extremely important as Blake's profit from the venture would come almost entirely from the engraving - the price of one engraving plate would probably exceed that of all the drawings put together.

But Cromek had no intention of letting Blake do the engraving. He used Blake as designer because he knew a good drawing when he saw one: but his chosen engraver was the Italian, Louis Schiavonetti, who had studied

with Cromek under Bartolozzi - another tonal engraver and object for Blake's scorn. In the event Cromek purchased twelve of Blake's drawings (not the twenty he had originally agreed on) and handed them straight over to Schiavonetti for engraving. In addition Cromek had watched Blake working on a picture of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims setting out on their journey. Cromek had then, for no discernible reason other than pure malice, suggested to Blake's friend, the engraver Stothard, that he compose a piece of work along these lines. Stothard, probably in all innocence since Cromek does not appear to have told him that the idea was lifted from Blake, then produced his own Canterbury Pilgrims, thus effectively stealing Blake's thunder and dealing a mortal blow to the friendship between the two men. (76) The bitterness this episode engendered in Blake produced a series of venomous epigrams and pieces of doggerel verse in his Notebook where Cromek features as 'Screwmuch', Schiavonetti as 'Assassinetti' and the unfortunate Stothard as 'Steward'. (77)

To add insult to injury Blake's designs for The Grave were the subject of fiercely hostile reviews in both The Anti-Jacobin Review and The Examiner. The former did a lengthy hatchet job on each design in turn. Of Blake himself, the Review revealed its ignorance by stating that

Mr. Blake was formerly an engraver, but his talents in that line scarcely advancing to mediocrity, he was induced, as we have been informed, to direct his attention to the art of design; and aided, as his friends report, by visionary communication with the spirits of the Raffaeles, the Titians, the Caraccis, the Corregios, and the Micael-Angelos of past ages, he succeeded in producing the inventions before us. (78)

To be described as a 'former' engraver must have been very wounding for Blake; so must the suggestion that he could have had any useful conversa-

tion with the spirits of Titian or Corregio - two painters he loathed. And the Anti-Jacobin Review's crowning insult was the remark that Schiavonetti had actually improved on the designs.

But it was Examiner's review that seemed to hurt Blake most. Some of its strident attack was couched in terms of outraged morality:

At the awful Day of Judgement, before the Throne of God himself, a male and female figure are described in most indecent attitudes. It is the same with the salutation of a man and his wife meeting in the pure mansions of heaven. This however is as appropriate a display of the chastity of celestial rapture, as solid flesh (79) is of unseen, intangible and incorporeal spirit.

Three weeks later Leigh Hunt, editor of the Examiner, went one better and included Blake in a list of 'The Ancient and Redoubtable Institution of Quacks, with their present officers, professors, and principal servants.' (80)

Blake's response to this was bold and not particularly sensible. He arranged a one-man exhibition of 16 of his paintings at Broad Street. Badly publicized, it attracted very few visitors - when Henry Crabb Robinson visited the exhibition he found that he was the only person in the room. (81) This flop merely provided more ammunition for the Examiner, which referred to Blake as 'an unfortunate lunatic, whose personal inoffensiveness secures him from confinement' and to his catalogue for the exhibition as 'a farrago of nonsense, unintelligibility and egregious vanity; the wild effusions of a distempered brain'. (82)

Such was the nature of Blake's major encounters with the official cultural establishment. His inability to make a reputation for himself meant that he either had to demean himself to the level of hack work to earn a living - as he did during the first few years of the new

century, largely in the employment of William Hayley - or else he sunk into abject poverty. The latter fate overtook him after the failure of the 1809 exhibition. He sank completely from the public eye for over a decade.

Blake's experience with Hayley needs to be considered before we can sum up the conclusions Blake drew about commodity production or 'commerce'. William Hayley - or 'the hermit of Eartham', as he liked to refer to himself - was a moderately wealthy Sussex country gentleman with a knack for producing shockingly bad poetry.⁽⁸³⁾ At the time Hayley's verse attained an ephemeral popularity - the temporary success of a monstrously long and tedious piece entitled The Triumphs of Temper seems to have gone to his head and produced the delusion that he was a significant artist. Indeed in 1790 he was offered and declined the laureateship.⁽⁸⁴⁾

Hayley is best known today from the savage epigrams Blake scribbled about him in his notebook about the year 1810 e.g.

To forgive Enemies Hayley does pretend
Who never in his life forgave a friend

or

When H.....y finds out what you cannot do (85)
That is the very thing he'll set you to

As Hayley's biographer remarks,⁽⁸⁶⁾ these statements do not necessarily constitute a definitive write-off of the man. They were written four or five years after the Blake-Hayley relationship had ended, and at a period when, in the aftermath of the Cromek affair, Blake felt exceptionally bitter and betrayed. And indeed Hayley genuinely attempted to show kindness for Blake, and certain of Blake's letters show that he felt grateful for this.

Nonetheless Hayley's friendship was strictly limited in nature, and involved asking Blake to do the sort of work that, far from inspiring the poet, he could only regard as meaningless. It involved trite illustration for Hayley's works, and even here Blake was not given a free hand. His first commissions for Hayley were portrait work, which in itself can hardly have pleased Blake. Nevertheless he seems glad, initially, to have left London for the Sussex coast, and for the first year or so he put a good face on his new work, writing to Thomas Butts in 1801:

My Hayley acts like a Prince. I am at complete Ease ... my present engagements are in Miniature Painting. Miniature is become a Goddess in my Eyes, and my Friends in Sussex say that I Excel in the Pursuit. I have a great many orders and they(87) Multiply.

But the Sussex idyll did not last long. For one thing the cottage Blake was living in was unhealthy, and his wife fell ill. By the beginning of 1802 Blake was admitting to Butts: 'When I came down here, I was more sanguine than I am at present; but it was because I was ignorant of many things which have since occurred, and chiefly the unhealthiness of the place'. For the first time a note of uneasiness about Hayley creeps in, though Blake is still able to dismiss it: 'Mr. H., I doubt not, will do ultimately all that both He and I wish - that is, to lift me out of difficulty; but this is no easy matter to a man who, having Spiritual Enemies of such formidable magnitude, cannot expect to want natural hidden ones'. Later in the same letter the reason for Blake's uneasiness is revealed. He is unable to do the work he wishes to do, because he has become financially dependent on Hayley:

My unhappiness has arisen from a source which, if explored too narrowly, might hurt my pecuniary circumstances, as my dependence

is on Engraving at present, and particularly on the Engravings I have in hand for Mr. H.: and I find on all hands great objections to my doing anything but the mere drudgery of business, and intimations that if I do not confine myself to this, I shall not live: this has always pursued me. You will understand by this the source of all my uneasiness. (88)

The suspicion that Hayley might prove a 'hidden' enemy was perhaps rooted in the engraved portrait of Cowper that Blake was executing for Hayley's life of the poet. Hayley had been very friendly with Cowper during the poet's last years, and his biography was intended as a tribute to his dead friend. (89) However, also involved in the project was Lady Hesketh, another of the deceased poet's close friends. Whereas Hayley was mildly liberal in his politics, (90) Lady Hesketh was a virulent royalist - a position which led her to demand that the Life of Cowper be censored:

every remark in favour of Royalty or Government, I entreat you, dear sir, not to suppress - but should you happen to find (which I hardly think you will) [some] which may think of a contrary nature, I depend that your affections for your friend and your obliging attention to me will induce you to bury them in oblivion. (91)

Not only should Cowper's political opinions be modified to suit Lady Hesketh's, but certain facts should be omitted from the biography - such as Cowper's love for Lady Hesketh's sister, the fact that he had sunk to earning money via book reviews, or that for some years he had been insane. (92) Hayley accepted the first two points but was reluctant to conceal Cowper's madness. Nevertheless Lady Hesketh got her way when Blake's miniature of Cowper after Romney's portrait arrived and she thought she detected hints of insanity in it. She wrote an anguished letter to Hayley:

I cannot restrain my pen from declaring that I think it Dreadful! Shocking! and that I entreat you on my knees not to suffer so

horrible a representation of our angelic friend to be presented to the public and to disgrace and disfigure a work I so much long to see ... I cannot bear to have it in my possession nor would I for words show it to anyone. (93)

Lady Hesketh had her way - and Blake had encountered a blatant piece of censorship from his erstwhile friend and patron. He had to do a second miniature copied from another portrait (by Lawrence), and it was this that was eventually engraved.

Hayley had hit on the idea in 1801 of earning Blake some money by having the artist engrave designs for a set of animal ballads he was working on: when these were sold the proceeds would go to Blake. Hayley's intentions may have been good, but the ballads, unfortunately, were not: there can hardly be anywhere in the English language doggerel quite as bad as this:

Ye whom a friend's dark perils pain
 When terrors most unnerve him,
 Learn from this elephant a strain (94)
 Your sinews to preserve him.

The first ballad, The Dog, tells the story of one Fido 'a dog of many sportive tricks'. (95) Lucy, his owner, has a fiancé who takes Fido out for a walk. When they reach a river, the man prepares to take a swim, at which Fido becomes very agitated, attempting to prevent him from entering the water. The man refuses to pay any attention, however, whereupon Fido makes the supreme sacrifice by plunging into the water first - straight into the jaws of the waiting crocodile. This occasions much sadness on the part of Lucy and her fiancé who erect a marble statue of Fido in their boudoir, and the poem ends:

The marble Fido in their sight
 Enhanc'd their nuptial bliss:
 And Lucy every morn and night, (96)
 Gave him a grateful kiss.

This was the nonsense that a man of Blake's genius was supposed to

illustrate. Not surprisingly Blake's engravings for these ballads are pretty poor stuff - the one for The Dog indeed merited the ridicule which Southey poured on it. (97)

Initially the ballads were issued one at a time - and in their avowed purpose of bringing in money for Blake and his wife they clearly failed. Approximately £15 was netted from country sales. (98) Receipts from booksellers were low. One, R.H. Evans, sold £2 worth (99) - others probably met with even less success. As Blake presumably had to meet part of the cost of the printers bill as well as the £30 for paper, he almost certainly made a financial loss out of the affair. This fiasco can only have increased Blake's distrust of and annoyance with Hayley - it seems to have produced little effect on Hayley himself who went on writing ballads and issued a whole book of them in 1805.

By Autumn 1802 Blake was admitting that he had been 'very Unhappy'. (100)
By the beginning of 1803 Blake was determined to remain at Felpham no longer:

because I am now certain of what I have long doubted, Viz that H. is jealous as Stothard was and will be no further My friend than he is compell'd by circumstances. The truth is, As a Poet he is frighten'd at me and as a Painter his views and mine are opposite; he thinks to turn me into a Portrait Painter as he did Poor Romney, but this nor he nor all the devils in hell will ever do.

The financial pressure on Blake had apparently slackened - 'I am getting before hand in money matters' - and he was no longer humiliatingly dependent on Hayley. Blake was still sending off copies of the Ballads and hoping for a profit from them - but at the same time he was clearly relieved that 'I am now so full of work that I have had no time to go on with the Ballads and my prospects of more and more work continually are certain'. (101)

The illness suffered by Blake's wife at Felpham, plus the pressure from Hayley, made Blake determined to return to London. A Reluctant Hayley finally agreed to his pet engraver leaving and 'there is all the appearance in the world of our being fully Employ'd in engraving for his projected Works, particularly Cowper's Milton ... Thus I hope that all our three years trouble Ends in Good Luck at last'. This same letter to Butts contains a stinging dismissal of Hayley:

Mr. H. approves of my Designs as little as he does of my Poems, and I have been forced to insist on his leaving me in both to my own Self Will; for I am determin'd to be no longer Pestered with his Genteel Ignorance and Polite Disapprobation. I know myself both Poet and Painter, and it is not his affected Contempt that can move me to anything but a more assiduous pursuit of both Arts ... his imbecile attempts to depress (102) Me deserve only laughter.

Relations between Blake and Hayley improved somewhat during the episode of Blake's trial for sedition, when Hayley offered generous support. And when he reached London, Blake seemed confident that Hayley would continue to employ him: indeed, he came to depend on this, for, as he wrote to Hayley, although engravers were much in demand in London 'Yet no-one brings work to me.' Blake evidently felt unhappy about the prospect of touting his skills round London: 'I suppose that I must go a Courting, which I shall do awkwardly; in the mean time I lose no moment to complete Romney to satisfaction'. (103) This refers to a head of Romney that Blake was engraving for Hayley's life of the painter.

Friendly correspondence between Blake and Hayley continued throughout 1804 and 1805, largely concerned with the work Blake was doing for Hayley's two biographies, of Romney and of Cowper (a second edition). Blake was not merely engaged in engraving but was also doing a fair amount of research for Hayley, inquiring, in particular, into the

whereabouts of all Romney's pictures. Quite evidently Blake expected that he would do the major part of the engravings for the Life of Romney.

But influences were working on Hayley to persuade him to use other engravers. In particular Lady Hesketh had never trusted Blake - a distrust that deepened after Blake's clash with the soldier Schofield and the ensuing sedition trial. Lady Hesketh did congratulate Hayley on Blake's acquittal - but in very cold, terse terms. Earlier she had written: 'he appeared to me very much to blame even upon his own representation of the matter, but if I may give credit to some reports which reached me at that time, Mr. B. was more seriously to blame than you were at all aware of'.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ By November 1804, she was demanding that 'no inferior or midling artists' should lay 'their indifferent hands'⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ on Hayley's future works, and by the middle of the following year she was scolding Hayley for exclusive charity towards Blake.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ In a letter to her friend, Johnny Johnson, Lady Hesketh became quite hysterical about Blake:

My hair stands on end to think that Hayley and Blake are as dear friends as ever! He talks of him as if he were an angel! How can you, Johnny, suffer our poor friend to be thus imposed on? I don't doubt he will poison him in his turret, or set fire to all his papers, and poor Hayley will consume in his own fires.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾

All this had its desired effect of switching Hayley's commissions away from Blake and towards other engravers, and particularly towards Lady Hesketh's protegee, Caroline Watson. This process started in 1805 when the job of engraving Cowper's portrait for the frontispiece to the second edition of Hayley's Life was given to her. Blake accepted this with remarkably good grace:

The Idea of Seeing an Engraving of Cowper by the hand of Caroline Watson is, I assure you, a pleasing one to me; it will be highly

gratifying to see another copy by another hand and not only gratifying, but Improving, which is better. (108)

Such a self-denigratory tone is extremely unusual for Blake - this deference is perhaps to be explained by the fact that Hayley had coated the pill with a potentially lucrative piece of sugar. The atrocious ballads were to be reissued all together in one small volume, and Blake was to reap the profit: a letter from Hayley to Lady Hesketh makes it clear that this was in fact conscience money: 'I printed them only that they may prove more beneficial in this pocket size to the diligent artist who laboured in the cause of poor Cowper with more Zeal than success'. (109) There rings through these words that smug and patronizing tone of Hayley that Blake must have detested.

At the end of 1805 Blake presumably realized that Hayley intended to employ Caroline Watson to engrave the Life of Romney. There would seem no other reason for the abrupt ending of the Blake-Hayley correspondence at that time (the last letter of Blake's to Hayley that we possess is dated 11 December 1805). All the work Blake had done for Hayley over the previous two years was to bring him almost nothing in the way of financial reward. When the life of Romney finally appeared in 1809 only one of the plates was engraved by Blake. And as for Hayley's edition of Cowper's Milton, (110) which Blake had had such high hopes of engraving, the two plates for this were the work of Abraham Raimbach.

The most crucial element in the Blake-Hayley quarrel, however, has nothing to do with whether or not Hayley swindled Blake - Blake thought he did, Hayley equally well persuaded himself that his treatment of the engraver was perfectly fair. (113) What is much more important was that their two views of art were diametrically opposed - Hayley accepted that art was a commodity, on occasion a grand and

awe-inspiring commodity, but still a commodity. Blake's work had no separate existence of its own, it was there to help Hayley's works sell. Hayley's concept of art went no further than this - he therefore did not understand that as far as Blake was concerned his work for Hayley was essentially hack work, work he did to earn money, not work that he regarded as particularly important in itself. What Hayley insisted he do at Felpham Blake considered as 'mere drudgery.'⁽¹¹²⁾ - to Blake it was his solemn duty to engage in works of 'The Real Man, The Imagination which Liveth for ever'.⁽¹¹³⁾ The 'Corporeal' world was not enough, the true artist must also work in the 'spiritual' world. The dichotomy corporeal/spiritual in Blake is best seen not as a conflict between materialist and idealist philosophical positions, but between the world of commodities and the 'true' world of the creative imagination.

Whether we accept Blake's words at their face value when he told Butts 'that I am under the direction of Messengers from Heaven, Daily and Nightly',⁽¹¹⁴⁾ is a moot point - the majority of critical opinion today would favour a non-literal interpretation of passages such as these: but it is fairly clear the the 'Messengers', whatever their origin, are directing Blake in the production of painting and poetry quite unconnected with William Hayley.⁽¹¹⁵⁾

At one point Blake made the mistake of showing some of his poetry to Hayley. If he expected a sympathetic response he was badly disappointed, for Hayley 'has read part by his own desire, and has looked with sufficient contempt to enhance my opinion of it.'⁽¹¹⁶⁾ The poem in question was probably The Four Zoas - a work of which Hayley is unlikely to have comprehended a single line. The right to work at liberty on his own projects, free of Hayley's niggling instructions, Blake

described as 'My Just Right as an Artist and as a Man',⁽¹¹⁷⁾ and it was a right he was not prepared to relinquish.

There is no doubt that Hayley was genuinely concerned for Blake, but in a fashion that was patronizing in the extreme. It is best summed up in words written by Hayley to Lady Hesketh in Blake's defence:

Whatever the Merits or the Failings of my diligent and grateful artist may be, I know I shall interest your Heart and Soul in his favour when I tell you that he resembles our beloved friend ⁽¹¹⁸⁾ in the Tenderness of his Heart and in the perilous powers of an imagination utterly unfit to take due care of himself.

This veiled reference to Cowper's insanity clearly places Hayley among the ranks of those who believed that even if Blake was talented, he was at least slightly mad.⁽¹¹⁹⁾ Blake's sensibility, Hayley continues

is so dangerously acute that the common rough treatment which true genius often receives from ordinary minds in the commerce of the world might not only wound him more than it should do, but really reduce him to the incapacity of an Ideot without the consolatory support of a considerate friend.

This was the sort of friendship that Blake could well do without - it led him to draw a distinction between 'corporeal' and 'spiritual' friends:

if a Man is the Enemy of my Spiritual Life, while he pretends to be a Friend of my Corporeal, he is a Real Enemy - but the Man may be the Friend of my Spiritual Life while he seems the ⁽¹²¹⁾ Enemy of my Corporeal, but Not Vice Versa.

This doctrine finds mythical expression in the quarrel between Satan and Palamabron in Book I of Milton, and bitter epigrammatical form in the couplet To H. in Blake's Notebook:

Thy Friendship oft has made my heart to ache
Do be my Enemy for Friendship's sake.

These then, what we can call the conditions of Blake's cultural production, and the concrete experiences derived from those conditions, provided

strong impulses to push Blake towards political conclusions of a highly radical nature. He attacked the whole system of 'Trading Exhibitions' of 'The Rich Men of England' selling, and not buying, pictures.⁽¹²³⁾ Commodity production Blake simply called Commerce: Woodlett's and Strange's works are 'the Life's Labour of Ignorant Journeymen, Suited to the Purposes of Commerce no doubt, for Commerce Cannot endure Individual Merit; its insatiable Maw must be fed by What all can do Equally well; at least it is so in England, as I have found to my Cost these Forty Years'.⁽¹²⁴⁾

Blake's attack on 'Commerce' - a position arrived at after years of bitterness and failure in confrontations with the art establishment - differentiates him from most of his fellow radicals. This position was clearly not compatible with the 'respectable' variety of radicalism examined in Chapter 1. Objectively plebeian radicalism, on the other hand, could easily accommodate this perspective. For evidently the class interests of wage earners and artisans were not (with the rare exceptions of those artisans who succeeded in becoming major employers) served by the development of capitalist relations of production. But generally this was not recognised by the radical leaders themselves (which does not make it any the less true). The great theoretical weakness of English Jacobinism (and of French Jacobinism, for that matter) was its overriding preoccupation with the mechanisms of political power. The leaders and, as far as we can tell, most of the members of the popular societies assumed that if they could seize control of the political machine (via universal suffrage and annual elections, or later, when the movement was forced underground, via conspiracy and French assisted insurrection), then they would be able to improve their economic position and introduce an egalitarian republic.

But in the wake of his own failure, Blake went beyond this, and located the sufferings of artisans and wage-earners in the functioning of an economic system of 'commerce', for which a state apparatus dominated in the main by capitalist landowners and a small but growing number of industrial entrepreneurs was the major political articulation, but not the determining factor. In some of his later annotations, Blake's position is not only explicitly anti-capitalist, but in its rejection of money, embraces a utopian anarchism. 'Where any view of money exists', Blake wrote, 'Art cannot be carried out, but War only'. And later, in the same set of aphorisms, 'Christianity is Art and not Money. Money is its Curse'.⁽¹²⁵⁾ Blake's conclusion is that once society is dominated by commodity production - that is, by exchange value, and hence by money, the alienated medium of exchange - then art is faced with a thoroughly hostile environment.

The last annotations Blake made before his death also reflect this position. The work that aroused Blake's anger and sarcasm on this occasion was Dr. Thornton's New Translation of the Lords Prayer. Thornton's version was a 'Tory translation' in which God becomes a petty tyrant concerned only with money and taxes. Blake poured vitriolic scorn on Thornton's conception:

Lawful Bread, bought with Lawful Money, and a Lawful Heaven,
seen through a Lawful Window Light! The Holy Ghost, and what-
ever cannot be Taxed is Unlawful and Witchcraft. Spirits are
Lawful, but not Ghosts; especially Royal Gin is Lawful Spirit.

Here Blake recalls the weight of indirect taxation pressing down on the working people of Britain - specifically, the window tax and the tax on spirits are mentioned. Blake's alternative appeal to the Almighty is:

Give us the Bread that is our due and Right, by taking away

Money, or a Price, or Tax upon what is common to all in thy(126)
Kingdom.

This passage is interesting not only for Blake's vigorous attack on taxation, but also for its conception of the Kingdom of God existing (or rather, to be brought into existence) in the here and now, on this earth. This theme had been central throughout Blake's major Prophetic Books - The Four Zoas, Milton and Jerusalem, - where it takes the form of a vision of a humanistic apocalypse.

Finally it must be pointed out that Blake's opposition to commodity production took on a severely practical aspect. He attempted to re-establish non-commodity forms of expression; in attempts to by-pass the commercial establishment Blake introduced his own revolutionary methods of art production. The one which Blake made most use of was his own process of illuminated printing used for the great majority of his poetry whereby words and illustration were engraved together on to a single plate by a particularly arduous method, supposedly taught to Blake by the spirit of his dead brother, Robert. This had the great advantages firstly of producing a unified work of art where word and image complemented and strengthened each other organically rather than one being *ex post facto* superimposed on the other; (127) and secondly of freeing Blake from dependence on publishers or patrons. Equally it had the disadvantage of helping reduce his contemporary audience to miniscule proportions. (128) Blake seems to have produced copies of his illuminated writings whenever a client wanted one - this accounts for the such strange anomalies as the contradictory ordering of the plates in the three copies of Milton we possess, and also the great variety of colouring in the copies of the more popular works such

as Songs of Innocence and Experience.

A second attempt at revolutionary innovation aimed at completely removing the cash nexus between the consumer and producer of art. This was the various plans Blake engaged in for public art on a grand scale. In order to impress the government with the need for public support for the arts, Blake was not above playing on national prejudices. He co-operated with Flaxman in urging the government to celebrate the British naval victories over France by raising a gigantic monument. Blake provided the engravings for Flaxman's Letter to the Committee for Raising the Naval Pillar. Flaxman argues against raising either an obelisk (too simple) or a triumphal arch (not big enough), and suggests instead the erection of a colossal statue

whose aspect and size should represent the Genius of the Empire; its magnitude should equal the Colossus of Rhodes; its character should be Britannia Triumphant; it should be mounted on a suitable pedestal and basement; the pedestal might be decorated with the Heroes and Trophies of the Country, and the History of its prowess inscribed upon the basement. The whole work might be raised to the height required, 230 feet, and present the noblest Monument of National Glory in the world. (129)

The idea of the pedestal was presumably to give various artists a chance to exhibit historical paintings or sculpture at the government's expense. 'Such a work', continued Flaxman 'should be worthy the grandeur of the country ... should be a decided proof of the excellence of our artists, the skill of our Mechanics and Builders, and in all respects a lasting memorial of the Magnanimity, Virtue and Wisdom of the country', (130) and Blake's final illustration shows the projected statue overlooking and dwarfing Greenwich Hospital. However despite Flaxman's suggestion of a 200,000 strong subscription of five shillings each to help finance the project, (131) the pamphlet and its appeal fell

on deaf ears. The committee of admirals and other public figures set up to produce a 'Monument to Perpetuate the Glorious Victories of the British Navy' failed completely in its task.⁽¹³²⁾ In 1805 the Times demanded that the money collected by the Committee should be used for a memorial commemorating Trafalgar and the death of Nelson: but the funds of the committee proved quite insufficient for purchasing even one marble column.⁽¹³³⁾

A similar attempt to revive large-scale public art was Blake's advocacy of fresco-painting on the walls of public buildings: Blake proposed not that the frescos be painted directly onto plaster, but on canvas stretched over plaster. In this way pictures could be regularly changed, and more artists be given a chance to exhibit:

A Wall on Canvas or Wood, or any other portable thing, of dimensions ever so large, or ever so small, which may be removed with the same convenience as so many easel pictures; is worthy the consideration of the Rich and those who have the direction of public Works ... I could divide Westminster Hall, or the walls of any other great Building into compartments and ornament them with Frescos, which would be removable at pleasure. (134)

Blake's frescos were water-colours 'as high finished as miniatures or enamels' and he dreamt of using the technique to reproduce 'those wonderful originals seen in my visions ... some of them one hundred feet in height'.⁽¹³⁵⁾ Such grandiose plans (the inspiration for which probably came from such examples as Michaelangelo's work in the Sistine Chapel) required state backing - but the state of William Pitt and George III had no use for men such as Blake.⁽¹³⁶⁾

FOOTNOTES

All references to Blake's writings are taken from the Oxford Standard Authors Edition of the Complete Poetry and Prose, edited by Sir Geoffrey Keynes, and are given as K with the page number following.

1. 'A commodity is in the first place an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance, they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference ... To become a commodity a product must be transferred to another, whom it will serve as a use-value, by means of an exchange ... A commodity is a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of mens' labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation existing not between themselves but between the products of their labour ... The existence of the things qua commodities, and the value relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom. There it is a definite social relation between men which assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things ...'

Karl Marx Capital Vol. I pp 35-72

2. For further detail see A. Hauser The Social History of Art 2 vols. London 1951
3. See Hauser op. cit. pp 545-548
4. See Maurice Rheims Art on the Market London 1961 pp 175-182
5. G. Reitlinger The Economics of Taste: The Rise and Fall of Picture Prices 1760-1960 London 1961 pp 60-62

Reynolds, however, considered that his most important works were his large religious and historical pieces. Owing to the vast number of commissions he received for portraits, he was unable to execute many of these. This is perhaps fortunate. As Barry said, probably with Reynolds in mind: 'As to the notion that a portrait painter can also, when called upon, paint history and that he can, merely from his acquaintance with the map of the face, travel with security over other regions of the body, every part of which has a peculiar and a difficult geography of its own, this would be too palpably absurd to need any refutation'. James Barry Inquiry into the Real and Imaginary Obstructions to the Acquisition of the Arts in England London 1775 p. 134

6. Joseph Farington The Farington Diary ed. James Grey 8 vols. London 1922-28. Entry of June 14 1795. I, p. 100
7. Reitlinger op. cit. pp 61-62
8. Incorrect. The salary was £50.
9. Reynolds to the Duke of Rutland, Sept. 1784. Quoted in W.T. Whitby Artists and their Friends in England
10. Annotations to Reynolds K. 468
11. Ibid. K. 472
12. Public Address K. 596
13. Reitlinger op. cit. p. 63
14. Quoted G. Pelles Art, Artists and Society. Origins of a Modern Dilemma New Jersey 1963 p. 32
15. Annotations to Reynolds K. 465
16. J.T. Smith Nollekens and his Times 2 vols. London 1829 II p. 314
17. Farington op. cit. Entry of Jan. 1 1795 I p. 83
18. Reitlinger op. cit. p. 66. It was, however, bettered in France where Napoleon paid David 300,000 francs for his Sacré de L'Empereur
19. Reitlinger op. cit. p. 70
20. Public Address K. 599
21. Barry op. cit. p. 76
22. Ibid. pp 77-78
23. Joyn Pye Patronage of British Art: An Historical Sketch London 1845 pp 29-30
24. Horace Walpole to Sir Horace Mann 18 Nov. 1771. Letters of Horace Walpole, Earl of Orford to Sir Horace Mann 8 vols. London 1843 II p. 180
25. Its price slumped to £630 when resold in 1796 after the fall in picture prices engendered by the war.
26. In fact the only undoubted Corregio in England arrived in 1793. This was the Danae. It was in an atrocious condition, having been mutilated because of its 'lewd' subject, and then badly

restored by the painter Crypel: nonetheless, it sold for 200 guineas in 1802 (Reitlinger op. cit. pp 6-7). Much retouching and restoring was done by picture cleaners, often with results highly detrimental to the painting. James Barry attacked the 'contamination of those miscreant picture-cleaners, or rather defacers, who, like a pestilential blast, sweep away every vestige of the pristine health and vigour of well nourished tints, leaving nothing to remain but a hoary meagreness and decrepitude' (Barry A Letter to the Dilettanti Society, respecting the Obtention of certain matters essentially necessary for the improvement of public taste and for accomplishing the original views of the Royal Academy of Great Britain Second Edition London 1799 p. 9)

Joshua Reynolds was as capable as anyone else of being taken in by fraud - when his collection was sold in 1795, the catalogue advertised 70 Van Dykes, 5⁴ Corregios, 5⁴ Michaelangelos, 2⁴ Raphaels and even 12 Leonardos! (Reitlinger op. cit. p. 9). Only two genuine Leonardos existed in England in 1800. The uncoloured cartoon of The Holy Family with St. Anne was in the possession of the Royal Academy, and Lord Lansdowne owned The Virgin of the Rocks (Reitlinger op. cit. p. 42).

27. Hogarth, anticipating such action from status-conscious painters, had opposed the creation of such an academy. Later, engravers were allowed six seats as 'associates' - but refused to accept them. (Bronowski William Blake and the Age of Revolution London 1972 pp 22-23)
28. Public Address K. 59⁴
29. John Pye Evidence Relating to the Art of Engraving, Taken before the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Arts 1836 London 1836 p. 8
30. Ibid. p. 18
31. Council members 'disliked competition from the ghosts of the past' (Reitlinger op. cit. p. 11)
32. John Pye Patronage of British Art p. 16⁴
33. Ibid. pp 172-73
34. R.A. Council Minutes Vol. II p. 357
35. Sir W.R.M. Lamb The Royal Academy. A Short History of its Foundation and Development London 1951 p. 26
36. S.C. Hutchison The History of the Royal Academy 1768-1968 London 1968 p. 7⁴
37. Edward Edwards ARA Anecdotes of Painters London 1808 p. 312

38. R.A. Council Minutes Vol. III pp 15-17
39. Barry op. cit. p. 35
40. Ibid. p. 51
41. Hutchison op. cit. p. 79
42. Annotations to Reynolds K. 449
43. Ibid. K. 445
44. Notebook K. 553
45. John Pye Patronage of British Art p. 218
46. J.T. Smith op. cit. Vol. II p. 301
47. Reitlinger op. cit. p. 72
48. Public Address. Additional Passages K.603
49. Public Address K. 591
50. Ibid.
51. Annotations to Reynolds K. 463
52. Ibid. p. 464
53. John Hall was an engraver of historical paintings after Benjamin West. He also reproduced the romantic scenes of Hamilton, De Louthembourg and Gibbon in works of Chiaroscuro where tone, not line, is supposed to determine form. Sir Robert Strange engraved portraits, allegories and histories after Guido Reni, and romantic scenes after Salvator Rosa (whom Blake also despised). Jean Hagstrum William Blake, Poet and Painter p. 160
54. Public Address K. 593
55. Ibid. K. 594
56. Ibid. K. 592
57. Annotations to Reynolds K. 452-453
58. Ibid. K. 445
59. Ibid. K. 452
60. Jerusalem Plate 3 K. 621
61. The Laocoon K. 775
62. Cf the preface to Milton K. 480

63. On Homer's Poetry and on Virgil K. 778
64. Public Address K. 600. Blake would seem to draw a distinction between 'political science' and 'politics'. The latter term refers to the debating games played in the Houses of Parliament by the government and opposition. Hence Blake's statement 'I am really very sorry to see my Countrymen trouble themselves about Politics ... Princes appear to me to be Fools. Houses of Commons and Houses of Lords appear to me to be Fools; they seem to me to be something Else besides Human Life'. Critics who use this quote to prove that Blake had turned apolitical are accepting a very narrow definition of 'politics' and are ignoring the comment on 'political science' that immediately follows these lines.
65. Annotations to Reynolds K. 451
66. Ibid. K. 445
67. Gerald Bentley Jr. Blake Records Oxford 1969 p. 29. According to Gilchrist, the blue-stocking Mrs. Matthews also contributed finance. Alexander Gilchrist The Life of William Blake 1906 ed. London p. 57
68. Farington op. cit. Entry of June 24 1796 I p. 151
69. This is far from certain. Bentley expresses doubt as to whether Blake received anything (op. cit. p. 52). On the other hand Ruthven Todd accepts the word of the 'mildly crazy' Richard Jackson 'whose family had certainly known Blake' that he was paid £40 for the engraving of each plate (Todd William Blake the Artist London 1971 p. 46). But as Todd points out, even that was miserable when compared to the sums other engravers were getting. And Blake may well have hoped to make extra money by selling watercolour copies of the prints - a number of such copies do in fact exist.
70. S. Maccoby English Radicalism 1786-1832. From Paine to Cobbett London 1955 p. 110
71. Memoirs and Recollections of the Late Abraham Raimbach Esq., Engraver ed. M.T.S. Raimbach London 1843 p. 22
72. Todd op. cit. p. 48
73. See Gilchrist op. cit. Chapter XXII
74. Blake to Hayley 27 Nov. 1805 K. 861
75. Flaxman to Hayley Oct. 18 1805. Quoted in Bentley op. cit. p. 166

76. Gilchrist op. cit. pp 253-54
77. Cf Notebook K. 536-37
78. The Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine Nov. 1808 p. 225
79. The Examiner August 7 1808 p. 510. The Anti-Jacobin Review also harped on this point: 'The full expression of nudity even in moral works is not wholly desirable and we think that the descending angel ... might have been furnished with wings to infold his nakedness' Nov. 1808 p. 232
80. The Examiner August 28 1808 p. 558
81. Gilchrist op. cit. p. 248
82. This is not merely my judgement. Byron had this to say:
 Whether he spin poor couplets into plays,
 Or damn the dead with purgatorial praise,
 His style in youth or age is still the same,
 For ever feeble and for ever tame.
 (English Bards and Scotch Reviewers
 311-316)
84. G.E. Bentley 'Blake, Hayley and Lady Hesketh' Review of English Studies N.S. VII 1956 p. 264
85. Notebook K. 544
86. Bishop Blake's Hayley
87. Blake to Thomas Butts 10 May 1801 K. 808
88. Blake to Butts 10 Jan. 1802 K. 811-812
89. See Bishop op. cit.
90. The extremely conservative Joseph Farington went so far as to call him 'A violent Republican', an absurd exaggeration. (Farington op. cit. Entry of Jan. 6 1795 I 85)
91. Lady Hesketh to Hayley 29 December 1800. Quoted Bentley 'Blake, Hayley and Lady Hesketh' p. 266
92. Cf Bentley op. cit. p. 265
93. Lady Hesketh to Hayley 19 March 1801. Quoted Bentley op. cit. pp 268-69
94. Hayley Ballads 1805 p. 21
95. Ibid. p. 2

96. Ibid. p. 12
97. Southey in The Annual Review IV, 575 (1806)
98. Bentley Blake Records pp 116-17
99. Blake to Hayley 26 October 1803 K. 831
100. Blake to Butts 22 November 1802 K. 815
101. Blake to his brother, James Blake 20 January 1803 K. 819-21
102. Blake to Butts 6 July 1803 K. 824-25
103. Blake to Hayley 7 October 1803 K. 829
104. Lady Hesketh to Hayley 27 November 1803. Quoted Bentley 'Blake, Hayley and Lady Hesketh' p. 282
105. Lady Hesketh to Hayley 15 November 1804. Quoted ibid. p. 283
106. Lady Hesketh to Hayley 27 July 1805. Quoted ibid. p. 284
107. Lady Hesketh to Johnny Johnson 31 July 1805. Quoted Bentley Blake Records p. 163
108. Blake to Hayley 25 April 1805 K. 859
109. Hayley to Lady Hesketh 18 July 1805. Quoted Bentley 'Blake, Hayley and Lady Hesketh' p. 284. Whether Blake actually made any money from this venture we do not know. It is quite possible that he made another loss - his letter to Hayley of 22 January 1805 records that he and the bookseller Phillips were going halves on the expenses. No information is available as to whether or not the Ballads sold.
110. Latin and Italian Poems of Milton translated into English Verse ... by the late William Cowper Edited by William Hayley London 1808
111. See Bishop op. cit.
112. Blake to Butts 10 January 1802 K. 812
113. Blake to George Cumberland 12 April 1827 K. 878
114. Blake to Butts 10 January 1802 K. 812
115. In the introduction to his final, massive epic Jerusalem, Blake makes the concept of 'direction' a bit more explicit: 'When this Verse was first dictated to me, I consider'd a Monotonous

- Cadence, like that used by Milton and Shakespeare ... to be a necessary and indispensable part of verse. But I soon found that in the mouth of a true orator, such monotony was not only awkward, but as much a bondage as rhyme itself. I therefore have produced a variety in every line, both of cadences and number of syllables'. (K. 621) Evidently if the poet has freedom of choice in his verse-form, then the 'Dictation' can only refer to ideas and concepts from the Poetic Imagination which in Blake's not particularly clear theology is often synonymous with God and with unfallen Man.
116. Blake to Butts 6 July 1803 K. 825
 117. Ibid.
 118. I.E. Cowper
 119. The debate as to whether or not Blake was 'mad' has raged for over a century and a half. Blake himself made the definitive comment on the subject in his 1809 Public Address, after he had received a very great deal of 'common rough treatment': addressing himself rhetorically to 'Ye English Engravers' - Woollett, Strange etc. - he remarked 'It is very true what you have said for these thirty-two years. I am Mad or Else you are so; both of us cannot be in our right sense'. K. 593
 120. Hayley to Lady Hesketh 15 July 1802. Bentley 'Blake, Hayley and Lady Hesketh' pp 277-78
 121. Blake to Butts 25 April 1803 K. 822
 122. Notebook K. 545
 123. Annotations to Reynolds K. 452
 124. Public Address K. 593
 125. The Laocoon K. 776-777
 126. Annotations to Thornton K. 787-788
 127. This can be easily seen by comparing any of Blake's illuminated writings with works which he illustrated but did not write e.g. Young's Night Thoughts.
 128. Blake remarks in a letter to Dawson of 9 June 1818 that 'The few I have Printed and Sold are sufficient to have gained me great reputation as an Artist, which was the chief thing I intended'. (K. 867). This was a gross exaggeration, written as it was in a period when Blake had sunk into total obscurity.
 129. John Flaxman Letter to the Committee for Raising the Naval Pillar London 1799 pp 7-8

130. Ibid. p. 9
131. Ibid. p. 10
132. David Erdman Blake: Prophet Against Empire Revised edition
New Jersey 1969 p. 441
133. This episode is, to say the least, opportunist, given Blake's denunciations of the war against France. Erdman suggests that the project is obliquely parodied in Night II of The Four Zoas. (op. cit. pp 336-37)
134. The Invention of a Portable Fresco K. 560
135. A Descriptive Catalogue K. 566. Blake was not the only revolutionary artist to espouse the cause of monumental art. Monuments cannot be purchased by individual consumers and hidden away in private rooms - monuments are for the people. Or as the Mexican artist and communist Siqueiros wrote in the Manifesto he issued when forming the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors: 'We repudiate so-called easel painting and all such art which springs from ultra intellectual circles, for it is essentially aristocratic.
- We hail monumental expression, because such art is public property.
- Our supreme objective in art, which is today an expression of individual pleasure, is to create beauty for all'. (Quoted in Jack Lindsay 'The Role of the Individual in Art' Marxism Today May 1975 p. 160
136. A third innovation attempted by Blake was the use of a millboard to give large-scale reproduction of colour prints. However the fragility of the millboard made it impossible to produce more than a few copies - and the results varied considerably in quality. See Northrop Frye 'Poetry and Design in William Blake' JAAC Vol. X September 1951

ii) The Critique of Politics

Having located Blake in terms of his productive activity, and the art market, it will now be convenient to investigate his radicalism, traced mainly through his poetry, under two separate heads. First, as a response to directly political events taking place around him; and second, as a response to the ideological climate of the time.

Much of the former is fairly easy to trace in the overt commitment of Blake's writings of the 1780s and 1790s. Blake matured during the American War of Independence, and if one were to seek an origin for his radical politics, it is here that one would start. While the war was in process, Blake wrote a number of the poems collected in the volume Poetical Sketches.

This was published in 1783, and according to the Preface the pieces it included were written between Blake's twelfth and twentieth years - that is, 1769 to 1778. One of the latest and most illuminating of these is the ballad Gwin, King of Norway, which describes a successful popular revolt against a tyrant. It may well have been suggested by a piece of Chatterton's, Godred Corvan, published in the 1778 edition of Chatterton's poems.

Gwin wields a 'cruel sceptre' over 'the nations of the north', while a vicious aristocracy oppresses the poor. Hunger sparks revolt:

The land is desolate; our wives
And children cry for bread;
Arise and pull the tyrant down!
Let Gwin be humbled!

The people's rebellion and energy is personified as the giant Gordred - an early sketch for Orc, Blake's definitive character of revolution in the later prophecies. Attacked by 'the nations' - for which Blake may well have expected his audience to read 'the colonies' - Gwin calls his chieftains together for the war. They are confronted by a great popular alliance as the husbandman and the merchant, the shepherd and the workman leave their tools and take up arms. Like many later figures of repression in Blake's poetry Gwin is associated with darkness and with disease: ⁽³⁾ he 'leads his host, as black as night/When pestilence does fly'.

A dreadful battle follows with an appalling death-toll; eventually Gordred slays the tyrant Gwin, and eagles feed upon the dead (the use of the eagle - an American symbol - by Blake is perhaps not coincidental). In one of the closing stanzas Blake generalizes from this battle to produce a sweeping indictment of monarchy as an institution:

O what have Kings to answer for,
 Before that awful throne!
 When thousand deaths for vengeance cry,
 And ghosts accusing groan!

The meaning of the poem is fairly transparent. Only its name links it with Norway: in the context of the 1770s and 1780s 'the nations of the north' are the thirteen North American colonies, and the 'cruel sceptre' which oppresses them is that of George III. Unless the Preface to Practical Sketches is quite wrong as to the dates of the composition of the poems, Gwin does not refer to the definitive British defeat at Yorktown: it may refer to the earlier British debacle at Saratoga, however. But this is hardly important, since Blake is quite uninterested in military detail, using the battle to express a general abhorrence of

war and to prophesy the inevitable collapse of tyranny.

Gwin is not a particularly good poem, but it is useful in showing Blake's loathing of war,⁽⁴⁾ even at this early stage in his career - the description of carnage on the battlefield occupies seven whole stanzas. The poem also tells us that Blake was opposed, not merely to bad kings, or to the abuse of kingly power but to the entire institution of monarchy. We can also witness his belief in the power of ordinary people, of the popular classes - the husbandman, merchant, shepherd and workman of the poem who organise resistance and whose energy is summed up in the figure of Gordred. In 1793 Gwin and Gordred will reappear, magnificently transformed, as the Guardian Prince of Albion and Orc in one of Blake's most spectacular illuminated books, America.

While the American war was in process, London was wracked with the worst bout of rioting of the century. Blake's participation in the Gordon Riots of June 1780 would seem to be the first of his few direct involvements in politics. He was in the front rank of the crowd that burned down Newgate prison and released its occupants on June 6th. Blake's first biographer, Gilchrist, and many later Blake critics, would have us believe that Blake's participation was 'involuntary'.⁽⁵⁾ It is not easy to see how one can be carried 'involuntarily' into the front rank of such a crowd, and since the burning of Newgate took place on the fifth day of the riots,⁽⁶⁾ it is perhaps more reasonable to assume that Blake, like hundreds of other London artisans present at the scene, knew full well what he was doing.

The riots themselves have usually been dismissed as the work of a bigoted, unthinking and destructive 'mob'. One chronicler of the

events has even called his book King Mob,⁽⁷⁾ and historians such as Maccoby⁽⁸⁾ blame the riots for killing off the chances for a parliamentary reform in the eighteenth century. Such a short-sighted view neglects the fact that had any reform been achieved at the time of the Wyvillite agitation it would in all probability still have left those artisans and wage-earners who formed the bulk of the rioters⁽⁹⁾ outside the political nation. Lacking all political rights, the 'lower orders' most obvious political weapon was the riot. Riots are always contradictory in character; they include wanton violence, looting, the settling of old personal scores - but they are also often directed against persons or institutions for reasons of class. The class interests of the 'lower orders' could not be expressed within the state apparatus, therefore they were expressed outside it, in the streets. Certainly the crowds involved in the 1780 riots were inflamed with religious bigotry (but a bigotry that had a strong historic rationale), and certainly they wanted to beat up Catholics - but if that was all they had wanted to do, they should have gone to the quarters of the Irish labourers in the East End. Instead they concentrated their efforts on the other side of the city, and the homes they attacked were the residences of rich Catholics.⁽¹⁰⁾ With the assaults on prisons and toll-houses - seen as instruments of repression - and the attempt on the Bank of England, the class nature of the riots became increasingly clear, and they threatened to turn into a general onslaught against the rich and the institutions of the rich.

The American War was a contributory factor in the riots: Lord Gordon himself considered that the Catholic Relief Bill had been drawn up 'for the diabolical purpose of arming the Papists against the Protestant

Colonies in America'.⁽¹¹⁾ 'Popery' and tyranny were indissolubly associated in the popular mind; so that it was easy to believe that George III and his ministers might attempt to raise an army of Catholics in Canada, or perhaps in Ireland, to crush the American rebellion. Blake, as a sympathizer of the American cause, and as a hater, in the standard Protestant tradition, of the Whore of Babylon, was no less likely to be swayed by this than any other London artisan.

The Gordon Riots found Blake involved in a popular upheaval of huge dimensions, in the greatest of all eighteenth century outbursts of the incoherent radicalism of the streets. They show, as do Gwin and other of the Poetical Sketches, where Blake's political sympathies lay. The riots may also have given Blake the inspiration for many of the more violent engravings in the Prophetic Books.

Two years later an incident occurred which cannot have endeared the British Government to Blake. In the company of Stothard and one Mr. Ogleby, Blake made a trip up the River Medway. While the artists were sketching by the shore of the river they were unceremoniously seized by a group of soldiers who accused them of being spies for the French government: obviously they were drawing up plans of the river and the surrounding country to assist a French invasion! Although their detention did not last long - they were freed when members of the Royal Academy certified that they were 'peaceable subjects of His Majesty King George and not spies for France' - this episode was not calculated to reconcile Blake to the English political system.⁽¹²⁾

Blake was arrested again, twenty years later, in 1803, during his stay in Felpham. This was an altogether more serious affair. According to

Gilchrist:

A drunken soldier - probably from the barracks at Aldwick or Chichester - broke into the little slip of garden fronting the painter's sequestered cottage, and was there as violent and unruly as is the wont of drunken soldiers to be.

