

THE INFLUENCE OF MILTON ON
WORDSWORTH'S POETRY

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THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State College in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

179878

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Silverton, Texas

August, 1950

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CHAPTER I

MILTON'S FAME IN WORDSWORTH'S DAY

Throughout the eighteenth century the literary reputation of Milton had steadily grown, but the poetry of Milton had never been more generally or ardently admired by men of letters than during the time of William Wordsworth. The early romanticists seemed to have been responsible for this. When romanticism became the dominant word in English literature, it was only natural that the works of Milton, along with those of Spenser and Shakespeare, should enter upon an era of great popularity. Biographies of Milton were numerous, but the numerous editions of his works give the best basis for proof of his fame during that period. With particular reference to Paradise Lost this can be noted.

Here a genuine surprise awaits us, for we find that between 1705 and 1800 Paradise Lost was published over a hundred times. The wonder grows when we look at the Faerie Queene, which we are accustomed to think, had approximately the same number of readers as the epic. If so, they must have borrowed most of their copies, for Spenser's poem appeared only seven times in the same period. Shakespeare, to be sure, is in a different category: every family must possess

his works even if no one reads them. But what is our astonishment to learn that the eighteenth century was satisfied with fifty editions of his plays.¹

A cursory reading of the criticism, correspondences, and reminiscences of the period gives one the impression that with most writers admiration for Milton was deeply felt.² DeQuincey, who was himself "a great collector of everything relating to Milton", says, "Milton is justly presumed to be as familiar to the ear as nature to the eye; and to steal from him as impossible as to appropriate, or sequester to a private use, some bright particular star."³

✓ Nevertheless, the habit of imitating Milton, which began very early in the eighteenth century, is still evident in the poetry of the later romantic period. The Monody on the Death of Chatterton, which Coleridge wrote in 1790, is "Miltonic not alone in title and in being an elegy on a dead poet, but in the arrangements of its rimes and varying length of its lines."⁴ It has

¹ Raymond Dexter Havens, The Influence of Milton on English Poetry, p. 4.

² Ibid., p. 6.

³ Thomas DeQuincey, Reminiscences of the English Lake Poets, p. 6.

⁴ Havens, The Influence of Milton, p. 553.

also been noted that Lamb imitated Comus and Lamb himself very early referred to Milton as Southey's predecessor.⁵ Lowell saw in the blank verse of Landor "the severe dignity and reserve force which alone among later poets recall the time of Milton,"⁶ and Coleridge expressed a similar opinion with reference to Cary's translation of Dante. Keats' debt to Milton is noted by Havens, who quotes de Selincourt: "Keats probably borrowed more from Comus than from any other poem (or part of a poem) of the same length."⁷ Some thought that the blank verse of Wordsworth was the most successfully Miltonic, and although he does not say, it is probably true that it was the author of The Excursion whom DeQuincy had in mind when he spoke of the "best practical commentator on Milton, viz., the best reproducer of his exquisite effects in blank verse that any generation since Milton has been able to show."⁸

⁵ Charles Lamb, The Letters of Lamb, edited by A. Ainger, I, 89, hereafter referred to as Letters of Lamb.

⁶ J. R. Lowell, The Complete Works of James Russell Lowell, Fireside Edition, IV, 399.

⁷ Havens, The Influence of Milton, p. 214.

⁸ Thomas DeQuincy, The Works of Thomas DeQuincy, Riverside Edition, IV, 573, note 85.

A noteworthy point here, however, is not merely that the poets of the day imitated Milton, but that the practice of referring to him as a standard of excellence was very common. / It was so common, indeed, as to move Landor, a devoted admirer, to profound disgust: "When they lift up some favorite on their shoulder, and tell us to look at one equal in height to Milton," he says, "I feel strongly inclined to scourge the more prominent fool of the two, the moment I can discover which it is".⁹

The habit of judging Wordsworth himself in terms of Milton is of early origin. In January of 1804, before he had published anything except An Evening Walk, Descriptive Sketches, and Lyrical Ballads, Coleridge declared that Wordsworth "no more resembles Milton than Milton resembles Shakespeare."¹⁰ In 1807, Jeffery wrote of the inferiority of Wordsworth's sonnets to those of Milton.¹¹ Besides these Wordsworth had as yet published nothing to suggest that he bore any resemblance to the author whom he acknowledged as his master.

⁹W. S. Landor, Imaginary Conversations, IV, 40.

¹⁰S. T. Coleridge, The Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, E. H. Coleridge, II, 540, hereafter referred to as Letters of Coleridge.

¹¹Frances Jeffery, "Poems of Wordsworth", Edinburgh Review, XI, (Oct. 1807), 215.