Gilchrist draws a dramatic picture of how Blake

robust, well-knit, with plenty of courage, and capable of a supernatural energy ... laid hold of the intrusive blackguard, and turn'd him out neck and crop, in a kind of inspired frenzy. (13)

Drunk or not, the soldier, Schofield, was infuriated enough to lay a complaint of sedition against Blake. According to this, Blake's altercation with the soldier had been nothing but an insolent cascade of treason: he was alleged to have uttered

the following seditious expressions, viz. that we (meaning the people of England) were like a parcel of children, that they would play with themselves till they get scolded and burnt, that the French knew our Strength very well, and if Bonaparte should come, he would be Master of Europe in an Hour's Time, that England might depend upon it, that when he set his Foot on English Ground, that every Englishman would have his choice whether to have his Throat cut, or to join the French, and that he was a Strong Man, and would certainly begin to cut Throats, and the strongest Man must conquer, that he damned the King of England, his country and his subjects, that his Soldiers were all bound for Slaves, and all the poor people in general. (14)

Schofield also accused Catherine Blake, the poet's wife, of equally bloodthirsty remarks.

In a memorandum of August 1803, Blake refuted Schofield's charges, and drew upon the evidence of several witnesses who had been in the vicinity at the time of the argument and had heard nothing seditious said. Blake also suggested a possible explanation for Schofield's hostility other than simple drunkenness:

The Soldier said to Mrs. Grinder, that it would be right to have my House searched, as I might have plans of the country which I intended to send to the Enemy; he called me a Military Painter; I suppose mistaking the words Miniature Painter, which he might

have heard me called. I think that this proves, his having come into the garden with some bad Intention, or at least with a prejudiced mind. (15)

Blake spent several anxious months waiting for his trial. But in the event, all passed off relatively smoothly and in January 1804 Blake was acquitted. The witnesses were on his side, apart from Schofield's colleague, a second soldier called Cock, and Schofield's story may well not have carried conviction. It was one thing to accuse Blake of having exclaimed 'Damn the King!' - Blake, like many another radical, could quite easily have said this when angered. But it was something rather different to make Blake a partisan of Bonaparte, eager to see English throats cut. Blake had received a nasty shock through the affair: he extracted a little vengeance of his own by incorporating Schofield and Cock (whose name he spelt as Cox) into his massive epic Jerusalem as two of the twelve sinister Sons of Albion.

These then were Blake's clashes with authority. They certainly do not constitute any sort of evidence that Blake was a political activist. In the space between his two arrests, Blake appears as a spectator rather than a participant. The remainder of the 1780s was a relatively tranquil time for Blake, and one of considerable optimism, as the 1784 manuscript An Island in the Moon shows. He flirted with Swedenborgianism, and developed his private technique for producing illuminated books.

As for the upheavals of the following decade, Blake does not appear to have taken a direct part in them. There is no evidence that he was ever a member of any political society (unfortunately not enough of the membership lists of the London Corresponding Society have survived for

us to be categorical on this point). His name is certainly not mentioned in the government investigations and suppression of the popular societies in the 1790s (though those of some of his acquaintances are). As for the colourful story that Blake warned Paine of his impending arrest in September 1792 and hustled him across to France, thus saving his life,⁽¹⁶⁾ the best that can be said for it is that it is unproven and unlikely. It did not take great prophetic insight, after the Royal Proclamation against seditious writings of May 1792, to realize that Paine was in considerable danger, and we can be sure that others besides Blake impressed this fact upon Paine. And Paine needed no warning to go to France - Calais had elected him its deputy to the National Convention, and regardless of threats of arrest Paine intended to cross the channel to take up his seat.

As regards activity Blake was on the sidelines of English Jacobinism. In old age he was to state that he 'always avowed himself a "Liberty Boy", a faithful "Son of Liberty".'⁽¹⁷⁾ This avowal was never loud enough to attract government attention (with the possible exception of the Schofield incident in 1803), and as repression gathered momentum so Blake's political avowals became increasingly cryptic. However, this is not to deny Blake's radicalism - merely to point out that it finds better expression in his poetry than in his active life.

We can be certain that Blake knew a number of leading radicals. The radical publisher, Joseph Johnson, employed Blake to design and engrave illustrations for Mary Wollstonecraft's Original Stories and Elements of Morality and planned to publish Blake's poem The French Revolution. And Johnson's habit of entertaining his authors presumably meant that Blake met radicals such as Paine, Wollstonecraft and Joel Barlow

across Johnson's dining table. Barlow in fact provided valuable source material for Blake's America in his lengthy (and none too readable) epic, The Vision of Columbus, and he seems to have repaid the compliment by incorporating ideas from America in the revised version, The Columbiad.⁽¹⁸⁾ Mary Wollstonecraft's Vindication of the Rights of Women may well have provided some of the inspiration for Blake's impassioned attack on women's oppression and defence of freedom in sexuality, Visions of the Daughters of Albion. Blake had another link to Mary Wollstonecraft in the form of his friend and fellow-artist, Henry Fuseli, with whom Wollstonecraft had fallen in love in 1792.⁽¹⁹⁾ Fuseli was a regular attender at Johnson's dinners, and a regular contributor to Johnson's Analytical Review.

There are one or two definite, if slim, links between Blake and the London Corresponding Society and the Society for Constitutional Information. William Sharpe, another radical engraver, who had worked with Blake on the Wits' Magazine in the 1780s, and on plates for Lavater's Physiognomy and Johnson's Milton in the 1790s, was an active member of the SCI. His biographer, however, attempts to minimize his political involvement and paints an amusing picture of Sharpe the political innocent under interrogation by the Privy Council:

Dabbling a little (it could be no more) in the politics of Thomas Paine and Horne Tooke - both of whose portraits he engraved - he was brought before the members of the Privy Council as one suspected of entertaining revolutionary principles. During his examination, being vexed at what to him seemed irrelevant questions, he handed to Pitt and Dundas the prospectus of a work which Tooke had in contemplation, requesting them to have the goodness to put their names to it as subscribers, and then to give it to the other members of the Council to add theirs. A hearty laugh at the singularity of the proposal ensued, and he was soon after liberated. ⁽²⁰⁾

Unfortunately, there is no evidence for this colourful story in the records of examinations before the Privy Council, where Sharpe, far from the cool, collected figure of the biography, made a rather miserable showing. He denied his previous radicalism, and attacked those who had favoured the calling of a Convention: 'he had observed that those who were most fond of the word Convention were the persons who appeared to him the most dangerous in their designs - imitating in all they said or did the French and the French Convention'.⁽²¹⁾ Sharpe claimed that he was never greatly interested in the SCI, and that when he did attend it was more for culinary than political motives: 'This informant was very constant at the Dinner and sometimes stayed at the Society but he thought less of the Business of the Society than of the Dinner Party'.⁽²²⁾

But the surviving minutes of the Society enable us to state confidently that Sharpe's commitment to the SCI was considerably greater than that. He joined on April 27, 1792, at a time when the anti-Jacobin witch hunt was already well underway and when 'respectable' members of the Society were tendering their resignations, and he attended 38 of the 48 meetings held by the SCI from that date till his arrest.⁽²³⁾ He was elected onto a number of SCI committees, and was a steward, just before his arrest, at the SCI anniversary dinner of May 2, 1794. It was at this dinner that Horne Tooke, at whose house Sharpe was living, declared that the SCI 'must either dissolve itself or alter its name for there was no Constitution in this country, that the Parliament was a Scum, Stink and Corruption of England'.⁽²⁴⁾ It is therefore impossible to accept claims that Sharpe was no more than a gullible hanger-on of the SCI, more interested in the food than the politics.

Blake was tenuously linked to the London Corresponding Society through another engraver, Henry Richter, who had been taught by Stothard at the time of Stothard's close association with Blake.⁽²⁵⁾ Richter's brother, John, was a leading figure in the LCS, and one of those arrested for high treason in 1794. In a brief appearance before the Privy Council John Richter denied that he was an active member of the Society.⁽²⁶⁾ This can hardly have convinced the Privy Council who knew from several sources that it had been Richter who had read out the resolutions at the LCS mass meeting at Chalk Farm a month earlier, on April 14. Some of these resolutions - which were all passed unanimously - sounded highly threatening. For instance, number eight read

That the unconstitutional project of raising money and troops by forced benevolences ... and the equally unjustifiable measure of arming one part of the people against the other, brought Charles I to the block and drove James II and his posterity from the throne; and that consequently Ministers in advising such measures, ought to consider whether they are not guilty of High Treason.

And the final resolution must have sounded even more alarming to establishment ears:

That it is the right and Bounden Duty of the People to punish all Traitors against the nation and that the following words are not now a part of the oath of allegiance, to wit 'I declare that it is not lawful upon any pretence whatsoever to take up arms against the King.'⁽²⁷⁾

This veiled threat of insurrection must have sounded all the more sinister when Richter added that a further convention of the people would be held in about six weeks time.⁽²⁸⁾

In his LCS division (Number two) Richter had proclaimed himself in favour of the members acquiring arms and ammunition, and, according to a government spy, had delivered 'a violent harangue' on the subject.⁽²⁹⁾ After Hardy's arrest at the beginning of May, it was

Richter who proposed a 'Meeting of the Delegates in the Present Emergency' to be held at Thelwall's house on Monday, May 15.⁽³⁰⁾ And Richter's standing in the LCS is well indicated by the fact that he was a member (along with Baxter, Thelwall, Lovett, Moore and Hodson) of the 'secret committee' chosen to transact business that was not to be entrusted to the entire society.⁽³¹⁾ The Privy Council thus had good reason for assuming that Richter was one of the more violent, and in their terms dangerous, of the LCS leaders.

We can thus state that Blake was acquainted with at least one leading light in the SCI and with the brother of a key figure in the LCS. In itself however this is not particularly helpful, as it says very little for the nature of Blake's own radicalism. A list of friends and acquaintances is not sufficient for the task of locating Blake within the varied spectrum of 1790s radicalism. For that we must turn to the evidence furnished by Blake himself in his poems: it is from these that we are able to deduce the particularities of Blake's radicalism and point to affinities with other radicals.

With one or two praiseworthy exceptions, most writers on Blake tend to evade the question of his political beliefs, or pass it over very rapidly. From Gilchrist onwards critics and biographers have been at pains to play down Blake's radicalism: just as his involvement in the Gordon Riots has to be excused as 'involuntary', so his support for the French Revolution has to be made respectable. Gilchrist therefore forces Blake into the same trajectory as the 'respectable' radicals examined in Chapter 1 - sympathy with the revolution in 1789, but abandonment of it after the September massacres of 1792.⁽³²⁾ But Blake's writings of the time show

no such convenient development.

We saw in Gwin, King of Norway that Blake harboured Republican feelings as early as the 1770s. These are clearly developed in The French Revolution, Blake's only lengthy work to deal unambiguously with contemporary politics. This poem, while suffering from severe aesthetic shortcomings (Blake was experimenting with a long trisyllabic metre in a line of seven or eight feet - a venture that is far from successful), has, however, a considerable advantage over Blake's later epics in that it is fairly easy to follow. There are no daunting figures from Blake's personal mythology to be decoded: instead the poem deals clearly with real historical events, and was thus potentially comprehensible to a large audience.

For his own purposes, Blake made one or two alterations to recent French history. For example, the National Assembly deliberates in Paris rather than Versailles; the troops are removed from the vicinity of Paris before the fall of the Bastille, rather than after, as in reality; and certain of the nobility who appear in Blake's poem are fictitious. There was no Duke of Burgundy in 1789, and as for the 'Earl of Burgoyne', this is simply a French rendering of Burgundy and equally fictitious. (33)

Nonetheless despite these deliberate liberties, and others (such as having the Assembly 'divide' to vote in English fashion) which probably arose from sheer ignorance, the basic framework of the poem is an intelligible enough account of the early period of the revolution.

The ancien regime is painted early in the poem through the device of a tour of the Bastille, imagined as consisting of seven 'Dens' - Horror,

Darkness, Bloody, Religion, Order, Destiny, and the Tower of God. Here lie the victims of the ancien regime - a man 'confin'd for a writing prophetic', another 'who refused to sign papers of abhorrence', a woman who 'refus'd to be whore to the Minister, and with a knife smote him' etc. (34)

Those who dominate this world are depicted as utterly malevolent. Although at the time of the poem's composition, in 1790-91, a constitutional monarchy seemed established in France, Blake's Louis XVI is thoroughly evil. He is a 'crown'd adder', and the loathsome reptilian imagery is piled on thick in one passage where

The cold newt
And snake, and damp toad on the kingly foot crawl, or croak on the
Shedding their slime; in folds of the robe the crown'd adder builds
From stony brows. awful knee,
and hisses (35)

Louis is accompanied by a similarly reptilian Archbishop of Paris who rises 'In the rushing of scales and hissing of flames'. (36) When confronted by the Duke of Orleans, one of the nobles who has defected to the side of the Third Estate, the Archbishop attempts to speak but cannot. Like Satan and his cohorts in Book X of Paradise Lost, 'his voice issued harsh grating; instead of words harsh hissing/Shook the chamber'. (37)

Blake uses a simple opposition of imagery in his treatment of the King and of the Third Estate. Again and again, the words 'cold', 'darkness', 'chill', 'pale', 'dead', and 'night' recur in the description of the King and his supporters. The Third Estate, however, is associated with images of brightness, fire and sunlight. It enters the poem in these lines:

and a light walks round the dark towers
For the Commons convene in the Hall of the Nation, like spirits of
fire in the beautiful

Porches of the Sun, to plant beauty in the desert craving abyss,
 they gleam (38)
 On the conscious city.

With the gathering of the Third Estate 'Kings are sick throughout the earth'. For Blake, then, the Revolution is not simply about winning reforms and a constitutional order: his interpretation is Republican and international.

The main action of the poem takes the form of a long debate among the nobility as to how they should cope with the Third Estate. The Duke of Burgundy demands that the National Assembly be put down in blood, asking incredulously:

Shall this marble built heaven become a clay cottage, this earth an
 oak stool and these mowers
 From the Atlantic mountains mow down all this great starry harvest (39)
 of six thousand years?

The French nobility is a 'great starry harvest', the revolutionaries are merely destructive 'mowers' - and foreign ones at that: the Duke, by giving their origin as 'the Atlantic mountains' attributes France's troubles to the successful American revolution. The contrast between the 'marble built heaven' of Versailles and the 'clay cottage' of the French peasant is one which the Revolution (and Blake) wish to destroy, and which Burgundy will fight to maintain. To him the dissolution of the old order is grotesque and unnatural, against 'eternal reason and science': (40) the revolution is an anarchy and a chaos, to avoid which Burgundy is quite prepared to plunge France into civil war: 'the eagles of heaven must have their prey!' (41)

The King accepts Burgundy's bloodthirsty advice and dismisses Necker. Then, in a long speech, the Archbishop of Paris depicts the imminent destruction

of religion.

The Archbishop recommends drastic measures of repression - the Assembly should be shut up 'in their final home'; the Bastille should 'devour/ These rebellious seditious; seal them up, O Anointed, in everlasting chains'.⁽⁴²⁾ The repressive measures advocated by Burgundy and the Archbishop are challenged by the Duke of Orleans. He disputes their visions of chaos and rejects their concept of 'order' as regimentation and uniformity. For Orleans true nobility cannot perish - those who are truly noble cannot feel bound or unhappy when the people are free. He rebukes the Archbishop with a radical rejection of the whole feudal ethic and the revolutionary notion of *égalité*: 'learn to consider all men as thy equals/Thy brethren, and not as thy foot or thy hand'.⁽⁴³⁾

This, however, does not cut much ice with the rest of the nobility, whose opinion remains unchanged either by Orleans or by the Ambassador sent by the National Assembly, the Abbé de Sieyès. The Abbé launches a strong attack on war, and predicts the collapse of the exploiting classes - the Nobles will 'put off/The red robe of terror', and the Priest shall become a simple plowman, and forswear deceit and superstition.⁽⁴⁴⁾ At this stage Sieyès hopes that such a transformation can be peaceful. These hopes are dashed by the point-blank refusal of the King and the Duke of Burgundy to give any consideration to the main demand of the Assembly - that the troops around the capital be withdrawn ten miles from Paris.

When Sieyès returns to the Assembly the deputies decide to defy the King and they 'vote the removal of war'⁽⁴⁵⁾ - this is a vote not only for the immediate removal of the troops, but also contains a more general implication that the National Assembly is renouncing war as a means of

dealing with internal or international questions altogether. La Fayette puts the Assembly's vote into practice and orders the army to depart from Paris in the name of 'The Nation's Assembly'. With a choice of who to obey, King and nobility or National Assembly, the army chooses the latter, and marches out of Paris.⁽⁴⁶⁾ The poem ends with this victory for the Assembly with

the courts of the Palace
 Forsaken, and Paris without a soldier, silent; for the noise
 was gone up
 And follow'd the army, and the Senate in peace sat beneath
 morning's beam (47)

The French Revolution could have won Blake the contemporary audience that was to elude him throughout his life. But it did not succeed in this, for it was never published.

Only Book 1 of the projected seven books is extant. It was printed by Joseph Johnson in 1791, but not published. Similarly Johnson printed Part I of Paine's Rights of Man in 1791 - but refused to publish it. Possibly the riots in Birmingham against Priestley scared Johnson off both Paine's and Blake's works. Or perhaps Blake himself got cold feet and withdrew the poem, as David Erdman suggests.⁽⁴⁸⁾

Blake probably planned, and could quite possibly have written, the remaining six books. A dramatic speech by Burgundy towards the end of Book 1 in which he says that the Bastille will have to depart from Paris before the King will order troop removals,⁽⁴⁹⁾ is clearly intended to lead up to the fall of the Bastille, which would presumably have been the major theme for Book 2. But of the missing six books nothing remains.

The French Revolution was the last poem Blake was to offer to a commercial publisher. All his later poetry he engraved, printed and

sold himself. They remained deeply revolutionary works, full of hatred for the eighteenth century establishment and its wars - but this commitment was now given increasingly in mythological terms, as Blake worked out his own private cosmogony. Arguably this enriched the poetry, but it also dealt a fatal blow to any serious chance of Blake achieving a hearing in his own time.

Blake's retreat into myth has been seen by David Erdman as a measure of caution, taken to avoid possible prosecution (Erdman also believes that it was Blake rather than Johnson who took the decision to cancel The French Revolution). This is certainly not the whole picture, however, as Blake had experimented in mythology well before the persecution of radicals and the Treason Trials. Testimony to this are the early works Tiriell and The Book of Thel (both written in about 1789). The myths invented by Blake developed over the subsequent decade and a half, become increasingly complex, and presented a formidable aspect to readers used to the genteel eighteenth century couplet. Fooling possible informers may have added another layer of opacity to the work, but did not create the difficulties in these poems; many of these difficulties are conceptual, and a careful reading of the lyrics (normally thought of as straightforward, as lucid where the Prophecies are obscure) will reveal similar difficulties. The assumption that Blake wrote well when he wrote lyrics, and badly when he turned to Prophecies is rooted in the fact that it is easier to read a difficult poem in eight lines of a familiar form, than one of 2000 lines in an unfamiliar form. Blake published no lyrics after 1794 (except for one or two that found their way into Milton and Jerusalem, and To Tirzah, a late addition to the Songs

of Experience). Most of those lyrics he wrote remained in manuscript. This seems to have been a deliberate choice: - as if Blake sensed that the lyric form was too easy for an audience to accept - that readers, seduced by their form, might not bother to think about the poems, or might completely misinterpret them; on this reading (admittedly speculative) one of the motives behind a switch to extremely dense 'prophetic' writing is a determination that the poems shall not be too easy to read, that their very form will force attentiveness on the reader. 'That which can be made explicit to the idiot is not worth my care', wrote Blake to a reverend gentleman who had failed to understand his painting. (50)

The republicanism implicit in The French Revolution is clearly present in later works, and quite visible beneath the web of private mythology that Blake spins. Those who would have us believe that Blake turned his back on revolution after the September massacres ignore the fact that at least four of the works where Blake's revolutionary principles are unfolded were printed after 1792 - America (1793), Europe (1794), The Song of Los (1795) and the notebook poem Let the Brothels of Paris be Opened (c. 1793).

America is Blake's mature reconstruction of the American Revolution. It forms part of a tetralogy, of which the other parts are Europe, and the two parts of The Song of Los, Africa and Asia. America is the most finished and satisfactory of these poems - in Europe Blake's highly experimental verse is sometimes less than fully successful, while The Song of Los bears signs of hasty workmanship; In Africa a weighty mythic content, through being crammed into two pages, degenerates into a cryptic code. However, Asia, the second part of the Song, rather

redeems this in a remarkable piece of verse to be discussed later.

In these poems Blake explores the revolutions of his time temporally and spatially. The American Revolution is the first act, the prelude, leading up to events in France: in Europe the perspective is deepened in time and two thousand years of European history are scanned. Africa broadens the vision still further, projecting it back to the Garden of Eden, and attempting (ambitiously and unsuccessfully) to encompass all human history in 52 lines. Asia forecasts the definitive collapse of tyranny. One can legitimately suspect that the titles Africa and Asia are chosen more for purposes of symmetry than geographical meaning - although one could argue that Asia was the seat of the most ancient and total tyrannies known to eighteenth century man, and that Africa had significance as the birthplace of humanity and a possible site for the fabled garden. Such speculations, however, scarcely matter, as their geographical titles turn out to be quite peripheral to these poems.

America, however, first and best of this series, is quite specific to the American Revolution. In it we meet for the first time the 'giant form' who personifies revolution, Orc, the 'demon red'.⁽⁵¹⁾ Orc's opponent, 'the Guardian Prince of Albion', is, like Louis XVI and the Archbishop of Paris, another reptile in disguise: he stands on England's cliffs 'a dragon form, clashing his scales'.⁽⁵²⁾ - and in the following plate an illustration depicts him as some form of dragon or basilisk. Of course in the eyes of 'Albion's Angel' it is the Revolution which is reptilian: to him Orc is the 'Eternal viper'.⁽⁵³⁾ and the fires he is associated with are fires of pain and destruction. From the Americans' standpoint, however, the 'fires

of Orc^s are creative - in overthrowing English rule, they are making a new nation and (or so Blake thought at any rate) a new social order.

Orc asserts a spirit of total revolution. It is not merely a case of political freedoms - an end to slavery, a release of political prisoners, no more subjection to the oppressors' scourge⁽⁵⁴⁾ - but also of a revolt against prevailing ideologies, a revolt against religion and an inauguration of sexual licence. Orc declares, in a parody of Christ replacing the old law by the new, an end to the decalogue and to the repressive morality of Christianity:

That stony law I stamp to dust; and scatter religion abroad
 To the four winds as a torn book, and none shall gather the leaves;
 But they shall rot on desert sands, and consume in bottomless deeps,
 To make the deserts blossom, and the deeps shrink to their fountains,
 And to renew the fiery joy, and burst the stony roof;
 That pale religious lechery, seeking Virginitie
 May find it in a harlot, and in coarse-clad honesty
 The undefil'd, tho' ravished in her cradle night and morn;
 For everything that lives is holy, life delights in life; (55)
 Because the soul of sweet delight can never be defiled.

It is this speech that drives the King of England to declare war and blow 'a loud alarm across the Atlantic deep'.⁽⁵⁶⁾ At this point 'Boston's Angel'⁽⁵⁷⁾ defects to the revolution. He has seen through the hypocrisy of the Angelic code whereby 'pity is become a trade and generosity a science/That men get rich by'.⁽⁵⁸⁾ The ideologies of the ruling class (usually seen in religious terms - 'State religion' and its evangelical variants) are not disinterested theories, but mechanisms whereby the poor are made to know their place and the social system of the rich is strengthened:

What God is he writes laws of peace and clothes him in a tempest?
 What pitying Angel lusts for tears and fans himself with sighs?
 What crawling villain preaches abstinence and wraps himself
 In fat of lambs? No more I follow, no more obedience pay! (59)

'Angel' is one of Blake's favourite terms of irony: time and again in his work of the 1790s he inverts its meaning - those who profess religion and abhor 'sin' and revolution consider themselves Angelic, but are in fact Satanic. The most sustained irony of this kind is The Marriage of Heaven and Hell whose central theme is the Devil/Angel dichotomy, and where the values associated with those terms are continually reversed.

In the context of British politics, 'Angels' include governmental figures - North, Pitt - and of course Wilberforce, the arch-preacher of abstinence. The contrast between the activities of Evangelical politicians, such as Wilberforce, suppressing the 'vices' of the poor, and the continued amassing of vast fortunes by the rich, was stark. Those who lived in luxury preached abstinence to the destitute and miserable. And a nation professing allegiance to a gospel of peace while engaged in a savage war on its colonies, and a decade later a war against Revolution rather nearer home, provided an equally glaring contradiction. The behaviour of 'Angels' such as North in the 1770s, Wilberforce and Pitt in the warfare of the 1790s, truly seemed as sadistic as Boston alleges - to take comfort in the tears and sighs caused by policies of war-mongering and austerity.

The military details of the war do not interest Blake - he sums it all up in three or four lines:

The British soldiers thro' the thirteen states sent up a howl
Of anguish, threw their swords and muskets to the earth, and ran
From their encampments and dark castles, seeking where to hide (60)
From the grim flames.

The armies of tyranny have been defeated not only by the revolutionary leaders whom Blake lists - 'Washington, Franklin, Paine and Warren,

Allen, Gates and Lee⁽⁶¹⁾ - but more important than the names is the great popular alliance they embody as 'the citizens of New York... the mariners of Boston ... the scribe of Pennsylvania ... the builder of Virginia ... all rush together in the night in wrath and raging fire'.⁽⁶²⁾ Once again it is the people's own activity that is their salvation.

And the result of the failure of the English war effort, as it breaks against the unity of the Americans, is that the 'pestilence' planned for America rebounds on Britain instead. The ruling class finds itself confronted with its own medicine. The burning of American towns is reflected in destruction in England as 'the spotted plague smote Bristol's/And the leprosy London's spirit'.⁽⁶³⁾ But this destruction is the revolutionary destruction of the riots of 1780, particularly the Gordon riots in London: riots directed, at least partially, against the ruling class and against its war. Blake is quite clear on the anti-war implications of the riots:

The millions sent up a howl of anguish and threw off their hammer'd
 And cast their swords and spears to earth, and stood, a naked multi-
 mail
 tude.⁽⁶⁴⁾

And this perhaps clarifies Blake's own motives for participation in the riots.

The American revolution and its repercussions in England force the apologists for tyranny to assume their true, reptilian, forms. The 'Bard of Albion'⁽⁶⁵⁾ grows scales and the priests 'rush into reptile coverts'.⁽⁶⁶⁾ Again, as in The French Revolution, political upheaval, by breaking the grip of religion, brings a sexual liberation:

For the female spirits of the dead, pining in bonds of religion,
 Run from their fetters reddening and in long drawn arches sitting,

They feel the nerves of youth renew, and desires of ancient times
over their pale limbs, as a vine when the tender grape appears. (67)

The rioting seems to present a major threat to the existing order -
'red flames fierce' rage 'over the hills, the vales, the cities',
and 'The Heavens melted from north to south'. (68) But the Gordon
rioters are crushed - Urizen, Blake's personification of repression
in all its aspects, at once the God of orthodoxy, the 'eternal priest',
the political tyrant, and the spirit of abstract reasoning, smothers
the fires of revolution. Temporarily Orc is hidden in Urizen's
'clouds and cold mists'. 'Angels and weak men' once again rule -
but their downfall is clearly prophesied: they will hold power for
twelve years 'And then their end should come, when France received
the Demon's light'. (69) The arithmetic here deserves attention.
Perhaps the figure of twelve years is merely arbitrary. But this
would not be in keeping with the care Blake usually took with such
matters. If the mention of twelve years is meaningful, it deals a
serious blow to any theory that would detach Blake from Jacobinism
- add twelve years to 1780 and the result is 1792, not 1789. In
other words, Blake considered that the 'Demon's light' of revolution
was established in France not with the fall of the Bastille, but
with the *Journée* of August 10, 1792, which overthrew the monarchy. (70)
This is clear evidence of the wrongheadedness of those who claim that
Blake abandoned the French revolution in 1792 - in fact it was only
from the establishment of the Republic in that year that Blake con-
sidered that the fires of Orc had genuinely reached France. This
political position in itself provides strong reason for aligning
Blake with the plebeian radicals as against their 'respectable' counter-
parts in the Friends of the People and similar groupings.

The poem ends apocalyptically: tyrants throughout Europe are appalled as 'the bands of Albion, and the ancient Guardians' collapse 'smitten with their own plagues'. These plagues, appearing a decade after the American defeat, are the wars which the counter-revolutionary powers of Europe have unleashed against the French Republic - and which the successes of the revolutionary armies have turned back on their own heads.. Blake concludes envisaging the revolution spreading throughout Europe - 'And the fierce flames burnt round the heavens and round the abodes of men'. (71)

The notebook poem Let the Brothels of Paris be Opened (sometimes also known as Fayette)⁽⁷²⁾ shows even more clearly where Blake stood in relation to French politics round 1792-93.⁽⁷³⁾ In this unpublished poem no mythological figures intervene, and precisely because it is unpublished Blake does not exercise the sort of self-censorship which he imposed on America where a specific reference to 'George III ... and his Lords and Commons' was deleted.⁽⁷⁴⁾

The poem tells of the degeneration of La Fayette from 'the General of the Nation' in The French Revolution into a traitor. He abandons the people of France, because he takes pity on the deposed King and his Queen. These are shown in a most unfavourable light: Louis XVI is shown inaugurating war in order to starve his people into submission:

Arise and come both fife and drum
And the famine shall eat both crust and crumb.⁽⁷⁵⁾

An oath sworn either by Louis, or by his spiritual alter ego 'old Nobadaddy', God of the ancien regime (the text is ambiguous here), shows the cynical alliance of religious and temporal power used to crush popular revolt:

To kill the people I am loth
 But if they rebel, they must go to hell;
 They shall have a priest and a passing bell. (76)

As for Marie Antionette:

The Queen of France just touched this globe
 And the pestilence darted from her robe.

The pestilence may well be sexual in nature, as the Queen begins the poem with the cynical cry of 'Let the brothels of Paris be opened' (a variant on 'let them eat cake').

As far as Lafayette was concerned, the Revolution was finished with the Constitution of 1791, establishing a constitutional monarchy in France, and dividing the population into 'active' and 'passive' (voting and non-voting) citizens. He had no sympathy for the militants of the Jacobin Club, nor for the sans-culottes of the Paris sections. As the political situation deteriorated, Fayette came to prefer the prospect of an Austro-Prussian intervention in France to that of the establishment of some sort of sans-culotte democracy. And so in August 1792 Fayette attempted to turn the army he commanded towards Paris to reinstate the monarchy, deposed in the journée of August 10. He failed; deserted by his troops, he turned to the Austrians, slipping across the border with a few captains. But although he was now hated by the revolutionaries, Fayette had won no gratitude from the monarchy and its European supporters. Louis XVI and Marie Antionette, though quite willing to use him, despised him, and the Austrians instead of welcoming him, threw him into prison at Wezel.

For Blake, Fayette was 'bought and sold'. His 'pity' for the king and Marie Antoinette meant that he had exchanged 'his own heart's blood/
 For the drop of a harlot's eye'. The poem ends with two stanzas of

rhetorical questions:

Who will exchange his own fire side
For the stone of another's door?
Who will exchange his wheaten loaf
For the links of a dungeon floor?

O, who would smile on the wintry seas
And pity the stormy roar?
Or who will exchange his new-born child
For the dog at the wintry door?

But Fayette has done all these. He has exchanged a tolerably comfortable life in the service of the Revolution for exile and a dungeon floor. He has looked benevolently on the 'wintry seas' and 'stormy roar' of foreign armies and domestic counter-revolution. And the new-born child - the French Republic, a France, since August 10, without kings - had been exchanged for the uncertain friendship of the 'dogs' of Austria and Prussia, pressing in against France's eastern frontiers.

This notebook poem establishes Blake's republicanism beyond doubt. It also makes it clear that in the struggle between 'moderates' such as Fayette, who wished to bring the revolution to a premature full stop, and those in the Jacobin Club and the Paris sections, who overthrew the monarchy and were later to execute the monarch, Blake stood with the latter.

By the time Blake came to write Europe in 1794, William Pitt was leading an English crusade against revolutionary France and pouring English subsidies into the coffers of the Austrian and Prussian war machines. At the same time government repression struck at the radical societies. In mid-1793 the Scottish radicals, Thomas Muir and Thomas Fyssh Palmer, were sentenced to long terms of transportation (fourteen years and seven years respectively) in trials before packed juries presided over by Lord Justice Braxfield.⁽⁸⁰⁾ In December the British Convention

held in Edinburgh, was forcibly broken up and its leaders arrested - Maurice Margaret, Joseph Gerrald, and William Skirving were condemned to join Muir and Palmer at Botany Bay. In May 1794 the Government struck the blow it hoped would finish off the radical societies altogether. It arrested leaders of the London Corresponding Society (including Thomas Hardy, John Thelwall, William Lovet, John Richter) and of the Society for Constitutional Information (including John Horne Tooke, Daniel Adams, William Sharpe, Thomas Kyd), and also provincial leaders from Norwich and Sheffield (of whom the fiery orator Henry 'Redhead' Yorke of Sheffield was the most prominent).

War abroad and repression at home created a dark picture, and this is reflected in the sombre colours of Europe:

Every house a den, every man bound: the shadows are filled
 With spectres, and the windows wove over with curses of iron
 Over the doors 'Thou shalt not' and over the windows 'Fear' is
written:
 With bonds of iron round their necks fastened into the walls
 The citizens, in leaden gyves the inhabitants of suburbs (81)
 Walk heavy; soft and bent are the bones of villagers.

This passage alludes to a multitude of repressions: the religious tyranny of 'thou shalt not' is joined with the persecution, the 'binding', of English radicals. At one level the 'bonds of iron' round the necks of 'the citizens' are the chains on imprisoned radicals sentenced to transportation, and waiting for their hulks to sail; at another level they can be read as the iron chains used in the slave trade; at yet another they are the machinery of the industrial revolution chaining workers to the semi-lit world of the mill or the mine. The 'curses of iron' have similar overtones, but also refer to the iron weaponry used in the war. (82) Inhabitants of suburbs (such as Blake himself, living in Lambeth) 'walk heavy' in the fear engendered by repression, and the

economic crisis sparked by the war. And villagers' bones are warped and distorted through years of back-breaking, rewardless toil.

But despite the repression they practise, the rulers of England - 'the Guardian Prince of Albion', the warrior Rintrah, and the 'horned priest' Palamabron: ruler, soldier and ideologue, the triple pillar of the 18th century state - are in an increasingly desperate situation as 'the flames of Orc roll heavy/Around the limbs of Albion's Guardian, his flesh consuming'.⁽⁸³⁾

The remote and tyrannical sky-goddess Enitharmon⁽⁸⁴⁾ (perhaps intended as a parody of the Virgin Mary), who with her injunction 'Go! Tell the Human race that Woman's love is Sin'⁽⁸⁵⁾ has inaugurated official Christian morality, is awoken from a long sleep by the trump of the last doom - sounded by the war of the European powers against France. Her imagined triumph is turned to tears when she realizes the full portent of the French Revolution, and that what has been doomed is the entire repressive order over which she rules. Orc appears furious 'in the vineyards of red France'⁸⁶ as the revolution gathers momentum, and as the despotic powers attack the young republic. They are depicted as savage beasts of prey:

The Lions lash their wrathful tails!
The Tigers couch upon the prey and suck the ruddy tide.⁽⁸⁷⁾

And the poem ends with Los, Blake's 'eternal prophet' calling 'all his sons to the strife of blood'⁽⁸⁸⁾ - to defend the Revolution from its enemies.

The effects of the French Revolution are further described in The Song of Los. Although the relevant part of the poem is entitled Asia, and purports to describe the reaction of Asian despots to the revolution, the

'Kings of Asia' have no specifically Asiatic characteristics. 'Asia' could, however, be read as a synonym for 'the East' - the eastern Kings Blake would have in mind ruled Austria, Prussia and Russia and were leagued with the British monarch in the grand alliance against France. The words of these kings seem applicable to any monarchy. They express their fears for the future in a remarkable passage that deserves to be quoted at length:

Shall not the King call for Famine from the heath,
 Nor the Priest for Pestilence from the fen,
 To restrain, to dismay, to thin
 The inhabitants of mountain and plain,
 In the day of full-feeding prosperity
 And the night of delicious songs?

Shall not the Councillor throw his curb
 Of Poverty on the laborious,
 To fix the price of labour,
 To invent allegoric riches?

And the privy admonishers of men
 Call for fires in the City,
 For heaps of smoking ruins
 In the night of prosperity and wantonness?

To turn man from his path,
 To restrain the child from the womb,
 To cut off the bread from the city, (89)
 That the remnant may learn to obey.

These powerful lines contain a wealth of history. We shall investigate some of the roots of this poetry, starting with the 'Famine' which the 'Kings of Asia' see as their major weapon. The bread crisis had been an important factor in the French Revolution: in 1787 the Royal Government removed all controls on the trade in grain. Producers were now no longer obliged to take their corn to market, but could sell direct to consumers - there was no hindrance even to corn exports. Corn monopolizers could therefore make massive profits, while the populace went hungry. The poor harvest of 1788 added to the misery and prices soared, reaching

a high point of four and a half sous a pound in Paris in July 1789: hunger was undoubtedly one of the main spurs to the popular revolution of that month. (90)

Bread crises and bread riots, while not as common as in France, were far from unknown in England. There were serious food riots throughout much of Southern England in 1766 for example. And in 1792 we find food riots in Leicester, for instance, in which the windows of almost every butcher's shop in the town were smashed: (91) some months later the Mayor of Leicester was expressing fears that the 'extraordinary high price of provisions' would occasion further rioting. (92) With England's involvement in the war against France, the crisis of food supplies became much worse. The price of a quarter of wheat rose from an average price of 60/6 in 1794 to 91/8 in 1795 (when The Song of Los was engraved) and by 1800 had reached the fantastic price of 142/10. (93) David Davies in his Case of the Labourers in Husbandry (1795) estimated that a labourer in his Berkshire parish, with wife and family, required 9/4½ a week for subsistence of which over two thirds, 6/8, would be spent on bread - but at the average rate of wages such a labourer would only be receiving 8/- a week. (94)

The crisis of 1795 resulted in widespread rioting. In Cornwall, for instance, tin miners marched on Penzance, believing that a large quantity of corn was to be shipped from the port. A small quantity was released for sale: this did not satisfy the miners who were then dispersed by the bayonets of the local militia. They returned the following day, but were forced to retreat when cannon taken from a moored ship were trained at them. Not surprisingly when faced with this sort of violence, the miners too prepared to resort to arms. Notices appeared in St. Just 'where the greatest number and most riotously disposed

miners reside' encouraging miners to learn the use of small arms and calling on those who had served in the militia to act as teachers. (95) A week later miners marched on Padstow and took forty bushels of wheat that were hoarded in a cellar which no-one dared admit owning. (96) One of the Home Office's Cornish correspondents neatly expressed the ruling class's normal response to the poor's demand for subsistence: dismissing the tin miners' claim that they had been sold unfit barley by a Penrhyn merchant, he continued:

This plea of scarcity and dearness of corn is only a cloak to mischievous designs: ... With respect to Cavalry I think with you, against an invading enemy they would be no use in such a County as Cornwall, but to keep the Tinnners in awe and to act against them in streets and for the celerity of their motions in moving from Town to Town, upon the shortest notice, they strike me as being (97) more extensively beneficial.

This is a fine example of the language of class warfare.

Almost every county in England and Wales saw food riots in 1795: in Flintshire crowds broke into a warehouse in Mold and forced the owner to sell the corn stored there for what they considered a fair price. (98) A riot in Plymouth in early April was quickly dealt with - but the authorities felt 'serious apprehension' because of the 'extreme scarcity of provisions and especially of corn'. (99) All over Devon riots took place - at Exeter, Totnes, Dartmouth, Newton Abbot, Collington, Biddeford. (100) At Coventry crowds attempted to force farmers and tradesmen to lower food prices: the military intervened, but their arrest of five of 'the mob' merely ensured continued rioting for the next three days. (101) At Birmingham, where crowds broke into a corn-mill at Snowhill, the military again made arrests, and in a subsequent running battle fired on the crowd, killing one man and wounding two others. (102) The LCS's Birmingham correspondents commented:

The chief argument of the rioters to the magistrates was 'You did not shoot us when we were rioting for Church and King and pulling down the presbyterians' meetings and dwelling houses, but gave us plenty of good ale and spirits to urge us on - now we are rioting for a big loaf we must be shot at and cut up like Bacon Pigs.' (103)

Corn moving around the country was often stopped before it could reach its destination. Colliers in the Forest of Dean refused to allow vessels carrying corn up the River Wye until they themselves were sufficiently supplied. (104) At Cambridge flour heading for Ely and Littleport was stopped; (105) and at Bedford crowds stopped flour destined for Birmingham and forced its owner to sell it to them at 8/- a bushel. (106)

Highly alarming from the ruling class point of view was the occasional participation of troops and militia on the side of the rioters. For instance, some of the Gloucestershire militia quartered in Portsmouth joined with 'the mob' to force a reduction in the price of meat and bread. (107) At Wells men of the 122nd regiment marched into the market place and forced the sale of butter and potatoes at prices fixed by themselves. (108) At Guildford soldiers led a movement to reduce the price of meat to 4d a pound, and in consequence were thrown out of the town by the magistrates. (109) The authorities feared that economic actions of this sort might spill over into more direct political activity, and were always ready to take alarm at 'treasonable' papers such as the doggerel poem stuck up at Lewes which began:

Soldiers to arms, arise and revenge your Cause (110)
On those bloody numskulls, Pitt and George.

Most of London's food supplies came from well outside the city, some of it travelling very considerable distances. The capital was therefore seriously at risk in time of shortage - not only was there less food being sent to the capital, but it was in danger of interruption by a hungry populace before it reached there. One report on the supply of

flour in London estimated on June 23 that there was only enough for ten days consumption in the capital and its neighbourhood: bakers were being crudely rationed, those who normally took twenty or thirty sacks of flour at a time could only take ten, and those who wanted ten were allowed five.⁽¹¹¹⁾ The bread crisis undoubtedly spurred recruitment to the LCS which probably reached its greatest membership level in late 1795. From July 100-200 members a week were being recruited and by the end of October the number of divisions had reached 73. The Society's correspondence increased with new societies springing up in places such as Tewkesbury (the scene of 'extreme rioting'⁽¹¹²⁾ in June), Sunbury, Bradford, High Wycombe, Rochester, Carlisle and Woburn.⁽¹¹³⁾

The resurgence of radicalism from the middle of the year onwards led at least one of the Home Office correspondents to suggest that the whole food crisis was a Machiavellian plot of the popular societies:

I have reason to believe that the present scarcity of provisions is not occasioned by real want of anything, but that the corn etc. is bought up by our rascally English Jacobins and hid on purpose in order to starve the people into a rebellion against the Government.
(114)

Plebeian radicals blamed the shortage on the war which, by late 1795, was becoming highly unpopular. The 'lower orders' of London made their feelings clearly felt on October 29 when a huge crowd of around 200,000 greeted the opening of Parliament with cries of 'No King!', 'No Pitt!', and succeeded in smashing all the windows in the King's carriage. This 'horrid and sacriligious attempt against His Majesty's person'⁽¹¹⁵⁾ was promptly seized upon by the government in order to introduce further repressive legislation - the two Acts.

And so Blake was being far from melodramatic when he makes his Asian kings

plot 'To cut off the bread from the city'. Popular radicals were convinced that famine was used as a deliberate weapon, both in England and in France, where the 'pacte de famine', an alleged horrible conspiracy by aristocrats and their allies to starve Paris into submission, was a potent factor in the sans-culotte agitation. But whether through deliberate conspiracy or not, the tyranny of hunger was imposed on the labouring classes throughout the eighteenth century - on the very people who made 'the night of prosperity and wantonness' enjoyed by their rulers possible.

The contrast between the opulence of a few and the misery of the majority in Ancien Regime France and in Hanoverian England was brutally clear to Blake - especially as his own living was far from assured. Not everyone suffered in the 1790s. During the inflation and food crises of the decade banking, for instance, continued to be a profitable business. The Bank of England's profits from discounts rose from £193,000 in 1792-93 to £633,000 in 1806-7, and to a record figure of £900,000 in 1809-10.⁽¹¹⁶⁾ The 'full feeding prosperity' and 'delicious songs' enjoyed in Versailles or at Bedford Square co-existed with the 'Famine' and 'Pestilence' in the Faubourg St. Antoine or the alleys of Holborn. To Blake this poverty was not something natural or inevitable; it was a curb deliberately placed on the laborious by the ruling class and its state. The 'price of labour' is fixed at a low level to ensure profits and the accumulation of capital: the labourers are to be fobbed off with 'allegoric riches' - the promise of a hereafter in return for a life of obedient toil and misery on this earth; the worthless promise of 'an allegorical abode where existence hath never come'.⁽¹¹⁷⁾

And if there is any difficulty, then the rulers and their ideologues

will not hesitate to 'Call for fires in the City/For heaps of smoking ruins'. Here Blake can hardly not have had in mind the notorious manifesto of the Duke of Brunswick, issued on 23 July 1792, threatening 'vengeance that shall be exemplary and unforgettable, with the town of Paris handed over to the full rigours of military justice and the complete overthrow of the existing authorities', should there occur 'the slightest outrage' against the royal family. Anyone defending themselves against the invading armies would be put to death. The hand of Marie Antoinette herself was behind this: she had asked the monarchs of the anti-French coalition to draw up such a declaration. It did not have the hoped-for effect: instead it inflamed popular fury and thus played a role in the events leading up to the revolutionary journée of August 10 and the fall of the monarchy. Blake would also have been aware that less than a year later similar threats had been uttered by the right wing inside the Convention. The Girondin deputy Isnard, in reply to the Paris Commune's demand for the release of Hebert said, on May 25 1793:

If through these recurrent insurrections there should be any attack made on the persons of the representatives of the nation, then I declare to you in the name of the whole country that Paris would be destroyed; soon people would be searching along the banks of the Seine to find out whether Paris had ever existed (118)

- a remark which summed up the scorn and the fear felt by the dominant sections of the French bourgeoisie for the Parisian popular classes.

In works later than The Song of Los it is not easy to follow the details of what Blake thought of contemporary events in France and Britain. The mythology that Blake was constructing now entirely dominates the poems, and the narrative sequence, for the most part, ceases to deal with the current events of the late eighteenth century. This is not to say that

the social and political issues of the 1790s do not appear in the poems (they evidently do - see, for example, the way in which Urizen draws from Malthus in Night VII of The Four Zoas); but it means that a reading of these poems is doomed to failure if it treats them as a cryptic running commentary on the development of France through the Directory and Consulate to the Empire, and on the unfolding European war against France. David Erdman attempts to read The Four Zoas in this fashion, and although he provides some brilliant flashes of insight, he often fails to convince.

For example, the Zoa Tharmas is read by Erdman as 'tharmas'Paine, and Enion, his emanation, becomes the frightened printing industry that will no longer publish his works. In which case, one might ask, why is Tharmas described, right at the start of the poem as the 'Parent power, dark'ning in the West'.⁽¹¹⁹⁾ How does Erdman's identification of this 'power' with Paine explain Tharmas' near insanity in Night III? What have these lines to do with Paine?

Tharmas rear'd up his hands and stood on the affrighted Ocean:
 The dead rear'd up his Voice and stood on the resounding shore
 Crying: Fury in my limbs! Destruction in my bones and marrow!
 My skull riven into filaments, my eyes into sea jellies
 Floating upon the tide wander bubbling and bubbling,
 Uttering my lamentations and begetting little monsters
 Who sit mocking on the little pebbles of the tide. (120)

It would take remarkable ingenuity to fit this into Paine's life-history. Similar objections to Erdman's case can be found throughout Tharmas's activities in the poem.

The problem with a reading that simply equates the mythological events in the poem with a corresponding event from contemporary European history is that it reduces the work to a cryptogram, an elaborate puzzle for

scholars. Too frequently one feels that Erdman is compressing Blake's myth in this fashion: so that Urizen comes to 'equal' England, while Luvah 'equals' France etc. Certainly there is this aspect to the characters, but there is also a great deal more. Urizen, for instance, is the expression of all forms of oppression - he is at once, King, priest, ideologue and the fallen God of this world. As for Tharmas, perhaps at certain points in the poem Blake's writing is influenced by his knowledge of Paine, but the mythical character is more than a simple disguise for something Blake dared not write in plain language.

Blake's radicalism is not diminished by this. His hatred of war remains a striking feature of his verse, and undoubtedly he draws on the wars against France for imagery and inspiration in such passages (though it is not possible to equate particular battle-scenes in the Prophetic Books with counterparts on the fields of Europe). His hatred of monarchy endures: - 'Everybody hates a King!'⁽¹²¹⁾ he wrote, when annotating Bacon's Essays Moral, Economical and Philosophical. This anger persists right up to the end of his life, in 1827, when he annotated Dr. Thornton's New Translation of the Lords Prayer. Here he expressed contempt for Thornton's 'Tory Translation' and its concept of God as King and Tyrant. He parodied it thus:

For thine is the Kingship, or Allegoric Godship, and the Power, or War, and the Glory, or Law, Ages after Ages in thy descendants; for God is only an Allegory of Kings and nothing else. Amen. (122)

But Blake's critique of his society does not stop at attacks on kings and priests. Blake was well aware that what he detested in the British state was not merely the institution of monarchy. Pervading the late eighteenth century British social formation were ideologies that justified and

reproduced the prevailing conditions of economic and political power. It is to that ideology and to Blake's rebuttal of it that we must now turn.

FOOTNOTES

1. According to a letter written some twenty years later: 'The American War began. All its dark horrors passed before my face' (Blake to Flaxman 12 September 1800. K. 799)
2. K. 11-13
3. C.f. in particular the notebook poem Let the Brothels of Paris be Opened (K. 185-186):

The Queen of France just touched this Globe
 And the Pestilence darted from her robe (11 20-21)
4. Some critics have questioned this, claiming that the unfinished dramatic piece King Edward III in Poetical Sketches is a patriotic defence of war. Erdman deals very convincingly with this argument, demonstrating the irony that underlies the piece. Erdman op. cit. Chapter 4
5. Gilchrist op. cit. p. 36
6. The rioting started on Friday June 2, and Newgate was burnt on Tuesday June 6 (there had been a lull on Sunday and Monday). See George Rudé 'The Gordon Riots: A Study of the Rioters and their Victims' in Paris and London in the Eighteenth Century: Studies in Popular Protest London 1970
7. Christopher Hibbert King Mob: the Story of Lord George Gordon and the Riots of 1780 London 1958
8. S. Maccoby English Radicalism 1762-1785: The Origins London 1955 p. 321
9. Of the 110 rioters whose occupations are known, there was one professional man, one public executioner, 22 small employers, shopkeepers, pedlars and independent craftsmen, four soldiers, six sailors and 76 wage-earners (of whom 36 were journeymen and apprentices, 13 waiters and domestic servants, eleven labourers of various kinds). Rudé op. cit. p. 283
10. Of those 136 victims of the rioters who claimed damages, and whose occupations are known, there were one peer, two ambassadors, two doctors, two priests, three magistrates, five schoolteachers, thirty gentlemen, twenty-nine publicans, distillers, brewers and brandy

merchants, nine other merchants, ten manufacturers, twenty-four shopkeepers, fifteen apparently independent craftsmen, and four wage earners. A hundred victims names appear in Rate Books and Land Tax registers: two thirds occupied houses of a rent varying from £20 to £230 per annum. Only eight lived in houses with an annual rate of under £10. (Rudé op. cit. p. 287)

11. George Lord Gordon Innocence Vindicated London 1783. Quoted Erdman op. cit. p. 8
12. Bray Life of Stothard London 1851 pp 20-21
13. Gilchrist op. cit. p. 173
14. Schofield's information, quoted in Mona Wilson Life of William Blake Revised Edition London 1948 p. 155
15. Blake's Memorandum K. 438
16. Gilchrist op. cit. pp 96-97
17. Ibid. p. 95
18. C.F. Erdman op. cit. Chapter 2
19. There is no evidence that, as some appear to believe, Blake fell in love with her, and wrote the poem Mary about her; still less that he planned to bring her into his house as a mistress.
20. W.S. Baker William Sharp, Engraver Philadelphia 1875 pp 20-21
21. Interrogation of Sharpe before Privy Council, June 9 1794. TS.11.963.3509 p. 530
22. Ibid. p. 536
23. Minute book of SCI TS.11.962.3508
24. Evidence of John Taylor TS.11.955.3499
25. Erdman op. cit. p. 159
26. Interrogation of Richter before Privy Council, 16 May 1794. TS.11.963.3509 pp 111-112
27. First Report from the Committee of Secrecy London 1794 p. 18
28. Minutes of evidence for Thelwall's trial TS.11.952.3496 (1)
29. Report of Taylor TS.11.953.3497
30. Report of Groves, 13 May 1794 TS.11.965.3510A

31. State of the evidence against Baxter TS.11.960.3506 (1)
32. Gilchrist op. cit. p. 96: 'When the painter heard of these September doings he tore off his white cockade, and assuredly never wore the red cap again' (Blake would have had no business wearing a white cockade in the first place since that was a royalist symbol - a fact of which Gilchrist is sublimely unaware).
33. Erdman op. cit. for further details.
34. The French Revolution K. 135-136, 11 18-50
35. Ibid. K. 147, 11.297-300
36. Ibid. K. 140, 1. 147
37. Ibid. K. 142, 11.177-178
38. Ibid. K. 136, 11.53-56
39. Ibid. K. 138, 11.89-90
40. Ibid. 1.95
41. Ibid. 1.104
42. Ibid. K. 141, 11.154-157 This should be compared with other of Blake's repressive characters and their insistence on eternal punishment c.f. the rapist, slave driver and thunder-demon Bromion in Visions of the Daughters of Albion:
- And is there not one law for both the lion and the ox?
And is there not eternal fire and eternal chains
To bind the phantoms of existence from eternal life?
- (K. 192)
43. Ibid. K. 143, 11.193-194
44. Ibid. K. 143-145, 11.206-240
45. Ibid. K. 146, 1.266
46. Ibid. K. 147, 1.285. Dramatically this is very effective; but historically it is wildly inaccurate, since the troops were only removed as a result of the popular journée of July 14, and the resultant fall of the Bastille.
47. Ibid. K. 148, 11.304-306
48. Erdman op. cit. p. 152
49. The French Revolution K. 145, 11.248-254
50. Blake to Dr Trusler 23 August 1799 K. 793

51. The name probably derives from the Latin *orcus*, meaning hell. Blake's inversion of categories in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, holds good for America and the other Lambeth prophecies as well. 'Angels' are the hypocritical upholders of the existing system - its statesmen, like Pitt, and its ideologues, like Wilberforce. 'Demons' are those who, in following their honest energies, come into conflict with the system, and pose a threat to its very existence.
52. America K. 197. Plate 3.15
53. Ibid. K. 199. Plate 9.15
54. Ibid. K. 198. Plate 6. In his remarks on slavery, Blake seems to have been unaware that, despite the fine phrases in the American Declaration of Independence, slavery was still practised in the United States, and the leaders of the revolution had little intention of abolishing it.
55. Ibid. K. 198-199. Plate 8.5-14
56. Ibid. K. 200. Plate 10.2
57. Possibly Samuel Adams (Erdman op. cit. p. 26). This episode should be compared with the defection of an 'Angel' to Blake's demonic principles at the end of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.
58. America K. 200. Plate.11.10-11
59. Ibid. Plate 11.12-15
60. Ibid. K. 201. Plate 13.6-9
61. Ibid. Plate 14.2
62. Ibid. K. 201-202. Plate 14.13-19
63. Ibid. K. 202. Plate 15.2-3
64. Ibid. Plate 15.4-5
65. Presumably the poet laureate at that time, the mediocre William Whitehead.
66. Ibid. Plate 15.20
67. Ibid. Plate 15.23-26
68. Ibid. Plate 16.1-2
69. Ibid. K. 203. Plate 16.13-15
70. There is an ambiguity here. Erdman believes that the twelve years

should be added to 1781, the date of Yorktown, thus giving 1793 as the date of France receiving the 'Demon's light', which then refers to the execution of Louis XVI. In either case the reference is to an act of republican violence against monarchy, and has nothing to do with the experiments in constitutional monarchy between 1789 and 1791.

71. America K. 203. Plate 16.23
72. K. 185-187. A fine analysis of the poem can be found in Arnold Kettle 'English Blake' in Marxism Today Vol. 1 October 1957
73. The earliest the poem could have been written was late October 1792. La Fayette defected to the enemy on August 19, and was jailed by the Austrians in September, and a report of this reached England in The Times on October 25.
74. In the cancelled plate b on K. 204. However the adulatory reference to Paine, possibly dangerous, was left in.
75. 11. 7-8. The fife and drum are, of course, martial instruments. This is not too far removed from historical fact. Louis saw the war as a means of involving European despots who would come to his aid by invading France, deposing the Legislative Assembly, and re-establishing royal absolutism. See Albert Soboul The French Revolution 1787-1799 trans. Alan Forrest (2 vols. NLB edition London 1974) I pp 235-239
76. 11. 17-19
77. 11.20-21. Erdman remarks that this passage may derive from Burke's eulogy on the French queen: 'surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision. I saw her just above the horizon, decorating and cheering the elevated sphere she just began to move in - glittering like the morning star, full of life, and splendour, and joy' etc. Burke Reflections on the Revolution in France Pelican edition London 1968 p. 169
78. 1.51
79. 11.64-71
80. Described as 'Unscrupulous, tyrannical, coarse, dissipated, illiterate, he was morally almost featureless. He had a bad heart, a tainted mind, a cross-grained, domineering nature and an uncouth exterior. A noble aspiration, or a lofty motive he was incapable of appreciating. Without faith, without hope, without charity, he moved continually in a world of sordid interests and ignoble purposes'. W. Forbes Grey Some Old Scots Judges - Anecdotes and Impressions London 1914 p. 99
81. Europe K. 243. Plate 12.26-31

82. Britain was Europe's leading armaments manufacturer, largely due to John Wilkinson's improved methods of boring iron cannon.
83. Europe K. 243. Plate 12.32-33
84. The character of Enitharmon does not remain consistent in Blake's writing. She assumes a very different and often positive role in The Four Zoas and in Jerusalem.
85. Europe K. 240. Plate 5.5
86. Ibid. K. 245. Plate 15.2
87. Ibid. Plate 15.6-7
88. Ibid. Plate 15.11
89. The Song of Los K. 247. Plate 6.9-24 7.1-2
90. Georges Lefebvre The Great Fear of 1789 English translation London 1973 p. 12
91. H.O. 42.20
92. Mayor of Leicester to Home Office October 28 1792. H.O. 42.22
93. Which meant that a four pound loaf, 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ d in 1793, was costing almost 1/4 in 1800. Georges Rude' Hanoverian London 1714-1808 London 1971 p. 229
94. David Davies The Case of the Labourers in Husbandry 1795. Quoted in Brian Inglis Poverty and the Industrial Revolution London 1971 p. 46
95. Captain of Penzance militia to Home Office 11 March and 13 March 1795. H.O. 42.34
96. Letter from Truro, March 20 1795. H.O. 42.34
97. Letter from Penrhyn to Home Office, 30 March 1795. H.O. 42.34
98. Thos. Griffiths to Home Office, 2 April 1795. H.O. 42.34
99. Mayor of Plymouth to Home Office, 6 April 1795. H.O. 42.34
100. Elford to Portland, 6 April 1795. H.O. 42.34
101. Letter from Coventry, 22 April 1795. H.O. 42.34
102. Spencer, Hicks and Villiers to Portland, 23 June 1795. H.O. 42.35
103. LCS Minute Book, 16 July 1795. Add. Mss. 27.813

104. Letter from G. Cornwall, 30 June 1795. H.O.42.35
105. Hardwicke to Portland, 19 July 1795. H.O. 42.35
106. Letter of Knollis, 20 July 1795. H.O. 42.35
107. Letter of Jack Carter, Portsmouth, 12 April 1795. H.O. 42.34
108. Letter of Jim Turner, Wells, 28 April 1795. H.O. 42.34
109. J.L. and Barbara Hammond The Village Labourer London 1966 edition p. 118
110. Paper enclosed in Richmond to Portland, 22 June 1795. H.O. 42.35
111. Report of C. Atkinson on supply of flour in London. H.O. 42.35
112. Letter from Tewkesbury Town Clerk, 25 June 1795. H.O. 42.35
113. Powell's reports. P.C. 1.23.a.38
114. Garnett to Portland, 18 July 1795. H.O. 42.35
115. Report of the Committee of Secrecy of the House of Commons 1799 p. xx
116. Rudé Hanoverian London 1714-1808 p. 230
117. Europe K. 240. Plage 5.7
118. Soboul op. cit. I, 309
119. The Four Zoas, Night the First K. 264, 1.24
120. Ibid. Night the Third K. 296, 11.160-166
121. Annotations to Bacon K. 400
122. Annotations to Thornton K. 789

iii) The Critique of Ideology

In discussing the question of ideology, one is walking across a theoretical minefield. Marxists (and others) have yet to reach any consensus even on the definition of the term. I do not intend to enter the debate in any particular detail, but merely to outline my own position, which informs the rest of this section.

Following Louis Althusser, one can say that ideology is a representation, not of reality, but of men's relationship to that reality.⁽¹⁾ That relationship is an imagined one: how people think they relate to each other and to the society of which they are part, is not necessarily how the relationship actually functions. It is this representation of an imaginary relationship that gives ideology its elusive and opaque character.

This concept of ideology evidently rules out some other, and more traditional, concepts. Ideology is not a conspiracy, a careful plot laid by the ruling class to deceive the masses, a deliberate and knowing distortion of reality. Such a crude and instrumentalist view of ideology fails to explain the complexities of history, and attributes a power of foresight to ruling groups which in fact they seldom possess. It also assumes that the ruling group itself is somehow above ideology and free of its influence: for only if it were free of it, could it indulge in the cynical manipulation of ideology which this view implies.

Ideology is not a myth or a delusion, nor is it a state of 'false

consciousness' that will be bypassed once the revolutionary class, in Lukacs' teleological view, has grasped its essential mission. It is a reality which arises from real relations of production which give it its strength and its persistence. It is the means by which men make sense of their world.

To conceive of ideology as representing an imaginary relationship makes it easier to understand its fragmentary and inchoate nature. Each group of people, even from within the same class, may imagine their relationship to the world slightly differently, thus producing a kaleidoscope effect in ideology. Strictly speaking there do not exist homogeneous entities that can be labelled 'feudal ideology', 'bourgeois ideology', etc. Contradictions and lacunae exist. Serious disagreements and conflicts may, and frequently do, take place on the terrain of an essentially common ideology. Individual ideologues may develop well worked-out systems: but these do not necessarily correspond to other components of their group or class ideology. Intricate ideological systems (Catholic theology, for instance) will eventually only carry historical weight when they cease being systems and are absorbed into 'common sense', becoming part of the texture of everyday life: or to be more precise, part of the way in which everyday life is perceived.

But ideology is not merely something in people's heads. It is structured: that is, it exists in certain practices, within certain structures and apparatuses (eg the family, the church, the school). By this route we arrive at the key relation between ideology and politics. Politics is centred on the question of the state and state power. In traditional Marxist thought, that state power has been seen as operating almost exclusively by repression, through utilising its monopoly of legitimate

violence (Lenin's State and Revolution contains the classic statement of this position). More recently, the increasingly evident fact that ruling classes do not perpetually hold guns at the heads of the workers, plus the renaissance of Marxist theory from the mid-1960s (including detailed study of the work of Antonio Gramsci) has led to the rejection of this view.

In Louis Althusser's conceptualisation, state apparatuses are those bodies, institutions and structures which ensure the reproduction of existing relations of production and hence the domination of a particular class, or class fraction, within a given social formation. This leads him to discern two types of state apparatuses: those that function mainly through repression or the threat of repression (armies, police forces, legal system etc.), and those that function mainly in an ideological way (the educational and religious apparatuses, for example). However, an apparatus is rarely exclusively repressive or exclusively ideological (thus armies are imbued with hierarchical and nationalist ideologies; coercion is used in schools against recalcitrant children).⁽²⁾

To conceive of the state as that which ensures the reproduction of relations of production is to bring ideology to the centre of the political stage, since in advanced Western societies it is mainly through ideological means that capitalist production relations are maintained. While the repressive state apparatuses organise the moment of force in a society, the ideological apparatuses organise the moment of consent:⁽³⁾ both ensure the structural domination of the class that controls the means of production.

This brief and compressed theoretical digression leads us to pose the

question: what problems were raised concerning ideology and the ideological apparatuses in the late 18th century? For the rulers of Britain there were, in fact, serious problems. The rise of a commercial, and shortly afterwards of an industrial, bourgeoisie put strains on and introduced dislocations into a power bloc which, earlier in the century, had been under the undisputed hegemony of the landed aristocracy. But more important was the development of substantial wage-earning classes not immediately assimilated into the ideological apparatuses (particularly the established church) that already existed. Industrialisation disturbed some observers for the destructive social impact it might have:

With the bell ringing, and the clamour of the mill, all the vale is disturb'd; treason and levelling systems are the discourse; and rebellion may be near at hand ... The people, indeed, are employed; but they are all abandoned to vice from the throng ... At the times when people work not in the mill, they issue out to poaching, profligacy and plunder. (4)

Changing class composition as the structure of the economy altered - the growth in industry and in the power of industrial capital, pauperisation of outworkers, degradation of certain areas of the countryside and exodus from others - posed the threat of instability. Hegemony as it had previously existed, and as enshrined in the post 1688 revolutionary settlement, needed to be reorganised to meet such changes. It is no coincidence, then, that the period of radical agitation and the French wars should also see important changes in the apparatuses of the state.

The repressive apparatuses were strengthened, partly because of the exigencies of the foreign wars, partly for purely domestic purposes. Pitt made the government's position clear in early 1793 when he remarked that 'A spirit had appeared in some of the manufacturing towns which made it necessary that troops should be kept near them'. (5) Colonel De

Lancey's reports from the disaffected towns of Manchester and Sheffield leave no doubt that the spirit in question was that of plebeian radicalism.⁽⁶⁾

For our purposes, however, changes in the ideological apparatuses are more important.⁽⁷⁾ Undoubtedly the major ideological structure earlier in the century was the established church:⁽⁸⁾ this transmitted the concepts of deference, of a society hierarchically ordered into ranks, one below the other, from the king downwards (which of course had a solid base in a real social division of labour), and of poverty as something unavoidable - the result of Adam and Eve's original sin, or a punishment for present wrongdoing, or a trial or test from the Almighty which had to be endured.

It has been said that the eighteenth century should be analysed in terms of 'deference' and the hierarchical structure of ranks deriving from that concept. According to this argument, 'class' is a term only appropriate to the nineteenth century. Marx was right for his own time, but his methodology should not be stretched backwards. Thus runs an argument that is both empiricist and subjectivist. It assumes that the truth of a society is contained in what its inhabitants think and write about it. 'Deference' and 'rank' are the terminology of the eighteenth century and are therefore the correct terms in which to describe that period.

This, however, would be to write a purely ideological history. The 'deferential' model of society is simply the ideological world picture of the eighteenth century church and state. It is an interpretation of reality (and a highly partisan one, at that) and not a description of it. That this world picture was widely accepted by all social strata at the

time (not universally - and certainly not in practice, since the 18th century, on closer inspection, does not look particularly deferential), does not make it any more valid for the historian. (For a contemporary parallel, proclamations from the Supreme Soviet that the USSR is now constructing communism, and the evident belief of most of the Soviet population that this is the case, do not absolve serious historians from analysing the specificity of the Soviet social formation). The ideas in the heads of people are real: they are the stuff of history, but not exclusively. They do not constitute the only reality; they are, in fact, just one interpretation of reality.⁽⁹⁾

Scattered through the dominant culture were concepts of deference, poverty and their concomitant stress on the individual piety and resignation that would win eternal bliss. The reverse of the deferential coin was the duty of the rich to show charity to the less fortunate - cut-price bread in times of shortage, perhaps, or gifts of cast-off clothes to miners' children. At its extreme this turned into unconscious self-parody, and became an argument that it is good to be poor, that poverty is necessary because without it there would be nobody for the rich to be charitable to. Indeed, Reeves' Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property told the poor to stop agitating because:

if the ties which bind all orders together in this country were once dissolved, whatever calamities the wealthy might be involved in would fall with double weight upon themselves, when there would be no recourse to look to - no friend, no protector, no benefactor.

(10)

In an age without universal education, the dominant ideological apparatuses were religious. Their role was summed up neatly by Archdeacon William Paley thus: 'Religion smooths all inequalities, because it unfolds a prospect which makes all earthly distinctions nothing'.⁽¹¹⁾

But the religious apparatus underwent important changes at the end of the 18th century. A potentially dangerous gulf had developed between the Established Church and the 'lower orders'. This was partly because, with the development of industrial towns, whole concentrations of wage-earners were coming into existence without any contact with the Church; and partly because orthodox Anglicanism lacked any proselytising zeal. It was a complacent, rationalistic religion, and the boundary between it and Deism was not easily drawn, or rather, the old fence between the two was rotting for lack of attention. Feeling was quite out of place in this religion - 'enthusiast' and 'zealot' had become terms of abuse, synonymous with 'fanatic'.

Bishops had generally behaved like the landowners they were - like any other Whig (or possibly Tory) magnate. The humble Anglican parson was ceasing to be quite so humble. He was certain to come off very well out of any enclosure act, and the gulf between parson and villagers tended to grow wider as the century progressed. Plurality of livings hardly helped.

This sort of religion, with its casual gentility, and its smell of corruption, was no longer able to grasp the hearts and minds of the masses, and many of its priests made no attempt to do so. And the early industrial revolution posed certain problems of an ideological nature - in particular the necessity for a new work-discipline, dictated not by the rhythm of the seasons, but by that of the machine.⁽¹²⁾ It was therefore imperative that the new workforce be integrated into the dominant ideology - or, to use the language of the time, that they should be 'Godly'. Failure to achieve this integration threatened an end to ruling-class hegemony.

The ideological assimilation of the new working class was a lengthy process, and one that was only finally achieved in the middle of the following century. But an important start was made in the 1790s with the rise of a new ideological apparatus in the form of 'vital religion'. It is the task of this section to read Blake within this context. Vital religion existed both within the Established Church as Evangelicalism and outside it as Methodism.

Much has been written on the profoundly counter-revolutionary nature of Methodism and of its utility to industrial capitalism as a work-discipline.⁽¹³⁾ No rigid line of theological demarcation can be drawn between Methodism and Evangelicalism. The Arminian heritage of Methodism should not be counterposed sharply to the Calvinist one of Evangelicalism. Wesley was an Arminian, but Whitefield was a Calvinist. In any case, theological niceties were hardly the stuff of either Methodism or Evangelicalism. The differences were essentially organizational, residing particularly in the autonomy of the Methodist structures from the established church which Wesley had broken with in 1784, his chapels being registered as Dissenting chapels in 1787. The parochial system was definitively abandoned in 1791 when the circuit system was extended to cover the entire country. Jones of Nayland summed up the situation, saying of Methodism 'it is christian godliness without christian order'.⁽¹⁴⁾ Still, it was genuinely difficult in the 1780s and 1790s to draw clear distinctions between Methodists and Evangelicals. To their enemies they looked much the same and were thrown together under the term 'enthusiast'. Those members of the possessing classes who opposed Methodism, and opposed Hannah More's educational work assumed - wrongly - that any sort of expression granted to the poor, and any sort of education for the poor was potentially dangerous. Their apprehensions were almost entirely without found-

ation. For although an autonomous movement such as Methodism must always be subject to internal tensions, due to the latent contradiction between its roots among the 'lower orders', and its function as an apparatus ensuring the continuance of property relations opposed to their interests; and although these tensions led to various radical breakaways, ⁽¹⁵⁾ the essential content of the movement was aptly summed up by Jabez Bunting when he stated 'Methodism hates democracy as much as it hates sin'. ⁽¹⁶⁾

'Vital Religion' set out to rectify the failings of the Established Church which had failed to sink its roots into the 'lower orders'. It had the advantage of enjoying a high degree of autonomy from the central state, which enabled it to criticize the irreligious conduct of those in high places, as well as low, giving it a superficially 'democratic' air. This is not to say that it was a deliberate conspiracy, nor to deny the sincerity of the Clapham Sect's motives. Obviously Evangelicals and Methodists set out to rectify what appeared to them as the moral pit into which the country had sunk. But all effective ideologies are similarly believed in, and all contain structures of belief, precepts for action, which, independent of the will of their authors, secure particular social interests. An examination of the work of two of the foremost among the Evangelicals, ⁽¹⁷⁾ Hannah More and William Wilberforce, will allow us to understand the content of this new ideological apparatus.

Evangelicals and Methodists went into labouring communities as earnest proselytizers. Hannah More's activity in Somerset is a prime example of the drive to instruct the poor and mould them into the type of God-fearing

and State-fearing citizen approved of by the Evangelicals.

But when it came to teaching reading in her Mendip schools, Hannah More was in a dilemma: if the poor learnt to read they might use this new-found skill on such irreligious matters as novels, or worse still pick up a copy of Rights of Man. So Hannah More decided to write material for the poor herself: the Cheap Repository Tracts.

Hannah More's tracts could never be accused of subtlety. Her points were made with a clarity that equalled Paine's: her message was brutal and unmistakeable. The existing order was God-ordained and in fundamentals could not be altered. Men were equal - but only after death. Until then each had his allotted station and must hold to it. The only important struggles were spiritual ones. Man's solace was his unquestioning trust in God. The tracts were heavily subsidised by the richer Evangelicals and distributed throughout the country. No attempt was made to disguise their ideological functions. Their purpose was defined as:

To improve the habits and raise the principles of the mass of the people, at a time when their dangers and temptations, moral and political, were multiplied beyond the example of any other period in our history ... to counteract not only vice and profligacy on the one hand, but error, discontent and false religion on the other. (18)

The tracts were thus designed as having a stabilising effect. They worked, not by rational argument, but largely at the level of intimidation or threats. This is best seen in some of Hannah More's ballads. Characteristically, these take the form of a confrontation between a 'bad', or misguided, workman who doubts the wisdom of Providence, or is attracted to radical ideas and a 'good' character who is a God-fearing defender of the status quo. The latter then either defeats all the former's arguments and converts him to the side of God and the Government; or the 'bad'

character continues in his sinful ways and suffers a dreadful fate.

These stereotyped figures betray a deep, though quite unconscious, contempt for the 'lower orders' on the part of Hannah More and her admirers. As for the arguments put in the mouths of the 'bad' characters, these are generally unrecognisable parodies of the radical position. No attempt is made here (unlike the case of some of the much more sophisticated pro-government pamphleteers) to meet the radicals on their own grounds, or to engage in any sort of political discourse.

The most obvious political ballad written by Hannah More is The Riot, or Half a Loaf is Better than No Bread,⁽¹⁹⁾ written in the year of the food riot par excellence, 1795. Tom Hod is hungry and so addresses his fellow villagers thus:

Come neighbours no longer be patient and quiet,
Come let us go kick up a bit of a riot;
I'm hungry my lads but I've littel to eat,
So we'll pull down the mills and we'll seize all the meat;
I'll give you good sport, boys, as ever you saw.

The local loyalist, Jack Anvil, argues against Tom, saying that God blesses England, and that though things may be bad at the moment they're much worse in Holland, Spain and Italy. And some corn is now being imported, so what's he worrying about? - they should all wait patiently and the prices will fall. Besides which they are squandering time and money:

Let us remember whenever we meet
The more ale we drink, boys, the less we shall eat.
On those days spent in riot, no bread you brought home,
Had you spent them in labour you must have had some.

As for matters of state, the villagers are too ignorant to make any judgement, so best to leave it to the King and the Government.

In any case the shortage must be due to the wickedness of the times, in

which case everyone is guilty. Potatoes are being planted too, so there really is no room for complaint. The remedy, of course, is to work all day, six days a week, and pray to God on Sundays; and if that does not have the desired effect, well

The gentlefolk too will afford us supplies,
They'll subscribe - and they'll give up their puddings and pies
The possibility of repression only enters in the last line of Jack's speech: 'And when of two evils I'm asked which is best / I'd rather be hungry than hang'd I protest'. Tom Hod is convinced and goes back to work.

For those who persist in the paths of unrighteousness divine vengeance intervenes, as illustrated by the story of Patient Joe, or the Newcastle Collier.⁽²⁰⁾ Patient Joe is a miner with an absolute trust in Providence who 'praised the creator whatever befell'. Come good, come ill, wealth or poverty, war or peace, Joe knows it's all for the best. Another child is born to Joe and his wife who are, naturally enough, joyful. The child dies - Joe is still joyful 'For God had a right to recall what he lent'. Not surprisingly, some of Joe's colleagues down the pit think that he is not altogether in his right mind, and poke fun at him. Foremost among these is the villain of the piece, 'idle Tim Jenkins', who is (inevitably) a drinker and a gambler.

One day a dog steals Joe's dinner - Tim Jenkins mocks Joe, asking him if this is for the good too. Of course it is, replies Joe, and goes off to chase the dog and get his dinner back. He fails to retrieve his dinner, but when he returns he finds that 'The pit is fall'n in, and Tim Jenkins is dead'. Joe is hardly typical of mining communities for the poem's next line is 'How sincere was the gratitude Joseph expressed'. He gives thanks to God that he was chasing after his dinner when the roof

collapsed:

How could it appear to a short-sighted sinner
That my life would be saved by the loss of my dinner

The twentieth century reader is likely to find this a nauseating piece - an effect which is only slightly diminished by its patent absurdity.

But it is not easy to estimate how this and other tracts would have appeared to an eighteenth century outworker, or agricultural labourer, or even miner. E.P. Thompson does not think they met with much success and were just left lying around servants' quarters in aristocratic mansions.⁽²¹⁾

But given the massive numbers that were distributed, this is not altogether convincing. 300,000 were sold in the first month and a half of the project (March 3 - April 18 1795), and by March 1796 the sales figures had topped the two million mark. Even taking the large number that went overseas into account, and Hannah More's own admission that the gentry and 'middling classes' brought them as much as the poor did, it seems clear that a great many of the tracts must have found their way into the homes of the 'lower orders'.⁽²²⁾ Indeed 'middling class' purchase may well have been for gratis distribution among the poor. We do not have to accept the more far-fetched claims made for the Tracts (for instance that a reading of The Riot prevented one of Bath in 1796, or that industrial relations in the northern mining areas were rendered harmonious by Patient Joe)⁽²³⁾ to recognize that they may well have had a significant impact.

Politically the tracts were a child's guide to Burke: but whereas Burke held the 'swinish multitude' in open contempt and only wrote for the recognized political nation, Hannah More realised that if the social order was to be maintained, then the poor had to be brought under ruling

class ideological hegemony. And that was not possible if ruling class ideologues refused to talk to them. To beat Paine it was necessary to play him at his own game - therefore the Tracts were cheap (selling for $\frac{1}{2}$ d, 1d or $1\frac{1}{2}$ d) and initially, subsidized by the Clapham Sect and others; and the services of hawkers and pedlars were enlisted to help with the distribution. (24)

Hannah More's material enjoyed two important advantages over both Burke and the radical pamphleteers. Firstly, her ballads might be dismissed as atrocious doggerel, but then they were not intended to be lasting masterpieces. They were meant to be easily accessible. The crude but vigorous rhythms of The Riot, and that ballad's painfully obvious rhymes were strong aids to immediate accessibility. In particular, they would help in reading the ballads aloud to an audience. Any subtle poetic devices are deliberately avoided. Complicated metaphors, involved imagery, even had Hannah More been competent enough to produce them, would have spoiled her purpose. The last thing a reader of the ballads was invited to do was to think critically about them.

Here we come to the second point on which More scores: the ballads are written as common sense advice: they appeal to that sub-stratum of accepted maxims which are the day-to-day expression of dominant ideologies. Jack Anvil simply puts these 'common sense' maxims into verse. In so doing, however, he also selects, since 'common sense' may include not only 'it's better to go hungry than be hanged for rioting', but also 'if there are enough of us, we won't get caught', not to mention traditional conceptions of the 'fair price' for foodstuffs. Nonetheless, a reading of Jack Anvil's rhyming advice might easily have produced an audience reaction of nodded agreement and a muttered chorus of 'That's right'.

In her own terms, The Riot is perhaps one of More's most successful pieces. Patient Joe, however, is less successful: unlike The Riot, it sins against 'common sense' in that its picture of a mining community is so obviously unreal.

Hannah More is best remembered today for her educational work in the Mendkps. But this has been singularly misunderstood. Modern writings on her tend to speak of this activity as, in some sense, progressive, and one recent study has even referred to her as a 'social worker',⁽²⁵⁾ an extremely misleading term. This attitude produces a very favourable picture of Hannah More who is seen, despite admitted sanctimonious excesses, as somehow paving the way for modern education.

This is all very well if a unilinear theory of history is held whereby the past gradually develops into the present as some great and mysterious purpose unfolds itself. Another, very different evaluation of Hannah More's work, however, results from a location of it inside the ideological apparatuses at work in the social formation of her time. For it is no 'accident', as John McLeish would have us believe,⁽²⁶⁾ that Hannah More's activity coincided with waves of government repression. The function of her schools was precisely to combat radicalism by creating loyal hearts and minds, by reconciling the poor to their lot. Or, as she wrote to the Bishop of Bath and Wells in 1801:

My plan of instruction is extremely simple and limited. They learn on weekdays such coarse work as may fit them for servants. I allow of no writing for the poor. My object is not to make fanatics but to train up the lower classes in habits of industry and piety ... the only books in use in teaching are two little tracts called Questions for the Mendip Schools (to be had of Hatchard), The Church Catechism (these are framed and half a dozen hung up in the room), the Catechism broken into short questions, Spelling Books, Psalter, Common Prayer, Testament, Bible. The little ones repeat Watts'⁽²⁷⁾ Hymns.

Two simplistic responses to this are possible. One is to dismiss it as dreary and monotonous fare rammed down the throats of helpless children. The other is to praise it as providing some reading matter rather than none, and as keeping the children off the streets. While the former at least shows some sympathy for the Mendip children, neither is an adequate historical response. The point is that More's educational system had a quite explicit driving ideological purpose. The question is not whether the system of education was good, bad, or better than nothing - but what was it for, what was its purpose and its intended and likely effects?

Clearly the central focus of the schools was Bible reading and general instruction in religion: the problem faced by the poor was not, as far as Hannah More and her sisters were concerned, poverty, but irreligion. Thus when she began her missionary work in Somerset it was not the grinding poverty of the area that impressed her so much as the general ignorance of the Catechism. She wrote to a friend:

Oh! You have no notion what a county this is. In one parish, where I opened a school of 108 on Sunday sennight, there were not any boys or girls of any age whom I asked, who could tell me who (28) made them.

Children brought up outside of normal religious teaching, by parents who were also ignorant of the Catechism, would probably find such a question extremely puzzling.

And Hannah More's religion was stark and punitive. For her, Christianity's central doctrine was that of the Fall: even the Redemption and Resurrection were subordinate to this, logically following from it. (29) The human soul was corrupt at birth, bearing the taint of original sin. There were no 'innocent' children.

The narrow nature of Hannah More's curriculum was shared by other establishment thinkers on education. Jonas Hanway wrote in 1786: 'Reading will help the people's morals, but writing is not necessary'. (30) Joseph Lancaster in 1805 wrote:

Above all, one solemn duty is owing from the public to poor children under their care, whether educated in orphan schools, houses of industry or workhouses - that every child should be able to read his Bible ... (we must combine) moral and religious education with habits of subordination ... children cannot be too soon trained in the way they should go. (31)

Andrew Bell, the moving force behind the 'National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church throughout England and Wales', established in 1811, was writing in 1805:

It is not proposed that the children of the poor be educated in an expensive manner, nor even taught to write or to cypher ... It may suffice to teach the generality, on an economical plan, to read their bible and understand the doctrines of our holy religion. (32)

The educational apparatus has changed over the decades - changes related to developments in the forces of production, and to the increasingly complex nature of an industrial capitalist society. Our current ideas of a 'liberal' education, of developing initiative and all-round ability, of producing alert and inquiring minds, could only become a dominant strand in educational ideology when the labour process had diversified to such an extent that a vast amount of skilled labour was required at all levels. At the end of the 18th century, however, the need was straightforward labour discipline.

Hannah More and those who thought like her had no intention of producing alert and inquiring minds, or even of training people to make the best use of all their talents or abilities. In fact they leaned in precisely the opposite direction - their aim was to regiment the children of the poor into an acceptance of the existing class structure, and to leave

faculties dormant if these were not conducive to the poor's primary role as hewers of wood and drawers of water. In their thinking 'religion' and 'subordination' went hand in hand, and indeed at times seem synonymous.

However, Hannah More went further than Bell or Lancaster could go - in the Mendip villages where she worked the structures which she created permeated the entire community. Not only the Sunday sermons, the schools, and the adult evening classes, but also the social organizations she formed such as the 'women's benefit societies' played a crucial role in remoulding village life and casting it in a harmonious and repressive totality which revolved round the village church. These benefit societies took contributions from the villagers and in return paid out sickness and maternity benefits: but unlike trade unions, or friendly societies, they were not autonomous bodies controlled by their members. The hands of the More sisters directed them, using them as back-up forces for the schools and the values that the schools taught, as mechanisms for punishing those who defied such values, and for generally spreading 'order' and 'decency' through the Mendips. (33)

Hannah More laid out with great clarity the function of these societies in a letter of 1792:

One great object in our establishment of the poor women's clubs, has been to back with penal statutes, the religious instruction of the schools. This summer I have had the satisfaction of seeing the first dawn of hope on a subject of great difficulty and delicacy. My young women who were candidates for the bridal presents which I bestow on the virtuous, gravely refused to associate with one who had been guilty of gross conduct; whereas it formerly used to afford matter for horrid laughter and disgusting levity ... I had the pleasure of witnessing the most becoming gravity and exact decorum in that part of my audience which I most feared, when I excluded from the pale of our establishment a female offender. It was a comfort that she had not been one of our disciples. (34)

What had happened was that Evangelical ideology had permeated village life distorting and disciplining it. The structures which Hannah More had created operated on a triple basis of indoctrination, charity and coercion. The 'female offender' (whose crime is not revealed) would evidently, prior to the Mores' arrival, have gone unpunished and remained in village life. Now however the dominance of the new, Evangelical institutions had restructured village social life in such a way that the 'offender', and presumably all who sympathised with her, could be ostracized. Whatever autonomous village life and traditions existed before the 1790s was being destroyed by, or subordinated to, the ideology imported into the Mendips by Hannah More.

While deeply moved by the least sign of irreligion, Hannah More was remarkably insensitive to the material sufferings of the people among whom she worked. We shall leave this unpleasant lady - 'the old Bishop in Petticoats'⁽³⁵⁾ as Cobbett called her - advising the villagers of Shipham how they should cope with the food scarcity of 1801. Here Hannah More expressed concisely what the 'proper' relationship of rich to poor should be. In this passage are found the elements of deference, subordination, charity and gratitude that constitute major parts of an ideological structure the ultimate function of which was to justify and maintain a grossly unequal social order:

Let me remind you that probably that very scarcity has been permitted by an all-wise and gracious Providence to unite all ranks of people together, to show the poor how immediately they are dependent on the rich, and to show both rich and poor that they are all dependent on Himself. It has also enabled you to see more clearly the advantages you derive from the government and constitution of this country - to observe the benefits flowing from the distinction of rank and fortune, which has enabled the high so liberally to assist the low ... nor would the gentry have been able to afford

such large supplies to the distresses of the poor, had they not denied themselves, for your sakes, many indulgences to which their fortune at other times entitles them. We trust the poor in general, especially those that are well instructed, have received what has been done for them as a matter of favour, not of right. (36)

At the micro-level of Mendips villages Hannah More demonstrated the effectiveness of 'vital religion' as an ideological apparatus in combating any threat to existing property relations, and in consolidating the hegemony of the ruling classes over society. At the national level, in Parliament, the main evangelical spokesman was Wilberforce, whose hostility to radicalism verged on the paranoid. He fully supported the savage sentences handed down to the Scottish reformers, and insulted one of them, Thomas Fyssh Palmer, in the House of Commons, even while admitting that he had not read his trial. (37) He enthusiastically supported the sequence of repressive legislation introduced by the Pitt government, starting with the suspension of habeas corpus in 1794, and indeed helped Pitt draft the Seditious Assembly Bills. It was Wilberforce who introduced the Combination Act of 1799.

His entire political outlook was shaped by an abhorrence of independent action carried out by the labouring classes, and an abhorrence even of their pleasures. Wilberforce declared that 'God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners'. (38) The latter meant in practice a frontal assault on the pastimes of the poor. Wilberforce was the leading spirit behind the Proclamation Society (39), and later the Society for the Suppression of Vice (accurately dubbed by Sidney Smith as 'The Society for the Suppression of Vice among those with less than five hundred pounds a year'), (40) whose objects were the enforcement of laws against duelling, lotteries,

drunkenness, blasphemy, unlicensed entertainment and particularly Sabbath-breaking. Of these only the attack on duelling really affected the upper strata of society. It was the poor man's drunkenness that was easiest to punish, and the poor man's blasphemy; and it was the entertainments of the poor that were unlicensed. As for the Sabbath, for many working men and women (and children) this was likely to be the only day of the week when they were not engaged in back-breaking toil: and now Wilberforce wanted to take that one day of leisure away. For Wilberforce the entire Sabbath had to be spent in religion and the worship of God:⁽⁴¹⁾ the bleakness of the material conditions of the poor was to be supplemented by a spiritual desolation. A desolation which could presumably be escaped if you happened to be an Evangelical yourself: but if you did not agree with Wilberforce's particular version of Christianity, then you were unfortunate, for the social rulings that proceeded from it applied to everyone. Not that Wilberforce and the Evangelicals saw it that way: they considered that they were enriching the poor man's lot with spiritual nourishment. Those whose pleasures were dubbed as Vices to be suppressed were not likely to agree.

Wilberforce's major writing, A Practical View of the Prevailing System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country contrasted with Real Christianity, again shows religion as the ideological mechanism used to ensure the subordination of the lower orders. Wilberforce declares that Christianity's greatest opponent is selfishness, and he defines selfishness thus:

In the great and wealthy, it displays itself in luxury, in pomp and parade, and in all the frivolity of a sickly and depraved imagination which seeks in vain its own gratification and is dead to the generous and energetic pursuits of an enlarged heart. In the lower orders, when not motionless under the weight of a superincumbent despotism, it manifests itself in pride, and its natural offspring, insubordination in all its aspects.

Thus two very different concepts - the frivolity of the rich and the insubordination of the poor - are yoked together and proclaimed to be the same thing. If 'selfishness' is to be destroyed the rich have merely to behave more soberly, drop their 'pomp and parade' and 'frivolity', while the poor have to abandon all thought of revolt and resign themselves to their miserable position in society. The disparity between the two demands is plain. In effect the abandonment of frivolity was the price the rich were asked to pay in order to ensure the integration and subordination of the masses into the new social formation that the development of industrial capitalism was creating. It was a price that the ruling class was eventually quite willing to pay, as the nineteenth century was to show.

That religion was to be a means of social control is transparently clear in A Practical View. As Wilberforce put it, in a long and revealing passage, Christianity:

renders the inequalities of the social scale less galling to the lower orders, whom also she instructs in their turn to be diligent, humble, patient: reminding them that their more lowly path has been allotted to them by the hand of God; that it is their part faithfully to discharge its duties, and contentedly to bear its inconveniences; that the present state of things is very short; that the objects about which worldly men conflict so eagerly are not worth the contest; that the peace of mind which Religion offers indiscriminately to all ranks, affords more true satisfaction than all the expensive pleasures which are beyond the poor man's reach; that in this view the poor have the advantage; that if their superiors enjoy more abundant comforts, they are also exposed to many temptations from which the inferior classes are happily exempted; that "having food and raiment they should therewith be content" since their situation in life, with all its evils, is better than they have deserved at the hand of God; and that finally all human distinctions will soon be done away, and the true followers of Christ will all, as children of the same Father, be alike admitted to the possession of the same heavenly inheritance. Such are the blessed effects of Christianity on the temporal well-being of (43) political communities.

Here, run together in one paragraph, are all the moral clichés whose ultimate function was to cement existing relations of production - to ensure that the dominated classes' view of their relationship to the world was the same as that of the dominant classes, deference, subordination, poverty, resignation. The plight of the poor, it is claimed, is nobody's fault - it was divinely pre-ordained, and therefore must be borne patiently. This should not be too difficult, since life is short, worldly goods are not worth having, the rich have it in their power to commit much grosser sins than the poor etc.

In this evangelical world, sex was an outcast. Sexual activity was to be exclusively monogamous and marital, and even then was not to be talked about. Now while prudishness had been far from absent earlier in the century (and was always inherent in the Calvinist tradition), it was only with the rise of 'vital religion' that it began to assume central importance. 'Victorian' morality is misnamed: it can be traced back to Hannah More and the Clapham Sect. Sexual libertinism had been (within limits) acceptable behaviour among ruling circles since the Restoration. One of the achievements of the Evangelicals was the change this: to initiate a process whereby sexuality would be driven out of the public arena, and restricted to an ever-diminishing private world, a subject to be defined only by its absence. The pronouncement of anathema against sex was simultaneous with the binding of people to the rhythms of the machine.

More and Wilberforce anticipated such vulgar theorists of the victorious industrial bourgeoisie as Dr. Andrew Ure, who could write in 1835 that 'it is, therefore, excessively the interest of every mill-owner to organize his moral machinery on equally sound principles with his mech-

anical, for otherwise he will never command the steady hands, watchful eyes, and prompt co-operation, essential to excellence of product'. Labour in the service of capitalist industry should be performed as a 'pure act of virtue ... inspired by the love of a transcendent Being'. The 'transforming power' necessary to produce this change was to be found 'in the cross of Christ'.⁽⁴⁴⁾

It goes almost without saying that all works of literature are also works of ideology. That is, they are situated within the ideological practices at work inside the particular social formation in which they are written. As no author exists in isolation from his society (even hermits through their particular choice of existence bear a particular relation to their world) so his works bear a relation to the ideologies of his time, and in particular to the dominant ideology. Since the ideological instance in social formations cannot be reduced to the economic instance, but enjoys a relative autonomy, it is not enough to deduce a writer's ideological standpoint from his class position, or from his immediate economic circumstances, though these will obviously have some bearing on what he writes. A glib explanation of Romanticism merely in terms either of a clinging to a feudal past, or of an assumed direct, one to one, relation with a rising industrial bourgeoisie is not a great deal of use, and is, in fact, the sort of thing that brings discredit on Marxist literary criticism.

Only a close reading of an author (including not only what he says, but also what he does not say - silence too can be significant), and a detailed knowledge of the environment in which he writes, will enable a clear understanding of his ideological coordinates. This previous sketch of certain aspects of dominant ideology in the 1790s, while it does not pretend

to be complete, helps fill in the picture of some portion of the ideological - Blake would have said 'spiritual' - canvas on which he, and Wordsworth for that matter, worked. It is certainly easy enough to spot some of Blake's most direct attacks on that structure of ideas represented by vital religion. We have already noted, for instance, the 'Councillor' in The Song of Los whose function is to 'invent allegoric riches',⁽⁴⁵⁾ and the sinister goddess Enigharmon whose injunction to Rintrah and Palamabron in Europe is to

Go! Tell the human race that Woman's Love is Sin;
That an Eternal life awaits the worms of sixty winters
In an allegorical abode where existence hath never come.⁽⁴⁶⁾

The promises that the Evangelicals and their like hold out for the poor are faked: not real riches, but 'allegorical' ones. The heaven they speak of exists only in fable: it is merely 'an allegorical abode', a delusion that has no real existence.

But certain works of literature are not only works of ideology, they are also works about ideology, works that explore the codes and images by which men live out their lives. This, I would argue, is the case with Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience. We are told what to expect from these lyrics by the subtitle of the 1794 engravings where the two sets appear together: Blake states that they are 'Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul'.⁽⁴⁷⁾

The state of Innocence has not always been treated critically with the care and subtlety that Blake devised for its creation (the more obvious social criticism of the Songs of Experience, indeed, has been much explored while leaving its sister poems to relative critical neglect). This is perhaps because the Songs exist on several levels. It has frequently been noted that they are genuine children's verse, and supremely effective

children's verse: that is, many of them are about children, they appeal to children, and yet they are never childish. But all too frequently an obvious question deriving from this is not asked. What are the implications of songs written from a child's viewpoint, yet written by an adult, and read by adults? Because what seems evident truth to a child may not seem so evident to an adult. Take 'The Divine Image', for example. What are we to make of a lyric that tells us:

For Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love
Is God our father dear,
And Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love⁽⁴⁸⁾
Is Man, his child and care.