It is curious that the pamphlet on the Convention of Cintra in 1809, rather than any of the poems, should have been the first of his published writings to elicit a definite assertion of Wordsworth's similarity to Milton. It seems evident that it was his work as a political pamphleteer in this instance which first caused Wordsworth's friends to look upon him as the Milton of his age and from the time of its publication "the tract has been a theme of eloquent praise by a long line of eminent men of widely varied interests."¹² Even before it appeared Southey had declared that the pamphlet would "be in that strain of political morality to which Hutchinson and Milton, and Sidney, could have set their hands."¹³ Charles Lamb, writing under the date of October 30, 1809, said, "Its power over me was like that which Milton's pamphlets must have had on his contemporaries, who were tuned to them."¹⁴ Coleridge, in a letter to Thomas Poole, January 12, 1810, called it "assuredly the grandest politico-moral work since Milton's Defensio Pop. Anglic."¹⁵

¹²John Edwin Wells, "The Story of Wordsworth's Cintra", Studies in Philology, XVIII, (1921), 15.

¹³C. C. Southey, Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey, II, 232.

¹⁴Letters of Lamb, I, 310.

¹⁵Letters of Coleridge, II, 557.

Yet Wordsworth's poetry was not unnoticed for the Miltonic qualities. In January of 1814, Leigh Hunt stated that Wordsworth "has merits of his own superior to his felicitous imitations of Milton, (for the latter, after all, though admired by some as his real excellence, are only the occasional and perhaps unconscious tributes of his admiration)...."¹⁶ This passage, written as it was before the appearance of The Excursion, is an interesting bit of testimony, for the opinion of those admirers alluded to must have been based upon the poems published in 1807 or before, since only two short poems appeared between that date and 1814.

The latter part of the fragment known as The Recluse (1800) shows conclusively that long before this time Wordsworth had got into the way of comparing himself with Milton. While he was preparing the manuscript of The Excursion for publication he wrote to Poole:

I have at last resolved to send to press a portion of a poem which, if I live to finish it, I hope future times will "not willingly let die." These you know are the words of my great predecessor, and the depth of my feelings upon some subjects seems to justify me in this act of applying them to myself, while speaking to a friend, who I know has always been partial to me.¹⁷

¹⁶ Leigh Hunt, Feast of the Poets, Notes, p. viii.

¹⁷ W. Knight, Letters of the Wordsworth Family From 1787 to 1855, II, p. 30, hereafter referred to as Letters: Wordsworth Family.

After the appearance of The Excursion comparison of the author with Milton became general. Lamb, in the Quarterly Review,¹⁸ Jeffery, in the Edinburgh Review,¹⁹ and the reviewers of the British Critic,²⁰ and the Monthly Review²¹ all noted the influence of Milton. Lamb, in particular, emphasized the Miltonic character of the poem. By the end of the year 1814, Southey could say that he spoke "with the most deliberate exercise of impartial judgment whereof I am capable, when I declare my full conviction that posterity will rank him with Milton."²² That Wordsworth was especially pleased by this feature of the reception of his work is apparent. In a letter to an unknown correspondent about The Excursion, he says, "Dr. Parr ... has declared it all but Milton; Dr. Johnson, a leading man of Birmingham, says that there has been nothing equal to it since Milton's days. Mr. Sergeant Bough has spoken to the same effect."²³

¹⁸ Charles Lamb. "Wordsworth's Excursion," Quarterly Review, XII, (Oct. 1814), 100.

¹⁹ Francis Jeffery, "A Review of "The Excursion", Edinburgh Review, XXIV, (Nov. 1814), I.

²⁰ A Review of The Excursion, (author not given), British Critic, III, (May 1815), 449.

²¹ A Review of The Excursion, (author not given), Monthly Review, LXXVI, (Feb. 1815), 123.

²² Southey, Life of Southey, IV, 91.

²³ Letters: Wordsworth's Family, II, 45.

The practice of comparing Wordsworth with Milton was a fixed literary convention from this time on, but there are some additional reasons for the rise of the custom. In the first place, Wordsworth was early recognized by his admirers as the greatest imaginative genius since Milton, who, on this account, would naturally come to mind as a term of comparison. In the second place, Wordsworth himself not only acknowledged him as his master but invited comparison by frequently referring to the example of Milton in his essays, letters, and conversations; his habit of quoting and talking about him must have been very evident to his friends, if we may judge by the testimony of Crabb, Robinson, and others. It was this, no doubt, as well as the fact of actual imitations, which prompted Charles Lamb to call Wordsworth "the best knower of Milton",²⁴ and the numerous comments on Milton in the essays and letters of the poet doubtless serve as the basis of Lane Cooper's assertion that Wordsworth is Milton's best critic.²⁵ In the third place, such evidences of actual influence and

²⁴William Wordsworth, The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, edited by A. J. George, (Cambridge Edition), p. 865, notes to The Excursion. All references to Wordsworth's poetry are made to this edition, hereafter referred to as Complete Poetical Works.