If we are children, certainly eighteenth century children, we may well agree: that corresponds to what we have been told by our parents, by our teachers and by the local parson. That, therefore, is how we conceptualize our relation to the world. If we are adult Evangelicals, or otherwise deeply involved in the Christian religion in its less intellectual forms, then equally we will agree. If however, we do not share those religious presumptions, then our response may well be very different - we may say that our experience does not bear out the concept either of a merciful and loving God, or of a humanity characterised by such virtues. We may even reject the poem as untrue, unreal, even as a piece of namby-pamby.⁽⁴⁹⁾

In other words our response to 'The Divine Image' depends in large measure on our own ideological position. Blake had his own way of expressing the same thing: 'Perceptive Organs closed, their Objects close',⁽⁵⁰⁾ or again, in the Notebook poem The Mental Traveller:

For the Eye altering alters all;
The Senses roll themselves in fear,⁽⁵¹⁾
And the flat Earth becomes a Ball.

This can be read as pure idealism, as a statement that reality is altered according to changes in human perception in a Berkeleyan fashion. I think it more useful and pertinent to read it as a statement about ideology. As one's perception changes, so one's understanding of reality changes: reality, not in toto, but reality as one individual relates to it, changes as his ideological assumptions alter. For ideology is not a fraud - it is a lived relation to the world. It is a reality, and a changing reality, and not merely some sort of 'unreal' smokescreen. As such, Blake's statement 'Perceptive Organs closed, their Objects close' is true for an individual's relation to those objects. If that object happens to be a poem, then its meaning alters depending on how the reader's ideology - or, to use Blake's term, his 'Perception' - alters.

In his late Notebook poem The Everlasting Gospel, Blake expressed this position in terms of the Bible:

The Vision of Christ that thou dost see
 Is my Vision's Greatest Enemy:
 Thine has a great hook nose like thine,
 Mine has a snub nose like to mine:
 Thine is the friend of ^All Mankind,
 Mine speaks in parables to the Blind:
 Thine loves the same world that mine hates,
 Thy Heaven doors are my Hell Gates.
 Socrates taught what Meletus
 Loath'd as a Nation's bitterest Curse,
 And Caiphaz was in his own Mind
 A benefactor to Mankind:
 Both read the Bible day and night,
 But thou read'st black where I read white. (52)

Even the sacred book would not have the same meaning for people who approached it from totally variant ideological standpoints. It may be argued that Blake's reading of the Bible was highly idiosyncratic, but that is hardly the point. What matters is that Blake considered that a work means different things to different people, depending on how it intersects with the ideas they already possess.

This is to recur time and again in Blake. Its most well-known expression is in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, where Blake inverts the categories of 'Devil' and 'Angel'. In that work an 'Angel' - an Evangelical-type figure - shows himself deeply concerned with Blake's spiritual condition. In pulpit language the 'Angel' addresses the poet: 'O pitiable foolish young man! O horrible! O dreadful state! consider the hot burning dungeon thou art preparing for thyself to all eternity, to which thou art going in such career'.⁽⁵³⁾ Blake and the Angel agree that they should show each other their 'eternal lot' and see which is preferable. The Angel leads Blake to an appalling vision, the culmination of which is the appearance of a frightful monster:

But now, from between the black and white spiders, a cloud and fire burst and rolled thro' the deep, black'ning all beneath, so that the nether deep grew black as a sea, and rolled with a terrible noise; beneath us was nothing now to be seen but a black tempest, till looking east between the clouds and the waves we saw a cataract of blood mixed with fire, and not many stones' throw from us appear'd and sunk again the scaly fold of a monstrous serpent; at last, to the east, distant about three degrees, appear'd a fiery crest above the waves; slowly it reared like a ridge of golden rocks, till we discovered two globes of crimson fire, from which the sea fled away in clouds of smoke; and now we saw it was the head of Leviathan; his forehead was divided into streaks of green and purple like those on a tyger's forehead: soon we saw his mouth and red gills hang just above the raging foam, tinging the black deep with beams of blood, advancing towards us with all the fury of a spiritual existence.⁽⁵⁴⁾

This is a British ruling class nightmare of the French revolution - as a horror, a monster, chaotic, fury, a cataract of blood. Leviathan's position, given with curious exactitude, is not coincidental. As David Erdman has pointed out 'to the east, distant about three degrees' is a fairly accurate description of the distance of Paris from London.⁽⁵⁵⁾ The monstrosity is also advancing across the sea, with the evident intention of bringing the same chaos and terror to Britain. But this

is the Angel's vision, and not Blake's. When the Angel flees, the perception of the scene changes, for it is now Blake who is observing it, unaffected by the Angel's panic. There is a remarkable change:

My friend the Angel climb'd up from his station into the mill: I remain'd alone; and then this appearance was no more, but I found myself sitting on a pleasant bank beside a river by moonlight, hearing a harper who sang to the harp; and his theme was 'The man who never alters his opinion is like standing water, and breeds reptiles of the mind.' (56)

What is monstrous to the Angel is not only pleasant to Blake, but also musical - artistry replaces terror. 'A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees', (57) Blake had commented in one of the Marriage's Proverbs of Hell. Again, this can be read as idealism. Or we can take it to mean that exactly how much of reality is assimilated, and the way in which it is assimilated, are determined by ideological presumptions. To the 'Angelic' the French Revolution was an appalling chaos that had destroyed France and threatened to overwhelm Britain - to Blake, and to many of his fellow artisan radicals, the same French Revolution was something altogether different. It was 'the full fervour of a meridian sun', (58) in the words of the SCI's message to the National Convention, while to Blake it could be visualised as 'a pleasant bank beside a river by moonlight'.

Returning to the Songs of Innocence, we can now perhaps attempt a more precise definition of what these lyrics are about. They are, most certainly, about lambs and blossoms, echoing greens and lost children, chimney sweepers and shepherds. But they are about these matters as seen from a particular standpoint, as seen from the State of Innocence, a state which is, par excellence, the state of childhood. Clearly children are under the power of the dominant ideology - not as conscious

ideologues, but as people who accept and believe what they have been told by parents and teachers, and interpret their experience in that light. The assumptions of the child narrators in the Songs are that the world was made by a beneficent being for the benefit of men, who are, by nature, like their creator, good, kind and peaceful. This creator is to be loved and worshipped. The world of innocence is a joyful world - it takes for granted, even in apparently adverse circumstances, a high degree of security and protection, and a warm and willing communication with other human beings and with nature. For our child-narrator 'Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love' are not convenient, though empty, slogans - for him they are real forces operating on his world.

The state of Innocence then is quite uncritical, unable to question its own ideological foundations: it does not possess the knowledge, the 'experience' to mount a challenge to them. That knowledge, frequently a bitter thing, is gained through social activity and is the hallmark of the state of Experience. Poems which openly criticise the existing order are thus out of place in Songs of Innocence: hence The Schoolboy, with its attack on the drudgery of classroom education, was later moved to Songs of Experience. That these songs take place within the framework of the dominant ideology does not mean that they are conscious supports for that ideology - they are not the same kind of work as Hannah More's poetry. They are not propaganda - propaganda can only be written from an awareness of alternative modes of thinking, and precisely what marks these child-narrators is their ignorance of such alternatives. Indeed their very unconsciousness of their ideological co-ordinates enables a picture to be painted from within that ideological framework that reveals its own weaknesses, its contradictions and its silences.

Blake's other 'Contrary State', Experience, shows us what happens when the child ceases to be a child - when the child, regardless, of his actual age, realises that the world is not in fact as he had believed, that there is no guarantee of security and protection, that there are tigers as well as lambs, poison trees as well as blossoms. Once the alternative has been posed, to cling onto the ideology dominant in Innocence is only possible if one is to become an active ideologue, not merely accepting, but also disseminating, if one becomes, in a broad sense of the term, a priest.

We see what this implies in Blake's manuscript poem Tiri-el, in the aged figures of Har and Heva, living in 'the vales of Har', a degenerate Eden. They have chosen to remain within the problematic of Innocence: but what is beautiful in a child turns to ugliness and senility in old men. They share some of the characteristics of children, but in them these only become a source of horror and revulsion. Their lives are stagnant:

Playing with flowers and running after birds they spent the day,
And in the night like infants slept, delighted with infant dreams. (59)

Har's speech is childish prattle. Failing to recognise his blind son Tiri-el, he gives him a senile blessing:

God bless thy poor bald pate! God bless thy hollow winking eyes!
God bless thy shrivel'd beard! God bless thy many-wrinkled forehead!
Thou hast no teeth, old man, and thus I kiss thy sleek bald head. (60)

The words chosen by Har are grotesque, and acute testimony to a numbing lack of sensibility and failure of perception. The activity of Har and Heva in their vales is immobile, and hinges on restriction - they catch and imprison 'singing birds', and Har himself sings 'in the great cage'. (61) Such art as there is is bound and fettered.

At the end of the poem Tiri-el returns to the vales of Har and, in a

moment of wisdom immediately before his death, blames Har for the succession of disasters that have overtaken him and his world. It is now that we learn that the senile Har is also a lawgiver: 'Thy laws, O Har, and Tiriél's wisdom, end together in a curse'.⁽⁶²⁾ In a last bitter outpouring Tiriél enumerates some of the pains and distresses of Experience, and the distorting effects of the dominant ideology: in Tiriél's dying words that ideology is now seen as compulsion, as the elimination of youthful energy. From the viewpoint of the man of Experience, childhood is no longer seen as a time of happiness and protection, but as one of social conditioning, of preparation for a world of repression and sorrows:

The father forms a whip to rouse the sluggish senses to act
 And scourges off all youthful fancies from the new-born man.
 Then walks the weak infant in sorrow, compell'd to number footsteps
 Upon the sand.
 And when the drone has reached his crawling length,
 Black berries appear that poison all around him. Such was Tiriél,
 Compell'd to pray repugnant and to humble the immortal spirit
 Till I am subtil as a serpent in a paradise,
 Consuming all, both flowers and fruits, insects and warbling birds.
 And now my paradise is fall'n and a drear sandy plain
 Returns my thirsty hissings in a curse on thee, O Har,⁽⁶³⁾
 Mistaken father of a lawless race, my voice is past.

Tiriél is now speaking quite recognizably in the voice that we hear in many of the Songs of Experience. He looks at Childhood, sees the same things that a child sees, but interprets them very differently: - his interpretation has finally broken free from the grip of the ruling ideology, and he can see that ideology now as a process of social discipline. The child is regimented into playing a predetermined social role. In retrospect, childhood becomes a period of sorrow, a period when one is 'compell'd to number footsteps' - forced into a social mould that is not of one's own choice. Clear too is the indictment of religion - prayer

is now seen as 'repugnant' and as a humbling of 'the immortal spirit'.⁽⁶⁴⁾ Its result is a distortion: as he who prays merely because he has been told to, by suppressing his original instincts, merely becomes 'subtil as a serpent in a paradise' - lethally dangerous. And, like the Biblical serpent, Tiriél has destroyed his paradise - his kingdom is collapsed, his city ruined, his sons and daughters, cursed by him, are dead, or in the case of his youngest, Hela, insane. Har's laws have produced the opposite of their supposed intention. They have resulted in anarchy: the imposition of that set of ideas has produced 'a lawless race' who have provoked havoc and destruction.

The state in which Har and Heva live - the state where Innocence has turned senile, a state of law and religion, a state that is lacking in all imaginative and creative vision - will have a name in Blake's later prophecies. There he will call it Ulro, and its dominant figure will be Urizen or Satan, Blake's fallen God of this world, the orthodox creator in orthodox religion, the type of the 18th century ideologue, and the enemy of anything radical or creative.

The innocence of childhood, then, cannot be sustained: either it collapses into the pain and bitterness of the experiential world, or attempts to remain within the problematic of Innocence produce sterility, and the parody of childhood which Har and Heva - and by implication the religious in general - live.

For those in the world of Experience, the vision of order, security and happiness, enjoyed in childhood, is no longer a reality - it is relegated to the arena of dreams and desires, where it specifically takes the form of sexual desire: that sexual desire which, of all human impulses, is

most bitterly thwarted in the world of late 18th century experience. Hence many of the Songs of Experience (and other Notebook poems that Blake did not engrave) are concerned with sexuality and its denial - My Pretty Rose Tree, for example, where the narrator's acceptance of orthodox sexual norms does not win him the expected reward, but leads him into the masochistic wilderness of the last line where 'her thorns were my only delight'.⁽⁶⁵⁾ Or Ah! Sunflower with its imagery of frustrated desire, The Sick Rose where sexual secrecy is linked to destruction and disease, and A Little Girl Lost which shows the enormous gulf between the child's innocent awakening to sexual bliss and her parents' evangelical fear and revulsion. The title of this poem carries a heavy irony - unlike The Little Girl Lost in Songs of Innocence, who has genuinely lost her way, the girl here, far from being lost, has just found something of the utmost importance to her. She is only 'lost' as far as her parents are concerned, in the religious use of the term - lost to their God and their religion.

To investigate Blake's reading of ruling class ideology further, we will take a detailed look at one of the finest of the Songs of Innocence, The Chimney Sweeper. Blake was taking for his subject one of the most vicious exploitations of his time: the practice of forcing the children of the poor to climb up and clean the chimneys of the rich.

Since, understandably, master sweeps often had difficulty in persuading parents to let their children enter such a dirty and dangerous trade (though there were plenty of instances of unscrupulous, or perhaps simply needy, parents selling their child into the job), pauper and orphan children from workhouses were frequently taken on. The conditions in which they worked were horrific and gained considerable publicity through the efforts

of the philanthropist, Jonas Hanway, whose Sentimental History of Chimney Sweepers in London was published in 1785. Of the condition of the young climbing boy, Hanway wrote:

We seldom behold his nocturnal trials and combats with the literal powers of darkness; but in the day we frequently see him, blasted with chilling cold, wet to the skin, without shoes, or with only the fragments of them; without stockings; his coat and breeches in tatters, and his shirt in smutty rags; sometimes with sores bleeding, or with limbs twisted or contracted, whilst his misery is rendered more pungent by his task-master, who has no feeling of his sorrows! (66)

Hanway told of a meeting he had with one climbing boy, terribly mutilated through his years in the trade:

He is now twelve years of age, a cripple on crutches, hardly three feet seven inches in stature. He began to climb chimnies before he was five years of age, his bones not having acquired a fit degree of strength. The same treatment of the colt would be deemed a transgression against all the rules of rustic economy towards the beast that perishes. In consequence of this treatment, his legs and feet resemble an S more than an L. His hair felt like a hog's bristles, and his head like a warm cinder. He was once blind for six months, but still he did his work ... Being out of his time of servitude, as a reward for his labour and suffering he is become an object of parochial charity. (67)

Hanway estimated that there were a hundred master sweeps in London and Westminster and that these had some four hundred young apprentices and climbing boys working for them. There were also approximately fifty 'inferior masters', with 150 climbing boys apprenticed to them. (68)

A parliamentary committee of inquiry was set up to look into the matter, and produced even more appalling evidence, including the practice of some master sweeps of lighting straw underneath recalcitrant boys to force them to climb the chimney. One master sweep stated that boys were usually sent up

without regard to the size of the chimney or the age of the boys; and if the chimneys happen to be too small, they call the boys down, strip them and beat them, and force them up again by which means they become crippled. (69)

Suitably shocked, Parliament passed a bill laying down certain measures of protection for climbing boys. No boy under the age of eight was to be bound to a sweep - and then only if his parents agreed. No boy was to be forced up a chimney actually on fire. And the master sweep had to provide his apprentices annually with a suit, in order to ensure that they attended church on Sundays.

The Act was, of course, easily evaded. The full extent of this evasion was not, however, known until 1817, when another parliamentary inquiry was held. This found that there had been almost no alteration in the conditions of chimney boys. They were still being sent up lighted chimneys, sometimes with the most gruesome results. The boys' legs and spines were still being twisted grotesquely out of shape because of the contorted positions they had to assume when climbing chimneys. The age restriction was evaded by purchasing boys aged four or five from their parents who were pledged to testify that the child was eight should the need arise. Not until 1834 was another Act to protect climbing boys passed - and this too could be evaded without great difficulty. Thus the insistence of a handful of peers and gentry on building awkwardly shaped chimneys that could not be swept by mechanical means ensured the continuation for more than half a century of the incarceration and torture of little children in tiny, soot-caked apertures.

Blake's Chimney Sweeper of Innocence was engraved a year after the 1788 Bill had been passed. Here is the poem in full:

When my mother died I was very young,
 And my father sold me while yet my tongue
 Could scarcely cry 'weep 'weep, 'weep 'weep!
 So your chimneys I sweep and in soot I sleep.

There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head,
 That curled like a lamb's back was shaved; so I said,

'Hush Tom, never mind it, for when your head's bare,
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair'.

And so he was quiet, and that very night,
As Tom was asleeping he had such a sight -
That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, and Jack,
Were all of them locked up in coffins of black;

And by came an angel, who had a bright key,
And he opened the coffins and set them all free;
Then down a green plain leaping, laughing they run,
And wash in a river and shine in the sun.

Then naked and white, all their bags left behind,
They rise upon clouds and sport in the wind.
And the angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,
He'd have God for his father and never want joy.

And so Tom awoke, and we rose in the dark,
And got with our bags and our brushes to work.
Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy and warm; (70)
So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.

The first stanza depicts, simply and effectively, the harsh realities of a climbing boy's life, sold at an extremely early age, and condemned to live in squalor, sleeping in the soot that is his constant companion. The sweep who narrates the poem has evidently been in the trade for some time - much longer than the new recruit, the frightened and miserable Tom Dacre. In the shaving of Tom's head 'like a lamb's back' there is an oblique biblical reference, and very strong implications of sacrifice. The last two lines in the second stanza are bitterly ironic: undoubtedly the older sweep is trying to be friendly and to comfort the younger; in fact his words merely point to the cruelty of what is being done. Tom's white locks will not be damaged by the soot because they have already been destroyed. Such a consolation is no consolation at all.

The next three stanzas bring us to the crucial theme of the poem, the counterpointing of dream with reality. Tom's comfort for the miserable

existence he has just entered comes to him in sleep. The 'coffins of black' in which the sweeps are locked are at one level their material, soot-caked bodies; at another they are also the dark and filthy chimneys themselves which, as the committee of inquiry had found, all too often did become coffins for the climbing boys.

At first sight the 'Angel' who releases the boys from their coffins appears an admirable character: the boys are transported to a pleasant, pastoral scene, they can remove the layers of soot in a river, and expose their rarely washed bodies to the sun. But we must remember, not only that this is a dream, but also that the word 'Angel' usually has unpleasant connotations in Blake's vocabulary, referring to the hypocrisy and repression practised in the name of the Christian religion.

Stanza five makes this clear. The boys now leave their bags of soot behind and take on an ethereal, faery-like existence. And then the Angel's real function is revealed - it is to reconcile the sweeps to their conditions through a piece of Evangelical moralizing:

And the Angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy
He'd have God for his father and never want joy.

This is really very bitter - for the children are only free when dreaming. When they awake they must return to their 'coffins of black'.

Logically when morning comes they are going to 'want joy', for they will still be sleeping in soot. However the ideology actually works; it fulfills its function. When Tom awakes and the sweeps go to work in the dark, cold morning, he is 'happy and warm' - the Angel's ideology has gripped him, and he has accepted the Angelic version of the relationship between himself and his society: the dream has become more important

than reality and justifies it. Tom's dream is thus very much a case of religion being the opium of the people: his sleeping illusions have provided him with the only comfort in his bleak existence, and have insidiously worked to prevent any change in that existence. For the child then comes out in defence of the existing order: 'So if all do their duty they need not fear harm'. This Evangelical truism begs the question: Duty to whom? What sort of duty is owed to the master sweeps? Or to the rich households that will send a six year old child up a lighted chimney? As for coming to no harm - in the case of the climbing boys the evidence given to the parliamentary committee gave the lie to this cliché. (71)

The poem's Angel acts as a Wilberforce figure, promising eternal happiness in the next world, provided all the sweep's time in this one is spent accruing profit for his employer. The poem is thus an investigation and an exposure of Evangelical ideology, showing how it operates to incorporate the victims of oppression into the very structures that oppress them.

In the companion poem in the Songs of Experience, the narrator no longer views his situation from the perspective of Innocence. There has been an ideological break. The child no longer imagines his relationship to his occupation in terms of piety and deference. Freed from these 'mind-forg'd manacles', (72) he can attack the people and institutions that oppress him. His parents have apprenticed him to a master sweep, and the child makes the not unnatural assumption that he is being punished for his infant vitality which a joyless world wants to crush:

Because I was happy upon the heath,
 And smil'd among the winter's snow,
 They clothed me in the clothes of death
 And taught me to sing the notes of woe. (73)

Here it is no longer a case of being a 'good boy' and having 'god for his father', still less of carrying out 'Duty'. No dream can substitute for reality now, and the sweep points to the real relation between heavenly life and present pain. His parents are 'gone to praise God and his Priest and King/Who make up a heaven of our misery'.⁽⁷⁴⁾ Religious ideologies are here seen as resting firmly on the bedrock of the misery and exploitation of the labouring poor. God, Priest and King operate as a political and ideological trio to maintain the vicious system whereby children must perish in rich men's chimneys.

Similarly 'Holy Thursday' in Songs of Innocence is primarily concerned with Evangelical ideology and the conflict between that ideology and reality. The poem centres on the 6000 charity-schoolchildren who, on Ascension Day (Holy Thursday) every year, were paraded to St. Pauls where sermons and hymns took place:

'Twas on a Holy Thursday, their innocent faces clean,
The children walking two and two, in red and blue and gree,
Grey-headed beadles walk'd before, with wands as white as white as snow,
Till into the high dome of Paul's they like Thames' waters flow.

O what a multitude they seem'd, these flowers of London town!
Seated in companies they sit with radiance all their own.
The hum of multitudes was there, but multitudes of lambs,
Thousands of little boys and girls raising their innocent hands.

Now like a mighty wind they raise to heaven the voice of song,
Or like harmonious thunderings the seats of heaven among.
Beneath them sit the aged men, wise guardians of the poor;⁽⁷⁵⁾
Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door.

Evidently the poem's narrator sees nothing wrong in this spectacle. Like the chimney sweep of *Innocence* he remains within the problematic of ruling class ideology. So apparently do the large number of Blake critics who find the poem merely a sentimental piece about little children going to church. Such critics conveniently forget that the poem makes its first appearance in Blake's unfinished satire An Island in the Moon,⁽⁷⁶⁾

where its narrator is the pedant, Obtuse Angle. The Times also found the Holy Thursday procession a moving experience and talked of

the glorious sight of 6000 children, reared up under the humane directions of the worthy Patrons and supported by the public contributions of well disposed persons ... aiding to the nurture of a future generation to fight his [majesty's] battles, carry forward the commerce and manufactories of Great Britain, and assist in maturing infant arts, to the honour and prosperity of the country. (77)

But eighteenth century charity schools were far from all sweetness and light. In many ways their function was similar to that of the schools Hannah More was to set up in the 1790s. Right at the beginning of the century their role was clearly laid down:

Children are made tractable and submissive by being early accustomed to Awe and Punishment and Dutiful Subjection. From such timely Discipline the Publick may expect Honest and Industrious Servants. (78)

The Rev. J. Clayton in the middle of the century when complaining about the condition of Manchester where large numbers of 'idle, ragged children' roamed the streets 'not only losing their time, but learning habits of gaming etc.', saw the Charity Schools as a solution, and praised them for inculcating such 'virtues' as Industry, Frugality, Order and Regularity. (79)

Although the most assiduous propagator of charity schools was the Anglican Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.), Methodists and Dissenters also established schools along the same lines. All held the same basic ideas as to how the schools should operate - they were to teach subordination to the poor. As Isaac Watts put it, they were to 'teach the duties of humility and submission to superiors' and of 'diligence and industry in their business'. (80)

There could be no such thing as universal or uniform education. Children

had to be trained for the rank in life that they, by birth, were destined to occupy. The Bishop of Norwich spelt this out in 1755:

These poor children are born to be daily labourers; for the most part to earn their bread by the sweat of their brows. It is evident then that if such children are, by charity brought up in a manner that is only proper to qualify them for a rank to which they ought not to aspire, such a child would be injurious to (81) the community.

The Charity School curriculum was even less varied than Hannah More's. The only reading materials allowed were standard religious texts - Catechism, Bible, Book of Common Prayer etc. Even such highly 'moral' works as Hannah More's Sacred Dramas for Children and Mrs. Trimmer's Story of the Robins, were not provided by the charity schools. Even religious singing met with opposition, particularly from Edmund Gibson, Bishop of London in the 1720s, and so never became part of the curriculum. (82)

Very few boys went on to study writing, and even fewer reached the realms of arithmetic. The girls were trained specifically for domestic service - rarely indeed was any girl allowed to learn reading or arithmetic; instead they were taught needlework and other domestic chores.

The uniforms worn by the charity school children were deliberately dull and monochrome. They were allowed

No gaiety of colour, no trifling ornaments, nor any distinction between them and other children which they can possibly be tempted to take pleasure in. It is good that they should bear (83) the yoke in their youth.

In addition to this spiritual desolation, acts of wanton cruelty were sometimes imposed on the children, particularly in the boarding schools where matrons and guardians were free from any regular surveillance. For instance, at the Grey Coat Hospital there was a sequence of such cruelties. The Matron flogged both girls and boys pitilessly, and was

eventually arrested for this. But flogging and semi-starvation continued and resulted in two children's rebellions, in 1789 and 1796, when windows were smashed and woodwork was set alight in order to force an inquiry.⁽⁸⁴⁾

Charity schools rapidly became a favourite vehicle for the philanthropic among the ruling orders to perform their 'duty' towards the poor. So much so that by the end of the first quarter of the 18th century supporting charity schools was the major form of such philanthropy in London.⁽⁸⁵⁾ But the patrons of Charity Schools expected recognition for their financial aid, and so hymns of gratitude were written for them which the children sung.⁽⁸⁶⁾ The relationship was, of course, reciprocal anyway: as an ideological apparatus, with a programme explicitly designed to keep the poor in their station, the charity schools could be seen as a useful insurance policy for their rich patrons.

Many of the children in the charity schools were orphans, but by no means all of them. Some were taken from their parents after these had been judged unfit to keep them: though it is difficult to imagine a parent who could have been more unfit than the charity schools themselves. Parents sometimes tried to see the children that the state had stolen from them and distressing incidents during the Holy Thursday celebrations occurred over this.

All of this puts a very different perspective on the poem. The children marching 'two and two' in their charity school uniforms (the 'red and blue and green' do not indicate a great splash of colour, but are merely the monochrome uniforms of three different charity schools) are an example, not of religious benevolence, but of regimented misery. Again the

reference to 'lambs' contains sacrificial implications - these children are being sacrificed to the greed of the 'wise guardians' and to the hypocrisies of church and state. The 'wands' which the beadle carries in the procession are also used to beat the children in the schools. (87)

The trite moralism ties the poem up neatly at the end: but again we are confronted with Blake's favourite inversion of the meaning of the word 'Angel'. Blake thought it quite correct to drive from the door such 'Angels' as Wilberforce, Hannah More and charity school guardians: the ideological role of such people is to perpetuate and justify the oppression of the poor.

As for Pity, this was not a virtue Blake thought very highly of. Pity may provide a few more pennies in the almsgiving at the church door, but it in no way changes the relationship between exploiters and exploited. The insidious function of this pity is that it operates as part of an ideological structure that legitimates the status quo: indeed it consolidates existing relations of production while believing, in all sincerity (since ideology is never a simple fraud), that it is alleviating the loss of the most disprivileged.

This takes us back to the first of Blake's lyrics we discussed, The Divine Image, and the child's praise for 'Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love'. We have already remarked that how one views these four 'virtues' depends on already existing ideological assumptions. The child's naive delight is quickly soured in the world of Experience. A very different perspective is given in the biting tones of the poem's 'contrary', The Human Abstract, in Songs of Experience:

Pity would be no more
If we did not make somebody poor;

And Mercy no more could be
If all were as happy as we. (88)

The drafts of this poem in Blake's notebook help illustrate the way Blake thought about this. Here he uses his Devil/Angel dichotomy, with its typically inverted moral significance. The Angel, an ideologue of the status quo, sings 'Mercy, Pity, Peace/Is the World's release', while the Devil, the honest poet of Experience, gives a variant of the Human Abstract stanza quoted above. The draft includes several possible endings for the poem, none of which were, in the event, used by Blake. (89)

In none of them do these evangelical virtues appear in a pleasant light: in one

And Mercy, Pity, Peace
Joy'd at their increase
With Poverty's Increase.

Or another variant:

And Miseries increase
Is Mercy, Pity, Peace.

Poetically rather more satisfying is the deleted stanza which read:

Down pour'd the heavy rain
Over the new reap'd grain,
And Mercy and Pity and Peace descended
The Farmers were ruin'd and harvest was ended. (90)

Here an ideological complex has a direct physical consequence. Ruling class virtues are of no use to subaltern classes. It is dangerous and emasculating for such classes to accept the ideology of their oppressors. To do so will merely ensure their continued position of subordination: the passive, individual 'virtues' of the Evangelicals are in fact highly destructive, sapping away at the roots of collective action and collective initiative.

Blake provides a savage and straightforward counterblast to the 'innocent' Holy Thursday, and its injunction to 'cherish pity' in the Songs of

Experience. Here the same charity school procession is watched, but this time not from the viewpoint of The Times or of Obtuse Angle. This time the speaker is not dazzled by regimented holiness. He is outside the problematic of Evangelical ideology and he can be safely identified with the poet. His perspective on the procession is that it is a negation of genuine religion and charity:

Is this a holy thing to see
 In a rich and fruitful land,
 Babes reduced to misery,
 Fed with cold and usurous hand (91)

If the answer to the question is yes, it is a holy thing, then that holiness is worthless and should be rejected; if the answer is no, then we may draw our own conclusions as to the nature of the religion and the God of those who run charity Schools. What to the 'innocent' bystander were 'harmonious thunderings' are dismissed by the poet of Experience as 'that trembling cry'. The charity school children are living in misery thus apparently contradicting the statement of the first stanza that the land is 'rich and fruitful' - the riches of Britain are appropriated by a small minority and mean nothing for that part of the population still living in abject penury. Their misery impoverishes the childrens' experience of their natural environment too:

And their sun does never shine
 And their fields are bleak and bare,
 And their ways are filled with thorns:
 It is eternal winter there.

To the mind of the poet the conditions of life in the 18th century have permeated the very processes of nature. Sunshine and rainfall, after all, are all that is necessary to produce food, yet children go hungry: therefore the current reality of Britain must be one of a bleak and bare wilderness:

For where'er the sun does shine,
 And where'er the rain does fall,
 Babe can never hunger there,
 Nor poverty the mind appall.

The charity schools, and the concepts of education that informed them, must also be born in mind when considering Blake's most explicit poem on education The Schoolboy. Originally placed in Innocence, since the speaker was a child, Blake later shifted this poem with its attack on 18th century schooling to Experience.

In reading this poem it is also worth bearing in mind the great differences over educational matters that, under occasionally similar slogans, lay between 'respectable' and 'plebeian' radicalism. The LCS laid heavy stress on the need for education - but this was an education that was a process of mutual aid, an education which the society's members would give to each other. Francis Place left an account of this process:

I met with many inquisitive, upright men and among them I greatly enlarged my acquaintance. They were in most, if not all, respects superior to any with whom I had hitherto been acquainted. We had book subscriptions ... the books for which anyone subscribed were read by all the members in rotation who chose to read them before they were finally consigned to the subscriber. We had Sunday evening parties at the residence of those who could accommodate a number of persons. At these meetings we had readings, conversations and discussions.

Weekly educational classes were arranged at which:

The chairman read from some book a chapter or part of a chapter, which as many as could read the chapter at their homes, the book passing from one to the other, had done and at the next meeting a portion of the chapter was again read and the persons present were invited to make remarks thereon; as many as chose did so, but without rising. Then another portion was read and a second invitation was given - then the remainder was read and a third invitation was given when they who had not before spoken were expected to say something. Then there was a general discussion. (92)

Here is the process of self-education - working men eagerly discussing the reading material at hand, displaying the thirst for knowledge that

has always been a characteristic and a weapon of the labour movement. The picture drawn by Place is very different not only from the mainstream establishment thought on education for the poor, but also from such radical dissenters as Priestley who turned their minds to educational theory. Priestley, writing his Essay on a Course of Liberal Education for Civil and Active Life, specifically addressed himself to 'young gentlemen, who now have leisure for studying the history and interests of their country, and who will not want opportunities to recommend schemes of public utility, or influence to assist in carrying them into execution'. As for 'low mechanics', Priestley contemptuously dismissed them as people 'who have no time to attend to speculations of this nature, and who had, perhaps, better remain ignorant of them'. (93)

Like the Anglican theorists in the S.P.C.K., Priestley was concerned that the poor should know and accept their rank in life, and that education should be used to this end: he wrote that if

those who have the poorest prospects in life can be taught contentment in their station, and a firm belief in the wisdom and goodness of providence ... and, consequently, apply themselves with assiduity and cheerfulness to the discharge of their proper duties, they may be almost as happy, even in this world, as the most virtuous of their superiors and unspeakably happier than the generality of them (94)

In this example the gulf between the radicalism of a dissenting coterie, fairly comfortable and interested in no basic social change, and the mass radicalism of the popular societies emerges particularly clearly. It is within this context that Blake's poem is situated. Here it is, in full:

I love to rise in a summer morn
When the birds sing on every tree;
The distant huntsman winds his horn,
And the skylark sings with me.
O! what sweet company.

But to go to school in a summer morn,
 O! it drives all joy away;
 Under a cruel eye outworn,
 The little ones spend the day
 In sighing and dismay.

Ah! then at times I drooping sit,
 And spend many an anxious hour,
 Nor in my book can I take delight,
 Nor sit in learning's bower,
 Worn thro' with the dreary shower.

How can the bird that is born for joy
 Sit in a cage and sing?
 How can a child, when fears annoy,
 But droop his tender wing,
 And forget his youthful spring?

O! father and mother, if buds are nip'd
 And blossoms blown away,
 And if the tender plants are strip'd
 Of their joy in the springing day,
 By sorrow and care's dismay,

How shall the summer arise in joy,
 Or the summer fruits appear?
 Or how shall we gather what griefs destroy,
 Or bless the mellowing year,
 When the blasts of winter appear?⁽⁹⁵⁾

The school is envisaged as a prison, and those who run it as cruel guards. This is not simply a juvenile complaint against education in general (and certainly it contains nothing personal, since Blake was self-educated and never went to school), but it is precisely situated: it is a protest against the conventional schooling of the late 18th century and the theory that lay behind it, the phenomena which we explained above. It is this bleak apparatus that Blake refers to: a reading of the poem as a tirade against education as such, written from a 'back to nature' perspective, would be quite unhistorical. The subject of the poem is rooted in Blake's time. The poem deals, albeit perhaps rather less successfully, with the same issues that are confronted in the two Holy Thursday poems.

To conclude this section, we will examine how Blake assimilated and reacted to a quite new feature of the ruling ideology - the theory of population. The Rev. Thomas Malthus published the first edition of his Essay on the Principle of Population in 1798. But he was not the first to say that the poor were poor because there were too many of them.

Edmund Burke, for example, a couple of years previously, had written:

The labouring people are only poor because they are numerous. Numbers in their nature imply poverty. In a fair distribution among a vast multitude, none can have much. (96)

Burke muddled in a smattering of badly-digested Adam Smith along with the more traditional device of shoving the miseries of the poor onto supernatural shoulders. His advice was

manfully to resist the very first idea, speculative or practical, that it is within the competence of government, taken as government, or even of the rich, as rich, to supply to the poor those necessities which it has pleased the Divine Providence for a while to withhold from them. We, the people, ought to be made sensible that it is not in breaking the laws of commerce, which are the laws of nature, and consequently the laws of God, that we are to place our hope of softening the divine displeasure to remove any calamity under which we suffer, or which hangs over us. (97)

But for the uses of the ruling bloc Malthus was a massive improvement on the rather crude position of Burke. For Malthus produced a theory of population which had the superficial appearance of being scientific. The crucial paragraph in his work stated that

The power of population is infinitely greater than the power of the earth to produce subsistence for man. Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio. A slight acquaintance with numbers will show the immensity of the first power in comparison with the second. By that law of nature which makes food necessary for the life of man, the effects of these two unequal powers must be kept equal. This implies a strong and constantly operating check on population from the difficulty of subsistence. (98)

In other words, 'difficulty of subsistence', a euphemism for famine, kept the population down and this was right and proper. Agricultural improve-

ment might increase the amount of land under cultivation, or the productivity of already cultivated land - but the population would still increase faster than the food supply, a crisis would eventually be precipitated, the surplus population would die off, and the labouring poor collapse to the subsistence level above which they could not hope to rise. Any attempt, either by the poor themselves or by humanitarians or politicians from other ranks of society, to better the conditions of the poor was futile and possibly dangerous - for it was bound sooner or later to break on the rock of the iron law of population.

This was an excellent argument for the rich, because it was an argument against the poor laws. Previously most people, especially the poor, had assumed that poor relief operated to the benefit of the poor. But now Malthus had 'proved' that at best such relief merely postponed the day of reckoning when 'difficulty of subsistence' would reassert itself as a 'strong and constantly operating check on population'. Indeed, by temporarily obscuring that check, the poor laws, and any other attempt to prevent people from starving to death, made matters worse by encouraging the poor to breed. Malthus quite explicitly excised any moral obligation to relieve the poor: a man, if he

cannot get subsistence from his parents, on whom he has a just demand, and if society does not want his labour, has no claim of right to the smallest portion of food and, in fact, has no business to be where he is. At nature's mighty feast there is no vacant chair for him. She tells him to be gone, and will quickly execute her own orders, if he do not work upon the (99) compassion of some of her guests.

In any case, such compassion would be misguided. It would encourage further breeding - more prodigals would appear at the feast, and sooner or later it would be impossible to provide for them all. Malthus' theory

was excellent ammunition for those who, in their alarm at the increase in the poor rates, wanted to do away with the old system of poor relief altogether. Awkward questions that might locate the question of the poor laws within class conflicts could be ignored - such as, for instance, the role of enclosures in increasing pauperism, and hence the rates. Or the question of the Speenhamland system - Speenhamland was attacked because it provided the poor with family allowances (and therefore, ran the Malthusian argument, encouraged breeding), and not for its real iniquity - that it encouraged farmers to cut the wages of agricultural labourers in the full knowledge that they would be made up to subsistence level out of the rates. Class conflict was covered over with a veneer of pseudo-science - all could be reduced to the technical matter of the tendency of population to outstrip food reserves.

The history of Malthusian theory is an excellent example of the incorporation of intellectually bankrupt material into orthodox economic and political thought because of its ideological value. Malthus had laid the scientific basis for the Christian truism that 'the poor are always with us'. It was impossible to eradicate poverty and blasphemous to try. Malthusian ideas became common currency being accepted, almost automatically, by leading political economists, Ricardo included; and every MP who wished to obstruct any proposed piece of legislation to ameliorate the lot of the poor could parrot a bit of Malthus against it. Yet Malthus' entire theory rested on the quite untenable assumption that population increased geometrically and food supplies arithmetically, so that when food supplies trebled, population quadrupled, and by the time food supplies increased ninefold, the population had been multiplied by 256. Such fraudulent statistics did not take in men like Hazlitt or

Cobbett - but they had no say in the running of the nation. Eventually Malthusian ideas were to achieve their greatest triumph in the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. This shameful piece of legislation seems to have been lifted straight from Malthus, who in 1830, recapitulating his earlier positions, had written:

If it be generally considered as so discreditable to receive parochial relief, that great exertions are made to avoid it, and few or none marry with a certain prospect of being obliged to have recourse to it, there is no doubt that those who were really in distress might be adequately assisted with little danger of a constantly increasing proportion of paupers; and, in that case, a great good would be attained without any proportionate evil to counterbalance it. But if, from the numbers of the dependent poor, the discredit of receiving relief is so diminished as to be practically disregarded, so that many marry with the almost certain prospect of becoming paupers, and the proportion of their numbers to the whole population is, in consequence, continually increasing, it is certain that the partial good attained must be much more than counterbalanced by the general deterioration in the condition of the great mass of the society and the prospect of its daily growing worse. (100)

Blake, of course, did not accept that the poor were poor because there were a lot of them. Nor did he accept that there was anything inevitable or natural about poverty, still less that poverty was part of the design of a wise Providence. When reading the list of books written by Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff, Blake noted one entitled The Wisdom and Goodness of God, in having made both Rich and Poor: a Sermon preached before the Stewards of Westminster Dispensary. In the margin Blake wrote acidly: 'God made Man happy and Rich, but the Subtil made the innocent, Poor. This must be a most wicked and blasphemous book'. (101) Here poverty is seen in terms of struggle - it is the result of one set of men oppressing another.

In Night VII (a) of The Four Zoas Blake unmasks Malthus, Urizen, the

'primeval priest'⁽¹⁰²⁾ reads a moral lecture from his 'book of brass':

Listen, O Daughters to my voice. Listen to the Words of Wisdom,
So shall you govern over all; let Moral Duty tune your tongue.
But be your hearts harder than the nether millstone ...
Compell the poor to live upon a Crust of bread, by soft mild
arts.

Smile when they frown, frown when they smile; and when a man
looks pale

With labour and abstinence, say he looks healthy and happy;
And when his children sicken, let them die; there are enough
Born, even too many, and our Earth will be overrun
Without these arts. If you would make the poor live with temper,
With pomp give every crust of bread you give; with gracious cunning
Magnify small gifts; reduce the man to want a gift, and then give
with pomp.

Say he smiles if you hear him sigh. If pale, say he is ruddy.
Preach temperance: say he is overgorg'd and drowns his wit
In strong drink, tho' you know that bread and water are all
He can afford. Flatter his wife, pity his children, till we can⁽¹⁰³⁾
Reduce all to our will, as spaniels are taught with art.

The Four Zoas was composed between 1795 and 1804. It is not possible to know exactly when this passage was drafted. The reference to the theory of population does, however, seem clear enough, and would give a probable date as shortly after Malthus' first edition in 1798.

Malthusian argument is yoked to Evangelical 'Moral Duty'. The poem then counterpoints ideology and reality. The 'soft mild arts' of religion have a real effect: they compel the poor to live upon a crust of bread. That, after all, was the intended effect of Hannah More's ballads such as The Riot: to discourage any direct action which the poor might take to ensure food at a price they could afford. The pallor of pious, over-worked and abstemious villagers is transformed in the Evangelical perspective into a proof of contentment and good health. The rich man's charity has its role to play in buttressing the existing order: so that the poor may live temperately, the rich must sustain them in times of hardship. But such gifts must be wrapped in ritual and mystique. From Blake's perspective, 'the Subtil made the innocent Poor': poverty is a

result of rich men oppressing others. Their small gifts delivered 'with pomp' do not rectify the balance: rather they are an important element in maintaining that balance, by presenting a picture of the rich as generous, fair, and virtuous. (This is a role paralleled by the use of mercy in the legal system - the gracious granting of pardons, the commuting of death sentences imposed for trivial offences etc.)⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ Towards the end of this passage the Evangelicals' obsession with popular 'vices' appears. The satirical reference to drink recalls the crusades of Wilberforce's Society for the Suppression of Vice.

Urizen is the arch-ideologue in Blake's Prophetic Books. He faces a two-fold opposition. First, there is the flaming figure of Orc whom we have already met as 'the Demon red' of America. 'Curse thy cold hypocrisy!' is Orc's response to Urizen's sermons in the same night of The Four Zoas. But Orc is chained, like Prometheus, to a rock; and Urizen is dominant over him, until Orc himself begins to take on characteristics associated with Urizen. He becomes reptilian, organising himself into 'a Serpent body' - again reminiscent of the reptilian changes undergone by Satan and his hosts in Book X of Paradise Lost. Orc is transformed

turning affection into fury and thought into abstraction,
A Self-consuming dark devourer rising into the heavens.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾

Orc is then compelled by Urizen to climb the Tree of Mystery: this stratagem is designed by Urizen to submit the entire human race to his will.

The Tree of Mystery has sprung from Urizen himself: it is an evil and tangled web, and it is the concrete expression of his mystifying ideologies, the same tree that grows 'in the human brain' in The Human Abstract of

Songs of Experience. (106) Orc's fate here is rich in suggestions. Using terminology that is not Blake's, and at the risk of oversimplifying, what has happened in this passage is the subordination of the rebellious elements in society to the dominant ideology. Initial protest is followed by forced acceptance: Urizen dominates the structures of this part of Blake's prophetic universe: these are his dens. Orc is reshaped in Urizen's image, just as the popular masses in any stable social formation are not merely repressed by the ruling stratum, but give their consent to that rule via the ideological structures that bind their society together. Conflict, however, is not eliminated: but it ceases to be immediately destructive. Orc is not reconciled to Urizen: he continues to howl, (107) and social conflicts based on real social relations continue to exist.

It is not, however, Orc who is to overthrow the power of Urizen, and reawake the fallen Albion. That task falls to Blake's second figure of opposition to the 'cold hypocrisy' of Urizen, the poet, prophet and builder, Los. It is Los who precipitates the apocalypse in Night IX of The Four Zoas, and in the later Jerusalem he has a similar redemptive role - it is he who 'kept the Divine Vision in time of trouble'. (108)

The priest/prophet, Urizen/Los dichotomy was established in Urizen's first appearance (109) in Blake's mythology in the 1795 Lambeth text The Book of Urizen. The priest establishes orthodoxy, ensures a unanimous consent. The key to Blake's concept of Urizen lies in the latter's insistence on uniformity, expressed thus in the speech which earns him expulsion from eternity:

Let each chuse one habitation,
His ancient infinite mansion,
One command, one joy, one desire,
One curse, one weight, one measure, (110)
One King, one God, one Law.

This is the ideological cement of society - the insistence that there is only one perspective, one basic way in which the world can be viewed, that the current ordering of society is inevitable because there are no alternatives.

It is the prophet or the poet who denies this, who poses alternatives, who exposes ideology as ideology. Blake in his work is engaged in the same task as Los in the mythology: that of revealing 'error' - the word continually used by Blake to denote a false mode of viewing reality, primarily in his own time the religious mode that we examined earlier in this chapter.

Blake thus stands as revolutionist not only because of his readily visible sympathy and support for the French Revolution, but because of an incisive critique of various of the ideological structures present in 1790s society. Such a critique removes Blake altogether from the sphere of 'respectable' politics.

FOOTNOTES

1. The introductory passages to this chapter are of necessity schematic. They lean heavily on the work of Louis Althusser, particularly on Althusser's essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' in Lenin and Philosophy (London 1971), for their basic concepts. For further discussion of the nature of ideology, see the writings of Nicos Poulantzas, particularly Political Power and Social Classes (London 1972) and Classes in Contemporary Capitalism (London 1976) and also the collection of essays On Ideology: Working Paper in Cultural Studies no. 10 (Birmingham 1977)
2. Althusser's massive widening of the definition of the state has provoked fierce controversies, and what is probably a majority of Marxist scholars now reject the notion of 'ideological state apparatuses'. But despite accusations of structuralism I still

find the distinction between repressive and ideological state apparatuses much more theoretically satisfying than the more familiar state/civil society dichotomy.