²⁵Lane Cooper, "A Compendious History of English Literature," The Chicago Dial, LVIII, (1915), 17.

imitation as were observed by Jeffery, Southey, Hunt, Lamb, and others, were rendered the more obvious by the fact that Wordsworth differed so essentially from most of the poets of the period intervening between Milton and himself. There are also certain traits in the temperaments of the two men, a few parallel circumstances in their lives, and some interests and opinions they held in common, which inevitably suggested comparison.

Wordsworth was aware of the fact that Milton's influence on him began early in his life. Writing in May, 1838, in a short "advertisement" to the sonnets collected in one volume, Wordsworth said:

Some of my friends having expressed a wish to see all the Sonnets that are scattered through several volumes of my Poems, brought under the eye at once; this is done in the present Publication, with a hope that a collection made to please a few, may not be unacceptable to many others.

My admiration of some of the Sonnets of Milton, first tempted me to write in that form. The fact is not mentioned from a notion that it will be deemed of any importance to the reader, but merely as a public acknowledgement of one of the innumerable obligations, which, as a Poet and a Man, I am under to our great fellow-countryman.²⁶

The phraseology of this passage, written when the poet was sixty-eight years of age, is sufficient proof

²⁶ Wm. Wordsworth, The Sonnets of William Wordsworth, edited by Edward Maxon, p. xxxii.

that Wordsworth himself believed Milton's influence on him to have been very great. Twenty-four years earlier he had called him "my great predecessor". Many other passages from his writings and his reported conversations might be adduced to show that Wordsworth, throughout his entire career, looked to Milton as an exemplar both as a man and as a poet. It must have been an almost habitual attitude of mind, which was apparently shared by the members of his household and some of his intimate friends. When DeQuincey professed to have discovered that the Richardson engraving of Milton "was a likeness nearly perfect of Wordsworth," not one member of that family but was as much impressed as himself with the accuracy of the likeness, and, with a few minor allowances, the poet himself "also admitted that the resemblance was for that period of his life (ca. 1808), perfect, or as nearly so as art could accomplish."²⁷

What were the innumerable obligations which, as a man, Wordsworth was under to Milton? "As the resemblances between the two men were no less personal than literary, it was natural that the devotion of the later poet to the earlier should be quite as much to the man as to his

²⁷DeQuincey, Reminiscences, p. 106.

works."²⁸ Many critics have quoted points in which the lives and temperaments of these two men were alike. Some of these are of course merely coincidental, but doubtless others are due to the poet's early choice of Milton as a man to be emulated. When this choice was made is difficult to ascertain. We can determine with some degree of precision when Wordsworth first began to look to Milton as an exemplar in art, but it is not so easy to discover when he began to regard him as a pattern for life. The two attitudes may or may not have been of concurrent origin. Certain it is that we see nothing in the parentage, childhood environment, and early education of the poets to suggest a parallel except that the "lake poet was a kind of Milton in homespun."²⁹ We are told that Wordsworth's father very early required him to commit to memory passages from Milton and others,³⁰ probably before he went to the Hawkshead school, at the age of eight, but we have no exact knowledge what impression this requirement made upon the young Wordsworth. Yet it seems clear from the familiar

²⁸ Havens, The Influence of Milton, p. 179.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 178.

³⁰ Christopher Wordsworth, Memoirs of William Wordsworth, edited by H. Reed, I, 34, hereafter referred to as Memoirs of Wordsworth.

passage in Book III of The Prelude³¹ that the life and art of Milton had become an inspiration to Wordsworth before he entered Cambridge, at the age of seventeen. It is commonly held that the poet had himself in mind when he described the early life of the Wanderer, of whom it is said,

Among the hills
He gazed upon that mighty orb of song
The divine Milton,³²

A passage which evidently alludes to the Hawkshead period. He once said that the poetry of Milton "was an earlier favorite with him than that of Shakespeare."³³ An idealistic youth like Wordsworth

could not print
Ground where the grass had yielded to the steps
Of generations of illustrious men,
Unmoved.³⁴

We know by his own statements that he was particularly conscious of the pervading presence at Cambridge of the spirits of Chaucer, Spenser, and Milton. Of the last named poet he says,

Yea, our blind Poet, who in his later day,
Stood almost single; uttering odious truth
Darkness before, and danger's voice behind,

³¹Lines 383 ff.

³²The Excursion, Bk. I, ll, 348-350.

³³Wm. Wordsworth, The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, edited by A. B. Grosart, III, 455, abbreviated to Grosart, Prose Works of Wordsworth.

³⁴The Prelude, Bk. III, ll. 277 ff.

Soul awful - if the earth has ever lodged
 An awful soul - I seemed to see him here
 Familiarly, and in his scholar's dress
 Bounding before, yet a stripling youth -
 A boy, no better, with his rosy cheeks
 Angelical, keen eye, courageous look,
 And conscious step of purity and pride.
 Among the band of my compeers was one
 Whom chance had stationed in the very room
 Honoured by Milton's name.³⁵

And then the young disciple tells the effect which the
 episode in Milton's room had on him:

O temperate Bard!
 Be it confest that, for the first time, seated
 Within thy innocent lodge and oratory,
 One of a festive circle, I poured out
 Libations, to thy memory drank, till pride
 And gratitude grew dizzy in a brain
 Never excited by the fumes of wine
 Before that hour, or since.³⁶

And of his Cambridge career he says also,

Those were the days
 Which also first emboldened me to trust
 With firmness, hitherto but slightly touched
 By such a daring thought, that I might leave
 Some monument behind me which pure hearts
 Should reverence. The instinctive humbleness,
 Maintained even by the very name and thought
 Of printed books and authorship, began
 To melt away; and further, the dread awe
 Of mighty names was softened down and seemed
 Approachable, admitting fellowship
 Of modest sympathy.³⁷

"The analogy with Milton is evident", says Harper,
 commenting on the lines quoted, "and perhaps Milton's

³⁵Ibid., ll. 283 ff.

³⁶Ibid., ll. 295 ff.

³⁷Ibid., ll 52 ff.

example gave him courage."³⁸

Wordsworth in his attitude toward Cambridge was hardly less independent than his predecessor. We are informed by his nephew that:

He was not prepared by habit or disposition to submit with genial affection and reverent humility to the discipline of the college; especially when that discipline was administered by some who did not appear to comprehend its true meaning, and did not embody its spirit in their lives.³⁹

He did not find his studies congenial, and "he appears to have indulged in a feeling of intellectual pride in taking a devious course."⁴⁰ This spirit of independence is quite properly accounted for by the reference to Wordsworth's own character and his early lack of restraint, but it is worth while to note the parallel to Milton's Cambridge career.

Another interesting fact is that to both, the University was more or less barren of poetic inspiration. Milton wrote his Hymn on the Nativity while there, with probably a few other short pieces, and in Il Penseroso he seems to have caught the spirit of Cambridge, but so far as his English verse is concerned, that is all.

³⁸G.M. Harper, William Wordsworth, I, 83.

³⁹Memoirs of Wordsworth, I, 46.

⁴⁰Ibid., I, 48.

As for Wordsworth, "scarce a single line appears to have been suggested by his residence at Cambridge."⁴¹ The only verses which are known to have been produced by him at Cambridge are those "written while sailing in a boat at evening."⁴² Also the editor of the American edition of the Memoirs adds this note: "It may be remembered that Milton complains of the shadeless fields and sedgy pools of Cambridge."⁴³

During his academic career Milton wrote a good deal of Latin verse; Wordsworth never indulged in this practice,⁴⁴ but like Milton, he was, even in his boyhood, especially fond of classical literature. Besides Homer, his favorite Greek authors were Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Demosthenes, and Herodotus.⁴⁵ "Before I read Virgil," he tells us, "I was so strongly attached to Ovid, whose 'Metamorphoses' I read at school, that I was quite in a passion whenever I found him, in books of criticism, placed below Virgil."⁴⁶ He then states that he was never

⁴¹Memoirs of Wordsworth, I, 50.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Letters: Wordsworth Family, II, 179.

⁴⁵Memoirs of Wordsworth, II, 492.

⁴⁶Ibid.

weary of traveling over the scenes where Homer led him and that it was the beauty of classical literature that affected him. The foregoing reference to Ovid may be compared with Milton's tribute to the Latin poet in his first Elegy. Alluding to his own "exile" from the university, he says, "Oh would that Ovid, sad exile in the fields of Thrace, had never suffered a worse lot! Then he would have yielded not a whit to Ionian Homer, nor would the first praise be thine, Virgil, for he would have vanquished thee."⁴⁷ Although Wordsworth told Landor,⁴⁸ in 1822, that his acquaintance with Virgil, Horace, Lucretius, and Catullus was intimate, his knowledge of the classics was probably not so extensive or so thorough as that of Milton. Both knew Italian early in life, but it cannot be said that both were equally influenced by things Italian. As for English poetry, both were great admirers of Chaucer, Spenser, and Shakespeare.