For one rebuttal of Althusser's position, see Perry Anderson 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', in New Left Review 100 November 1976 - January 1977

3. This concept of moments of force and of consent derives from Antonio Gramsci. See for example, Selections from the Prison Notebooks London 1971 p. 80
4. The Torrington Diaries edited by C.B. Andrews 1936 III pp 81-2. Quoted in E.P. Thompson Making of the English Working Class p. 207
5. Cited in Carl B. Cone The English Jacobins: Reformers in Late Eighteenth Century England New York 1968 p. 116
6. De Lancey to Home Office HO 42.20
7. Though other important developments in the repressive apparatus could be noted - the erection of barracks at industrial towns throughout the country, the growth of the Volunteer Movement (essentially the militarisation of significant sections of the landed classes), the mushrooming of 'loyal associations' in late 1792 (such as Reeves' Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers) as supplements to the inadequate police power, the development of government networks of spies and provocateurs, and the strengthening of the legal apparatus via the Royal Proclamation against Seditious Writings of May 1792, the suspension of Habeas Corpus in 1794 and again in 1798, the Two Acts of 1795, the outlawing by name of the London Corresponding Society, the United Englishmen and the United Irishmen in 1799 and the Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800.
8. Douglas Hay argues that law constituted the key ideological apparatus in the 18th Century (see his essay 'Property, Authority and the Criminal Law' in Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth Century England London 1975), and E.P. Thompson appears to agree with him in the final chapter of Whigs and Hunters (London 1975). I am unconvinced. Clearly law came to play a far more central role in the eighteenth century than hitherto, particularly by legitimising certain forms of property and not others. But most common people were unable to take part in legal structures (unless they found themselves in the dock): they lacked either the knowledge or the money to initiate legal proceedings. The law was imposed on, perhaps accepted by, but rarely participated in by people below the level of yeoman. For these people, the majority of the population, the Christian religion remained the main form of social cement: a lived ideology, a coherent method of viewing and making sense of the world, and one which placed them thoroughly in a subordinate role.

9. Terms such as 'class', 'mode of production', 'social formation' etc. attempt to describe those objective processes that are reflected in a distorted way in ideologies. In that class simply describes the common position of a social group towards the means of production, it is a valid concept for any historical epoch. Which does not mean that all historical phenomena are immediately reducible to their actors' class positions.
10. Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property Publications London 1793
11. Paley 'Reasons for Contentment addressed to the Labouring Part of the British Public' in The Works of William Paley D.D. 4 vols. London 1838 II 525
12. See E.P. Thompson 'Time, Work Discipline and Industrial Capitalism' in Past and Present 1967 No. 38 pp 56-97
13. See in particular E.P. Thompson Making of the English Working Class, Chapter 11, and R.F. Wearmouth's two works, Methodism and the Working Class Movements of England 1800-1850 London 1937 and Methodism and the Common People of the Eighteenth Century London 1945. Wearmouth's fervent support for Methodism, however, blinds him to the logical conclusions of his documentation, leads him to make such ideologically charged statements as that Methodism 'saved' England from the 'calamity' which overtook France, and he ends up with the remarkable and quite ahistorical conclusion that Methodism was the 'greatest friend' that the common people of the eighteenth century had (Methodism and the Common People of the Eighteenth Century p. 265)
14. Quoted in Jones op. cit. p. 86
15. Thompson cites as one example the Independent Methodists of the Newcastle districts who split off in 1819, one of whose preachers attacked 'unequal laws and a partial administration' which 'plant a thorn in every breast and spread a gloom in every countenance' (Thompson op. cit. p. 432)
16. Thompson Making of the English Working Class p. 430
17. For a useful general article on the Evangelicals see V.G. Kiernan 'Evangelicalism and the French Revolution' in Past and Present Feb. 1952 No. 1
18. Hannah More Works London 1818 Vol. IV preface
19. Hannah More Works 6 vols. London 1834 Vol. VI pp 62-65
20. Ibid. Vol. VI pp 66-68
21. E.P. Thompson The Making of the English Working Class Revised

Edition London 1968 p. 386

22. M.G. Jones Hannah More Cambridge 1952 pp 141-145
23. Ibid. p. 147
24. Ibid. pp 139-141
25. John McLeish Evangelical Religion and Popular Education: A Modern Interpretation London 1969 p. 71
26. Ibid. p. 70
27. Hannah More to Bishop of Bath and Wells 1801 in William Roberts Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Miss Hannah More 4 vols. London 1834 III pp 133-134
28. Hannah More to Mrs. Kennicott, August 2 1791. Memoirs II p. 308. The people of the Mendips originally had a healthy suspicion of religion and are quoted as saying: 'We have hitherto done very well without religion, and we want none of it among us now. Religion will not make our corn grow, it will neither clothe our backs nor fill our bellies. Reading never did good to anybody'. (Memoir of Mrs Hannah More in Works I p. 30)
29. McLeish op. cit. p. 68
30. Quoted ibid. p. 46
31. Quoted ibid. p. 47
32. Quoted in Brian Simon The Two Nations and the Educational Structure 1780-1870 London 1974 p. 133
33. McLeish op. cit. p. 59
34. Hannah More to a friend, 1792. Memoirs II pp 318-319
35. Jones op. cit. p. 123
36. Quoted in J.L. and Barbara Hammond The Town Labourer 1760-1832 London 1917 p. 229
37. Cockburn Examination of the Trials of Sedition ... in Scotland Edinburgh 1888
38. Quoted in Robin Furneaux William Wilberforce London 1974 pp 56-57
39. So called because of the Royal Proclamation against vice and immorality issued on June 1 1787.
40. Quoted in Furneaux op. cit. p. 55
41. See Furneaux op. cit. pp 153-154

42. A Practical View London 1797 p. 398
43. Ibid. pp 405-406
44. Dr. Andrew Ure Philosophy of Manufactures 1835. Quoted in E.P. Thompson Making of the English Working Class pp 397-398
45. K. 247 6.15-18
46. K. 240 5.5-7
47. The Songs of Innocence had first appeared on their own in 1789. Naive theories that these represented a young hopeful Blake, and the Songs of Experience, engraved 5 years later, an older and embittered one, can be rejected on several grounds. First, manuscript drafts of several of the Songs of Innocence exist - but not where one would have expected a blissful young idealist to put them. They are to be found in the unpublished satire An Island in the Moon (written c. 1787), where they are sung by characters who can certainly not be assumed to be speaking with Blake's voice. There is no abrupt break in Blake's writing and thought in the early 1790s; rather there is a continuity and a coherence running through Tiriell, the Book of Thel, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Blake's Notebook poems (which include many drafts for the Songs of Experience) and Visions of the Daughters of Albion. In these works, themes and images from both Innocence and Experience appear. The handling of characters such as Tiriell and Thel as early as 1789 also shows that Blake had no illusions in the state of Innocence he had described in his lyrics. It can never, of course, be ascertained whether, when he published Songs of Innocence in 1789, Blake had yet conceived the idea of writing a 'contrary' set of lyrics. But, more importantly, after he had drafted the Songs of Experience, he saw the two sets as being intimately linked and published them together.
48. K. 117
49. Certainly it would be namby-pamby if it appeared on its own, out of context, without the other lyrics to help place it. Anthology editors, please note.
50. The Gates of Paradise k. 767
51. K. 426 1.62-64
52. K. 748 (a) 1-14
53. K. 155
54. K. 156
55. Erdman op. cit.

56. K. 156
57. K. 151
58. SCI Minute Book, Nov. 9 1792. TS 11.962.3508 p. 117
59. K. 100 2.8-9
60. K. 101 2. 35-37
61. K. 103 3.22-23. It has also been suggested that 'the great cage' contains a reference to the imprisoning conventions of 18th century art and poetry.
62. K. 109 8.8
63. K. 110 8.30-42. The poem was never completed, and the manuscript, particularly in this last passage, contains a number of suggestive deletions. There is for instance a sequence where Tiriel protests against the uniformity of law (8.10-22) - much of this will reappear in Visions of the Daughters of Albion. There is also a deleted line where Tiriel, addressing Har, speaks of 'Thy God of Love, thy Heavens of Joy' - a reference to the God whose presence is accepted by the children of Innocence, but now rejected by the wiser, 'experienced' Tiriel. The unfinished nature of the poem is also shown by metrical oddities such as the short line 'Upon the sand'. Doubtless Blake would have added to this line and straightened out much else that is awkward in the poem, had he ever decided to publish it.
64. For Blake, the term 'immortal spirit' would not have meant the 'soul' in any theological sense (Blake rejected the body-soul dichotomy - most explicitly in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell), but imaginative powers and perceptions.
65. K.215 1.8
66. Jonas Hanway A Sentimental History of Chimney Sweepers in London and Westminster London 1785 p. 27
67. Ibid. pp 77-78
68. Ibid. pp 88-89
69. Quoted in Brian Inglis Poverty and the Industrial Revolution London 1971 p. 31
70. K. 117-118
71. Moralizing critics of Blake accept the angel's perspective. As Joseph Wicksteed remarks 'an earthy darkness of the flesh is escaped spiritually' - the difference is that Wicksteed approves of this, and Blake doesn't (Wicksteed Blake's Innocence and Experience

London 1928 pp 108-109). Others, confronted with Blake's presentation of eighteenth century realities, sidestep them with lengthy ramblings about Blake's alleged borrowings from Swedenborg and neo-platonism. The prime sinner here is Kathleen Raine, who appears to believe that poetry is vastly improved if its content is ignored while the critic ransacks the most unlikely and obscure corners for 'source material'. Do we really need to have heard of, let alone read, Everard's translation of the Hermetica (The Divine Pymander) or Thomas Taylor's Dissertation on the Mysteries to understand The Chimney Sweeper? (Raine Blake and Tradition 2 vols. London 1969 Vol. I pp 20-26)

72. The phrase is from the second stanza of London (K. 216). See the concluding chapter for a discussion of this poem.
73. K. 212 1.5-8
74. Ibid. 1.11-12
75. K. 121-122
76. K. 59
77. The Times June 6 1788. Quoted in Erdman op. cit. p. 122
78. An Account of the Charity Schools Lately Erected 1708 quoted in M.G. Jones The Charity School Movement: A Study of Eighteenth Century Puritanism in Action Cambridge 1938 p. 73
79. Rev. J. Clayton Friendly Advice to the Poor 1755. Quoted in E.P. Thompson 'Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism' in Past and Present 1967 No. 38 p. 84
80. Isaac Watts An Essay Towards the Encouragement of Charity Schools, particularly those that are supported by Protestant Dissenters 1728. Quoted Jones op. cit. p. 74
81. Sermon preached by the Bishop of Norwich at the Anniversary Meeting of the Charity Schools in and about London and Westminster, May 1, 1755. Quoted in Jones op. cit. p. 75
82. Jones op. cit. pp 80-83
83. Sermon Preached by the Bishop of Oxford at the Anniversary Meeting of the Charity Schools in and around London and Westminster 1743. Quoted in Jones op. cit. p. 75. (Different schools however would wear different coloured uniforms. Hence the poem's reference to 'red and blue and green').
84. Minutes, Grey Coat Hospital. Quoted in Jones p. 104
85. Jones op. cit. p. 58

86. e.g. Obscured by mean and humble birth
 In ignorance we lay,
 Til Christian Bounty called us forth
 And led us into day

O look for ever kindly down
 On those that help the poor.
 O, let success their labours crown
 And plenty keep their store

Hymn Sheet printed for the Anniversary Service of the Charity Schools in St. Mary's Parish Church, Rotherhithe 1792. Quoted in Jones op. cit. p. 76

87. This point completely escapes many critics. John Holloway, for instance, can only remark: 'their lamb-like radiance becomes one with the divine, with the "harmonious thunderings" of the heavenly choirs. Hence the sudden explosive surprise yet total appositeness of the closing' (Blake: The Lyric Poetry London 1968 p. 64). Joseph Wicksteed, identifying the poem's narrator as Blake himself, removes the entire bite of the poem by saying of the last line: 'His vision has told him that the children whom our gifts of pity go to help are seen by the visionary as angels round the throne of God'. The throne of God would appear to have emerged from Wicksteed's imagination, for it is certainly not in the poem (Wicksteed: Blake's Innocence and Experience London 1928 p. 104).
88. K. 217 1.1-4
89. The poem as it was finally engraved is somewhat damaged by Blake's attempt to cram too much into it. In it the Tree of Mystery makes its first appearance, and dominates the last four stanzas - unfortunately the connection of the last four to the first two stanzas is rather tenuous. The Tree of Mystery receives better and more extended treatment in the Prophetic Books.
90. K. 164
91. K. 211-212
92. Quoted in R.K. Webb The British Working Class Reader 1790-1848: Literacy and Social Tension London 1955 pp 36-37
93. Priestley Essay on a Course of Liberal Education for Civil and Active Life 1768 p. 72. Quoted in Brian Simon The Two Nations and the Educational Structure 1780-1870 London 1974 p. 35
94. Priestley Miscellaneous Observations Relating to Education 1778 p. 129. Quoted in ibid.
95. K. 124
96. Burke Thoughts on Scarcity London 1795 p. 2

97. Ibid. p. 32
98. Malthus Essay on the Principle of Population London 1798
99. Ibid.
100. Malthus A Summary View of the Principle of Population London 1830
101. Annotations to Watson K. 384
102. Urizen is first described in this way in the Preludium to The Book of Urizen K. 222
103. K. 323 The Four Zoas Night VII (a) 110-129
104. See Douglas Hay's analysis of the place of mercy in the eighteenth century legal system in his essay 'Property, Authority and the Criminal Law' in Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in 18th Century England London 1975
105. K. 324 155-156
106. K. 217-
107. See later in the same Night e.g. 332 (K. 328), and Orc's furious serpent activity in Night VIII.
108. K. 742 Jerusalem 95.20
109. That is, his first personal appearance. He is invoked by name, but almost in passing, in an earlier work, Visions of the Daughters of Albion 1793
110. K. 224 The Book of Urizen 4.36-40. In Visions of the Daughters of Albion this same uniformity is expressed by the priest-rapist figure Bromion in his rhetorical question 'And is there not one law for both the lion and the ox?' (K. 192) See also the end of Tiriell (K. 110).

3. WORDSWORTH

i) Education and the impact of France

Wordsworth's upbringing was in strong contrast to Blake's urban artisan background. Wordsworth's family were fairly well-to-do Cumberland freeholders. His grandfather, Richard Wordsworth, was Chief Steward to the powerful magnate Sir James Lowther from about 1720 to 1738, and held the office of Clerk of the Peace for Westmoreland from 1744 to 1750. His son continued the Lowther connection, and was an agent for the next James Lowther who bought him a house in Cockermouth.

Wordsworth's mother also came from well-to-do stock. She was the daughter of William Cookson, a Penrith mercer, and of Dorothy Crackanthorpe of Newbiggin Hall, some miles east of Penrith. Their son, and William Wordsworth's uncle, Christopher Crackanthorpe, who became guardian of the Wordsworth children after their father's death, also went into business as owner of a mercer's shop. The family could afford to keep servants, and to send young William first to Hawkshead Grammar School, and later to Cambridge.

Lowther, who became Earl of Lonsdale in 1784, regarded Cumberland and Westmoreland as his personal fiefs, and by and large he exercised complete political control over the area. As a result these two northern counties were among the most conservative and quiescent in the country; and it was only to be expected that this conservatism should manifest itself in the household of Lowther's agent. For example, in The Prelude Wordsworth refers to Pitt as

One of whose name from Childhood we had heard
Familiarly, a household term. (1)

From Dorothy Wordsworth's correspondence we learn that that bane of radicals, William Wilberforce, was a visitor to Penrith, sometimes staying for lengthy periods:

Mr. Wilberforce has been with us rather better than a month, tell your father I hope he will give him his vote at the next general election. I believe him to be one of the best of men. He allows me 10 gns. a year to distribute in which manner I think best to the poor; it is a very nice sum by which I am enabled to do more good than might ever have been in my power. (2)

Here are the conventional attitudes of the wealthy towards the poor, who are seen, not as people suffering oppression, but as objects for charity.

The home atmosphere of the Wordsworth children, then, was far from radical. Their standard of living, if not extravagant, was certainly comfortable. It is this background that should be taken into account when considering Wordsworth's politics, rather than the alleged traumas which are supposed to have followed his father's death and the move from Cockermouth to Penrith. Attempts to explain Wordsworth's espousal of radicalism in terms of hypothetical misery endured at the hands of his guardian, Christopher Crackanthorpe, flounder on the lack of any real evidence for this, either in Wordsworth's letters or in The Prelude. In fact, the childhood depicted in The Prelude is anything but neurotic - it is the ordinary and uneventful life of a boy with a greater than usual attraction to natural beauty. It is even, one is tempted to say, a trifle dull. (3)

Since he was away at school in Hawkshead for much of the time, Wordsworth did not have to suffer his guardian a great deal. It was his sister Dorothy who bore the full brunt of the objectionable Crackanthorpe, and her letters to Jane Pollard make it quite clear how miserable she felt. But Dorothy's emotions should not be carelessly transplanted to William: and it should also be noted that the experience of tyrannical relations did not radicalise Dorothy in the least. She remained a loyal monarchist, and in a letter written from Windsor in 1792 allowed herself to fall into

raptures over George III:

The King stopped to talk with my uncle and aunt, and to play with the children, who though not acquainted with the new-fangled doctrines of liberty and equality, thought a king's stick as fair game as any other man's, and that princesses were not better than mere Cousin Dollys. I think it is impossible to see the King and his family at Windsor without loving them, even if you eye them with impartiality and consider them really as Man and woman and not a king and princesses, but I own I am too much of an aristocrat, or what you please to call me, not to reverence him because he is a monarch more than I should were he a private gentleman and not to see with pleasure his daughters treated with more respect than (4) ordinary people.

There is certainly not a great deal of Jacobinism here.

Wordsworth's brothers also showed no signs of radicalism. Richard became a respectable lawyer. John led an uneventful life in the Navy until his death at sea in 1805 and, like Dorothy, he admired Wilberforce. Christopher was quite untouched by the flowering of radicalism at Cambridge and went on to take holy orders, and later to become Master of Trinity College. Only William was to proclaim himself a democrat.

If the reason for this is not to be found in Wordsworth's relations with his guardian, neither is it to be found in the Lonsdale debt. In 1783 Wordsworth Senior died, being owed several thousand pounds by his employer. It soon transpired that Lonsdale had no intention of honouring the debt (possibly influenced by Crackanthorpe's support for the Duke of Norfolk, one of Lonsdale's principal political opponents), and so an action was brought against him on behalf of the Wordsworth children. But Lonsdale's local power proved overwhelming: when the case came up at Carlisle, he had retained every counsel on the circuit and appeared in court with a hundred witnesses. The judge ordered the case to stand over. (5) Years of tiresome litigation followed, and the debts were not finally paid until after Lonsdale's death in 1802. But again this seems to have left little impression on Wordsworth. Lonsdale is not mentioned in The Prelude, and it was Dorothy, not William, who complained in correspondence of his perfidy. Wordsworth played no part in the recovery of the debt himself:

this was left to his brother Richard, who handled all the family's legal and financial affairs, receiving scant thanks for his efforts from William or Dorothy, who would only correspond with him to demand money or advice, usually attacking him for alleged delay or negligence.

But in any case by no means all of Wordsworth's father's estate was tied up in the Lonsdale debt. The financial affairs of the Wordsworth family are not easy to unravel, but it seems unlikely that there was any real hardship. John Wordsworth Senior had owned several properties - including the Sockbridge estate, various 'cattle gates' on the moor, Ingmire Close (purchased from his father-in-law), two fields near Cockermouth (these had cost him £200), and other small properties in various parts of Cumberland. (6) Wordsworth's brother Richard had an income of around £100 a year from the estate, while an estate at Newbiggin also yielded money - Dorothy writes of receiving £150 from it. (7)

When the share in rent from the Crackenthorpe estates which their Grandmother gave the children in 1790 (some £500) is considered, plus £500 from their mother's estate, plus £1,000 which in one form or another were in the hands of uncles or guardians, plus £200 owed by one of their guardians to their father's estate, it seems that there were no serious financial problems - although a substantial amount of the family's money had to go into court battles against Lonsdale. (8)

The family finances certainly proved sound enough to send William to Cambridge. His three years at the University, however, did not apparently advance his political development one iota. True, he arrived at the university in 1787, just before political controversy revived within its precincts, when, in the words of one of his biographers, it was 'in the very last stage of intellectual langour'. (9) The trouble was that intellectual langour was a condition that suited Wordsworth very well. He

was never academically inclined and read little. Book III of The Prelude is largely an admission that he wasted his time at Cambridge:

we talked
 Unprofitable talk at morning hours,
 Drifted about along the streets and walks,
 Read lazily in lazy books, went forth
 To gallop through the country in blind zeal (10)
 Of senseless hosemanship.

In short, his years at Cambridge were years of stagnation. According to The Prelude, he came to despise much of the university system - compulsory chapel, the examinations, dons 'trick'd out like aged trees' (11) - but nevertheless he fell lethargically into its routine. He wrote no poetry at Cambridge, and even the communion with nature of his Hawkshead days seemed lost. Wordsworth claimed that he maintained his love for the natural world as an undergraduate, but The Prelude contains no specific reference to any of the natural beauties surrounding Cambridge.

His first academic results in university exams in December 1787 and June 1788 were encouraging (12), but after that date he never bothered to complete an examination. He had come to dislike maths and simply failed to take the mathematical parts of the exams. This was symptomatic of a general indolence which Wordsworth never really shook off. Hopes that his family had entertained of his taking a scholarship were therefore dashed.

There was a certain amount of mild liberalism present in Cambridge at the end of the 1780s - the Vice-Chancellor, for instance, described the taking of the Bastille as 'a subject of triumph and congratulation' (13) - but Wordsworth's college, St. John's, was sunk in reaction. Its leading luminaries were Church and King diehards, one of whom, the Reverend George Whitmore, college Tutor in the early 1790s, described the repeated smashing of dissenters' windows in 1791 as 'a Laudable Ebullition of Justifiable Zeal' (14). The Master of St. John's, William Craven, became involved in the witchhunt against the unitarian William Frend, whose 1793 pamphlet,

Peace and Union recommended to the Associated Bodies of Republicans and Anti-Republicans, caused an uproar in Cambridge. Craven was one of those who signed the decree formally expelling Frennd from the university (15). The atmosphere that these men attempted to engender was hardly suited to the growth of radical ideas.

In 1790, at the end of his third year at Cambridge, Wordsworth visited France. With a Welsh friend, Robert Jones, he went on a walking tour of the Alps. All Europe was talking about the events in France: the revolution of 1789 was not something that anyone with the slightest interest in politics could ignore. Yet, in a long letter to his sister, all that Wordsworth could find to say about the revolution was the following:

We not only found the French a much less imposing people (than the Swiss) but that politeness diffused through the lower ranks had an air so engaging that you could scarce attribute it to any other cause than real benevolence....We also had perpetual occasion to observe that cheerfulness and sprightliness for which the French have always been remarkable. But I must remind you that we crossed it at the time when the whole nation was moved with joy in consequence of the revolution. It was a most interesting period to be in France and we had many delightful scenes where the interest of the picture was owing solely to this cause. (16)

This is not the language of a revolutionary. Politics enters this letter casually, almost incidentally. Wordsworth evidently cares far more for the Alpine scenery that he lovingly describes than for the revolution and its consequences. We can thus safely state that at the end of 1790 Wordsworth's political consciousness was virtually non-existent.

Early 1791 saw Wordsworth's first stay in London. He summed up this period in a letter to his friend William Matthews as follows:

I quitted London about three weeks ago, where my time passed in a strange manner, sometimes whirled about by the vortex of its strenuous inertia and sometimes thrown by the eddy into a corner of the stream where I lay in almost motionless indolence. (17)

These months in London can hardly have been a happy time for Wordworth. He was not financially supported by his guardian, who had never been endeared

to him, particularly as he showed no enthusiasm for acquiring a career. Wordsworth had, therefore, to scrounge off his brother Richard in order to live in London at all. Initially he had only one friend in the capital, William Matthews. In The Prelude Wordsworth attempted to put a brave face on this:

Free as a colt at pasture on the hill
I rang'd at large, through the Metropolis
Month after month. Obscurely did I live
Not courting the society of men
By literature, or elegance, or rank (18)
Distinguished.

Wordsworth did not seek the society of distinguished men for the very good reason that he knew none of them, and none of them knew him. He was a complete unknown, wandering about London and destined, if his uncles had their way, shortly to enter the Church. Leslie Chard attaches considerable importance to this particular time in London, maintaining that it was then that Wordsworth picked up the germs of his republicanism (19). There is, however, not a great deal of evidence for this. Wordsworth would have been extraordinarily obtuse had he not noticed that London was alive with political ferment. Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France had been published a few months previously and furious replies were pouring off the radical presses. But Wordsworth does not appear to have taken part in the controversy himself. He did visit Parliament, and, according to The Prelude, heard Pitt speak and was not impressed (20). But it is impossible to tell whether this attack on Pitt represents what Wordsworth felt in 1791, or when The Prelude was being written, between 1798 and 1805. In a later addition to the poem, in 1820, Wordsworth included lines on Burke and Fox (21), but these, written by a poet petrified in Toryism, can certainly not be extrapolated back to 1791.

It is possible, as Chard argues, that Wordsworth made the acquaintance of certain radical dissenters in early 1791. Equally possibly, he may not have done. In any case he certainly was not enthused - or he would hardly have

wandered off to Jones' home in Denbighshire where he proceeded to do nothing for several months. He admitted as much to Matthews:

The truth of the matter is that when in town I did little, and since I came here I have done nothing. A miserable account ! However, I have not in addition to all this to complain of bad spirits....I rather think that this gaiety increases with my ignorance, as a spendthrift grows more extravagant the nearer he approaches to the final dissipation of his property. (22)

Perhaps Wordsworth was moving vaguely leftwards in 1791: and perhaps Lonsdale's open announcement that he would resist to the end any settlement of his debts to the Wordsworths pushed him towards taking up a political position. But the real turning point came with Wordsworth's second visit to France.

This journey, in December 1791, was not undertaken for any political purpose, but, as Dorothy wrote, 'for the purpose of learning the French language which will qualify him for the office of travelling companion to some young gentleman' (23). His uncle was becoming worried about Wordsworth's career prospects. It had been more or less decided that Wordsworth was to take orders, and Wordsworth himself was half reconciled to this fate, half rebelling against it. He had already been offered a curacy at Harwich which he had rejected on the grounds that he was not of age (a downright lie). The trip to France thus looks like an attempt either to avoid the priesthood altogether, or at least to postpone entry into clerical life.

For modern Wordsworth biographers, the chief interest of their subject's stay in France lies in his sex life. For most of the nineteenth century Wordsworth's sexual indiscretions in Orleans were a well-kept secret, but at the beginning of this century Annette Vallon was unearthed, and the discovery that Wordsworth had a French mistress and an illegitimate daughter has provided the main interest in his French visit ever since. Biographers have made an inordinate fuss over the affair with Annette, most

of them jumping to the conclusion that this was Wordsworth's first sexual experience. Critics have insisted that the experience was decisive and that Wordsworth always felt enormous secret guilt about abandoning Annette. Every one of the innumerable mother and child situations in Wordsworth's poetry is looked at through the prism of Annette Vallon and baby Caroline, and critiques of the poems degenerate into disquisitions on the state of Wordsworth's psyche. ⁽²⁴⁾ But, search as one may, there is no documentary evidence at all to substantiate this thesis. The poems themselves prove nothing, since distraught mothers were very much the stuff of the magazine verse of the late eighteenth century ⁽²⁵⁾; Wordsworth was thus drawing on a well-established stereotype. There is no reason to suppose that the tormented women of his lyrics reflect his personal situation.

Annette certainly made no intellectual impact on Wordsworth at all. Politically, she could have played no role in moving him leftwards, since she and her family happened to be royalists. Her brother Paul was implicated in a scuffle in Orleans in March 1793 in which the Montagnard deputy Bourdon was almost killed ⁽²⁶⁾. Annette herself became a militant counter-revolutionary: her friends were in contact with the reactionaries of the Vendémiaire uprising of Year IV, and she took an active part in the provincial chouannerie around Blois. ⁽²⁷⁾

Some of Wordsworth's other early contacts in Orleans were also counter-revolutionaries. His first host in the city was a man whose wife's recent death had unhinged him, and who looked on the revolution with hatred. Wordsworth shared these lodgings with two or three cavalry officers and a Parisian gentleman who also appear to have been hostile towards the revolution. ⁽²⁸⁾ As late as May 1792 Wordsworth still displayed no particular interest in the revolution. He still reckoned on a respectable clerical career, and wrote:

It is at present my intention to take orders in the approaching

winter or spring. My uncle the clergyman will furnish me with a title. Had it been in my power I certainly would have wished to defer the moment....You will naturally expect that writing from a country agitated by the storms of a revolution, my letter should not be merely confined to us and our friends. But the truth is that in London you may have a better opportunity of being informed of the general concerns of France than in a petty provincial town in the heart of the Kingdom itself. (29)

By the time he wrote this, Wordsworth had probably already met the man who was to be a far more important influence on his life than Annette, and who was to ensure that he would soon be unable to write of politics in such an uninterested manner. This was the young officer, Michael Beaupuy, a lone revolutionary in a company of loyalist troops. Beaupuy's influence on Wordsworth was probably surpassed only by that of Coleridge. In The Prelude he is described in almost reverential terms - e.g.

Injuries
 Made him more gracious, and his nature then
 Did breathe its sweetness out most sensibly
 As aromatic lowers on alpine turf (30)
 When foot hath crushed them.

Beaupuy and Wordsworth were frequently to be seen together at the Jacobin Club at Blois (31), and in their political conversations Beaupuy converted Wordsworth to republicanism. But it is quite evident from the descriptions given in The Prelude that, as absorbed by Wordsworth, this was an extremely abstract, almost ethereal form of republicanism. Grand schemes were discussed by the two men, but, judging from Wordsworth's recollections in The Prelude, they hardly ever seem to have touched on the very concrete problems of their time. Wordsworth describes these conversations thus:

oft in solitude
 With him did I discourse about the end
 Of civil government, and its wisest forms,
 Of ancient prejudice and chartered rights,
 Allegiance, faith and law by time matured,
 Custom and habit, novelty and change,
 Of self-respect and virtue in the Few
 For patrimonial honour set apart,
 And ignorance in the labouring Multitude. (32)

This passage is simply a string of abstractions. It gives no indication that the two men were talking together at a time when foreign armies were

invading French soil, and when the crisis that was to result in the overthrow of the monarchy on August 10 was maturing. This is a peculiarly insubstantial kind of politics: it is devoid of any consideration of the practical issues that were fanning the flames of revolt in Paris. Bread prices, and other brutally stark economic issues, played a major role in the French as in most other revolutions; but Wordsworth showed no indication of comprehending such basic facts.

What is of particular interest is the contrast Wordsworth and Beauvuy drew between the 'virtuous' few and the 'ignorant' multitude. This was to remain a key element in Wordsworth's political thought. Despite Wordsworth's life-long practice of singing the praises of the suffering and enduring 'labouring poor', the role which he assigned to them was essentially a passive one. Because of their 'ignorance', they were unable to take their destiny into their own hands; it was therefore the duty of the enlightened few to educate them. The question of who is to educate the educators (33) did not occur to Wordsworth. Like many other English observers, he was under the illusion that the French Revolution was an act of sheer benevolence on the part of the Virtuous Few to liberate the Multitude from Despotism and educate it into Liberty. The masses were therefore consigned to be passive recipients of virtue and education: they were to be acted on, and were on no account to act for themselves. Thus, for Wordsworth, popular emancipation did not arise from the struggles of the popular classes themselves - rather, it was imposed from above, essentially from within the existing order. This position clearly sets Wordsworth apart from Blake and the plebeian societies; it also helps explain Wordsworth's later reactions to the revolutionary dictatorship of Year II.

Rule of the virtuous, the displacement of the aristocracy of blood by the aristocracy of merit, was not a new political idea. It had its antecedents

in English Republican thought of the seventeenth century, particularly in Milton's tract, The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth. Milton had proposed the election of a 'grand or General Council' which would sit in perpetuity, its membership only being changed through death:

The ship of the Commonwealth is alwaies under sail; they sit at the stern; and if they steare well, what need is ther to change them; it being rather dangerous ? (34)

Rejecting annual rotation of a third in the Council (a solution that would be tried, with a notable lack of success, in revolutionary France under the Directory), Milton also objected to the creation of a second, more popular assembly (in Oceana, Harrington had proposed one of a thousand members (35)). The great puritan was no democrat: he wrote scornfully of 'a licentious and unbridl'd democratic' (36), and proposed a system of successive elective assemblies that would undoubtedly have excluded the bulk of the population. The purpose of such assemblies was to 'refine' wisdom and produce a chamber consisting of the best-qualified men in the country:

Another way will be, to well-qualifie and refine elections: not committing to all the noise and shouting of a rude multitude, but permitting only those of them who are rightly qualified, to nominate as many as they will; and out of that number others of a better breeding, to chuse a less number more judiciously, till after a third or fourth sifting and refining of exactest choice, they only be left chosen who are the due number, and seen by most voices the worthiest. (37)

The great instrument of social change would be education, in which Milton placed all his trust:

To make the people fittest to chuse, and the chosen fittest to govern, will be to mend our corrupt and faulty education, to teach the people faith not without vertue, temperance, modestie, sobrietie, parsimonie, justice; not to admire wealth or honour; to hate turbulence and ambition; to place every one his privat welfare and happiness in the public peace, libertie and safetie. (38)

So argued an angry Milton at a time when the Commonwealth was crumbling and Royalist restoration approaching. Then a political system based on the masses, apparently sunk in apathy, might well have seemed utopian. The same excuse, however, can hardly apply to those who used similar arguments in

revolutionary France.

In the early 1790s Wordsworth's reading habits were lax. He may well, therefore, not have read Milton's prose works, nor the writings of other Republicans such as Harrington (though we know that he certainly made good this failing later in his life ⁽³⁹⁾). Beaupuy, however, would have known these authors. For Beaupuy was a follower of Brissot's faction, the loose grouping of deputies in the Convention who have gone down in history as the Girondins. Much of Girondin political theory derived from the English Republicans. After the formation of the Convention in 1792, for example, Girondin deputies eagerly proposed various constitutional schemas clearly modelled on Milton, Harrington and their contemporaries.

The problem with such schemas, however, is that while they may look very fine on paper, they do not necessarily bear any relation to reality. To plagiarise a seventeenth century English Republican utopia and impose it upon the seething cauldron of Paris in 1792 was an exercise foredoomed to failure. Divorced from the real conflicts of revolutionary France, constitutional schemes degenerated into arid abstractions, and a trivial idealism. Unwittingly Wordsworth summed this up when he wrote of Beaupuy, 'Man he lov'd / As Man' ⁽⁴⁰⁾. Not real men engaged in real conflicts, but 'Man' as a grandiose and generalised abstraction. Neither Wordsworth, nor the Beaupuy of The Prelude, had any concept of historical process, of the agencies of historical change.

Thus, while Wordsworth could depict individual pictures of intense human misery (the war widow in An Evening Walk is the earliest ⁽⁴¹⁾, and Lyrical Ballads is replete with examples), when it came to the cause of misery, or the eradication of that misery, nothing concrete was offered, and we are left with a series of clichés concerning abstractions entitled 'freedom'

or 'oppression'. These and similar personifications are liberally scattered through Descriptive Sketches, largely written in 1792, where they effectively substitute for any serious political thought. They become convenient catchwords which relieve the poet of any need to explain his political stance to his audience. They are superimposed on Wordsworth's recollections of his 1791 Alpine tour, rather than integrated as a harmonious part of the poem (42).

The abstract way of thinking is at its most striking in the passage in The Prelude where Wordsworth and Beaupuy meet 'a hunger-bitten girl', who causes Beaupuy to exclaim 'Tis against that which we are fighting'. Wordsworth does not tell us whether they gave the girl anything to eat: instead he informs us that he and Beaupuy

believed
 Devoutly that a spirit was abroad
 Which could not be withstood, that poverty,
 At least like this, would in a little time
 Be found no more, that we should see the earth
 Unthwarted in her wish to recompense
 The industrious and the lowly Child of Toil (43)

Unfortunately, spirits do not make reliable historical agents: real men are the agents of history, and when the people of Paris summarily threw the Girondin leaders out of the Convention, Wordsworth repudiated their action. He never understood that the poor were not interested in Beaupuy philosophising about their hunger and misery. What they wanted were specific, concrete measures to alleviate their distress - in particular, controls on the price of foodstuffs. It was the Montagnard dictatorship, and not the Girondins, who proved able to swallow their free trade principles and, however reluctantly, and however inefficiently, instituted price controls through the Law of the Maximum. The importance of such a measure, and its centrality to French popular politics, were never grasped by Wordsworth.

At the end of the year Wordsworth left France, apparently without even

seeing the daughter whom Annette Vallon had borne him, and who had been christened Anne Caroline Wordsworth (sic) ⁽⁴⁴⁾. Wordsworth's departure at this time seems somewhat strange. England and France were not yet at war, and if, as critics and biographers assume, Wordsworth was deeply in love with his French mistress, then this was certainly a highly inappropriate time to pack his bags and cross the Channel. Unlikely excuses have been invented for Wordsworth. His nephew, Christopher, when compiling his Memoirs of William Wordsworth, gave his intimacy with the Girondins as reason for his hasty departure from France ⁽⁴⁵⁾. On this flimsy foundation Herbert Read builds a hypothesis that Wordsworth was deeply involved in Girondin intrigues, acting as a courier from Blois to Paris ⁽⁴⁶⁾. Quite apart from the improbability of someone of Wordsworth's unadventurous nature involving himself in such cloak and dagger work, this argument collapses on historical grounds. The struggle between Girondins and Montagnards was certainly acute in late 1792, but the outcome was by no means decided. In December 1792 there was nothing to indicate that within a year the Girondin leaders would be in hiding or on the scaffold. While it would undoubtedly have been dangerous to consort openly with Girondins in Spring and Summer of 1793, this was not the case in Winter 1792. ⁽⁴⁷⁾

It is even doubtful whether Wordsworth knew any leading Girondins personally. When Barron Field wrote an unpublished biography of Wordsworth in which he stated 'he is said to have become acquainted with many of the leaders of the revolutionary party and to have lived in the same house with Brissot', Wordsworth wrote in the margin 'There is much mistake here which I should like to correct in person' ⁽⁴⁸⁾.

Wordsworth's return to England can be accounted for by a much simpler, if less romantic, hypothesis (one rejected for no good reason by Read ⁽⁴⁹⁾), namely that he had run out of money. Once he had remedied his financial situation, he may well have intended returning to France - but the outbreak

of war would have scotched any such plans. Wordsworth's family, blissfully unaware of his French indiscretions, were continuing with their plans for him to enter the Church. As late as February 1793 Dorothy was writing to Jane Pollard inviting her friend to stay with her and William at their 'little parsonage' (50). But Wordsworth did not take orders. Presumably this scheme, always uncongenial to him, was conveniently ditched when his uncles learned of the liaison with Annette and its fruit (51).

The years 1793-96 form Wordsworth's radical period. It was heralded by the publication of his two poems, An Evening Walk and Descriptive Sketches, by Joseph Johnson at the end of January 1793. This was Wordsworth's positive alternative to taking orders - he would make a name for himself in the world of literature. If Wordsworth expected the two poems to bring him any significant financial reward, he seems to have been disappointed, for we find him writing to Matthews in May 1794:

Pray let me request you to have the goodness to call on Johnson, my publisher, and ask him if he ever sells any of those poems, and what numbers he thinks are yet on his hands (52).

The poems, youthful and rather uninspiring, contain little in the way of meaningful radical sentiment beyond the rather vapid invocations of 'freedom' and 'oppression' already mentioned. Pitt's most fanatical treason-hunters would have found it difficult to describe them as Jacobinical. Had they been explicitly revolutionary it is altogether possible that Johnson would have refused to publish them. He had had second thoughts about Part I of Rights of Man, forcing Paine to find another publisher, and similarly Blake's The French Revolution never got beyond the stage of typesetting. By 1793 Johnson's caution was resulting in his circle becoming limited to the more moderate reformers, those sympathetic to the politics of Grey's Association of the Friends of the People, and to Dissenters in particular.

Wordsworth too was cautious: his most politically outspoken work, the Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff, remained unpublished until 1876. Like Blake, who restricted his indictment of Bishop Watson to marginal scriblings in a copy of the Bishop's reply to Paine's The Age of Reason, (53) Wordsworth thought the risks of publication too great. Only one radical actually published a retort to Watson: the Bishop's Address to the People of Great Britain in 1798 drew a reply from the pen of Gilbert Wakefield. Watson was arguing in standard manner against parliamentary reform, urging that such matters should be left to the experts, especially in time of war:

It is better to tolerate abuses, till they can be reformed by the counsels of the wisest and best men in the kingdom, than to submit the removal of them to the frothy frequenters of alehouses, to the discontented declaimers against our establishment, to the miserable dregs of the nation who seek for distinction in public confusion. = An ancient fabrick may by mere force be defaced and thrown down, but it requires the knowledge and caution of an architect to (54) beautify and repair it.

Wakefield angrily rejected this sort of argument:

Can we then rationally expect that the pensioners of Church and State should view, with a suitable discrimination and a clear disinterestedness, the imperfection of our establishment, or profess themselves friendly to measures, which may remove that foundation on which they stand? Certainly a system with all its corruption must necessarily appear more eligible to men so situated, than (55) the dangerous alternative of reformation.

Wakefield's pamphlet went on to attack Pitt and deny any sincerity to the administration's hopes for peace: it stated:

that the continuance of the war is a desperate profligacy in the ministers, and a ruinous infatuation in the people, and that all²/₃ incentives to the prolongation of this monstrous work of (56) desolation, calamity and blood is BOLD IMPIETY.

Such words were not pleasing to governmental ears in the crisis year of 1798, when Ireland was in revolt and a French invasion seemed a real possibility: and so Wakefield's outspokenness earned him a two-year prison sentence. Blake and Wordsworth therefore seem wise in not publishing their attacks on Watson. Nevertheless, there is an important difference between the two poets on this issue. Blake was writing, like Wakefield, in 1798, when the radical movement had been smashed, and he

explicitly stated that 'I have been commanded from Hell not to print this as it is what our Enemies wish' (57). Wordsworth, on the other hand, was writing five years earlier, when the Pittite repression had by no means won the day. His reply to Watson was penned while the popular societies were still thriving, before the major attacks on the London Corresponding Society were launched, and probably even before the start of the Scottish trials of Muir and Palmer. Wordsworth clearly intended to publish his letter, but got cold feet and never finished it (indeed the work as we possess it breaks off in the middle of a sentence).

The occasion for Wordsworth's Letter was the attack made by Watson on the French Revolution immediately after the execution of Louis XVI. This was published as an appendix to his sermon on The Wisdom and Goodness of God in Having Made both Rich and Poor. Watson, who had previously enjoyed a reputation as a liberal in politics, now took up the cudgels in defence of the British Constitution and against the French Republic, joining Burke in the ranks of apostasy. Watson's arguments have a familiar, Burkean ring to them:

That the constitution of this country is so perfect as neither to require or admit of any improvement, is a proposition to which I never did or ever can consent; but I think it far too excellent to be amended by peasants and mechanics.....Peasants and mechanics are as useful to the State as any other order of men; but their utility consists in their discharging well the duties of their respective stations; it ceases when they attempt to become legislators; when they intrude themselves into concerns for which their education (58) has not fitted them.

When Kings are executed under pressure from peasants, mechanics and others from the lower end of the social ladder, then a divinely pre-ordained order has been violated. To those who claimed that Louis XVI had forfeited all kingly rights and prerogatives through his betrayal of the French people, Watson argued first, in true clerical style, that he who had no sin should cast the first stone, and secondly, that in any case the king's perfidy had resulted from Republican oppression (59). The Bishop also included a

panegyric on the British law and British courts (60) - a panegyric that events in Scotland later in the year were to prove singularly misplaced.

Wordsworth's Letter defends - albeit not wholeheartedly - the execution of the King, and the course the Revolution had taken up to January 1793. He admits that violence is sometimes a necessary companion of reform, a view which he was shortly to abjure:

What ! Have you so little knowledge of the nature of man as to be ignorant that a time of revolution is not the season of true liberty ? Alas the obstinacy and perversion of man is such that she is too often obliged to borrow the very arms of Despotism to overthrow him, and, in order to reign in peace, must establish herself by violence. She deploras such stern necessity, but the safety of the people, her supreme law, is her consolation. (61)

Wordsworth rejects monarchy as a foolish and an impracticable form of government:

As for the nature of monarchy, particularly of hereditary monarchy, there must always be a vast disproportion between the duties to be performed and the powers that are to perform them; and as the measures of government, far from gaining additional vigour, are, on the contrary, enfeebled by being entrusted to one hand, what arguments can be used for allowing the will of a single being the weight, which as history shows, will subvert that of the whole body politic ? And this brings me to my grand objection to monarchy, which is drawn from the eternal nature of man; the office of king is a trial to which human virtue is not equal. (62)

The burden of Wordsworth's argument is that Louis was cursed with a supra-human task - one which of its very nature was impossible of fulfillment. Now there is nothing like this in the arguments used by Louis XVI's judges and prosecutors. To them, the king was a criminal, one who was responsible for misery bloodshed and war, and as such deserved the death penalty. Indeed, the debate in France was not so much over Louis' guilt, but over whether it was worth the formality of a trial at all. St. Just put the extreme Montagnard position very clearly: 'I do not see the possibility of any middle way: this man must either reign, or he must die'. Those who, for various reasons, wanted a trial certainly did not demur from St. Just's summary judgement that 'He is the murderer of the Bastille, of Nancy and the Champ de Mars, of Tournay and the Tuileries.

What foreigner or which of your enemies has done you greater harm ?' (63). A huge gulf separates the passions of the Convention from Wordsworth's reasoned prose. The dimension of social conflict, always to the fore in the minds of men such as St. Just, is largely absent from Wordsworth. To the latter Louis was an unfortunate individual placed in a cruel dilemma: he was someone asked to perform the impossible. Indeed earlier in the piece Wordsworth had referred to 'the blind fondness' of the French which 'had placed a human being in that monstrous situation which rendered him unaccountable before a human tribunal' (64).

Some of the ideas in the Letter may have had their origins in Paine's Rights of Man (65), but Wordsworth's defence of the revolution is nowhere near as thorough-going as Paine's, and republicanism is not offered as a definitive political solution. Wordsworth adds a note of caution in his carefully-phrased remark that his arguments 'may lead to a conclusion that a Republic legitimately constructed contains less of an oppressive principle than any other form of government' (66). This raises the interesting question of who is to determine when a Republic is 'legitimately constructed'. The people at large evidently cannot determine this for they, so Wordsworth argues, have been debauched by monarchy, and have been fooled both into rioting against Priestley, and into support for a war 'from which not a single ray of consolation can visit them to compensate for the additional keenness with which they are about to smart under the scourge of labour, of cold and of hunger' (67). In passages such as this we sense Wordsworth's isolation. Although he was to claim that 'My heart was all / Given to the People and my love was theirs' (68), he was always apart from 'the People'. He was in opposition to the existing order, but never took part in, and never understood popular movements. His attitude to 'the People', whether it be called 'love' or anything else, was essentially patronising. The 'virtuous few' would educate 'the labouring multitude'. The latter have no autonomous existence of their

own in Wordsworth's political theory. In place of the active notions of political organisation and struggle is put the passive notion of education which, in the Letter, becomes a cure-all:

It is the province of education to rectify the erroneous notions which a habit of oppression, and even of resistance, may have created, and to soften this ferocity of character, proceeding from a necessary suspension of the mild and social virtues; it belongs to her to create a race of men who, truly free, will look upon their fathers as only enfranchised. (69)

However, when education was used to rectify 'erroneous notions', it was to be through the media of the Cheap Repository Tracts and the Methodist chapel, in the service of the existing socio-economic order, and in a sense quite the reverse of that intended by Wordsworth in 1793.