In their objective features the lives of our two poets were unlike in many particulars after they left the university. Without the immediate necessity of choosing a means of livelihood, Milton settled down at

⁴⁷ John Milton, The Complete Poetical Works of John Milton, edited by H.F. Fletcher, The New Cambridge Edition, p. 489.

⁴⁸ Letters: Wordsworth Family, II, 179.

Horton for a period of luxurious ease and leisurely study, terminated by a long tour in France and Italy which gave him the opportunity for making the acquaintance of leading men of letters in both countries. His return home was followed by the beginning of that domestic unhappiness which ended only with his life. The work on which his literary reputation chiefly rests was accomplished late in life.

A somewhat different account must be given of Wordsworth. After obtaining his degree, he began casting about for some means of support and like Milton, he rejected the Church as a means of livelihood, but for several years it was not possible for him to settle down with the sole purpose of devoting himself to art. He spent a year in France, but certainly under very different circumstances from those under which Milton visited that country; he made no literary acquaintances, but he had experiences which were to determine the bent of his life and art for many years. As a result of political disturbances, Wordsworth passed through several years of intellectual and spiritual distress, but finally recovered and was at last permitted, by the generous bequest of a friend, to give his time and attention unreservedly to poetry. This period of his life has been compared to the Horton period of

Milton.⁴⁹ Wordsworth had the devotion of his sister and his wife, and he was surrounded with domestic comforts so satisfying that he described himself as "one of the happiest of men",⁵⁰ and this state of felicity was undiminished, save by the loss of relatives and friends, till the day of his death. Although he was deeply interested in public affairs and wrote an occasional pamphlet of a political character, his poetic labors never suffered any prolonged interruption. Milton, as he grew older, became even more radical in politics and religion than he was in his youth, but Wordsworth switched from radicalism to extreme conservatism. In contrast with Milton again, his best work was done early in life.

A notable coincidence is that Wordsworth began to have premonitions of blindness at about the same age at which this malady overtook Milton, and the poem To Dora beginning with the first two lines of Samson Agonistes, is certain evidence that he was conscious of the parallel:

"A LITTLE onward lend thy guiding hand
To these dark steps, a little further on!"
 —What trick of memory to my voice hath brought
 This mournful iteration?

⁴⁹ Arthur Copeland, "William Wordsworth," Methodist Review, (Poole), LII, (1879), 253.

⁵⁰ H. C. Robinson, Diary and Correspondence, edited by Thomas Sadler, I, 245.

Partly on this account Wordsworth, like Milton, was in the habit of employing the women of his household as amanuenses.

There is also a circumstance with reference to the habits of composition of these two poets which may be mentioned but is somewhat trivial. Milton testified that "his vein never happily flowed but from the autumnal equinoctial to the vernal,"⁵¹ and Wordsworth rejoiced "in a season of frost and snow more favorable to the Muses than summer itself."⁵² Although this is not the usual attitude of poets, we can understand how it might be true of a blind poet, but it seems especially curious in connection with Wordsworth, since he was a lover of nature.

On the subjective side, the parallel between the two is closer, not withstanding Christopher North's assertion that "Wordsworth is, in all things, the reverse of Milton -- a good man, and a bad poet."⁵³ Speaking of Milton, Richard Garnett says, "Among the moderns, he is commonly compared with Wordsworth . . . The resemblance with Wordsworth is indeed very close in many respects - dignity of aim, gravity of life, early and deliberate

⁵¹David Masson, The Life of John Milton, VI, 464.

⁵²Complete Poetical Works, Note to "While Not a Leaf Seems Faded," p. 538.

⁵³Christopher North, "Wordsworth's Sonnets and Memorials", Blackwood's Edinburg Magazine, XII, (Aug., (1822), 175.

dedication to poetry, high self appreciation, haughty self-reliance, majesty of sentiment, preference for blank verse, especially mastery of the sonnet."⁵⁴ Both poets were at variance with the world throughout life. Their work was not appreciated, their "utterances were ridiculed and perverted,"⁵⁵ and both men must have felt a great loneliness of the soul. "So true is this that the following lines of Matthew Arnold on Wordsworth seem even truer of his great prototype:

He grew old in an age he condemned.
He looked on the rushing decay
Of the times which had sheltered his youth;
Felt the dissolving throes
Of a social order he loved;
Outlived his brethern, his peers;
And, like the Theban seer,
Died, in his enemies' day."⁵⁶

It is "impossible to believe that Wordsworth, struggling against all this opposition, should not have felt himself drawn closer and closer to one who had passed through precisely the same experience before him."⁵⁷

It has been denied by some that Milton's "soul was like a star and dwelt apart,"⁵⁸ while others thought these

⁵⁴John Milton, Prose of John Milton, Selections, edited by R. Garnett, (Camelot Series), p. xiii.

⁵⁵V. P. Squires, "The Influence of Milton on Wordsworth," Poet Lore, IX, (1897), 540.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸North, Blackwood's Magazine, XII, (Aug. 1822), 175.

words were truly spoken of him. It is certain that Wordsworth himself believed in the truth of his famous line. Whether or not he emulated Milton in this respect, he must have been conscious of a similar aloofness in his own life and character. At any rate, critics have noted the fact, and it has become almost customary to apply the line to Wordsworth himself. Gingerich also applies the next two lines of the apostrophe to Milton to the author: "What Wordsworth finely says of Milton was true of himself...:

Thou hadst a voice whose sound
 was like the sea;
 Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free."⁵⁹

Swinburne declares that the time has been since the days of Wordsworth when the entire sonnet to Milton "might perhaps with no less propriety have been addressed to him who wrote it."⁶⁰

Likewise another commonplace criticism is to speak of "the sublime egotism of Milton and Wordsworth,"⁶¹ for both were undoubtedly characterized by that peculiar kind

⁵⁹Solomon Gingerich, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning, p. 191.

⁶⁰A. C. Swinburne, "Wordsworth and Byron", Nineteenth Century, IV, (1884), 786.

⁶¹John Keats, Letters, edited by Sidney Calvin, p. 211, hereafter referred to as Letters of Keats.

of egotism which is often a mark of greatness. "Wordsworth's egotistical nature also showed itself, as Milton's did, in his impatience of external authority. Entrenched in his own opinions, he defied all attempts to move him out of them."⁶² Another similarity in character is that both poets lacked a sense of humor, and the "nature of both poets was austere and seclusive,"⁶³ and neither possessed the grace of doing trivial or little things with ease. Masson thinks that Milton is the superior in that his lack of humor is abundantly compensated by "a large measure of what may properly enough be called wit," whereas in the later poet "there is almost as little wit, properly so-called, as of humor."⁶⁴ Hudson argues that Wordsworth "comes off better than Milton in this respect at least, that he never attempts to be humorous; whereas Milton attempts it repeatedly, and always makes a sorry failure of it."⁶⁵ Havens comments that "Wordsworth was not repelled, as many have been, by the elder poet's egotism, his exacting nature, or his lack of easy geniality,

⁶²Wm. Morrison, "Affinities in Wordsworth to Milton," Poetry Review, XII, (1921), 125.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴David Masson, "The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, London, 1849," North British Review, XIII, (1850), 273.

⁶⁵H. N. Hudson, Studies in Wordsworth, p. 15.

for he had the same faults himself and thought lightly of them."⁶⁶

It cannot be denied that Milton and Wordsworth are curiously alike in their failure to make use of love, as some poets do, as material for art. Wordsworth informs us that he did not permit himself to write of love for the reason that he feared to give rein to his passion.⁶⁷ It is nevertheless true that both men were rather severe in their attitude toward women. Notwithstanding his unfortunate domestic experience, this has always been one of the hard things to explain about Milton. Strong says of Wordsworth:

He could go to the cemetery and look at the tombstone a few hours after his wedding, and that in spite of the fact that the exquisite poem, "She Was a Phantom of Delight," was written for his bride. His sister did much to correct this austerity. And though, like Milton, he did not greatly devote himself to his sister or his wife, he has recognized his debt to Dorothy in his poems. He says, for example:

I too exclusively esteemed that love
And sought that beauty which (as Milton sings)
Hath terror in it. Thou didst soften down
This over sternness.⁶⁸

⁶⁶Havens, The Influence of Milton, p. 178.

⁶⁷Complete Poetical Works, Notes to "Strange Fits of Passion Have I Known", p. 831.

⁶⁸A. H. Strong, Great Poets and Their Theology, p. 348.

DeQuincey's remarks on the impossibility of Wordsworth's ever being a lover in the real sense and his condescension toward women are very well known.⁶⁹ They are mildly suggestive of the austerity displayed by Milton in the Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce. But Wordsworth thought Milton's treatment of his daughters "betokened a low estimate of the conditions and purposes of the female mind."⁷⁰ And the wonder of it, to Wordsworth, is how Milton had this attitude:

"And yet, where could he have picked up such notions," said Mr. W., "in a country which had seen so many many women of learning and talent? But his opinion of what women ought to be, it may be presumed, is given in the unfallen Eve, as contrasted with the right condition of man before his maker:

He for God only, she for God in him.