Wordsworth's letter goes on to declare opposition to all 'extremes' of riches or poverty; and finally Wordsworth puts himself on record as a supporter of shorter parliaments and universal manhood suffrage. In terms derived from Rousseau, he declared:

If there is a single man in Great Britain who has no suffrage in the election of a representative, the will of the society of which he is a member is not generally expressed; he is a Helot in that society. (70)

As for Watson's apostasy, Wordsworth dismisses it - false friends are no loss:

Conscious that an enemy lurking in our ranks is ten times more formidable than when drawn out against us, that the unblushing aristocracy of a Maury or a Cazales is far less dangerous than the insidious mask of patriotism assumed by a Lafayette or a Mirabeau, we thank you for your desertion. (71)

The Letter stands as testimony to the political faith held by Wordsworth in 1793. He was a republican, a supporter of regicide (under certain circumstances, at least), and in favour of the two basic demands of English plebeian radicalism. These were positions that Wordsworth would spend the rest of his life retreating from: another generation of Romantics would find in him a much worse apostate than Watson, and could say in their turn 'we thank you for your desertion'. (72)

FOOTNOTES

1. Prelude VII, 525-6. All quotations from The Prelude are from the 1805 version unless otherwise stated. This first draft of the poem was written between 1798 and 1805. It is a valuable source for Wordsworth's early life, but, like any autobiography, it has to be treated with care. It omits, for example, certain embarrassing occurrences - most notably Wordsworth's liaison with Annette Vallon (though in a sense this enters the poem through the back door in a disguised, fictional, and highly melodramatised way as the story of Vaudracour and Julia).
2. Dorothy Wordsworth to Jane Pollard, 25 January 1790. The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth. The Early Years. 1787-1805. Ed. E. de Selincourt (Oxford 1935). p. 25. Hereafter referred to as Early Letters.
3. Although F.W. Bateson attempts to portray the episode of the stolen boat in The Prelude Book 1 (lines 375-427) as a deeply-felt desire to escape from Penrith, this is a most unconvincing performance. See Bateson's Wordsworth: A Reinterpretation (London 1958) for the psycho-analytical approach, and Chard's Dissenting Republican (Paris 1972) for a refutation.
4. Dorothy to Jane Pollard, 16 October 1792. Early Letters p. 79.
5. Emile Legouis The Early Life of William Wordsworth (London 1897) p. 69. See also the Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Bankruptcy and Insolvency of 1840, quoted in Barron Field Memoirs of Wordsworth ed. Geoffrey Little (Sydney 1975) p. 24.
6. Gordon G. Wordsworth 'The Boyhood of Wordsworth' in The Cornhill Magazine ns XLVIII (1920) pp. 410-420.
7. Early Letters p. 64
8. Early Letters pp. 63-64, 68, 108. See also Wallace W. Douglas 'Wordsworth as Business Man' in Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, June 1948, Vol. 63.
9. Legouis Early Life p. 71.
10. Prelude III, 251-256.
11. Ibid. III, 575.
12. He was placed in the first class in 1787 and second class in 1788. Mary Moorman William Wordsworth: The Early Years. 1770-1803 (Oxford 1957) p. 93.
13. Legouis Early Life pp. 107-108.
14. H. Gunning Reminiscences of the University, Town and County of Cambridge from the Year 1780 (London 1854) Vol. 1, p. 277.
15. See F. Knight University Rebel: The Life of William Frend (London 1971)

16. Wordsworth to Dorothy, 6 September 1790. Early Letters p. 35.
17. Wordsworth to Matthews, 26 June 1791. Early Letters p. 48.
18. Prelude IX, 18-23.
19. See Chard op. cit. Chapter 2: 'London Early 1791: Towards Political Commitment'.
20. Prelude VII, 516-542.
21. Prelude (1850 version) VII, 512-543.
22. Wordsworth to Matthews, 13 August 1791. Early Letters p. 56.
23. Dorothy to Jane Pollard, 7 December 1791. Early Letters p. 63.
24. Perhaps the worst sinner in this respect is Hugh l'Anson Fausset whose The Lost Leader. A Study of Wordsworth is hopelessly sanctimonious on this theme. Emile Legouis, who deserves some credit for being the first to detail the Wordsworth-Annette liaison, mars his book, William Wordsworth and Annette Vallon, by fantasising, in the manner of a cheap novelist, on what Wordsworth 'must have thought' about Annette etc.
25. See Robert Meyer 'The Contemporaneity of the Lyrical Ballads' in Wordsworth: Lyrical Ballads. A Casebook ed. Jones and Tydeman (London 1972).
26. Legouis William Wordsworth and Annette Vallon (revised and enlarged edition, 1967) pp. 40-44.
27. Ibid. pp. 48-54.
28. Ibid. p. 7.
29. Wordsworth to Matthews, 17 May 1792. Early Letters pp. 75-76.
30. Prelude IX, 299-303.
31. Legouis William Wordsworth and Annette Vallon p. 21.
32. Prelude IX, 326-334.
33. The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men that change circumstances and that the educator himself needs educating! (Karl Marx Theses on Feuerbach, in Marx-Engels Selected Works Moscow 1968, p. 28).

34. John Milton The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth Penguin edition (Selected Prose) 194 p. 340
35. James Harrington Oceana 1656. Harrington's mighty Assemblies were dismissed by Milton as 'troublesom and chargeable' and 'urweildie with thir own bulk' op. cit. p. 344
36. Milton op. cit. p. 343
37. Ibid. p. 344
38. Ibid. pp 344-345
39. His later letters indicate an admiration for the English Republicans. And his later poems, particularly the sonnets in support of the war against Napoleon, invoke Milton's name and reputation as aids to the English crusade against France. By the time of his death Wordsworth's library contained a handsome collection of seventeenth century political writings.
40. Prelude IX 311-312
41. See An Evening Walk lines 241-300 (1793 version)
42. e.g. 'Tho' Liberty shall soon, indignant, raise
Red on his hills his beacon's earnest blaze'
Descriptive Sketches 774-775 (1793 version)
43. Prelude IX 518-524
44. Herbert Read Wordsworth London 1930 p. 71
45. C. Wordsworth Memoirs of William Wordsworth London 1851
46. Read op. cit. p. 77-78. Read repeats the legend (originating in Christopher Wordsworth's Memoirs) of an intimate connection between Wordsworth and Girondin leader, Brissot de Warville.
47. Indeed in late 1792 it was the Girondins who seemed bent on crushing the Montagnards. The Girondins were dominant in the Convention, and launched a series of bitter attacks on Robespierre and Danton: it was this deliberately inflammatory policy of the Girondins, Soboul argues, that created the chasm between Gironde and Montagne (Soboul op. cit. pp 273-278). In fact, Girondin aggressiveness would eventually work against Brissot and his group, since it alienated a substantial group of deputies in the Convention, and thus weakened the Girondin's political position in that they could no longer count on a majority. But the implications of this were certainly not clear by the end of 1792.
48. Barron Field Memoirs of Wordsworth edited by Geoffrey Little Sydney 1975 p. 26

49. Read op. cit. pp 77-78
50. Dorothy to Jane Pollard, 16 February 1793 Early Letters p. 84
51. However all correspondence relating to the subject appear to have been destroyed. (George Wilbur Meyer Wordsworth's Formative Years London 1943 pp 27-28). After his death, Wordsworth's family and friends were evidently very thorough in their determination to preserve the Victorian image of the pure and austere poet.
52. Wordsworth to Matthews, May 23 1794. Early Letters p. 117
53. Annotations to Watson K. 383-396
54. Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff An Address to the People of Great Britain London 1798 pp 32-33
55. Gilbert Wakefield A Reply to some parts of the Bishop of Llandaff's Address to the People of Great Britain 3rd edition London 1798 p. 3
56. Ibid. p. 28
57. Annotations to Watson K. 383
58. Appendix to Bishop Watson's Sermon reprinted in The Prose Works of William Wordsworth edited by Alexander B. Grosart London 1876 Vol 1 p. 28
59. Ibid. p. 25
60. Ibid. p. 26
61. Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff in Prose Works I p. 6
62. Ibid. p. 14
63. St. Just's speech of 13 November 1792, quoted Soboul op. cit. p. 283
64. Prose Works I p. 4
65. See Edward Niles Hooker 'Wordsworth's Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff' in Studies in Philology Vol. 28 1931 p. 523. Hooker argues that Wordsworth is unlikely to have drawn inspiration from Godwin's Political Justice, published in February 1793, if only because of its forbidding price of 3 guineas.
66. Prose Works I p.9
67. Ibid. p. 10
68. Prelude Book IX 124-125
69. Prose Works I p. 6

70. Ibid. p. 19
71. Ibid. pp 22-23
72. See, for instance, Shelley's Sonnet to Wordsworth of 1815, and several passages in Byron's Don Juan, notably in the opening few stanzas where Wordsworth is unfavourably compared to Milton who

deign'd not to belie his soul in songs
 Nor turn his very talent to a crime;
He did not loath the Sire to laud the Son
 But closed the tyrant-hater he begun.

Thinkst thou, could he - the blind old man - arise
 Like Samuel from the grave, to freeze once more
 The blood of monarchs with his prophecies ...
 Would he adore a sultan? he obey
 The intellectual eunuch Castlereagh?

(Don Juan Dedication Stanzas X-XI)

ii) The Retreat from the Revolution

The outbreak of war between England and France greatly depressed Wordsworth - perhaps partly because he intended to return to Annette, and partly because at this stage he still supported the Revolution against its European enemies. A visit to the Isle of Wight in Spring 1793 where he saw the English fleet making ready for war cast him into deeper gloom. This plus a long walk across Salisbury Plain shortly afterwards resulted in the poem published in 1842 under the title Guilt and Sorrow, but initially titled Salisbury Plain. The political stance of Wordsworth in this poem is one of pacifism, and the burden of the work is a denunciation of the horrors of war. Wordsworth attempts to show us the effects of war on two individuals - this treatment is very instructive, and very far removed indeed from Blake's all-embracing visions of war in the Prophetic Books.

The poem is a deeply depressed work - more so in its early drafts than in the later, published revision.⁽¹⁾ It tells of a sailor wandering across the desolate expanse of Salisbury Plain. After incidents of Gothic terror - ghostly voices cry out from Stonehenge, for example - the man discovers a woman, a vagrant, who tells a harrowing story of misfortune. Her father had suffered from some not very well specified form of 'Oppression' which had 'trampled on his tresses grey'.⁽²⁾ She goes to America where her husband, enlisted in the army, dies, as do her three children - within the space of a year. Homeless and friendless she returns to England where she becomes a vagrant.

The poem's enraged pacifism is not conveyed at all well. Wordsworth's

attempts to conjure up the carnage of war are very clumsy:

The mine's dread earthquake, the bomb's thunder stroke,
 Dire faces half betrayed through clouds of smoke,
 The midnight flames in thundering deluge spread,
 The stormed town's expiring shriek that woke
 Far round the grisly phantoms of the dead,
 And pale with ghastly light the victor's human head. (3)

The politics of the poem extend no further than this. After the female vagrant's tale is told, Wordsworth addresses himself rhetorically to worldly powers:

Say, rulers of the nations, from the sword
 Can ought but murder pain and tears proceed?
 Oh, what can war but endless war still breed?

The poem's first draft ends optimistically with an appeal to

Heroes of truth, pursue your march, uprear
 The oppressor's dungeon from its deepest base;
 High o'er the towers of Pride undaunted rear
 Resistless in your might th' Herculean mace
 Of Reason, let foul Error's monstrous race
 Dragged from their dens start at the light with pain (4)
 And die!

Both politically and stylistically this represents no advance on Descriptive Sketches: abstractions - heroes of Truth, towers of Pride, Reason, Error - clutter up the lines expressing sentiments that would be common to the entire political spectrum from Charles James Fox leftwards.

The second draft, renamed Adventures on Salisbury Plain, is rather different. The optimistic final stanzas disappear, and everything is done to make the tale blacker and gloomier. The wandering sailor is given a history: he was pressganged into a war (presumably the American War, although this is not precisely stated), and when he returned home found himself defrauded of his possessions. He met a traveller whom he robbed and killed; he then fled and also became a vagrant. At the

end of the poem a sick woman is discovered who turns out to be the Sailor's wife: she and her children have been forced to take to the road because of her husband's crime. She dies in the Sailor's arms: he gives himself up, confesses the murder and is hanged. (5)

The poem's social context remains one of pacifism - war is now at the root of the ruined lives of not one, but two individuals. Critics tend to read this poem as an indictment of late eighteenth century society. Indeed it is, but in a limited sense - limited because Wordsworth could not identify the underlying conflicts of which wars are the most overt expression. War becomes an evil in itself whose origins remain a mystery.

The stress on the isolated individual and his or her suffering that we see in Adventures on Salisbury Plain is something that recurs again and again in Wordsworth's output. Oppression is never seen as collective; and therefore neither is resistance. Indeed usually there is no resistance: Wordsworth's characters, like the Sailor and the female vagrant, are broken - the only forms of resistance they know are flight and wandering. They are passive. They do not act, but are acted on: the vagrant has done nothing but suffer throughout her life, and the sailor's only actions are the murder which sets him wandering (an act which took place years before the events narrated in the poem), and his final surrender. It is doubtful if this can really be counted as an action: indeed, it clearly fits into the patterns of acquiescence and passivity so usual in Wordsworthian characters.

We shall meet this again in Lyrical Ballads. Suffice it to say here that the apparent inability of Wordsworth's characters to fight back, and the

resulting lack of political perspective, should be related to the poet's own circumstances. He was never associated with anything that could claim to be a mass movement. He was quite isolated from popular classes - artisans, labourers, small masters, who were the backbone of the plebeian societies. His associates were almost all from strata much nearer the ruling bloc. His politics are very much those of a spectator rather than a participant. Hence his inability to portray figures whose suffering does not break them, but rather drives them to resist.

Throughout the period 1793-95 Wordsworth's political opinions only really surfaced in the form of letters, especially in correspondence with his friend Matthews. His family knew of his anti-war position and his general antagonism to the Pitt administration, and his brother Richard urged caution on him. He need not have worried: as Dorothy wrote - 'I think I can answer for William's caution about expressing his political opinions. He is very cautious and seems well aware of the dangers of a contrary conduct'.⁽⁶⁾

Wordsworth detailed his political opinions when writing to Matthews: the two men were thinking of publishing a magazine to be called, at Wordsworth's suggestion, The Philanthropist. In discussing the scheme Wordsworth wrote:

I solemnly affirm that in no writings of mine will I ever admit of any sentiment which can have the least tendency to induce my readers to suppose that the doctrines which are now enforced by banishment, imprisonment etc. etc. are other than pregnant with every species of misery. You know perhaps already that I am of that odious class of men called democrats and of that class I shall forever continue. In a work like that of which we are speaking, it will be impossible (and indeed it would render our publications worthless, were we to attempt it) not to inculcate principles of government and forms of social order of one kind or another. I have therefore thought it proper to say this much in order that if your sentiments - or those of your co-adjutor - are

dissimilar to mine, we may drop the scheme at once. Besides essays on Morals and Politics, I think I could communicate critical remarks upon Poetry etc. etc., upon the arts of Painting, Gardening and other subjects of amusement. But I should principally wish our attention to be fixed upon Life and Manners and to make our publication a vehicle of sound and exalted Morality. (7)

This stress on Morality may well be a reflection of Wordsworth's acquaintance with London dissenting circles - but we shall return to that question later.

In June 1794, after an encouraging reply from Matthews, Wordsworth outlined his current political creed:

I disapprove of monarchical or aristocratical governments, however modified. Hereditary distinctions and privileged orders of every species, I think must necessarily counteract the progress of human improvement: hence it follows that I am not among the admirers of the British constitution. (8)

According to Wordsworth there are two factors capable of subverting this constitution:

first, the infatuation, profligacy and extravagance of men in power: and secondly the changes of opinion respecting matters of government, which within these few years have rapidly taken place in the minds of speculative men. (9)

To the latter Wordsworth 'would give every additional energy in my power'. But Wordsworth shrinks back from the prospect of an actual revolution:

The destruction of those Institutions which I condemn appears to be hastening on too rapidly, I recoil from the idea of a revolution: yet if our conduct with reference to both foreign and domestic policy continues such as it has been for the past two years, how is that dreadful event to be averted? Aware of the difficulty of this it seems to me that a writer who had the welfare of mankind at heart should call forth his best exertions to convince the people that they can only be preserved from a convulsion by economy in the administration of the public purse and a gradual and constant reform of those abuses which, if left to themselves, may grow to such a height as to render even a Revolution desirable. (10)

Wordsworth here clearly adopts a gradualist position: even though he has declared himself no admirer of the British constitution, this political

perspective is not significantly different from that of groupings such as Grey's Association of the Friends of the People - a perspective of reform of abuses in a structure which is basically sound. Clearly Wordsworth is no revolutionary: quite explicitly he writes of revolution as a 'dreadful event' which is 'to be averted'. The agents of change are found in 'the minds of speculative men' whose opinions regarding government are rapidly changing. We are back to 'the virtuous few' again: the masses do not have a role to play in the political process as envisaged by Wordsworth.

For Wordsworth ordinary working men were benighted creatures who had to be enlightened. This was another task which The Philanthropist could undertake:

I know that the multitude walk in darkness. I would put into each man's hand a lantern to guide him, and not have him set out on his journey depending for illumination on abortive flashes of lightning, or the coruscations of transitory meteors. (11)

Wisdom is to be brought to the masses from above. The political theory here is intensely elitist - the masses are seen as passive recipients of virtue; their own activity and experience is not taken into account.

Meanwhile Wordsworth was retreating from the French Revolution. His reaction to events in France is what could have been expected from a supporter of the Girondins. Unable to appreciate St. Just's remark 'They who make but half a revolution dig their own graves', he detested the Montagnard dictatorship and the Revolutionary Government of Year II. The eruption of the Parisian popular classes onto the stage which characterized the rise and consolidation of Montagnard power was not understood - indeed could not be understood - by someone of Wordsworth's political beliefs, for whom the masses were not active participants in

history, but were to be led and educated by 'the virtuous few'. Montagnard rule therefore seemed to Wordsworth no more than a bloodthirsty chaos. In The Prelude the Montagnards are 'the Men who for their desperate ends/Had plucked up Mercy by the roots'.⁽¹²⁾ And the Terror is described as follows:

And thus beset with Foes on every side
 The goaded Land waxed mad; the crimes of few
 Spread into the madness of the many, blasts
 From Hell came sanctified like airs from Heaven;
 Domestic carnage now filled all the year
 With Feast-days ...
 Friends, enemies, of all parties, ages, ranks,
 Head after head, and never heads enough
 For those that bade them fall; they found their joy,
 They made it, ever thirsty as a Child,
 If light desires of innocent little ones
 May with such heinous appetites be matched ⁽¹³⁾
 etc. etc.

Such lines can only be described as hysterical. They bear little relation to events in France, and much more to how the Government wanted those events to be seen in Britain. The sans-culottes of Paris, the original mass base for Montagnard power, receive one derisory passing mention - 'the madness of the many'. The only redeeming feature that distinguishes this from the views of ideologues such as Burke is Wordsworth's realisation that the Montagnards had every right to defend France from the hostile powers of Europe. But he failed to grasp that this was precisely the task that the Girondins had proved incapable of carrying out, and that a Girondin-led France would have meant the collapse of the Revolution, with an ensuing Royalist restoration producing a bloodbath to make the Montagnard Terror look like a pinprick.

The death of Robespierre pleased Wordsworth immensely:

Great was my glee of spirit, great my joy,
 In vengeance and eternal justice, thus
 Made manifest

.....behold!
 They who with clumsy desperation brought
 Rivers of Blood and preached that nothing else
 Could cleanse the Augean Stable, by the might
 Of their own helper have been swept away; (14)
 Their madness is declared and visible.

Evidently Wordsworth either did not know, or did not stop to consider, that the coup of 9 Thermidor was largely the work of work of some of the most bloodthirsty terrorists of all - Fouché and Collot d'Herbois in particular - nor did he bother to compare the rampant corruption of the regime established after the fall of the Montagnards with Robespierre's own incorruptibility, nor were the social policies followed before and after Thermidor of any interest to him.

But if he was overjoyed by Thermidor, the same cannot be said for the victories of the revolutionary armies in 1794-95; apparently as long as the French were largely on the defensive they were fighting for 'Liberty'; but as soon as they took to the offensive the war underwent a miraculous change of character:

And now, become oppressors in their turn,
 Frenchmen had changed a war of self-defence
 For one of conquest, losing sight of all (15)
 Which they had struggled for.

Wordsworth's temporary elation at the fall of Robespierre gave way to gloom and depression. As yet, though disillusioned with France, he was no supporter of the Government. That change would not take place until 1803. The steady introduction of repressive legislation by Pitt's administration repelled him:

I cannot, in conscience and in principle, abet in the smallest degree the measures pursued by the present ministry. They are already so deeply advanced in iniquity that like Macbeth they (16)
 cannot retreat.

Together with Matthews he rejoiced at the acquittal of Hardy, Horne Tooke and Thelwall, though not surprisingly the cautious Wordsworth expressed considerable suspicion of the flamboyant Horne Tooke:

I cannot say, however, that I entirely approve of the character of Tooke. He seems to me to be a man much swayed by personal considerations, one who has courted persecution, and that rather from a wish to vex powerful individuals, than to be an instrument of public good. (17)

From this, as from every other aspect of his life in this period, it is clear that Wordsworth was neither in contact nor in sympathy with the popular societies. There is no record of him having met any known member of the societies until John Thelwall's visit to Somerset in 1797. His attitude to the treason trials is close to that of Grey, who feared that all opposition, even the most moderate, would be threatened with extinction, should Hardy be found guilty.

In the same letter Wordsworth reflected that:

The late occurrences in every point of view are interesting to humanity. They will abate the insolence and presumption of the aristocracy by showing it that neither the violence nor the art of power can crush even an unfriended individual, though engaged in the propagation of doctrines confessedly unpalatable to privilege; and they will force upon the most prejudiced the conclusion that there is some reason in the language of reformers. Furthermore, they will convince bigoted enemies to our present Constitution that it contains parts upon which too high a value cannot be set. To every class of men occupied in the correction of abuses it must be an animating reflection that their exertions so long as they are temperate, will be countenanced and protected by the good sense of the country. (18)

Wordsworth should perhaps have asked himself why 'the good sense of the country' had not made itself felt in the case of Maurice Margarot, Joseph Gerrald and the other radicals arrested at the British Convention and sentenced to transportation. Did 'the good sense of the country'

stop at the border, perhaps? More importantly, this letter confirms Wordsworth's gradualism - to be 'countenanced and protected' the 'exertions' of radicals must be 'temperate'. This goes alongside a declaration of support for the Constitution, which only a few months previously Wordsworth had dissociated himself from - 'I am not among the admirers of the British Constitution' he had written then. There was no real contradiction, however, Wordsworth had merely brought his expression into line with his underlying political thought which was gradualist and moderate.

By late 1794 plans for The Philanthropist had collapsed, and Wordsworth was asking Matthews to find him work on an opposition newspaper.⁽¹⁹⁾ Matthews may have written for Daniel Stuart, an opposition publisher and an active member of the Society of the Friends of the People. In 1795 Stuart bought the Morning Post - and Wordsworth, possibly through Matthews, developed a relation with this paper. He started sending poetry to the Morning Post in 1797, and later, in 1808, he sent it his pamphlet on the Convention of Cintra.

But Wordsworth never became a reporter: in the same letter as he pleaded for a job, he provided a battery of excuses for not accepting one. He seemed to dread the thought of working as a parliamentary reporter, claiming that he possessed neither 'strength of memory, quickness of penmanship, nor rapidity of composition' and that he was 'subject to nervous headaches'.⁽²⁰⁾ With these negative qualifications it is not surprising that he was not employed.

It is possible at this stage to draw some conclusions about Wordsworth's place in 1790s radicalism. First, he was never a political activist, and

appears never to have belonged to a political organisation. His place within radicalism must therefore be assessed by what he wrote. We have already seen from his correspondence and his poetry how the political ideas he held occupied an elitist framework, that for him the virtuous few educate the ignorant many. There is no concept of mass politics here, and in fact a revulsion from the most evident form of mass politics of the time - events in France in 1792-94. These are clearly attitudes that set Wordsworth apart from the popular societies. They line him up instead with what I have described as 'respectable' radicalism.

A number of links can be drawn between Wordsworth and figures inside the respectable radical camp. First, there is the Cambridge connection. Several of Wordsworth's mid-1790s acquaintances had also been at that university more or less contemporaneously with Wordsworth. One of these was Francis Wrangham, an Anglican clergyman. Wrangham appears to have had a gut hatred of corruption, and a sense of humour that could on occasion land him in difficulty. Wrangham is said to have composed an epigram on one Cambridge notary, Dr Jowett - in Coleridge's words 'a man of small stature' - which read:

This little garden little Jowett made
 And fenced it with a little palisade
 A little taste hath little Jowett
 This little garden doth a little show it. (21)

In Spring 1795 Wrangham and Wordsworth began to collaborate in writing a satire based on Juvenal. It is essentially an angry, anti-aristocratic piece, written in bad rhyming couplets. A few lines will give the flavour of the work:

Heavens! Who sees majesty in George's face?
 Or looks at Norfolk and can dream of grace?
 What has this blessed Earth to do with shame
 If Excellence was ever Eden's name?

Insatiate Charlotte's tears and Charlotte's smile⁽²²⁾
 Shall ape the scaly regent of the Nile.

The two men worked sporadically on this satire for about 18 months.

Politically the piece is shallow: it shows a disgust at leading political figures, but nothing more: it contains nothing that would have disturbed a wide range of radical dissent, or many members of the Association of the Friends of the People.

It was never finished: Wordsworth's final contribution to the satire was sent off the Wrangham in February 1797. It still includes attacks on the aristocracy e.g.:

The bastard⁽²³⁾ gave some favorite stocks of peers⁽²⁴⁾
 Patents of manhood for eight hundred years.

Poetically the venture was worthless: and Wordsworth, not normally inclined to finding faults in his own work, had to admit that 'What I have sent you is some of it sad stuff'.⁽²⁵⁾

Two of Wordsworth's other acquaintances at this time, James Losh and John Tweddell, were also ex-Cambridge. Both were members of the Association of the Friends of the People, and Losh was reputed to have helped draft the motion which Grey put before the House of Commons in May 1793. Losh's correspondence with Wordsworth included sending him bundles of pamphlets.

These connections lead to further ones. Losh was a Unitarian and acquainted with the Cambridge Unitarian cause celebre, William Frend.

For writing the pamphlet Peace and Union recommended to the Associated Bodies of Republicans and Anti-Republicans, Frend was expelled from

Jesus College, and then, after an arraignment before the Senate, from the University itself. The pamphlet was pacifist in tone, and it attack-

ed the role of the established church. It pointed out that the concept of an alliance between church and state was merely fictional when, as in Britain, the church was an integral part of the state.⁽²⁶⁾ It also argued for an amelioration of the lot of the poor:

If a labouring man does not receive sufficient wages to enable him to bring up a numerous family, and to lay something by for his support in the decline of life, it is but common justice that they, who have been enriched by his labours, should, when his strength is gone, make his latter days cheerful and comfortable. So far from diminishing the poor rates, there seems, unless the price of labour should be considerably increased, sufficient reason for increasing them. (27)

Frend had political concepts of his own, such as the notion of a highly complex system of referenda via tythings, hundreds and thousands,⁽²⁸⁾ the utopian and impractical nature of which indicate his isolation from the main streams of radical thought. He had substantial student support at Cambridge,⁽²⁹⁾ apparently on a basis of hostility to the prevailing wind of reaction that saw dangerous Jacobins in the mildest of liberals.

Moving from Cambridge to London in 1793, Frend associated with respectable radical circles, via his friend and fellow Unitarian, George Dyer. Dyer was an amateur poet, albeit an unsuccessful one - witness the epigram from Crabb Robinson's friend, Reid:

The world all say, my gentle Dyer,
Thy odes do very much want fire,
Repair the fault, my gentle Dyer,
And throw thy odes into the fire. (30)

Dyer graduated from Emmanuel College, Cambridge in 1778, and moved to a Unitarian position under the influence of the Rev. Robert Robinson. In 1780 Robinson set up a Cambridge branch of the Society for Constitutional Information, a project of which Dyer seems to have approved, though he never joined it. He was acquainted with Earl Stanhope, the notable Left

Whig, to whom he was for a time a tutor. On his death in 1816 Stanhope was to make Dyer one of his executors - Dyer also inherited a substantial legacy from Stanhope.

He associated with a number of other prominent dissenting figures including Priestley, Gilbert Wakefield, Mrs. Barbauld, John Jebb, Robert Hall, Capel Lofft, and, of course, Frenn. At one point schemes were afoot - moved by Lofft and Robinson - to set up a dissenters' college at Cambridge at which Dyer should be a tutor, but Robinson's death in 1790 torpedoed this plan. (31)

One of Dyer's prime concerns was with the discrimination suffered by Dissenters: this was the main burden of his work An Inquiry into the Nature of Subscription to the Thirty Nine Articles. From essentially a religious position he deduces opposition to monarchy:

All monarchies properly so called originated in violence and corruption and their continuance depends on the same principles which gave them their existence. (32)

Clear in this pamphlet is the influence of Paine. Dyer states that he was considering writing a reply to Burke's Reflections - but that Paine, Mackintosh and others have already done a perfectly adequate job. At one point Dyer advocates the distribution of cheap pamphlets, including Rights of Man, among the poor. (33)

This is the highpoint of Dyer's radicalism. With the onset of war and repression, he beat a hasty retreat. By 1795, when he was acquainted with Wordsworth, his position had changed considerably. His A Dissertation on the Theory and Practice of Benevolence published in that year steers carefully away from overt radical politics: instead institutions through which 'benevolence' can be exercised - charity schools, workhouses and

the like - must be the channels whereby inequities in society are corrected. Inequality is now seen as something inseparable from man's existence as a social being, and benevolence and charity can smooth out the worst excesses. This marks a huge retraction from the position Dyer had held two years previously.

Wordsworth was present at a tea at Frennd's on February 27, 1795, together with Dyer, Losh, Tweddell and William Godwin. This appears to have been Wordsworth's first encounter with Godwin, though he may well have read Political Justice earlier. Wordsworth was obviously very impressed with Godwin, because he called on him the following morning, on three subsequent occasions in March and two in April.⁽³⁴⁾ After a short absence from the capital Godwin renewed the acquaintance with Wordsworth in July.

Godwin had a remarkable talent for making initial strongly favourable impressions on young intellectuals of his day. Coleridge wrote an effusive sonnet To William Godwin, author of Political Justice, while Hazlitt, in a much quoted remark, gave this retrospective account of Godwin's fame:

No work in our time gave such a blow to the philosophical mind of the country as the celebrated Enquiry Concerning Political Justice. Tom Paine was considered for the time as a Tom Fool to him, Paley an old woman, Edmund Burke a flashy sophist. Truth, moral truth, it was supposed, had here taken up its abode; and these were the oracles of thought.

Hazlitt went on, though without revealing a source for the anecdote, to quote Wordsworth:

'Throw away your books of chemistry', said Wordsworth to a young man, a student in the Temple, 'and read Godwin on necessity'.⁽³⁵⁾

At a vantage point one and three quarter centuries later, it is difficult

to understand why Godwin should have made this sort of impression. For his work now has little more than curiosity value: an interesting oddity amongst English political literature. It is strong on logic, of a dry, mathematical, reductive kind, but very weak on reality. It is almost wholly abstract, omitting all consideration of real eighteenth century political structures. Its utopianism and manifest impracticability often reach ludicrous proportions. It is shallow, and not a little pretentious - conclusions that many of Godwin's early admirers, including Wordsworth and Coleridge, soon reached.

Godwin's political stance is frequently described as 'anarchist', a term which, unless considerable caution is employed, is liable to lead to confusion. Godwin's most recent editor sees him as a fountainhead for later anarchist thought, going so far as to equate the relationship between Political Justice and anarchism, with that between Locke's Second Treatise on Civil Government and liberalism or between The Communist Manifesto and socialism. (36) But it is most unlikely that nineteenth century anarchists like Bakunin or Kropotkin had ever heard of Godwin, let alone read him; and where anarchism has developed into a mass movement as in Italy or Spain earlier this century, it has characteristically taken the form of anarcho-syndicalism, employing methods and tactics that would have been anathema to Godwin.

For although Godwin agrees with later anarchists on the innate evil of all states and governments, he parts company with them on almost everything else. He is opposed to any kind of common action: his touchstone is the unique, isolated individual who is (or should be) motivated by his own private judgement and nothing else. There is certainly no common

ground with anarcho-syndicalism in statements such as this:

Man is a species of being whose excellence depends upon his individuality; and who can be neither great nor wise but in proportion as he is independent. (37)

Godwin's attacks on authority are mounted in the name of the individual. A schema is drawn up whereby society is merely an agglomeration of individuals who take decisions by consulting their 'reason': law, government and authority stand in the way of this free and untrammelled exercise of reason, and are therefore evils. Godwin pushes this line of argument to impossible extremes. Anything which impinges on the splendid isolation of the individual is condemned. The Godwinian universe has no place for united action, even of the most innocuous nature:

Everything that is usually understood by the term co-operation is, in some degree, an evil. A man in solitude is obliged to sacrifice or postpone the execution of his best thoughts, in compliance with his necessities, or his frailties. How many admirable designs have perished in the conception, by means of this circumstance? It is still worse when a man is also obliged to consult the convenience of others. If I expected to eat or to work in conjunction with my neighbour, it must be either at a time most convenient to me, or to him, or to neither of us. We cannot be reduced to a clockwork uniformity.

Hence it follows that all supererogatory co-operation is carefully to be avoided, common labour and common meals. (38)

Mechanisation is seen by Godwin as something that will blessedly release man from the necessity of working with other people. Music comes under attack, as does theatre:

Shall we have theatrical exhibitions? This seems to include an absurd and vicious co-operation. It may be doubted whether men will hereafter come forward in every mode formally to repeat words and ideas that are not their own? It may be doubted whether any musical performer will habitually execute the composition of others. We yield supinely to the superior merits of our predecessors, because we are accustomed to indulge the inactivity of our faculties. All formal repetition of other men's ideas seems to be a scheme for imprisoning, for so long a time, the operations of our own mind. (39)

Quite logically, political co-operation is out of the question for Godwin. It is education in his schema which determines social development, not political action: 'In proportion as weakness and ignorance shall diminish, the basis of government will also decay'.⁽⁴⁰⁾ The wise (such as Godwin himself) enlighten the many, and thus, gradually, the stateless society is brought into being. The many are not expected to take matters into their own hands: that would be 'tumult and violence' which Godwin abhors. In fact Godwin is at some pains to stress that political education as he conceives of it will not lead to violence:

As it is only in a gradual manner that the public can be instructed, a violent explosion in the community is by no means the most likely to happen as the result of instruction. Revolutions are the produce of passion, not of sober and tranquil reason. (41)

Godwin's rejection of revolution is almost as categorical as Burke's:

Under this view of the subject then it appears that revolutions instead of being truly beneficial to mankind, answer no other purpose than that of marring the salutary and uninterrupted progress which might be expected to attend upon political truth and social improvement. They disturb the harmony of intellectual nature. They propose to give us something for which we are not prepared, and which we cannot effectually use. They suspend the wholesome advancement of science, and confound the process of nature and reason. (42)

But Godwin notes gloomily that revolutions (violence included) tend to accompany major changes in social systems. He goes on to advise politicians to do their utmost to stave off revolution:

The duty, therefore, of the true politician is to postpone revolution if he cannot entirely prevent it. It is reasonable to believe that the later it occurs, and the more generally ideas of political good and evil are previously understood, the shorter, and the less deplorable, will be the mishaps dependent on revolution. (43)

Most later anarchists - Bakunin, Italian anarcho-syndicalism, the Spanish CGT - fall quite clearly within the socialist tradition. Godwin, however, is part of a quite different political lineage. His insistence

on the supremacy of the individual, and on gradualism in change, place him squarely within the traditions of liberalism. Indeed Godwin's anarchism is merely the liberal exaltation of the individual pushed to extremes.

Godwin has sometimes been described as the most radical of all 1790s thinkers, since only he advocated the abolition of government. But that advocacy was always on a theoretical level and always coupled with a rejection of any concrete political action. His scorn for political societies and for 'reformers' in general, his insistence that change can only come through individual enlightenment, and his opinions on revolution, clearly remove him from the orbit of Plebeian radicalism. The impotent radicalism of Godwin belongs in the respectable camp - and even then, is on its right-wing.

The activists in the LCS and other popular societies show no sign of having read Godwin. Political Justice is not mentioned in their correspondence, and its ideas seem to have made no impact on them whatsoever. This may have had something to do with its price - selling at three guineas, Political Justice was unlikely to reach a wide audience among the lower orders.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Add to that its pedantic and laboured style - poles removed from Rights of Man - and its great length, and the likelihood of a mass readership for it shrank to zero.

Godwin associated with certain of the radical leaders, including Thelwall - but this particular association was rudely broken in 1795, the year of Wordsworth's acquaintance with Godwin, with the publication of Considerations on Lord Grenville's and Mr. Pitt's Bills (that is, the Two Acts).

Godwin signed this work 'a lover of order', and although he rejected the content of both bills, of far greater importance was this pamphlet's sweeping attacks on radical agitation - particularly that of Thelwall. The attack is couched in language similar to that used by the liberal reformers of the Society of the Friends of the People:

Do you tell me 'that there are great abuses in society'? No wise man will dispute it. But these abuses are woven into the very web and substance of society; and he that touches them with a sacriligious hand will run the risk of producing the widest and most tremendous ruin. Do you tell me 'that these abuses ought to be corrected'? Every impartial friend to mankind will confirm your decision with his suffrage and lend his hand to the salutary work.

Yes, my countrymen, abuses ought to be corrected. The effort to correct them ought to be incessant. But they must be corrected with judgement and deliberation. We must not, for the sake of a problematical future, part with the advantages we already possess; (45) we must not destroy faster than we rear.

Godwin attacked the LCS which, he claimed, was modelled on the Jacobin Club in its language, actions and practice of forming 'lesser affiliated societies in all parts of the island'. Its activity was 'impetuous and ardent' and it lacked 'the ballast ... of property': this is a retreat from one of the tenets of Political Justice where Godwin had denounced property. The LCS had gathered 'immense multitudes' together and 'The speeches delivered at these meetings, and the resolutions adopted, have not always been of the most temperate kind'. Such gatherings are in themselves alarming, according to Godwin, especially as no 'persons of eminence, distinction and importance in the country' have been present. Out of all this Godwin produces a remarkable defence of at least some of the Government's activities:

From this delineation of the LCS, it follows that the government of this country would be unpardonable, if it did not yield a very (46) careful and uninterrupted attention to their operation.

As for Thelwall, he is denounced in the pamphlet as a demagogue. The

whole practice of political lectures is severely condemned by Godwin. Individual enlightenment is the answer and not mass meetings: 'It is not, for the most part, in crowded audiences, that truth is successfully investigated, and the principle of science luminously conceived'. This leads to a clear restatement of Godwin's gradualism: for him, reforms must be carried on by slow, almost insensible steps, and by just degrees. The public mind must first be enlightened; the public sentiment must next become unequivocal; there must be a grand and magnificent harmony, expanding itself through the whole community. (47)

After this, Godwin's criticism of the Bills that are the subject of his pamphlet has a ring that is less than convincing. A scholastic piece of even-handed justice appears at the end of the work:

The London Corresponding Society has been thoughtlessly pursuing a conduct, which was calculated sooner or later to bring on scenes of confusion. They have been to blame. But is scarcely possible for a serious enquirer to pronounce, that the King's ministers, and the opulent and titled alarmists are not much more to blame. (48)

With this sort of stuff, it is hardly surprising that Thelwall, and other radicals, reacted with anger and contempt to Godwin's pamphlet.

Now some of Godwin's ideas were already held by Wordsworth in 1794, (49) as his correspondence with Matthews shows. There is the same stress on enlightenment: the virtuous few educating the benighted many. 'I know that the multitude walk in darkness', Wordsworth had written. 'I would put into each man's hand a lantern to guide him'. (50) There is also a common shrinking from violence, and Wordsworth had recoiled 'from the idea of a revolution'. Gradualism and elitism, then, mark the politics of both men.

According to many critics Godwin converted Wordsworth to necessitarianism, which brought on a deep spiritual crisis and a mood of despair (in

which Adventures on Salisbury Plain - the second draft of that poem - was written). In The Prelude this period under the spell of Godwin is seen as a ghastly aberration, a sin against 'feeling' and against 'nature'. At this time he

took the knife in hand
And stopping not at parts less sensitive
Endeavoured with my best skill to probe
The living body of society
Even to the heart; I pushed without remorse.
My speculation forward; yea, set foot
On Nature's holiest places. (51)

Although this passage is deliberately obscure and although the phrases about 'Nature's holiest places' do not mean very much, it is clear that Wordsworth sees a sharp distinction between the cold and analytical approach of Godwin dominated by an impersonal Necessity, and his own sensuous response to the natural world.

Godwin mixed with moderate Dissenting circles, and the Rev. Joseph Fawcett, one of the most noted of dissenting preachers was a close associate of Godwin. Wordsworth's acquaintance with Fawcett began through attending his sermons during his 1793 stay in London; he may also have come to know Fawcett through Joseph Johnson, who published Fawcett's pacifist poem The Art of War in 1795. Later in his life, when he was anxious to backpedal on earlier radical associations, Wordsworth took to slandering Fawcett, and even accepted as truth the malicious falsehood that Fawcett had drunk himself to death. The unpleasant character of the Solitary in The Excursion is based on Fawcett, and in his notes to the poem Wordsworth claims that Fawcett's Christianity:

was probably never very deeply rooted, and, like many others in those times of like showy talents, he had not the strength of character to withstand the effects of the French Revolution, and of the wild and lax opinion which had done so much towards producing it, and far more in carrying it forward in its extremes. (52)

An examination of Fawcett's work, however, reveals politics very close to those of Wordsworth - the two men shared, in 1795, a hatred for war, and a lack of understanding of any form of mass politics. Fawcett's Art of War is a very high-pitched poem written in the bad blank verse typical of the late eighteenth century. Like Wordsworth's very early pieces it is flooded with bland personifications. Thus we can find 'festive Joy', 'languid Dejection', 'the brow of Care', 'melancholy Love', 'the frown of Rage', 'melting Pity's cheek', and 'Envy's hiss' all in the space of seven lines!⁽⁵³⁾ After much sarcasm, some of it very clumsy, and prolonged attacks on the horrors of war, the poem ends with an appeal to Reason:

How long shall it be thus? - Say, Reason, say,
 When shall thy long minority expire?
 When shall thy dilatory kingdom come?
 Haste, royal infant, to thy manhood spring!
 Almighty, when mature, to rule mankind
 Thine is the majesty, the victory thine,
 For thee reserv'd, o'er all the wrongs of life
to thee
 All might belongs: haste, reach thy ripen'd years!
 Mount thine immortal throne and sway the world! (54)

Thus it is not the actions of real men that are agents of history, but the grandest abstraction of them all, 'Reason', in a mysterious intervention, the mechanisms of which cannot be explained.

The influence of Godwin is strong in The Art of War; we find the same belief in the perfectibility of mankind through the efficacy of individual reason. The naive belief in the power of education and enlightenment, unaided by any cruder weapon, is shared by the two men. Godwinian strains are also evident in some of Fawcett's sermons, such as Christianity Vindicated as not particularly inculcating Friendship and Patriotism. To the latter two qualities, Fawcett posed a generalised benevolence,

based, once again, on the omnipotence of individual reason.

In a later volume of poems we find An Ode on the Commemoration of the French Revolution in the Champ de Mars, July 14, 1792, which has the following disclaimer attached to it:

The reader is desired, in perusing the following ode, to keep the date of it in his eye; that he may not imagine that that unmoderated admiration of the French Revolution, which runs through it, extends to any of the transactions, from the September following to the death of Robespierre, by which the cause of liberty in France has since been disgraced. He is requested to remember, that it was written at a moment when the subject of its praise was as yet a fair and unspotted event: when the friend of humanity contemplated in the French nation, the beautiful spectacle of an innumerable and unanimous family, exulting in the new possession of liberty, calmly resolving to relinquish it but with life, and adorning the grandeur of heroic resolution with the amiable smiles of fraternal amity: and as little suspected that its honour was to be stained by members of its own, as that its cause was to be opposed by a people, which had long insulted the slavery of Europe by the loudness of its boasts of freedom. (55)

This is a very clear expression of a respectable radical's view of France. The Revolution is acceptable in its initial stages: from the downfall of the monarchy onwards however it is to be abjured, with nothing to be said in favour of the Revolutionary Government of Year II. What is important for Fawcett in the early years of the Revolution is not the question of power and who holds it, but much vaguer and more nebulous concepts such as that of 'an innumerable and unanimous family' (which was, of course, far from unanimous as events were bloodily to show). This moralistic approach to French events is combined with disapproval of England's war. On this point Fawcett and Wordsworth are in agreement - though certainly in the former's case this opposition to the war is far more of a moral, pacifist opposition, than a political one. (56)

The Gentleman's Magazine, not noted for friendly attitudes towards reformers, had words of praise for Fawcett for not being as opposed to

the state church and to ceremony as others amongst the dissenters. (57)

Some years later the same journal again praised Fawcett - this time it noted that his preaching attracted to Old Jewry 'the largest and most genteel audience that ever assembled in a dissenting place of worship'. (58)

These then are some of Wordsworth's political acquaintances of the mid-1790s. They are basically cast in a respectable mould, hold no brief for Jacobinism, have moved rightwards in the period 1792-95, and are not involved in the popular societies. The nearest we approach to such involvement is Fawcett's acquaintance with Thelwall, and the fact that Godwin's close friend, the playwright Thomas Holcroft, was in the SCI and was, indeed, arrested in 1794.

Wordsworth's unpublished play The Borderers is normally taken as the artistic by-product of his Godwinian period in which he allegedly exposes the fallacies of Godwinian 'reason' and 'necessity'. He does so less than convincingly. The villain of the piece, Oswald, represents Godwinian politics (and also, as Donald Hayden suggests, (59) almost certainly contains elements of France), but in his apparently motiveless malignity, he derives much more clearly from Shakespeare's Iago than from anything in Godwin. Oswald's involved and eventually successful plot to trick the naive Marmaduke into committing a hideous crime - the murder of the blind old Herbert, who is abandoned on a desolate moor to die - has little connection with Godwin, despite Oswald's spurious invocation of reason. He is clearly corrupt and malicious and intent on making others so; his lying, cheating and general duplicity are impossible to square with Godwin's own political position. Furthermore, the whole concept of retribution that runs throughout the play, and the heavily violent tone,

are quite alien to Godwin.

Whatever Wordsworth may have thought he was writing, then, The Borderers is not a Godwinian (or anti-Godwinian work). In it Godwinian reason only appears as a twisted parody, all too easily knocked down. The more significant aspect of the play, however, is the move away from a social determination for worldly evil. It is not social structures that are indicted in The Borderers, but human nature itself, summed up in Marmaduke's lines:

We are all of one blood, our veins are filled (60)
At the same poisonous fountain.

and in his earlier declaration that 'The world is poisoned at the heart'.⁽⁶¹⁾

To rub the point home, other characters in the play also commit gratuitously evil acts. In spite of her father's explicit injunction to 'bless all mankind',⁽⁶²⁾ Idonea curses Herbert's murderer, who turns out to be her lover, Marmaduke. A beggar-woman willingly allows herself to be used by Oswald in his murderous schemes. A peasant, Eldred, discovers Herbert on the moor - but instead of saving him, becomes frightened and abandons him. There is a systematic blackening of everyone in the play: everyone, from all social classes, from the lecherous Lord Clifford to the peasant Eldred, is fatally flawed. No reforms will change what is wrong, for its roots lie, not in social contradictions, but in a supposedly innate evil. Attempts to change this state of affairs are therefore worse than useless. Those who act only commit further crimes, and spread suffering and death around them.