"Now that", said Mr. Wordsworth, earnestly, "is a low, a very low and a false estimate of women's conditions."⁷¹

"Our greatest poet since Milton", says Stopford Brooke, "was as religious as Milton."⁷² And it is his

⁶⁹DeQuincey, Reminiscences, p. 140.

⁷⁰Grosart, Prose Works of Wordsworth, III, 455.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²S. A. Brooke, Theology In The English Poets, p. 229.

idea that the element of grandeur of style which "belongs so preeminently to them flowed largely from the solemn simplicity and the strength which a dignified and unbigoted faith in great realities beyond this world gave to the order of their thoughts."⁷³ Undoubtedly a deep religious faith is the ground-work of the art of both Milton and Wordsworth, notwithstanding the youthful semi-atheism of the latter. One writer sees in Wordsworth's religious change a relation to Milton. "On the background of Milton's account of the fall, repentance, and regeneration of Adam, the Rainbow and the Ode are seen to be organically related in their genesis as in their final form: together they illuminate an important epoch of Wordsworth's inner life."⁷⁴ Another critic thinks Wordsworth is equal with Milton as a spiritual poet when he says, "Of the moral and spiritual there is as much in Wordsworth as in Milton, the difference here being in the subjects on which their imagination wrought."⁷⁵ Each believed that poetry was the handmaid of religion; Milton believed that poetic abilities "are the inspired gift of God",⁷⁶ and Wordsworth that the poet derives his

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Abbie F. Potts, "The Spenserian and Miltonic Influence in Wordsworth's Ode and Rainbow," Studies in Philology, XXIX, (Oct. 1932), 613.

⁷⁵Morrison, Poetry Review, XII, (1921), 129.

⁷⁶John Milton, Prose Works of John Milton, II, 47.

light from Heaven, and each held it as a main purpose to stimulate devotion and to inculcate virtue and the love of truth by the aid of art.⁷⁷ Wordsworth went so far as to assert that "to be incapable of a feeling of poetry, in my sense of the word, is to be without love of human nature and reverence for God."⁷⁸ He thought that Paradise Lost might be as serviceable to religion as Law's Serious Call.⁷⁹

Yet he could not permit himself to go as far as Milton in the treatment of Christian doctrine as material for poetry. "Besides general reasons for diffidence in treating subjects of Holy Writ," he writes, "I have some special reasons. I might err in point of faith, and I should not deem my mistake less to be deprecated because they were expressed in meter."⁸⁰ It was further stated that he judged Milton to have done what he feared he might do. "Even Milton, in my humble judgement, has erred, and grievously; and what poet could hope to atone for misapprehensions in the way in which that mighty mind has done?"⁸¹ Comparing Milton and Wordsworth on theological

⁷⁷ Letters: Wordsworth Family, I, 364.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 302.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 365.

⁸⁰ Ibid., III, 191.

⁸¹ Ibid.

questions, Leigh Hunt says:

Both are liable to some objections on the score of sectarianism, and narrow theological views. But Milton widened these as he grew old; and Wordsworth, assisted by advancing light of the times -- cannot help conceding or qualifying certain views of his own, though timidly, and with fear of a certain few, such as Milton never feared. Milton, however, was never weak in his creed, whatever it was: he forced it into width enough to embrace all place and time, future as well as present. Wordsworth would fain dwindle down the possibilities of heaven and earth within the views of a Church-of-England establishment. The vast future frightens him; he would fain believe that it is to exist only in a past shape, and that shape something very like one of the smallest of the present, with a vestry for the golden church of the New Jerusalem, and beadles for the "limitary cherubs."⁸²

In his later life, Wordsworth came to believe in the established church as thoroughly as Milton disapproved of it. He defended it on various occasions, and, according to Crabb Robinson, "he even said he would shed his blood for it."⁸³ He found it easy to justify Laud, whom Milton and all good Puritans looked upon as the incarnation of wickedness,⁸⁴ and drew "cheerful auguries for the English Church" from the Oxford Movement,⁸⁵ a Romanizing propaganda which would have provoked Milton to a vitriolic outburst.

⁸²Hunt, The Seer, I, 206.

⁸³Robinson, Diary, I, 250.

⁸⁴Complete Poetical Works, Notes to Ecclesiastical Sonnets, II, No. 45, p. 896.

⁸⁵Ibid., Notes to "Musing Near Aquapendente", p. 905.