Implicit in the pessimism of The Borderers is a renunciation, of all reforming activities. The only response to the world's ills is quiescence

- or what in a few years Wordsworth will call 'wise passiveness'. (63)

FOOTNOTES

1. There are two early drafts, Ms. 1 and Ms. 2. Ms. 1 was transcribed by Dorothy into a small quarto notebook at Windy Brow in Spring 1794. The lengthier Ms. 2 was copied by Dorothy as a fair copy into a notebook between 1798 and 1800. But it must have been written prior to November 27, 1795 judging by a letter of that date from Wordsworth to Francis Wrangham.
2. Poetical Works Vol. 1 edited by de Selincourt London 1940 p. 107
3. Ibid. p. 113
4. Ibid. p. 340
5. In the 1842 revision, this is softened, and he is reprieved.
6. Dorothy to Richard Wordsworth May 28, 1794. Early Letters p. 117
7. Wordsworth to Matthews May 23 1794. Early Letters pp 115-116
8. Wordsworth to Matthews June 1794. Early Letters pp 119-123
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid. Wordsworth seems to have become acquainted with Godwin's Political Justice by the time he wrote this letter. At any rate certain passages in the letter seem to betray a recent reading and attempted assimilation of Godwin: e.g. 'I severely condemn all inflammatory addresses to the passions of men, even when it is intended to direct those passions to good purpose!'
12. Prelude X 309-310
13. Prelude X 312-340
14. Prelude X 540-551
15. Prelude X 792-795
16. Wordsworth to Matthews November 7 1794. Early Letters p. 127
17. Wordsworth to Matthews late December 1794. Early Letters p. 129

18. Ibid.
19. Wordsworth to Matthews November 7 1794. Early Letters p. 127
20. Wordsworth to Matthews. Late December 1794. Early Letters p. 129
21. Quoted in a letter of 28 November 1791. Collected Letters of S.T. Coleridge edited by E.L. Griggs Oxford 1956 Vol. 1 p. 19
22. Wordsworth to Wrangham November 20 1795. Early Letters p. 144.
The first two lines quoted were supplied by Southey (to be dismissed by Wordsworth a few months later as 'a coxcomb').
23. I.e. William the Conqueror
24. Wordsworth to Wrangham February 27 1797. Early Letters p. 160
25. Ibid.
26. Frennd Peace and Union Cambridge 1793
27. Ibid. p. 29
28. Ibid. pp 21-22
29. E.g. Students disrupted Frennd's trial before the Senate, clapping him loudly. Coleridge was involved in this, and was particularly noisy in his support for Frennd.
30. Diary, Reminiscences and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson Vol. 1 p. 40
31. M.R. Adams Studies in the Literary Backgrounds of English Radicalism Lancaster, Pennsylvania 1947 pp 232-235
32. Dyer An Inquiry into the Nature of Subscription to the 39 Articles London 1792 p. 152
33. Adams op. cit. pp 240-241
34. March 18, 25 and 31; April 9 and 22
35. William Hazlitt The Spirit of the Age OUP edition 1904 p. 18
36. Isaac Kramisch, editor of the Pelican Classics edition of Political Justice 1976, on page 7 of his Introduction.
37. Enquiry Concerning Political Justice 1976 p. 556
38. Ibid. p. 758
39. Ibid. p. 760

40. Ibid. pp 247-248
41. Ibid. p. 252
42. Ibid. p. 274
43. Ibid. p. 281
44. Pitt is alleged to have argued in the Cabinet that there was no need to suppress Political Justice, precisely because of its high price. Godwin could preach anarchism and sexual liberation as long as he liked - provided such ideas did not go beyond a small coterie, he was unlikely to suffer government wrath.
45. Considerations on Lord Grenville's and Mr. Pitt's Bills concerning Treasonable and Seditious practices and Unlawful Assemblies. By a lover of Order (W. Godwin) London 1795 pp 5-6
46. Ibid. pp 12-15
47. Ibid. p. 17
48. Ibid. p. 81
49. Perhaps as a result of his conversations with Beauclerk: but possibly also through a reading of Godwin (we do not know precisely when Wordsworth read Political Justice. Cf. footnote 11)
50. Wordsworth to Matthews June 1794 Early Letters pp 119-123
51. Prelude X 873-879
52. Wordsworth Poetical Works ed. E. de Selincourt (Oxford 1947) Vol. 5 pp 374-375
53. Fawcett The Art of War London 1795 p. 11
54. Ibid. pp 51-52
55. Fawcett Poems London 1798 p. 166
56. Godwin thought very highly of Fawcett. Mr. Clare, the only moral character in Godwin's novel Caleb Williams was modelled on Fawcett. Hazlitt too paid tribute to Fawcett, writing glowingly of him in his continuation of Holcroft's autobiography The Life of Thomas Holcroft (edited London 1925)
57. Gentleman's Magazine March 1791
58. Ibid. February 1804
59. Donald E. Hayden After Conflict, Quiet. A Study of Wordsworth's Poetry in relation to his Life and Letters New York 1951 p. 91. A French connection is made explicit in Wordsworth's note to the

drama when it was first published in 1842: 'the study of human nature suggests this awful truth, that, as in the trials to which life subjects us, sin and crime are apt to start from their very opposite qualities so are there no limits to the hardening of the heart and the perversion of the understanding to which they may carry their slaves. During my long residence in France, while the Revolution was rapidly advancing to its extreme of wickedness, I had frequent opportunities of being an eye-witness of this process, and it was while that knowledge was fresh upon my memory that the tragedy of The Borderers was composed' (Poetical Works I p. 342 1842).

60. Ibid. 1. 1739-40 p. 197
61. Ibid. 1. 1036 p. 170
62. Ibid. 1. 2145 p. 215
63. In Expostulation and Reply in Lyrical Ballads

iii) Somerset and Lyrical Ballads

In August 1795 Wordsworth left London and with his sister settled at Racedown in Somerset. It was here that Wordsworth became acquainted with Coleridge. Coleridge had always been a convinced Christian and something of a mystic. More a metaphysician than a politician, his political radicalism had been restricted to a vague feeling of sympathy for the French Revolution in its early years. Like all shades of liberal and radical opinion he rejoiced at the Fall of the Bastille (writing an enthusiastic ode on the subject) but when respectable and plebeian radicals parted company, Coleridge remained in the camp of the former. Like Wordsworth he welcomed the overthrow of the Montagnards, and even worked with Southey on a drama entitled The Fall of Robespierre. Despite political and religious differences, Coleridge was on good terms with Thelwall and maintained a lengthy, and at times highly polemical, correspondence with the radical orator.

Of Thelwall he wrote that he was

Perhaps, the only acting democrat that is honest, for the patriots are ragged cattle; a most excrucible herd. Arrogant because they are ignorant, and boastful of the strength of reason, because they have never tried it enough to know its weaknesses. (1)

Here Coleridge combines a revulsion from the omnipotence of reason - a reaction to his earlier infatuation with Godwin - with a quite remarkable elitism. The mass of the popular societies are casually dismissed as 'ignorant', while Thelwall is treated as the exception that proves the rule.

Coleridge had retreated very rapidly from the French revolution, following

much the same trajectory as most of the initial respectable support for the overthrow of absolutism. His friend Cottle was able to write of him and Southey:

The successive enormities, however, perpetrated in France and Switzerland by the French, tended to moderate their enthusiastic policies, and progressively to produce that effect on them which extended also to so many of the soberest friends of rational (2) freedom.

Rejection of the French Revolution did not, however, at this stage, imply support for the measures of the Pitt administration. Coleridge maintained liberal politics, and in his 1795 set of lectures comparing the English and French revolutions was able to praise Muir, Palmer and Margarot as 'martyrs in the holy cause of freedom'. (3)

If, politically, Coleridge's development can be seen to present a similar profile to that of Wordsworth, the same cannot be said of his personality. Coleridge's effervescent and expansive character contrasts startlingly with the plodding and pedestrian Wordsworth upon whom he seems to have acted as a vigorous catalyst: for it was undoubtedly Coleridge's influence that sparked Wordsworth back into writing poetry.

In Somerset the two poets led a fairly isolated existence. Their only close associate was Thomas Poole, one of the few local radicals. Poole was no supporter of the plebeian societies, but in the middle of Somerset any hint of liberalism was likely to be confused with full-blooded Jacobinism. Poole scandalised the local gentry by adopting a French hair-style and refusing to wear the usual powder: (4) his reputation was not enhanced when he intervened to prevent Paine being burnt in effigy at Stowey at the end of 1792. (5) Although the death of Louis XVI appalled him, he did not support the English war effort: he wrote:

I do execrate as much as any man that unnecessary instance of injustice and cruelty perpetrated in France; and should be happy to see every man that voted for the King's death brought to condign punishment. But 'tis not Louis' death, nor the Scheldt, nor the decree of November that are the causes of the war. It is a desire to suppress the glowing spirit of liberty which, I thank God, pervades the world, and which, I am persuaded, all the powers on earth cannot destroy ... I consider every Briton who loses his life in the war as much murdered as the King of France, and everyone who approves of the war as signing the death warrant of each soldier that falls. (6)

But Poole explicitly rejected political democracy. In a letter written to defend his brother Richard who had been accused of being a 'flaming democrat' he makes this quite clear:

While there was a probability of a limited monarchy in France, he applauded some of their measures, but long, very long since, has he viewed with horror and detestation the excesses perpetrated in that unhappy kingdom. He never admired the democratic form of government, nor did he need the fatal experience of French events to convince him of the futility of that splendid theory. With respect to the British Constitution, he always did and does revere it as the greatest effort of human wisdom, and would, if necessary, sacrifice everything to its preservation. To say that he does not see some abuses which in a proper time and in a proper manner ought to be amended, would be ridiculous. I believe there is not a Briton but perceives some ravage of time in the splendid mansion of his fathers, in a summer season, and by competent and duly authorised workmen, he could wish to see repaired. (7)

This position, evidently held by Poole as well as his brother, place them firmly within the ambit of that radicalism typified by Grey's Association of the Friends of the People. The Constitution is in need of some repairs, but those who undertake the task must be 'competent' and 'duly authorised'. There is no question of political democracy, of universal suffrage, of anything of the sort.

Nevertheless Poole's relatives considered him dangerous. Charlotte Poole's journal contains numerous complaints about his political opinions: from the tone of her writing Poole comes over as some sort of wild ultra-

Jacobin rather than the moderate reformer he actually was:

Tom Poole came up in the evening; he is never happy till he has introduced politics, and as usual he disgusted us; for he has no candour, and there seems to be so much venom, bitterness and determination in his whole conduct that it quite shocks me. He endeavours to load the higher class of people indiscriminately with opprobrium, and magnifies the virtues, miseries and oppressed state of the poor in proportion. If he does not stand up as the advocate of the French enormities, he endeavours to palliate them, and I am sure, from his conversation and conduct, he would be glad to see all law and order subverted in this country. (8)

With the arrival of Coleridge and Wordsworth, matters worsened. The appearance of a stranger speaking in an unfamiliar Lake District accent, plus a peculiar intellectual, both of whom were rumoured to have been mixed up in anti-government activity in London, increased local suspicion of Poole. Indeed certain absurd rumours appear to have been spread with the intention of embarrassing Poole: one of these was that Coleridge or Southey or both had lamented Robespierre's death and had claimed that 'Robespierre was a ministering angel of mercy, sent to slay thousands that he might save millions'.⁽⁹⁾ This was, of course, diametrically opposite to what Coleridge and Southey wrote and thought on the subject.

Village gossip about Wordsworth took off in several directions. For all the admiration and sympathy he professed for rural people, Wordsworth seemed unable to get close enough to them to avoid a series of grotesque misunderstandings and suspicions. According to Cottle:

The wiseacres of the village had, it seemed, made Mr. Wordsworth the subject of their serious conversation. One said that "He had seen him wander about by night, and look rather strangely at the moon! and then, he roamed over the hills, like a partridge". Another said "He had heard him mutter, as he walked, in some outlandish brogue, that nobody could understand!" ... Another very significantly said "I know that he has got a private still in his cellar, for I once passed his house, at a little better than a hundred yards distance, and I could smell the spirits, as plain as an ashen fagot at Christmas!" Another said, "However that was,

he is surely a despard French Jacobin, for he is so silent and dark, that nobody ever heard him say one word about politics!"

The arrival of John Thelwall in Somerset in July 1797 increased Poole's discomfiture still further. Thelwall's paper, The Tribune, had been suppressed and he had been banned from holding meetings in London. He was now looking for a small farm in the West Country and Poole and Coleridge had volunteered to help him find one.

Even before Thelwall's arrival, high treason had been sniffed, and on representations from Lord Somerville of Fitzhead Court, Taunton, Sir Philip Hale, a landowner near Bridgwater, and a Bath physician named Lysons, the Home Office sent a spy to watch the two poets. This story circulated in Wordsworth's lifetime, but the poet, by then a staunch Tory, denied it - implying that Coleridge was guilty of a gross fabrication. However, correspondence between the Home Office, Lysons and the spy, Walsh, was discovered among the Home Office papers at the end of the 19th century, proving Coleridge's version of history to be correct, and Wordsworth's to be a falsification.

Lysons had found Wordsworth's unmarried status sinister, and similarly his interest in the Somerset landscape. He wrote to the Duke of Portland:

I am since informed that the master of the house has no wife with him, but only a woman who passes for his sister - the man has camp stools which he and his visitors carry with them when they go about the country upon their nocturnal or diurnal expeditions, and have also a Portfolio in which they enter their observations, which they have been heard to say were almost finished - They have been heard to say they should be rewarded for them and were very attentive to the river near them - probably the river coming within a mile or two of Alfoxden from Bridgwater - These people may possibly be under-agents to some principal at Bristol. (11)

Thus Wordsworth's and Coleridge's rambles through the Somerset countryside

collecting material for their poetry became, in the minds of local fanatics, the plottings of an advance-guard for a French invasion.

Some of those suspicions of Wordsworth were initially under the impression that he was French - presumably because they had never heard an accent like his before. This was the opinion of one Charles Mogg whose alarmist stories of Wordsworth scouting out the local brooks (surely planning a route for the French Navy!) were reported to the Home Office by J. Walsh of Hungerford.⁽¹²⁾ The Home Office wrote back immediately ordering Walsh to go to Alfoxden to spy on Wordsworth.⁽¹³⁾

Walsh quickly found out that he was dealing, not with Frenchmen, but with 'a mischievous gang of disaffected Englishmen'.⁽¹⁴⁾ Walsh seems to have been possessed either of a vivid imagination or of a capacity for unquestioning acceptance of all that Thomas Poole's enemies told him: his next letter refers to 'the inhabitants of Alfoxten House' (I.e. Wordsworth and Dorothy) as 'a set of violent democrats' and Poole as 'a most violent member of the Corresponding Society'. Thelwall's presence in the vicinity, and at Alfoxden itself, was, naturally, evidence that dangerous plots were being concocted. However the spy also had to report that 'a great counsellor from London' had visited Wordsworth and Coleridge (this presumably refers to Wordsworth's friend Basil Montagu whose son he and Dorothy were educating), as had 'a gentleman from Bristol' (the eminently respectable bookseller Cottle).⁽¹⁵⁾

At this point the correspondence in the Home Office papers peters out. Presumably the Government had realised that Wordsworth and Coleridge were not French agents and had called their spy off. Walsh had attempted to play the role of agent provocateur, drawing Coleridge into conversation

and arguing vehemently for democratic views. Much to Walsh's surprise, Coleridge did not fall into the trap, but instead gave a lucid exposition of arguments against Jacobinism.⁽¹⁶⁾ The 'river' Wordsworth was reported to be taking great interest in was in fact a trickle hardly navigable by a canoe, let alone French battleships, and Wordsworth was studying it for a poem entitled The Brook.

The problems arising from Thelwall's request for a farm proved rather more difficult than those posed by the spy. Poole was under considerable local and domestic pressure. Charlotte Poole wrote in her journal:

We are shocked to hear that Mr. Thelwall has spent some time at Stowey this week with Mr. Coleridge, and consequently, with Tom Poole. Alfoxden House is taken by one of the fraternity and Woodlands by another. To what are we coming? (17)

The 'one of the fraternity' at Alfoxden was, of course, Wordsworth: but Woodlands was occupied by a Mr. Wilmott, son of a silk manufacturer in Sherborne,⁽¹⁸⁾ who seems to have been quite unconnected with Wordsworth or Coleridge: which indicates the paranoia at work in the minds of the Government's Somerset supporters.

Poole's invalid mother took fright. There seemed a real danger that he would be ostracised and that his business interests would suffer. He therefore informed Coleridge that he could not take the risks involved in helping Thelwall. Coleridge tried a little longer on his own to find Thelwall a farm and wrote to him that 'we will at least not yield without a struggle and if I cannot get you near me, it shall not be for want of a trial on my part'.⁽¹⁹⁾ Coleridge negotiated on Thelwall's behalf for two days, sounding out land-agents, and using arguments that Thelwall himself was unlikely to have approved of: at one point he wrote that as, in the event of a Revolution, Thelwall would have great influence among

the poor, then it would be advisable for him to have spent some years in Somerset where his impetuosity would be curbed and disciplined. But the answer that Coleridge got was that it would require both his and Poole's recommendation before the land agent would agree to let Thelwall have a farm. As Poole refused to accept this responsibility, Coleridge had to write apologetically to Thelwall, informing him of his failure:

Very great odium T. Poole incurred by bringing me here. My peaceable manners and known attachment to Christianity had almost worn it away when Wordsworth came and he, likewise by T. Poole's agency, settled here. You cannot conceive the tumult, calumnies and apparatus of threatened persecutions which this event has occasioned round about us. If you too should come, I am afraid that even riots and dangerous riots might be the consequence. Either of us separately would perhaps be tolerable, but all three together what can it be less than plot and damned conspiracy - a school for the propagation of Demagogy and Atheism? (20)

What comes across quite clearly from these incidents is that Wordsworth, though at the centre of them - an object of suspicion to local gentry and to government spies, and a problem for Thomas Poole - was in no way involved in attempting to resolve them. He played no role in the attempt to aid Thelwall and was quite unworried by or oblivious to any local hostility. He had stimulating company in the form of his sister and Coleridge, lived in the luxurious mansion of Alfoxden House almost rent-free, and he had no financial problems at all thanks to the legacy left him by his friend Raisley Calvert, whom he had nursed before the latter's death, and to the fees paid by Montagu for the education and upkeep of his son.

Overtly political issues dropped out of Wordsworth's consideration altogether. His letters of 1797-98 are devoid of politics: in them there is nothing to show that their author still regarded himself as a democrat.

The declarations of 1794, the pledges that he would 'forever continue' to be one 'of that odious class of men called democrats' all appeared to have evaporated with remarkable ease. Certainly Coleridge did not take Wordsworth's radical credentials very seriously. He wrote to Thelwall, and his emphasis shows his surprise, that 'the aristocrats seem to persecute even Wordsworth'.

Such 'persecution' had one very tangible effect. In late 1797 Wordsworth's tenancy of Alfoxden was terminated, largely because of Thelwall's visit. Thomas Poole interceded with the owner, Mrs. St. Albyn, to allow Wordsworth to stay on: his letter is eloquent testimony both to his own politics and to those of Wordsworth:

I am informed you have heard that Mr. Wordsworth does keep company, and on this I fear the most infamous falshoods have reached your ears. Mr. Wordsworth is a man fond of retirement and fond of reading and writing - and has never had above two gentlemen at a time with him. By accident, Mr. Thelwall, as he was travelling through the neighbourhood, called at Stowey. The person he called on at Stowey (21) took him to Alfoxden. No person at Stowey, nor Mr. Wordsworth, knew of his coming.(22) Mr. Wordsworth had never spoken to him before, nor indeed had anyone of Stowey. Surely the common duties of hospitality were not to be refused to any man; and who would not be interested in seeing such a man as Thelwall, however they may disapprove of his sentiments or conduct? ... Be assured, and I speak it from my own knowledge, that Mr. Wordsworth, of all men alive, is the last who will give any one cause to complain of his opinions, his conduct, or his disturbing the peace of anyone.

(23)

There is no reason to disagree with Poole's assessment of the quiescent state of Wordsworth's politics: 'interested in' Thelwall, but in an apparently detached manner, and, as one would expect from Wordsworth's comments on the 1794 trials, not seeing a kindred spirit in the radical leader. But all Poole's pleas were to no avail: and the Wordsworths were forced to leave Alfoxden after a year's tenancy.

The fruit of Wordsworth's year at Alfoxden was the first volume of Lyrical Ballads. On these rest any claim to radicalism on Wordsworth's part in the 1797-98 period. The 1798 volume of Lyrical Ballads is a remarkable little book, partly by virtue of containing one of the finest poems in the language, Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner, and partly through the nature of Wordsworth's contributions and the justifications for them.

The critical history of these Ballads has been one of initial dismissal, followed by growing adulation. Wordsworth's critical reputation was fairly well established by the end of his life. Then, in the middle of the nineteenth century, Matthew Arnold wrote him definitively into the canon of great poets - at the expense of jettisoning a fair amount of his later work. On the whole subsequent critics have agreed with Arnold that there is a 'great decade' (1797-1807) in which Wordsworth wrote almost all the work for which he is remembered, followed by a long decline in poetic power, in which a few brilliant flashes occasionally surface to light the deepening gloom (for instance, the Extempore Effusion on the Death of James Hogg of 1834). Wordsworth has become firmly established in schools and in literature faculties, usually as Number 3 in the hierarchy following Shakespeare and Milton. Since he has the advantage of having written relatively short poems with relatively straightforward syntax, he is well represented in anthologies and it is frequently pieces from his work that children still have to learn by rote.

While it has become a critical commonplace to dismiss certain of Wordsworth's poems (particularly The Excursion),⁽²⁴⁾ it is almost impossible to find a book or an article in the last century which challenges Wordsworth's

claims to greatness.⁽²⁵⁾ Even the anti-Romantics such as T.S. Eliot, or the 'New Criticism' school, treated Wordsworth lightly, reserving their main attacks for Shelley. Criticism has thus developed which is often downright mystifying. To take just one example, what are we to make of this remark from Kenneth R. Johnston's essay 'The Idiom of Vision':

It is hard to tell when ordinary sight transmutes into vision in Wordsworth's poetry - but this difficulty is, as much as anything⁽²⁶⁾ else, the very essence of his genius.

This is a peculiar assertion that functions as a justification for what in most other poets would be seen merely as bad poetry.

Some of Wordsworth's contemporaries, however, were prepared to use undiluted vitriol when discussing his work, notably Francis Jeffrey of the Edinburgh Review. Jeffrey has been much maligned by later writers, and accused of nurturing a vicious grudge against Wordsworth: yet his criticism, harsh though it undoubtedly is, and despite the clear class prejudice that informs it, also seems to me to bear a refreshing strand of honesty. Some of his judgements easily stand the test of time. Few readers or critics will disagree with this estimate of The Excursion:

We have imitations of Cowper, and even of Milton here, engrafted on the natural drawl of the Lakers - and all diluted into harmony by that profane and irrepressible wordiness which deluges all the blank verse of this school of poetry, and lubricates and weakens (27) the whole structure of their style.

His judgements on Wordsworth's lyrics pose rather greater difficulties. In Jeffrey's forthright condemnation several modes of criticism seem to be sandwiched together. In dealing with the Poems in Two Volumes of 1807 Jeffrey reveals this confusion:

The peculiarities of diction alone are enough, perhaps, to render them ridiculous; but the author before us really seems anxious to court this literary martyrdom by a device still more infallible - we mean that of connecting his most lofty, tender or impassioned conceptions, with objects and incidents, which the greater part of

his readers will probably persist in thinking low, silly or uninteresting.

After quoting several of the poems (To the Daisy, Louisa, The Redbreast and the Butterfly, To the Small Celandine) with some derision, and remarking of the Ode to Duty that 'the lofty vein is very unsuccessfully attempted', Jeffrey comes to Alice Fell. With this piece he loses patience altogether: 'If the printing of such trash as this be not felt as an insult on the public taste, we are afraid it cannot be insulted'. As for the Intimations Ode, this is 'the most illegible and unintelligible part of the publication'. Jeffrey sums up his remarks on the poems thus

Even in the worst of these productions there are, no doubt, occasional little traits of delicate feeling and original fancy, but they are quite lost and obscured in the mass of childishness and insipidity with which they are incorporated. (28)

Perhaps without realising it, Jeffrey is, however, constantly changing the ground and target of his criticism, thus making it easier for later admirers of Wordsworth to brush him aside. Writing as an acute, but traditional critic, steeped in Milton, Dryden and Pope, Jeffrey has several converging, but distinct, objections to Wordsworth. His objection to the Intimations Ode is simple - he doesn't understand it. It is so internal to the Romantic structure of feeling, the problems with which it deals are so alien to Jeffrey's mode of thought, that it means nothing to him and is 'illegible'. But this is not his main problem with Wordsworth - what he is concerned with is the diction and the subject matter - but he conflates the two together, and thereby crucially weakens his argument.

For it is straightforward prejudice on Jeffrey's part that leads him to dismiss Wordsworth's subject-matter. For him the poor and humble - rural

upstarts or small celandines - do not belong in poetry. In this, he is joined by, for example, Robert Southey, who found The Idiot well-constructed but detested its subject: 'No tale has deserved the labour that appears to have been bestowed on this. It resembles a Flemish in the worthlessness of its design and the excellence of its execution'.⁽²⁹⁾

Jeffrey, however, does not grant Wordsworth excellence of execution. For him, the diction employed by Wordsworth makes the poems 'ridiculous'. Had Jeffrey stuck to this ground, he would present a more formidable critical obstacle to Wordsworth lovers: his trenchant remark on the 'profuse and irrepressible wordiness' of The Excursion applies just as well to many other Wordsworth pieces, including some of the relatively short poems in both the 1807 volumes, and in the earlier Lyrical Ballads. To judge both diction and subject-matter in virtually the same breath, however, is to invite critical defeat. When Alice Fell is denounced as trash we cannot tell what criteria Jeffrey is using - he would seem to be fusing Alice Fell herself with the leaden jingling that passes for verse in this poem.

Poetry can, however, be made out of any subject - but not in any style. What is wrong, for example, with Wordsworth's piece on Wilkinson's spade in the 1807 volume is not that instruments of manual labour should not be subjects for poetry, but that they cannot be slotted into traditional, rhetorical, declamatory verse. When Wordsworth attempts to do so, the result is bathos and unconscious self-parody.

Similarly with The Thorn of Lyrical Ballads: there is nothing intrinsically damaging in writing about a pond, a thorn, a miserable woman and a

dead child. But when the narrator is made to prattle the story in a series of grinding repetitions, that acts as a barrier to any conveyance of pathos, misery or pity, and forces one to agree with Southey that 'he who personates tiresome loquacity, becomes tiresome himself'. (30)

There is no necessary connection between the subject of a poem and its diction - the skill and sensitivity of the poet will determine how well the two are matched (within historic limitations of the development of the language). The crucial question with regard to Lyrical Ballads (and its poetic value or otherwise), then, becomes whether or not Wordsworth's mode of expression is adequate to his subjects. Jeffrey found the whole exercise 'ridiculous', while for Byron the Ballads were merely 'Christmas stories tortured into rhyme' whereby Wordsworth 'shows/That prose is verse and verse is merely prose'. (31)

Wordsworth's explanation of his intentions in employing the particular diction of the Ballads is to be found in his famous Preface to the work. (32) This Preface, some forty pages long, did not appear in the first edition of the Ballads in 1798. There was instead a short 'advertisement' of a few hundred words. Wordsworth wrote the Preface in 1800, made a lengthy addition in 1802, and it was in this form that it appeared in the two volume edition of 1805. In later years, Wordsworth reprinted the Preface as an appendix to his collected poems, and made further amendments - but these later changes need not detain us here.

The 1798 Advertisement explains the Ballads as follows:

The majority of the following poems are to be considered as experiments. They were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure. (33)

Expanding this in 1800 Wordsworth wrote that the Ballads were:

published as an experiment, which I hoped might be of some use to ascertain how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation, that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted (34) which a poet may rationally endeavour to impart.

The change is perhaps significant. The alteration from 'the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society' to 'a selection of the real language of men' removes any obvious social connotation.

Both the Advertisement and the Preface then attack 'the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers'. (35) The Preface then returns to the aims of the poems, and it is worth quoting what Wordsworth has to say on this at some length:

The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men; and at the same time to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way; and further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly, though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. Low and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and consequently may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and from the necessary character of rural occupations are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; and lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. The language, too, of these men is adopted (purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions. Accordingly such a language,

arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent and a far more philosophical language than that which is frequently substituted for it by poets, who think that they are conferring honour upon themselves and their art in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men, and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression in order to furnish food for fickle tastes and fickle appetites for their own creation. (36)

Underlying this statement of intent is the familiar, centuries-old town-country dichotomy. A series of assertions have been made to the effect that people in the country somehow 'feel' in a way that is more immediate and more genuine than people elsewhere. This is treated as self-evident: Wordsworth does not try to argue the point. Similarly the claims for rural language are merely asserted. They are, in fact, highly contentious. Why should we believe that country people's language was more 'simple and unelaborated' than that of the lower orders in the towns? Written material - letters, memoirs etc. - does not suggest this at all. As for claiming that this 'simple' language is 'far more philosophical' Wordsworth here is being simply anti-intellectual. Any philosophy requires a system of concepts and arguments that almost by definition are not the everyday coinage of working people, of either town or country. Of course Wordsworth's attack on the ornate and essentially empty poetic diction much in vogue in the late eighteenth century is quite justified: - but already what he intends to replace it with appears to have dubious credentials.

Furthermore, Wordsworth has inserted in a parenthesis words which vitiate his whole supposed purpose. This 'language really used by men' is to be 'purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust'. In other words we are not going to be reading the 'real language of men at all', but a bowdlerised version. Wordsworth intends to present us not with the actual language of

ordinary men, but with the language he thinks ordinary men ought to speak.

Wordsworth makes this point about language several more times in the Preface: then yokes it, somewhat incongruously, to a conception of the poet as an elevated being - as one who is precisely not ordinary. A poet is

a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, imbued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them. To these qualities he has added a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present: an ability of conjuring up, in himself passions which are indeed far from being the same as those produced by real events, yet (especially in those parts of the general sympathy which are pleasing and delightful) do more nearly resemble the passions produced by real events than anything which, from the motions of their own minds merely, other men are accustomed to feel in themselves; whence, and from practice, he has acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels, and especially those thoughts and feelings which by his own choice, or from the structure of his own mind, arise in him without immediate external excitement. (37)

Now in this definition it should be remembered that Wordsworth is speaking of himself: and there is something rather smug about claims to 'a greater knowledge of human nature', 'a more comprehensive soul' etc. It is an altogether less grand conception of a poet than Blake's claims to vision and prophecy, and at the same time it is overbearing and paternalistic.

Nature also enters the Preface, to be linked with 'man', the subject of poetry, and the poet. According to Wordsworth, the poet 'considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting qualities of nature'. (38)

So for Wordsworth human qualities are, in fact, natural qualities: in a sense men mediate between these qualities and the poet. The poet with his 'more comprehensive soul' then feeds these qualities back to other men, employing 'the real language of men', once that has been purged of what the poet, in his wisdom, considers to be 'lasting and rational causes of dislike and disgust'. This is inscribed within the context of a rural society, and one which has been basically idealised.

Is it possible to consider Lyrical Ballads' relationship to ideology in the same way that Blake's lyrics were considered earlier in this work?

With the concepts of Innocence and Experience Blake provides the basic structural elements for an understanding of his Songs as interventions in the field of ideology. With Wordsworth's Ballads⁽³⁹⁾ there is no such convenient starting point. Yet the poems do contain an ideological structure: and one that is quite close to that of certain of Wordsworth's eighteenth century predecessors. They are poems about rural life, some of them written from the position of a spectator encountering images of wretchedness and transcribing particular ills (e.g. Last of the Flock, Simon Lee). The spectator's identity may change to that of a garrulous seaman (The Thorn), or he may be done away with altogether (Goody Blake and Harry Gill, The Idiot Boy): yet the predominant mood remains a contemplative one, whose ideological co-ordinates are not far removed from Gray or Goldsmith.

The stance of the narrator of The Deserted Village to ruined Auburn, or of Gray to his departed village Hampdens is very similar to that taken by Wordsworth in the Ballads. They are poems that observe, and remain at the level of observation. They do not cohere into a critique of

society as a whole. They are vignettes of suffering, in painting which the poet reveals his own sensibility. And they are poems where victims may complain, but they accept their fate: their only resistance is in tears, or occasionally (with Goody Blake) curses.

Wordsworth's location of his subject-matter is interesting: he wrote that the poet should not deal with things 'as they are', but 'as they seem to exist in the senses, and to the passions'. This 'seem' is deeply ambiguous. Obviously poets can only write of the world as it appears to them - everything in a piece of literature is mediated by the writer's own perception and talents. But there is no necessary contradiction between material reality and the poet's perception of it: and if a poet's duty is to tell the truth, then he is under an obligation to eliminate any such gap. The poet cannot escape from the ideological conditions of his time, but he does not have to reproduce them as naked ideology, as propaganda. Indeed great poetry is frequently in tension with its ideological suppositions - King Lear and Hamlet contain clearly reactionary responses to Renaissance individualism, to the birth of the bourgeois world order, yet they do not read as simple apologies for feudalism. Nor can Paradise Lost be reduced to the status of a Puritan sermon.

But Wordsworth appears to posit a yawning gap between things 'as they are' and 'as they seem to exist'. That the poet might be able to narrow this gap does not concern him. Underlying this, perhaps, is an unspoken concept - that material reality is in fact unknowable. In the concluding chapter we will see this concept at work in The Prelude with respect to Wordsworth's encounter with London.

What the poet knows, then, is himself: the poet therefore will concentrate on writing not about the outside world, but about himself. He will be more than a narrator - he will be a subject. Hence the self-centred nature of much of Wordsworth's work - most obviously The Prelude, the Intimations Ode, and Tintern Abbey: but also many of the lyrics, including many of the Lyrical Ballads. For what is important in these is the poet's response to nature - human or otherwise - and that response gains greater reality than its material source.

Within this general contemplative framework, a framework loosely shared with Gray and Goldsmith, and to be contrasted with Crabbe's realism, there is not such room for change or action. Nature is cyclical and things are as they are. Sometimes they are bad and may stir us to indignation: sometimes it may be possible to ameliorate certain sufferings - a change in the poor laws will doubtless improve the lot of the farmer in Last of the Flock - but there will be no fundamental change, because there is nothing fundamentally wrong. The countryside enjoys an order into the origins of which the poet is not concerned to probe.

This position is far removed not only from the apocalyptic upheavals of Blake's Prophetic Books and the need proclaimed there for a total renovation, but also from Blake's lyrics with their thorough-going critique of eighteenth century social reality.

Wordsworth's declared intention of using 'the real language of men' has convinced critics that these poems are in some sense 'radical' or 'popular'. There are several arguments against this. At one point, Wordsworth himself explicitly disavowed any intention of writing Lyrical Ballads for 'revolutionary' political impact. In a letter to Joseph

Cottle he claimed purely mercenary motives: 'I published these poems for money, and money alone'.⁽⁴⁰⁾ If Wordsworth was serious, then he miscalculated: according to his reminiscences near the end of his life, when he was annotating Barran Field's unpublished memoir, his profit from Lyrical Ballads

was trifling - owing to the heavy bills brought against me in the usual way of the Trade by the Publisher - and the smallness of the Editions, exceeding in no case till within the last ten years a (41) thousand copies.

More importantly, however, there are two arguments deriving from the poems themselves against their supposed radicalism. First, even in terms of his own position on poetic diction, Wordsworth simply does not succeed. The poetry is not written in 'the real language of men', even when allowances are made for the removal of what Wordsworth considered would lead to dislike and disgust. Partly this is because Wordsworth faced an insuperable obstacle in that real people do not speak in stanza form and do not employ rhyme schemes or regular metres. In other words poetry has features that set it apart from 'the real language of men'. Wordsworth's use of ballad metres and rhyme schemes is sometimes singularly inept. We are Seven presents us with a child who will not accept the fact of death. The eight-year old girl knows that her brother and sister are lying in the churchyard, but cannot grasp the implications of this. Wordsworth explained in the Preface that the poem was about 'the perplexity and obscurity which in childhood attend our notion of death, or rather our utter inability to admit that notion'.⁽⁴²⁾ However this is not what comes across when the child is made to say:

The first that died was little Jane;
In bed she moaning lay,
Til God released her of her pain
And then she went away.

So in the churchyard she was laid
 And all the summer dry
 Together round her grave we played,
 My brother John and I.

No impression of perplexity is given here: what we have is a macabre picture of two children dancing round their sister's grave in an almost callous fashion. The rhymes and the almost light-hearted spring in the metre contradict Wordsworth's declared intentions. As in any conflict between form and content, the form defeats the content and effectively creates a new one. Another 'realist' objection to the poem could be raised - and would be quite in order given Wordsworth's commitment to reality in the Preface - namely that eight-year old children do not behave like this, do not dance round graves, and have an understanding of bereavement, if not actually of the phenomenon of death.

But the second argument as to the non-radical nature of these poems rests on their subject-matter and how this is treated. They are not uniform; but the largest single group deals with incidents in country life (of the 1798 poems, Animal Tranquillity and Decay, Goody Blake and Harry Gill, The Last of the Flock, The Thorn, We are Seven, Simon Lee the Old Huntsman, The Idiot Boy and The Mad Mother - to these could be added The Female Vagrant, which is essentially a long extract from Salisbury Plain). They are about one or two people, usually from the rural poor, who in one way or another have faced an unpleasant or oppressive experience. Suffering and pity are the key notes in many of these. The Ballads are not - unlike Blake's great mythic structures - about collective oppression and collective action: they are about isolated individuals. Martha Ray in The Thorn is the extreme example of this: she does nothing

but sit by the pond, the thorn and the moss which are the poem's central points of reference and cry 'Oh misery! Oh misery! Oh woe is me! Oh misery!' She exists outside of any social context, a spectacle of suffering, whose only function is to excite pity in the heart of the poem's narrator and its readers.

Not all the sufferers in the Ballads are abstracted from socio-economic reality. The farmer in The Last of the Flock, for example, is a victim of the system of poor relief. He has six children, he falls on needy times, appeals to the parish for relief, they point to the fact that he owns fifty sheep, and refuse to give him any relief until he sells them. One by one the flock dwindles until the poem's narrator meets him, tears in his eyes, taking his last sheep to be sold.

But despite this, the poem does not become a vehicle for social indignation. Rather, Wordsworth chooses to paint a vignette of misery in the unfortunate farmer. It is the farmer's suffering that is important, not the activities of the parish authorities who are shadowy figures, mentioned by the farmer, but quite distant from the poem. Like Martha Ray, the farmer is isolated - he has his sheep and his children: the rest of the community does not impinge on the poem at all.

Indeed, so exclusive is the emphasis on the farmer's suffering that the political stance of the poem can seem uncertain. It could be written by someone interested in a more humane system of poor relief. Alternatively it could be written by a Malthusian as an example of the difficulties you land yourself in if you have six children. It is only through evidence external to the poem that we know that the latter is not the

case, and that Wordsworth was not a Malthusian.

Weeping child, helpless old man, lunatic mother - these are the heroes and heroines of Lyrical Ballads. They are isolated, they are passive - and out of them Wordsworth has created a poetry of pity: that pity of which Blake wrote:

Pity would be no more
If we did not make somebody poor.⁽⁴³⁾

The sufferings of the characters may make us feel great sympathy and sorrow: but they point no way forward. They do not suggest that anything can be changed. Change is difficult - sympathy is easy and costs nothing. If change does occur, then it is through extra-human mediation. Thus in Goody Blake and Harry Gill, the old woman, a victim of the farmer Gill's malevolence - he objects to her surreptitious pilfering of firewood from his hedge - confronts her oppressor as an individual and calls on supernatural powers for assistance. Her wish is answered and Harry Gill is struck with a deathly cold. The poem ends sententiously with a call on all farmers to treat old women well or they too might feel the wrath of God. Despite the poem being subtitled 'A True Story', this fate does not appear to have overtaken many landed gentry in the eighteenth century.

What is the framework within which these Ballads operate? What, if any, are their theoretical presuppositions? The first two poems in the collection go some way towards answering these questions. These poems, Exposition and Reply and The Tables Turned, take the form of a polemic between Wordsworth and a friend named Matthew (traditionally identified as Hazlitt).

Matthew criticises Wordsworth for his inactivity, sitting and dreaming 'on that old grey stone'. Wordsworth invents the following justification for this:

The eye it cannot choose but see;
 We cannot bid the ear be still;
 Our bodies feel, where'er they be;
 Against, or with our will.

Nor less I deem that there are powers
 Which of themselves our minds impress;
 That we can feed this mind of ours
 In a wise passiveness.

This is specifically anti-intellectual. From it one deduces that passiveness equals wisdom, because if one sits gazing into nature then the eye and the ear somehow accumulate 'correct' impressions because of the action of 'powers' beyond human control.

This anti-intellectual stance becomes more pronounced in The Tables Turned. Here Wordsworth demands that his friend leave his studies:

Up! Up! my friend, and clear your looks
 Why all this toil and trouble?
 Up! Up! my friend and quit your books,
 Or surely you'll grow double.

What is to replace books (which, the poem claims, are 'a dull and endless strife'). Wordsworth has an answer ready to hand: nature is. The throstle (thrush) 'is no mean preacher', so 'Let Nature be your teacher'. What nature provides is:

Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health
 Truth breathed by cheerfulness.

There is thus no real need for hard and concentrated thought: truth and wisdom are external, imbibed from the natural world. They are quite independent of human activity. A crescendo of anti-intellectual militancy is reached in the following stanza:

One impulse from a vernal wood
 May teach you more of man,
 Of moral evil and of good
 Than all the sages can.

Intellectual activity is replaced by sensuous delight in natural beauties. Man is not a creator but a receptacle for something already there. He merely opens his senses, and natural wisdom pours in. In fact the intellect is positively harmful:

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
 Our meddling intellect
 Misshapes the beauteous forms of things -
 We murder to dissect.

The fact that this line has become one of the 'memorable quotes' of English literature should not blind us to its fundamentally reactionary nature. What is posited is a completely passive mind which functions as a receptacle for impressions from the natural world - impulses from vernal woods etc. These sensual impressions then become the matter of poetry - they cannot be systematised: they remain 'powers/which of themselves our minds impress'.

It is not surprising, then, that the characters in the narrative Ballads are all passive, given that 'wise passiveness' is seen as a virtue by the poet. 'Goodness' and 'wisdom' become attributes of contemplation and/or suffering. The active life, the determination to change, is absent.

This quasi-philosophical rejection of the intellect finds a more sophisticated expression in Wordsworth's most celebrated contribution to Lyrical Ballads - Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798. This poem

is an ode to the annihilation of thought: the politics here are the politics of acquiescence and resignation. The Wye landscape acts as inspiration and Wordsworth drifts into 'wise passiveness'. 'Forms of beauty' - specified as natural forms: 'mountain springs', 'steep and lofty cliffs', 'the wild green landscape' etc. - give Wordsworth his release. To them he owes:

that blessed mood
 In which the burthen of the mystery
 In which the heavy and the weary weight
 Of all this unintelligible world
 Is lightened; that serene and blessed mood
 In which the affections gently lead us on
 Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
 And even the motion of our human blood
 Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
 In body, and become a living soul;
 While with an eye made quiet by the power
 Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
 We see into the life of things.

Wordsworth is quite explicit - the world is 'unintelligible:' it cannot be known. But it possesses triggers which can set off the trance-like state in which poetry is conceived. There is, of course, a problem here: if the world is unknowable, then what is the poet to write about? Wordsworth falls back on his own mind: the poet will write about his own dreams, his own creativity. We are now in the land of the completely subjective. It is a highly generalised and abstract land as the above passage demonstrates. 'Living soul', 'power/Of harmony', 'deep power of joy', 'life of things' - such is the level of generality in these phrases that it hardly rises above the level of clichés. All links with the concrete have been severed.

In Tintern Abbey Wordsworth slips easily from the reminiscence of natural beauties - often quite effective - into the mystical mood. The pantheist reverie reaches its height in the famous passage:

And I have felt
 A presence that disturbs me with the joy
 Of elevated thoughts: a sense sublime
 Of something far more deeply interfused
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
 And the round ocean and the living air,
 And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
 A motion and a spirit, that impels
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
 And rolls through all things.

While this is much more effective in poetic terms than the passage quoted previously - the setting suns image is a vast improvement on 'the life of things' - its content is much the same. There exist certain things outside the human - 'a presence', 'a sense sublime', 'a motion and a spirit' etc. - which are the source of inspiration, joy etc., and which feed themselves into the human spirit via natural effects ('setting suns', 'round ocean', 'living air'). A vague and shadowy being invests 'all things' - the poet's function is to sit back and imbibe it - to dream himself onto the right wavelength.

The reference to 'elevated thoughts' is misplaced: it is clear that Wordsworth is not talking about thoughts in the normal sense of the word at all. He is talking about feelings: and the point to be made about these particular feelings is that they are clearly opposed to activity, to change. The poem resonates with fatalism. Some have taken the reference to 'the still, sad music of humanity', two lines before the above passage, as some kind of proof that Wordsworth's radical credentials are still valid. But this 'music' enters the poem almost incidentally: Wordsworth admits that he does not look on nature exactly as he did when a youth; now when he gazes on the natural world he will often hear that 'still, sad music'. Nothing is specified, and one does not have to be a radical to feel for the miserable and the hungry. What is really

important is the effect of this 'music' on Wordsworth. The poem is quite explicit: the 'still, sad music' is:

Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue.

The still, sad music of humanity, then, far from rousing the listener into activity, subdues him. Once again the result is passivity, acquiescence. The worship of nature has led to the abandonment of action.

Tintern Abbey is generally considered a fine example of Wordsworth's principle of 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'. The concept is explained by Wordsworth in his preface thus:

I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity; the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar⁽⁴⁴⁾ to this is carried on.

Again passivity is central to the poet's role: tranquillity and contemplation are the key ingredients for this mode of composition. The sort of emotions that are to be recollected are those vague and grandiose sentiments that we find in Tintern Abbey - sentiments apparently completely divorced from social relations: a mysticism that enjoys the illusion of going beyond time and place, of lacking roots in specific historical conjunctures. The intellect appears to play no role in this process at all. The shaping hand of the poet is restricted to matters of technique - in the final analysis his role is merely to cast into iambic pentameters, or some other suitable form, the emotions that are recollected.

To sum up, we can say that by the time he wrote Lyrical Ballads Wordsworth

had developed an anti-radical theory of poetry. That theory rested on such concepts as 'tranquillity', 'contemplation' and 'wise passiveness'. It accorded no social role to the poet who was simply 'a more comprehensive soul': not for Wordsworth the conception of poets as prophets or visionaries (Blake), nor as 'unacknowledged legislators of the world' (Shelley).

As the poet is passive, so are his characters: and a curious, static tableau of English rural life is drawn, in which the participants all endure or suffer; almost never do they take independent action. It should go without saying that this in no way resembles the real social landscape of rural Britain in the eighteenth century. Poaching, food riots, enclosures and the resistance to them, a bitter class struggle fought on a thousand fronts, this is almost absent from Wordsworth's picture. What Wordsworth's depiction does resemble is a ruling class image of the rural poor as meek, humble, long-suffering souls who will have their reward in the next life provided they remain subservient in this one. There are thus elements of an ideological convergence between Lyrical Ballads and Hannah More's poems.

Both assume a passive rural population, living as part of a harmonious community, with shared interests with the richer strata of society. Value judgements are made against the backcloth of this image, and that which disrupts the harmony is condemned: for Hannah More this primarily means radical activists (Tom Hod in The Riot); for Wordsworth, the concept includes avaricious farmers (Harry Gill) and the heartless operation of the poor laws (in Last of the Flock).

One final point worth considering is the question of how much Wordsworth

was in touch with the lives of the rural poor anyway. The evidence we have on this comes from Cumbria later in Wordsworth's life. The Rev. H.P. Rawnsley collected local people's reminiscences of Wordsworth in the 1880s, before all recollection of the poet had faded. He was disappointed with what he found, firstly because he was unable to find the 'good life and manners and simple piety as Wordsworth knew and described in fell-side homes',⁽⁴⁵⁾ and secondly because those who remembered Wordsworth were not very complimentary about him. They pointed in particular to his seclusion. Rawnsley drew from this the conclusion that in fact Wordsworth was not really aware of the lives of ordinary people at all - that he idealised them. According to one villager:

He niver asked folk about their work, nor mentioned the flocks nor nowt... Farming, nor beast, nor sheep, nor fields wasn't in his way, he asked no questions about flocks or hers, and was a distant man, not what you might call an outward man by noa means.

Another remarked that:

As for Mister Wordsworth, he'd pass you, same as if you was nobbut a stone.

And a third:

You could tell fra the man's face his poetry would niver have no⁽⁴⁶⁾ laugh in it.

These reminiscences were gathered from old people and they refer to the Wordsworth of Rydal Mount, to the Tory poet of the 1830s and 1840s, not to the poet of Lyrical Ballads. However, they are the only record we possess of how anyone from the rural poor regarded Wordsworth. Nothing we know about Wordsworth's activities in the 1790s contradicts this picture: and it is a fair assumption, given the lack of evidence to the contrary, that the same seclusion and aloofness marked his relations with Somerset villagers during the time that Lyrical Ballads was composed. These considerations must throw further doubt on the validity of

Wordsworth's concept of 'language really used by men' and also on his observation of rural life generally.

FOOTNOTES

1. Coleridge to Wade 1797, quoted in Joseph Cottle: Reminiscences of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey London 1847 p. 143
2. Ibid. pp 19-20
3. Ibid. p. 19
4. Mrs. Henry Sandford Thomas Poole and His Friends London 1888 Vol. 1 p. 34
5. Charlotte Poole's journal Jan. 1 1793. Quoted in Sandford op. cit. p. 40
6. Poole to Gutteridge, Feb. 23 1793. Quoted ibid. pp 40-42
7. Poole to Dr. Magerdie, May 27 1793. Quoted ibid. p. 63
8. Charlotte Poole's journal, March 15 1796. Quoted ibid. p. 136
9. Ibid. p. 105
10. Cottle op. cit. pp 181-182
11. Lysons to Portland, 11 August 1797. HO. 42.41
12. Walsh to Home Office, 11 August 1797. HO. 42.41
13. Home Office to Walsh, 12 August 1797. HO. 42.41
14. Walsh to Home Office, 15 August 1797. HO. 42.41
15. Walsh to Home Office, 16 August 1797. HO. 42.41
16. Coleridge Biographia Literaria
17. Charlotte Poole's journal, 23 July 1797. Quoted Sandford op. cit. p. 135
18. Ibid.
19. Coleridge to Thelwall, 19 August 1797. Letters of Coleridge Vol. 1 p. 341

20. Coleridge to Thelwall, 21 August 1797. Letters of Coleridge Vol. 1 pp 343-344
21. I.e. Coleridge
22. Not strictly true: Coleridge certainly knew.
23. Poole to Mrs. St. Albyn, 16 Sept. 1797. Quoted Sandford op. cit. p. 242
24. Most critics today would agree with Byron, remarking on
 'A drowsy, frowzy poem, call'd the "Excursion"
 Writ in a manner which is my aversion'
Don Juan Canto III XCIV
25. The nearest approach to such a challenge is Douglas Bush's
 'Wordsworth: A Minority Report' in Wordsworth: Centenary Studies
 (edited G.T. Dunklin, New Jersey 1951). But although Bush raises
 the question: is Wordsworth still 'for us, a great poet?', he
 still maintains that he was 'a great genius', that he ranks among
 the top five poets in the language etc.
- A minority among critics adhere stubbornly to the mid-Victorian
 view that there was no decline in ability, and that Wordsworth
 continued to write excellent poetry up to his death (or even that
 the later work is actually better - presumably because of its
 religious orthodoxy - than the earlier). The best-known exponent
 of this view is Edith Batho in her The Later Wordsworth. It is,
 to say the least, unconvincing. Some critics are totally removed
 from literary reality and write in esoteric worlds of their own.
 This is the case with the prolific G. Wilson Knight who even
 manages a reference to 'the great but almost terrifying sonnets on
 Punishment of Death' (The Starlit Dome: Studies in the Poetry of
 Vision London 1941 p. 76)
26. In New Perspectives on Coleridge and Wordsworth edited Geoffrey
 Hartman New York 1972 p. 3
27. Edinburgh Review Nov. 1814
28. Ibid. Oct. 1807
29. Critical Review Oct. 1798
30. Ibid. A few very determined critics have tried to turn 'tiresome
 loquacity' into a virtue, producing a 'psychological' reading of
 the poem whereby Wordsworth is alleged to be investigating the
 response and superstitions of the seafaring narrator in the poem.
 Full marks for ingenuity, at any rate.
31. Byron English Bards and Scotch Reviewers 1 245 241-242

32. However, anyone dealing with this Preface needs to employ a certain amount of caution. Wordsworth later claimed that he wrote the Preface because Coleridge asked him to. Coleridge admitted that the Preface 'is half a child of my own brain', and went on to add 'yet I am far from going all lengths with Wordsworth. He has written lately a number of poems ... very excellent compositions, but here and there a daring humbleness of language and versification, and a strict adherence to matter of fact, even to prolixity, that startled me ... I rather suspect that somewhere or other there is a radical difference in our theoretical opinion respecting poetry' (Coleridge to Southey 29 July 1802 Letters II, 386-387). Biographia Literaria has much to say about Wordsworth, and in particular Coleridge offers some sharp criticism of the Preface: 'With many parts of this Preface in the sense attributed to them, and with the words undoubtedly seem to authorise, I never concurred; but on the contrary objected to them as erroneous in principle, and as contradictory (in appearance at least) both to other parts of the same Preface and to the author's own practice in the greater number of the poems themselves'. (Biographia Literaria II pp 7-8). Certainly later in life Wordsworth took a completely dismissive attitude towards his earlier positions as expressed in the Preface: 'I will mention that I never cared a straw about the theory - and the Preface was written at the request of Mr. Coleridge out of sheer good nature'. (Marginalia in Barron Field's Memoir of Wordsworth 1839 edited Geoffrey Little Sydney 1975)
33. Lyrical Ballads Collins edition 1968 - all references are to this edition.
34. Ibid. p. 18
35. Ibid. p. 20
36. Ibid. pp 20-21
37. Ibid. pp 30-31
38. Ibid. p. 34
39. Strictly speaking the poems are not Ballads at all. The Ballad is above all an active form of verse, an apparently objective narrative (hence the stark and powerful nature of the best of the old Ballads). But Wordsworth's stress is not on narrative, but on description and contemplation. The use of suspense, of rapid movement, of climactic moments, all common to ballad poetry was quite alien to Wordsworth. For Wordsworth there is always a primacy of feeling: 'the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feelings'. (Lyrical Ballads p. 24) - in other words, precisely the opposite of the Ballad method.

See C.W. Stand 'The Influence of the Popular Ballad on Wordsworth and Coleridge' in Publications of the Modern Language Association of America Vol. 29 1914

40. Wordsworth to Cottle Early Letters p. 267
41. Field op. cit. p. 30
42. Lyrical Ballads p. 23
43. Songs of Experience K. 217
44. Lyrical Ballads p. 42
45. Rev. H.P. Ransley 'Reminiscences of Wordsworth among the Peasantry of Westmoreland' in Transactions of the Wordsworth Society no. 6 1884 p. 160
46. Ibid. pp 164-189

4. CONCLUSION

The most obvious difference between Blake and Wordsworth is that the former is an urban poet, the latter a rural one. With the exception of his unhappy three years under William Hayley's patronage at Felpham in Sussex, Blake lived his entire life in London - he was born in Broadwick Street (now in Soho), lived in Hercules Buildings, Lambeth, for most of the 1790s, and took up residence in South Moulton Street, near Oxford Circus, after his return from Sussex. But the places associated with Wordsworth are all rural - Esthwaite Water and the other Cumberland haunts of his youth, Racedown in Dorset, Alfoxden in Somerset, Grasmere and Rydal Mount in the Lake District.

Lest too rigid a distinction be drawn, it should be noted that Blake's London was not yet the huge metropolis we know. In his last major poem, Jerusalem, he could still refer to

The fields from Islington to Marylebone
To Primrose Hill and Saint John's Wood (1)

Blake knew the countryside round London. With his wife he visited the Flaxmans at Hampstead, then a village on the outskirts of London. (2) His acquaintance with Hampstead was certainly renewed towards the end of his life when he visited John Linnell and his wife who lived there. His letters to Linnell reveal his youthful acquaintance with Hampstead, Highgate, Hornsey, Muswell Hill and Islington - though he complains that all these places

always laid me up the day after, and sometimes two or three days,
with precisely the same Complaint and the same torment of the
Stomach, Easily removed, but excruciating while it lasts and
enfeebling for some time after. (3)

Blake's urban environment did not prevent him from writing pastoral. But his use of pastoral imagery, while clearly situated in the pastoral tradition, is neither merely derivative and conventional, nor on the other hand is it naturalistic. That is clear both from Songs of Innocence (compare, for example, the lucidity of The Echoing Green or Night with the stiff and traditional pastoral of much eighteenth century minor writing) and that masterpiece of pastoral, The Book of Thel. But Blake is never content simply to describe a natural scene: a critic would comb Blake's work in vain for such a description. Nature for its own sake does not interest him - 'Where man is not, Nature is barren'.⁽⁴⁾ Natural objects therefore usually take on mythological or symbolic characteristics in Blake's work.

Blake never travelled north of London. Hence he never actually witnessed the key elements in the industrial revolution - notably the changes in the Lancashire textile industries, although he would have been able to read of the development of the factory system in newspapers, and this is presumably one source for the activities of the 'Looms of Cathedron' which play an important role in the Prophetic Books.

The industrial enterprises which Blake did have the opportunity to see were rather different in nature. London expanded massively in size during the eighteenth century, but this was a quantitative rather than a qualitative change. The new labour processes developed in Yorkshire and Lancashire had not really reached London by the end of the century, and the capital remained, above all, a great artisan centre.

By and large London industrial enterprises were on a relatively small scale with the exception of the declining Spitalfields silk industry.

The industrial expansion that did take place in the eighteenth century capital was mostly directed along the banks of the Thames and its tributaries which provided convenient sources of power. Isleworth was a centre of local industry and reached its peak in 1796 with the opening of calico mills. The river Wandle provided power for almost 40 mills by the end of the century, and one Wandle calico mill employed as many as 200 people. (5)

In Lambeth, where Blake lived from 1791-1800, development had been speeded up by the opening of Westminster Bridge in 1750, followed by the construction of a road from the bridge into Kennington, and the improvement of the Vauxhall-Brixton road. These transport links encouraged much new building, including the establishment of a pre-fabricated stone factory at Narrow Wall in 1769. Among the new residential construction was Hercules Buildings where the Blakes lived at Number 13. By 1811 Lambeth could boast four potteries, an iron foundry, six breweries, two manufactories of steam engines, a soap factory, a coachmakers, and large timberyards. Not exactly a major industrial centre, but a considerable expansion over a space of three or four decades. (6)

But the show-piece of London industry was the Albion flour mill, built in 1786 and the first steam-driven enterprise in the capital. John Watt himself arranged the mill's machinery. There were 50 pairs of millstones driven by two engines and their productivity was expected to reach 16,000 bushels of flour a week. Not everyone, however, was enthusiastic about the enterprise. Millers using more traditional machinery were worried by the competition provided by the new mill, and, for want of other evidence, it is on this opposition that the blame can reasonably

be cast for the mysterious fire which destroyed the Albion mill in 1791.⁽⁷⁾

The industry with the greatest expansion in eighteenth century London was undoubtedly building. The population increased enormously over the century. The 1801 census established the total population as approximately 900,000. As there was no previous census, and since Bills of Mortality must be treated with caution,⁽⁸⁾ estimated figures for London's 1700 population vary - from 575,000 (E.A. Wrigley) to 674,500 (M. Dorothy George).⁽⁹⁾ It seems more or less agreed that the figure for 1750 is around 675,000.

Corresponding to the increase in the population was the physical growth of the metropolis itself. The rich were developing the West End, building the stately squares that are still familiar to present day inhabitants of London. But this development, usually carefully planned, was one whereby a few people occupied a great deal of space. Very different was the growth of London's poorer districts to the east and south. These sprawled out haphazardly, often in conditions of desperate overcrowding. Shadwell, Bethnal Green, Wapping, Stepney, grew with no defined plan and presented an ugly view to the visitor. Frequently whole families would live in single rooms, and the very poor would find themselves perched up in garrets, or living in damp and unsanitary cellars.

This expansion, whether genteel and planned, or wretched and chaotic, required massive quantities of building materials, particularly bricks, thus giving additional impetus to the proliferation of the brickfields that had appeared during the reconstruction of London after the Great Fire, when the use of wood in building had been forbidden. Brick kilns sprang up in almost every part of London - so much so that the philan-

thropist Jonah Hanway wrote of London in 1769:

we have taken pains to render its environs displeasing both to sight and smell. The chain of brick-kilns that surrounds us, like the scars of the smallpox, makes us lament the ravages of beauty (10) and the diminution of infant ailments.

Poets said the same thing in verse:

Where'er around I cast my wand'ring eyes
Long burning rows of fetid bricks arise,
And nauseous dunghills swill in mouldering heaps (11)
While the fat sow beneath their covert sleeps.

The increasing demand for bricks tempted less scrupulous brickmakers to increase their profit by adulterating their product. Dirt and ashes were mixed in with brick clay to create a substance highly unsuitable for building - this undoubtedly contributed to the disconcerting habit shown by many London houses of collapsing shortly after, or even during, construction.

Blake's many descriptions of furnaces (12) probably draw on the operation of brick-kilns, which he would have had the opportunity to observe at first hand. Erdman has pointed out that the smelting described in Night II of The Four Zoas is not an accurate representation of a blast furnace, but seems to derive from a knowledge of how a brick-kiln or a pottery operates. (13) And Vala's lament a little later in the same night is replete with industrial terminology applicable to brick-making: e.g.

We are made to turn the wheel for water
To carry the heavy basket on our scorched shoulders, to sift
The sand and ashes, and to mix the clay with tears and repentance. (14)

Blake may also have seen some of the charcoal furnaces that were operating in his youth in Sussex and Kent. (15)

The iron industry also provided Blake with a rich vein of imagery, partic-

ularly because, more than any other industry, this was associated with England's war effort. At times of war English ironmasters prospered greatly by fulfilling the increased demand from the government for ordnance. The industry expanded under the stimulus of government orders during the Seven Years War, the American War and the War on the French Revolution. The importance of government orders for the industry is shown in the fact that in 1781 three fifths of the work done at the major Walker ironworks at Rotherham was under contract to the government.

Some of this war production took place quite close to Blake's Lambeth residence. One iron mill in the Wandle valley manufactured cannon on a large scale and was famed for its 600 pound mechanical hammer. (16)

The connection between industry and war stands out brutally in Blake's work. The activities at the looms, furnaces and machinery of the Prophetic Books take place within a context of constant warfare. Blake's critique of industrialism is posed very much in terms of production for war. A remarkable sixteen lines from The Four Zoas sum up Blake's acute analysis of the Industrial Revolution:

Then left the sons of Urizen the plow & harrow, the loom,
 The hammer & the chisel and the rule and compasses.
 They forg'd the sword, the chariot of war, the battle ax,
 The trumpet fitted to the battle, and the flute of summer,
 And all the arts of life they chang'd into the arts of death.
 The hour glass contemn'd because its simple workmanship
 Was as the workmanship of the plowman, and the water wheel
 That raises water into Cisterns, broken and burn'd in fire
 Because its workmanship was like the workmanship of the shepherd,
 And in their stead intricate wheels invented, Wheel without wheel,
 To perplex youth in their outgoings and to bind to labours
 Of day and night the myriads of Eternity, that they might file
 And polish brass and iron hour after hour, laborious workmanship,
 Kept ignorant of the use that they might spend the days of wisdom
 In sorrowful drudgery to obtain a scanty-pittance of bread,
 In ignorance to view a small portion and think that All,
 And call it demonstration, blind to all the simple rules of life. (17)

Peaceful rural and artisan labour is abandoned in favour of the production of war materials. The misery, alienation and ignorance of the early industrial workforce is graphically shown, and is linked to specific policies - to the bellicose adventures of the English state. Blake sees the changes in the division of labour, the increasing complexity produced by industrialisation, as an evil: 'intricate wheels' become masters of men, whose labour is broken into small constituent parts - the filing and polishing of brass and iron, for instance - so that the vision of the whole is lost sight of.

The machinery of war, of 'the arts of death', is at its most ghastly in Night VIII of The Four Zoas, when Urizen, after a period of peace, (18) once again unleashes war on the universe:

Horrible hooks and nets he formed, twisting the cords of iron
And brass, and molten metals cast in hollow globes, and bor'd
Tubes in petrific steel, and ramm'd combustibles and wheels
And chains and pullies fabricated all around the heavens of Los. (19)

Los, the archetypal poet and prophet, struggles against the effects of war, creating his city of art, Golgonooza, as an appropriate polarity to the activities of Urizen, a harmonising influence to counter the bestial nature of the war. But

Urizen gave life and sense by his immortal power
To all his engines of deceit: that linked chains might run
Thro' ranks of war spontaneous: and that hooks and boring screws
Might act according to their forms by innate cruelty.
He formed also harsh instruments of sound
To grate the soul into destruction, or to inflame with fury
The spirits of life, to pervert all the faculties of sense (20)
Into their own destruction.

This harsh tone is something new in English poetry: for the first time a mechanised world has entered literature, and we are very far removed from the soothing couplets of the Gentleman's Magazine and similar

periodicals. The same grating and even crabbed verse will appear again as Blake deals with the same subjects in his two other long poems, Milton and Jerusalem. Biblical imagery of blood and wine - leading Blake to refer to the European war as 'the Winepress on the Rhine',⁽²¹⁾ which is call'd war on earth⁽²²⁾ - is yoked together with industrial images to produce lines such as these:

But in the Wine presses the Human grapes sing not nor dance:
 They howl and writhe in shoals of torment, in fierce flames consuming
 In chains of iron and in dungeons circled with ceaseless fires,
 In pits and dens and shades of death, in shapes of torment and woe:
 The plates and screws and racks and saws and cords and fires and
cisterns,
 The cruel joys of Luvah's daughters, lacerating with knives
 And whips their victims. (23)

The iron machinery and the wars against France have a persistent presence in Blake's work. Furnaces and battlefields litter the longer poems. In these epics there is always an enormous amount of activity, a ferment of labour, of building, and also of destruction - 'labour' and 'laborious' are among the most frequently used words in the Prophetic Books.

Whether it is Urizen building the Mundane Shell, Enitharmon at the looms of Cathedron, Los creating Golgonooza, or the anonymous and sorrowful labourers of the Four Zoas passage just quoted, the poems are full of work, of titanic activity. In this way, although Blake had no detailed knowledge of Lancashire cotton technology, they reflect the changes taking place in the economic structure of Britain.

When we turn to Wordsworth, what is conspicuous is the total absence of this from his work. It is one of the two great silences in Wordsworth's poetry (the other being sex). Admittedly it is a silence shared with many other poets of his time - including Coleridge, Keats and Shelley - but in any comparison with Blake that silence acquires considerable

importance. It indicates that a crucial aspect of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century reality is missing from Wordsworth's understanding of his world. The smoke and noise of industry does not penetrate Wordsworth's individual vision. The works by which he is remembered concentrate largely on rural scenes where industry has not yet made its mark. As the industry is missing, so are the labourers. There are no great scenes of building in Wordsworth's poems, nor indeed of any collective activity. His is a passive universe. We shall return to this point.

While Blake rejected naturalism, Wordsworth's reaction to the urban environment was one of flight. His relief to be out of the city and into the country is clearly expressed in the very opening of The Prelude:

O, there is blessing in this gentle breeze
 That blows from the green field and from the clouds
 And from the sky: it beats against my cheek,
 And seems half-conscious of the joy it gives.
 O welcome messenger! O welcome friend!
 A captive greets thee, coming from a house
 Of bondage, from yon city's walls set free,
 A prison where he hath been long immured.
 Now I am free, enfranchised and at large,
 May fix my habitation where I will. (24)

Here Wordsworth's relation to the city is one of escape. The first line sets the tone for much of Wordsworth's output: the breeze in itself carries a mysterious blessing, which cleanses and heals the poet. He needs no better guide in the Dorset or Somerset countryside than 'a wandering cloud'. Freed of the city 'I cannot miss my way! I breathe again!' (25) Wordsworth shakes off the mental and spiritual detritus of the city:

That burden of my own unnatural self
 The heavy weight of many a weary day
 Not mine and such as were not made for me. (26)

Unnatural is the key word here: the city is opposed to 'nature'; the selfhood developed by men in the city, and by Wordsworth himself in his brief stay, is contrary to that developed in the countryside. The rural air brings its own purifying power: the breeze outside blows on Wordsworth and in response he feels within 'A corresponding mild creative breeze'. (27) Wordsworth's doctrine of inspiration via nature is expressed very clearly here. A mystical communion with the natural world was to be Wordsworth's creed for that period during which he composed most of the poetry for which he is remembered - the 'great decade' of 1797 to 1807. To most casual readers of poetry today, Wordsworth is still the poet who wrote of daffodils, celandines, nightingales, skylarks and the whole gamut of natural beauty. It is significant that the nearest Wordsworth came to grappling with a serious problem of inspiration is in the Ode on Intimations of Immortality, which hinges on the poet's increasing inability to relate to natural objects in the same way as he could when young. (28)

Like Blake, Wordsworth may have known of textile factories from newspapers, but unlike Blake, he chose to live in conditions of semi-solitude in Dorset, Somerset and the Lake District, with a few chosen companions such as his sister Dorothy and Coleridge. Wordsworth may have introduced new modes of diction into English poetry (although that point is debatable) but the subject-matter of his verse is firmly within the problematic of eighteenth century sensibility. The objects or persons presented in the poems may be somewhat humbler than was normal for the eighteenth century, but there was no qualitative change in the way in which they were seen.

As for Wordsworth's treatment of war, this stands in stark contrast to

that of Blake, even when Wordsworth was opposed to British military adventures. In Salisbury Plain, for example, the indictment of war rests on the vignettes of two pathetic figures whose lives it has ruined. It thus takes place in conventional Spenserian stanzas: its pervasive gloom, and excesses such as the incident at Stonehenge relate it to the gothic genre, while its pathos belongs in the tradition of Gray and Thompson.

Wordsworth distinguished himself from the plebeian attitude to the war, by his lack of sympathy for France once that power had breached her own frontiers:

And now, become oppressors in their turn,
Frenchmen had changed a war of self-defence
For one of conquest, losing sight of all (29)
Which they had struggled for.

This is arguably historically more accurate than the popular societies' generally uncritical adulation of French military prowess, but it was a position likely to lead to a crippling impotence and isolation within the context of British politics. Wordsworth maintained an attitude towards the war of a plague on both your houses in the late 1790s. Not until the turn of the century, and particularly after the breakdown of the Peace of Amiens, did Wordsworth become an enthusiast for the British war effort. At this point, when Wordsworth switched to supporting the war, his isolation was broken and his work entered the mainstream of patriotic verse. England 1802 may be considered a fine sonnet, but both its form and its content place it in a firm tradition which certainly stretches back at least as far as the Milton whom it invokes.

Blake's vision of war, however, would not fit into Spenserian stanzas or sonnets. The loose and clanging fourteeners of Blake's verse inhabit a

thoroughly different world. Wordsworth, depending on his political attitude to the war, invokes either pathos for the plight of individuals who are its victims, or grand rhetorical declamations of patriotism. Blake actually looks at the mechanisms of modern warfare, and relates these to general social conditions. War in Wordsworth is timeless: in Blake the 'horrible hooks and nuts', 'the cords of iron', the 'tubes of petrific steel' are quite specific: they are the poet's conceptualisations of the European and naval battlefields of his own day, and they mark a decisive break with earlier modes of describing warfare.

Both Blake and Wordsworth wrote major poems on London. They have been compared before,⁽³⁰⁾ but a fresh look at the two pieces provides a useful point of departure for a final consideration of the poets, their work and their relation to the radical movements. Blake's London is in Songs of Experience, and Wordsworth's piece comes from Book VII of The Prelude, entitled 'Residence in London'. Blake's poem was engraved in 1794; a first draft exists in the Notebook and is estimated by Keynes as having been written about 1793. Wordsworth's piece refers mainly to his stay in London in 1793, after his return from France, though in it may also be conflated impressions of his 1791 stay in the capital. Here are the two poems:

Blake: I wander through each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infants cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
Every black'ning Church appalls;
And the hapless Soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
 How the youthful Harlot's curse
 Blasts the new born Infant's tear,
 And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse. (31)

Wordsworth: O Friend! one feeling was there which belonged
 To this great city, by exclusive right;
 How often, in the overflowing streets,
 Have I gone forwards with the crowd, and said
 Unto myself 'The face of every one
 That passes by me is a mystery!'
 Thus have I looked, nor ceased to look, oppressed
 By thoughts of what and whither, when and how,
 Until the shapes before my eyes became
 A second-sight procession, such as glides
 Over still mountains, or appears in dreams;
 And all the ballast of familiar life,
 The present, and the past; hope, fear; all stays,
 All laws of acting, thinking, speaking man
 Went from me, neither knowing me, nor known,
 And once, far travelled in such mood, beyond
 The reach of common indications, lost
 Amid the moving pageant, 'twas my chance
 Abruptly to be smitten with the view
 Of a blind Beggar, who, with upright face,
 Stood, propped against a wall, upon his chest
 Wearing a written paper, to explain
 The story of the man, and who he was.
 My mind did at this spectacle turn round
 As with the might of waters, and it seemed
 To me that in this label was a type,
 Or emblem, of the utmost that we know,
 Both of ourselves and of the universe;
 And, on the shape of the unmoving man,
 His fixed face and sightless eyes, I looked,
 As if admonished from another world. (32)

Wordsworth is talking personally, descriptively, of his own misery as an inhabitant of London feeling quite out of place there, and unable to form a meaningful relationship with the other city-dwellers. Blake is altogether different: his poem is not a personal recollection but an indictment. The 'I' of his 'London' is the lyricist's fiction, and the poem attempts to encapsulate in sixteen lines the reality and horror of the late eighteenth century capital. It is a vision of a society in organic crisis. The poem is tightly organised - from the general weakness and woe in the 'charter'd' streets of the first stanza, (the reference

is to the royal charter, but also implies binding, limiting, restricting),⁽³³⁾ the focus of the poem narrows to the individual voices, cries and bans (proscriptions such as the May 1792 Proclamation against Seditious Writings) and then to graphic illustrations of the reality behind the three pillars of eighteenth century society - the religious, the political and the social, all of which are seen as defiled, as blighted, as different from what they claim to be. The hypocrisy of the Church is shown up by the scandal of the Chimney Sweeps, young children sent up to torture and possibly death in the task of cleaning rich men's chimneys, and London's dirty churches are transformed into the whited sepulchres of the Bible. The war against France is the reality of 1793's politics, and the visionary poet sees the press-ganged troops of George III accuse the British state with their blood. Finally Blake turns to personal and sexual relations, and to the rottenness that underlies the veneer of polite and convenient social mores. Prostitution and venereal disease were endemic to eighteenth century London; but for Blake they are only the other side of the coin of marriage - a marriage that is joyless and loveless, where a repressive morality hides and restricts and where the bridal car is equivalent to a 'Marriage hearse'. This is the world of sexual repression evident in other Songs of Experience: the world of 'free love with bondage bound' of Earth's Answer,⁽³⁴⁾ of the destructive 'dark, secret love' of The Sick Rose⁽³⁵⁾ and of the joyless priests 'binding with briars my joys and desires' of The Garden of Love.⁽³⁶⁾

In its attempt at a total vision of London the poem seems to hesitate only once, in the phrase 'mind-forg'd manacles'. Blake had originally written, in the Notebook draft, 'german-forg'd links'⁽³⁷⁾ - a directly political allusion to the House of Hanover. The phrase is hardly poetically satisfying, so it is not surprising that Blake altered it. But did political

caution, as well as a desire for metrical purity, impel Blake to produce the line as it now stands? It is impossible to answer this, but a careful consideration of the finished version leads to the conclusion that the change is for the good, and that the concept of 'mind-forg'd manacles' is a rich one, enabling oppression to be located at other and more significant levels than merely that of the monarchy.

Two radically different interpretations can be put on this line, which apparently locates oppression in people's minds. An idealist interpretation would claim that oppression in fact only exists as a mental illusion, and that Blake does not advocate political struggle of any sort, but sees change as a purely spiritual factor. If this were the case, it would be difficult to understand how chimney-sweepers, soldiers and youthful harlots fit into the poem. A far more satisfactory reading of the line is that where Blake talks of 'mind-forg'd manacles' he is referring to what we would conceptualise as ideology. The line then refers to the dominance of a particular set of ideas that reproduce particular relations of production and particular forms of oppression in a given society. Such ideas both exist - they are real, and not an illusion or a smokescreen - and are fraudulent in that their reading of reality is not the only possible one, but is a partisan one, arising out of and defending particular interests, particular relationships. Hence the ambiguity of the word 'forg'd' with connotations both of fraud and of the Blacksmith's smithy. Breaking the mind-forg'd manacles, breaking the hold of the dominant ideology then becomes a precondition for political and social change, which remain of vital importance. This ideology does not merely exist in people's heads, however, but is articulated through a series of specific structures, political and religious.

Like so much of Blake's work, the poem has strong Biblical connotations. Heather Glen has pointed this out for the word 'mark' - of particular relevance are passages from Ezekiel and Revelation (where the 'mark of the beast' makes its appearance). According to Swedenborg, whom Blake had read attentively, if highly critically, the Revelation passage refers to the Beast's 'prohibition against anyone's learning or teaching anything but what is acknowledged or received in the doctrine'.⁽³⁹⁾ To paraphrase, and to render into modern terminology, the mark of the Beast indicates the dominance of the ruling ideology, a barrier to questioning received ideas about society and its ordering, an inability to see the world in terms other than those laid down by dominant forces, and which explain and justify their dominance. A crippling of strength and joy results from this - hence 'marks of weakness, marks of woe'.

The key passage quoted from Wordsworth is a climactic moment in a whole book of The Prelude detailing Wordsworth's stay in London and his collapse from the sense of wonder at the city he felt from tales of London heard before arriving at the place, to an eventual feeling of revulsion for the city. Adjectives of despondency and squalor litter the lines of this Book. There is a growing sense of the poet's isolation from other city-dwellers, and their own isolation from each other:

Above all, one thought
 Baffled my understanding, how men lived
 Even next-door neighbours, as we say, yet still
 Strangers, and knowing not each other's names (40)

The city grinds its inhabitants to undifferentiated atoms, and Wordsworth quickly finds a monotony in its streets:

Here there and everywhere a weary throng
 The comers and the goers face to face,
 Face after face; the string of dazzling wares,
 Shop after shop, with symbols, blazoned names,
 And all the tradesman's honours overhead (41)

Wordsworth sees and hears merely trivia in the London streets - 'a raree show', 'a company of dancing dogs/Or dromedary, with an antic pair/Of monkeys on his back', 'some female vendor's scream, belike/The very shrillest of all London cries'.⁽⁴²⁾ Ballad sheets 'dangle from dead walls'; advertisements 'Press forward, in all colours, on the sight'.⁽⁴³⁾ Cripples assault the poet's eyes.⁽⁴⁴⁾ He escapes to the theatre and watches, with pleasure but no great enthusiasm, a Sadlers Wells melodrama. He is shocked to hear, for the first time in his life (which is perhaps a little difficult to believe):

The voice of woman utter blasphemy -
 Saw woman as she is to open shame
 Abandoned, and the pride of public vice,
 Full surely from the bottom of my heart
 I shuddered: but the pain was almost lost,
 Absorbed and buried in the immensity
 Of the effect ...
 Distress of mind ensued upon this sight (45)
 And ardent meditation.

This is the nearest Wordsworth can get to Blake's 'youthful harlot's curse' and the difference indicates the gulf between the two poets: Wordsworth shocked that a woman can blaspheme, Blake compressing out of the experience of the London streets an indictment of his whole society.

The city also instills awe and fear into Wordsworth - fear of the potential of its people in united activity:

What say you then
 To times when half the city shall break out
 Full of one passion, vengeance, rage or fear?
 To executions, to a street on fire,
 Mobs, riots or rejoicings? (46)

Wordsworth takes one example, Bartholomew Fair. His description of this traditional event is one of the most unpleasant passages in The Prelude. The activities and enjoyments of London's common people merely revolt

him:

What a hell
 For eyes and ears! what anarchy and din
 Barbarian and infernal - 'tis a dream
 Monstrous in colour, motion, shape, sight, sound! (47)

A catalogue of the various entertainments at the fair follows, written in a vein of shuddering condescension. Wordsworth neither understands nor sympathises with what he sees: what is more, he fears it. He sees it as a threat to civilised standards - and at the back of his mind is the question posed earlier - what if half the city unite in pursuit of objects other than entertainment, if they 'break out' in rioting or worse? What will stop this human mass? His description comes to a violent climax:

All out-o'-the-way, far-fetched, perverted things,
 All freaks of nature, all Promethean thoughts
 Of man, his darkness, madness and their feats
 All jumbled together to make up
 This Parliament of Monsters. Tents and Booths
 Meanwhile, as if the whole were one vast mill,
 Are vomiting, receiving on all sides,
 Men, Women, three-years' Children, Babes in arms. (48)

Perverted, monstrous, vomiting - thus Wordsworth on the pleasures of the London poor. What Wordsworth sees as the chaos and confusion of the fair, is also a paradigm of the city as a whole. Bartholomew Fair is

typical
 Of what the mighty city is itself
 To all except a straggler here and there,
 To the whole swarm of its inhabitants;
 An undistinguishable world to men,
 The slaves unrespited of low pursuits,
 Living amid the same perpetual flow (49)
 Of trivial objects.

To Wordsworth then, the city and its inhabitants are an alien and a hostile force, which brings us back to our original quote. Like Blake, Wordsworth looks into the faces of the city-dwellers: but where the visionary Blake sees 'marks of weakness, marks of woe', Wordsworth sees nothing. To him

the faces are all anonymous - each one is 'a mystery'. Wordsworth's vision of the city is of grim monotony: everything merges into a blurred and meaningless sameness. The blind beggar, wearing a label, is a pathetic emblem of the entire city: his identity is not within himself, within what Blake would have called his 'minute particulars': his identity is a scrap of paper stuck to his clothing. The beggar's 'fixed face and sightless eyes' epitomise the city and emphasise Wordsworth's spiritual distance from London.

Indeed in one way the beggar serves the same function in the poem as Wordsworth himself - as an isolated individual, powerless amongst a mass that seems to have no meaning. And when the two individuals meet in this passage, no communication is possible: the Beggar cannot be assimilated into Wordsworth's understanding of his world. It is quite impossible to penetrate behind his blindness: only the crude, mocking label offers a clue to the Beggar's identity. Beggar and poet appear to inhabit completely separate micro-worlds, each one unknowable to the other. In this the Beggar summarises all the other inhabitants of the city, atomised, unknowable.

Summing up, we can say that Blake's London is a social vision of the city, while Book VII of The Prelude is an individual vision. In a series of sharp and concrete images Blake explores the city as a paradigm of 1790s society, and in those images stand revealed bitter social conflicts - sweep, soldier, harlot are all victims of their times, victims of religion, war, the moral code.

But for Wordsworth the opposition is not seen in these social terms - in his poem the opposition is that of the individual against the city. The

city is some sort of malignant growth that stifles creativity, and its inhabitants are part of that growth. Hence the mixture of fear, loathing and contempt which Wordsworth feels for London extends to its people (the poorer ones, at least). Their social activities, such as Bartholomew Fair, revolt him - while their political potential for 'mobs' or 'riots' adds a dimension of fear to his verse.

These lines from The Prelude were all written before Wordsworth's recognised collapse into overt Toryism: but they betray a political position that goes some way towards explaining that collapse. They retain a purely idealist conception of the old town/country dichotomy which functions on a plane of elitist rejection for the masses of the city poor. Wordsworth's yearning is for a quietude and a passivity, for

the peace
Of night, for instance, the solemnity
Of nature's intermediate hours of rest,
When the great tide of human life stands still. (51)

Implicitly 'human life', seen at its most vivid and hectic in the city, is posed against a restful 'nature', best experienced in the countryside. Action, and through action, change, are rejected in favour of 'stillness', of a quiet 'natural' beauty. This thesis will be openly stated by the older Wordsworth. But in the 1805 Prelude it already exists as a well-formed embryo, and this itself was only the culmination of Wordsworth's political development - on fairly logical lines - throughout the 1790s.

As we have seen, neither Blake nor Wordsworth could have been described as a political activist. Both attracted government attention, and Blake was even arrested twice: but the activities involved - Wordsworth's observations of Somerset brooks, Blake and Stothard's sketches on the Medway, and Blake's expulsion of a soldier from his garden - have precious

little to do with the radical movement.

As far as can be ascertained neither poet was a member of any political organisation. Equally, to the best of our knowledge, neither attended any of the mass meetings organised by the LCS, or by provincial societies, during the 1790s, or took part in any other public radical activity. Blake's one known piece of political activity, his involvement in the Gordon riots, is of a different calibre altogether.

Myths have grown up around the two poets' politics. Blake is alleged to have warned Paine of his impending arrest and sent him hurrying to France; Wordsworth becomes some kind of undercover Brissotin agent in Paris. Colourful though these tales are, they lack all historical foundation.

Blake and Wordsworth were not political militants. Primarily they were observers: they did not engage in politics, they wrote about it. Furthermore, neither was a particularly effective political writer. Wordsworth did not publish his most outspoken piece, the Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff, and his planned political magazine remained no more than a plan. As for Blake, his only venture into orthodox printing was The French Revolution: and this too was never published. The rest of his political writing was doubly inaccessible: both because of its 'prophetic' style, and because the production methods involved, while allowing Blake to control his own work, and to escape from some of the normal constraints of commodity production, inevitably meant that only a few copies were produced, and that these were expensive. We would have to conclude that, as politicians, both poets were failures.

Their impact on their contemporaries of the 1790s was slight. Joel Barlow

may have borrowed from Blake's America; and some of Blake's own brand of radicalism may have rubbed off on others of Joseph Johnson's circle. But there is precious little evidence for this. During his most radical period of 1793-1795 Wordsworth hardly influenced anyone at all. He was quite unknown. Wordsworth was to start gaining a reputation from the publication of Lyrical Ballads in 1798 onwards. Blake was to remain in obscurity for the rest of his life.

Both men, then, were 'passive radicals'. In their work one finds reflections on the developing state of French and British politics; and one finds commitment at an intellectual level, but not at a political one. The writings of Blake and Wordsworth, however, display some of the tensions existing in the radical camp. As I have suggested, 1790s radicalism divides roughly into 'plebeian' and 'respectable' camps, with the Corresponding Societies as the typical organisational form of the former, and Grey's Society of the Friends of the People as the most notable representation of the latter. Through their writings I have suggested that it is possible to align Blake with the plebeian radicals and Wordsworth with the respectable ones.

These two categories of radicalism are far from watertight compartments, and diverse strands of opinion coexisted within each of them. But the broad division is justifiable in terms of a number of issues that clearly separated the two radical camps.

First, the relation between popular movements and parliamentary politics. For the Friends of the People, reform would be won through parliament with occasional petitioning from outside parliament acting as useful pressure. Although the popular societies only rarely rejected parliament-

ary activity altogether, their stress was very much on mass action, and in their most daring phase the societies even created a body, the British Convention, which implicitly threatened to replace traditional parliamentary institutions.

Second, democracy - how much of it, and for whom? The demands of the popular societies could hardly have been clearer - universal manhood suffrage and annual parliaments. Although respectable parliamentarians had been prepared, in less troubled times, to champion both these causes, the Friends of the People were not. Many of them were far from enthusiastic about universal suffrage; their aims were much more vague and general:

First, to restore the Freedom of Election and a more equal representation of the People in Parliament. Secondly, to secure to the People a more frequent exercise of their Rights of elect- (51)
ing their Representatives.

Consistent with this was the popular societies' enthusiasm for Tom Paine, and the Friends of the People's rejection of him.

Third, France. For respectable radicals the French Revolution was a good thing up until 1792. From the Fall of the Monarchy (and particularly from the September Massacres) onwards, it became a very bad thing. The popular societies, on the other hand, did not desert the French Revolution, despite the Terror and despite the war. Many admired the Montagnards, and we have already seen how Thelwall took to calling himself a 'sans-culotte'. Their attitude to the war was one of unmitigated hostility: or, to be more precise, by and large the popular societies opposed British war aims, and hoped for a French victory.

Returning to the two poets, we find that it is possible to ascribe Blake to the plebeian radical camp, while Wordsworth is firmly with the

respectable radicals. There is a harsh material basis for this. The differing backgrounds of the two men undoubtedly exerted a strong influence over their work and their careers. It is hardly surprising that rural Cumberland and artisan London produced poets so different. Wordsworth was never really short of money, and he never had anything that could be called employment (if one discounts a few months spent nursing the fatally ill Raisley Calvert). Put simply, Wordsworth never had to work.

Blake, on the other hand, was a highly skilled artisan. If he was to survive, he had to use his hands to produce engravings. Here he had to fight an uphill struggle. His style of engraving was not in favour, and the type of work he wanted to do was not understood by patrons such as Hayley. He thus found himself reduced to drudgery in order to survive. Attempts to break out of the constraints he worked under, and to establish himself as a known and respected artist, all failed - the Night Thoughts, the illustrations to The Grave, and the subsequent disastrous exhibition.

We may have a better insight into the labour and activity in Blake's poetry if we remember that Blake was first and foremost an engraver, an artisan. He worked with his hands and depended on the products of his art for his life. Wordsworth never found himself in a similar situation.

The clearest political divergences between Blake and Wordsworth are over France. As a Girondin supporter, Wordsworth loathed the Revolutionary Government of Year II, and rejoiced at its overthrow on 9th Thermidor. Blake, however, had always approached the Revolution as a republican. The French Revolution is written from a republican and not a constitutional monarchist standpoint: the early prophetic books reveal a position

of support for revolutionary France which is clear enough up until at least 1795. What Blake thought of the Directory and of Napoleon is difficult to ascertain; the later Prophetic Books are too rich in mythic matter, and too poor in identifiable contemporary references, for any definite statement on this.

What can be said for certain is that Blake remained in total opposition to the war. Some of the most effective verse in the Prophetic Books is written in denunciation of the war (notably in Night VIII of The Four Zoas). The specifics of the passages already quoted refer, not to war in the abstract, but to the modern warfare fought on the battlefields of Europe and on the high seas at the turn of the eighteenth century.

Wordsworth's opposition to the war was similar to that of the Parliamentary opposition. It was also couched not in terms of overall social effect, but in terms of suffering individuals, as in Salisbury Plain. The war here is an abstraction: there is none of the shocking and gruesome detail that Blake depicts.

But behind the poets' different evaluations of France, and their different visions of the war, lay a different political attitude and a different perspective on the dominant ideology. While Blake penetrates and criticises the ruling ideology, Wordsworth's poetry ends by accepting it. Challenges to the social order cannot be mounted within the framework of the 'wise passivity' that Wordsworth allocates to himself in Lyrical Ballads. Wordsworth's characters hardly ever actually do anything: in the main they simply suffer passively, Martha Ray in The Thorn being the supreme example of this. They thus stand in contrast to the energy and activity displayed by Blake's mythic characters. Furnaces and looms

appear repeatedly in the Prophetic Books - Los, Urizen, Orc, Enitharmon, are constantly building, destroying, exploring, struggling. Whatever their difficulties, and alleged obscurities, these poems are undoubtedly poems of immense activity.

The active character of Blake's work directly contrasts with the 'wise passivity' invoked by Wordsworth. The poet whose emotions derived from the experience of 1790s London, rather than from mystic communion with nature, did not need tranquillity in order to recollect them. To come to Blake's Chimney Sweeper poems after Tintern Abbey is like entering another world - to be more precise it is like stepping out of a religious service in St. Martins-in-the-Fields into a mass demonstration in Trafalgar Square.

FOOTNOTES

1. K. 649
2. See Catherine Blake's letter to Mrs. Flaxman, 14 Sept. 1800. K. 800 - in this letter, interestingly enough, she refers to London as a 'terrible desert'.
3. Blake to Linnell, 1 Feb. 1826. K. 871
4. Marriage of Heaven and Hell K. 152
5. Christopher Trent Greater London London pp 223-224
6. A.D. Nash Living in Lambeth Lambeth Borough Council undated pp 23-26
7. Paul Mantoux The Industrial Revolution in the Eighteenth Century Revised edition London 1949 p. 341
8. For instance, Jews, Catholics and Dissenters did not have their children registered with parish clerks.
9. E.A. Wrigley 'A Simple Model of London's Importance in Changing

- English Society and Economy 1650-1750^o in Past and Present no.37, 1967 p. 44: M. Dorothy George London Life in the Eighteenth Century London 1925 p. 24. Included in these figures are five parishes outside the Bills - Marylebone, St. Pancras, Paddington, Chelsea and Kensington.
10. Quoted George op. cit. p. 98
 11. C. Jenner Town Eclogues London 1772. Eclogue IV pp 27-28. Quoted in R. Williams The Country and the City London 1973 p.
 12. See, for example, K. 282-283.
 13. Erdman op. cit. p. 334
 14. Four Zoas Night II 1. 220-222 K. 285-286
 15. At Worth and West Houtchley in Sussex, at Penshurst, Speldhurst and Lamberhurst in Kent.
 16. Trent op. cit. p. 224
 17. Four Zoas Night VIIb 1. 170-186. The same passage is repeated, with minor embellishments, in Jerusalem Chapter 3, pl. 65 1. 12-28 (K. 699-700) written some time between 1804 and 1820.
 18. David Erdman, following a strict historical scheme, identifies this with the renewal of war with France after the breakdown of the Peace of Amiens in 1803. Certainly Night VIII is one of the latest parts of the poem to have been written.
 19. 1. 92-95. K. 343
 20. K. 344 1. 131-138
 21. Milton Pl. 25 1.3 K. 510
 22. Ibid. Pl. 27. 1.8 K. 513
 23. Ibid. Pl. 27 1. 30-36 K. 513-514
 24. Prelude I 1-10
 25. Ibid. I 18-19
 26. Ibid. I 23-25
 27. Ibid. I 43
 28. Coleridge wrote of the same problem in his Dejection: An Ode - summed up in the line 'I see, not feel, how beautiful they are': the problem of inspiration faced by Coleridge and Wordsworth is of a fundamentally different nature to those of Blake as expressed in

Milton and in Los's subjugation of his spectre in Jerusalem. These have nothing to do with nature, but take place as mental warfare, a spiritual battle. The struggle that takes place within Blake himself has its physical coordinates in his plight of poverty, the necessity to indulge in hack work, and the impossible situation that this was to put him in, particularly with regard to Hayley.

29. Prelude X 792-795
30. See in particular: Raymond Williams The Country and the City London 1973 and Heather Glen 'The Poet in Society: Blake and Wordsworth on London' in Literature and Society No. 3 March 1976
31. Songs of Experience K. 216
32. Prelude VII 592-622
33. The concept of a charter was important in early English political thought. A charter would have an apparently liberating effect, but often in reality it served to limit rights. Charters granted to boroughs or corporations would favour some, but often at the expense of many. The granting of such charters was inextricably mixed with the confused and corrupt electoral system. Paine pointed ironically to the real effects of charters in Rights of Man (Part II, 242-3 Penguin edition 1969)
34. K. 211
35. K. 213
36. K. 215
37. Notebook K. 170
38. Marxist theory postulates a dichotomy between ideology and science: subjective and objective understandings of the world: - the former as a direct expression of a lived relationship to the world and subject to constant change, the latter a rigorous and intellectual analysis of material reality in all its dimensions. That Blake at least played with a similar conception is perhaps evident in the last line of The Four Zoas: 'The dark religions are departed and sweet science reigns' (K. 379). Indeed the whole of Blake's 'prophetic' work from the Book of Urizen onwards (particularly the long poems, The Four Zoas, Milton and Jerusalem) can be read as the stripping away of successive ideological layers, successive false or partial modes of vision, to arrive finally at objective truth. Hence the stress in these works on the realisation, uncovering and exposure of 'Error'.
39. Swedenborg: Apocalypse Explained section 840. Quoted in Glen op. cit.

40. Prelude VII 117-120
41. Ibid. VII 171-175
42. Ibid. VII 190-199
43. Ibid. VII 209-211
44. Ibid. VII 216-222
45. Ibid. VII 417-428
46. Ibid. VII 644-648
47. Ibid. VII 658-661
48. Ibid. VII 687-694
49. Ibid. VII 695-702
50. Ibid. VII 627-630
51. Proceedings of the Society of Friends of the People Associated for the Purpose of Obtaining a Parliamentary Reform in the Year 1792 London 1793 p. 4

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2. Archive Material

Additional Manuscripts in the British Museum, especially: 27,811; 27,812 and 27,813 (LCS correspondence and Minute Book): 16,919-16,929 (Papers of the Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers)

Home Office Papers in the Public Record Office, especially series 42.20-42.41 (1792 to 1799 in chronological order)

Treasury Solicitors Papers in the Public Record Office, especially files prepared for the 1794 trials (including, for example, the SCI Minute Book, a mass of SCI and LCS correspondence, depositions of witnesses etc.)

Privy Council Papers in the Public Record Office, especially files on the LCS, and on radical activities 1797-1799 (including membership lists of LCS divisions, accounts from government spies etc.)

3. Magazines

The most important consulted were:

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4. Pamphlets, Books etc.

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