Wordsworth's unfriendliness to Popery was grounded on its intolerance toward private judgement, and he was equally opposed to dissent because it "is impatient of anything else," but he approved the Church because it had always held to a middle course.⁸⁶ Milton was allied to the second extreme. Yet Wordsworth, by implication at least, commends him for his "latitudinarianism."⁸⁷

Wordsworth "was predisposed to sympathize with a form of religion which appears to afford some exercise of the imaginative faculty."⁸⁸ He was an enthusiastic admirer of the arts of painting, architecture, and sculpture, especially when employed in the service of religion. "He loved reverence and decorum, and even splendor and magnificence, in the public worship of God".⁸⁹ He had, therefore, no leanings toward a Puritan system of theology and church polity, and these opinions are said to have been maintained unalterably to the close of his life. Milton was very severe in his denunciations of this splendor of ceremony as being "opposed to the

⁸⁶William Wordsworth, Prose Work of William Wordsworth edited by W.A. Knight, II, 338.

⁸⁷Ecclesiastical Sonnets, III, No. 4, p. 625.

⁸⁸Memoirs of Wordsworth, II, 338.

⁸⁹Ibid.

reason and end of the Gospel,"⁹⁰ and he likewise retained his convictions until death. Yet when we consider the magnificence of his pictures of heaven in Paradise Lost and his susceptibility to sensuous beauty in every form, we wonder whether, in a different age, the beauty of religious ceremonies might not have made the same imaginative appeal to him as a poet as it did to Wordsworth.

It cannot be determined with assurance just what points of doctrine Wordsworth had in mind when he declared it to be his opinion that Milton had erred grievously in his poems. There are one or two allusions to conversations in which he apparently discussed the subject, but nothing was reported of the conversations.⁹¹ Milton's own commentary on the theology of Paradise Lost, and the Treatise on Christian Doctrine, was brought to light after Wordsworth had reached middle life, and there seems to be no indication whether or not he ever read the Commentary, but undoubtedly he must have been interested in the discovery. We know in general that Milton grew less orthodox as he advanced in years and that of Wordsworth the reverse is true, but their conceptions of God, Satan, heaven, and hell, the creation, the fall, and free will were probably not unlike in

⁹⁰Milton, Prose Works, "The Reason of Church Government," II, Chapter 2.

⁹¹Memoirs of Wordsworth, I, 370.

essential features. Wordsworth points out the mistake of a critic "in the philosophy of his view of the danger of Milton's Satan being represented without horns and hoofs."⁹² He also defends Milton's conception as true and grand, and "that making sin ugly was a commonplace notion compared with making it beautiful outwardly, and inwardly a hell. It assailed every form of ambition and worldliness, the form in which sin attacks the highest natures."⁹³

Like Milton, Wordsworth has interested in education, but it cannot be said that his opinions were influenced in many particulars by the author of the famous Tractate. In general the later poet is an advocate of naturalness and simplicity in the educative process, an attitude probably derived from Rousseau, whereas Milton's theories are very artificial. Wordsworth "was among the first to protest against educational hotbeds."⁹⁴ His opposition to the education of girls by "the stimulus of emulation" was that much education would unfit them for "any kind of hard labor or drudgery."⁹⁵ This point of view might bring

⁹²Ibid., II, 463.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Complete Poetical Works, Notes to The Prelude, V,

⁹⁵Letters: Wordsworth Family, II, 337.

to mind Milton's failure to make any provision for the education of women. Both poets held that the chief function of education for this life is preparation for citizenship. Political conditions in Wordsworth's day would naturally suggest the importance of athletic and military training, and the fact that his views on this phase of education coincide with those of Milton may be purely accidental. It is nevertheless to be noted that in a discussion on the subject with John Scott he cites the Tractate as an authority: "And surely you will allow that martial qualities are the natural efflorescence of a healthy state of society."⁹⁶ He adds that all great politicians seemed to have been of this opinion and names them as Machiavel, Lord Brooke, Sir Philip Sidney, Lord Bacon, Harrington, "and lastly Milton, whose 'Tractate on Education' never loses sight of the means of making man perfect both for contemplation and action, for civil and military duties."⁹⁷

If Wordsworth could not agree with Milton on all questions of religious doctrine, he was at least essentially in accord with him on the fundamentals of moral training. In a letter to "The Friend", January 4, 1810, which is

⁹⁶Ibid., II, 88.

⁹⁷Ibid.

giving the young advice, Wordsworth noted that "The Friend" had cited Milton in describing the manner in which good and evil grow up together and insisting upon the knowledge and survey of vice as necessary to the confirmation of the truth, and then Wordsworth adds that if this is rightly applied it can become the guidance of a more experienced or superior mind.

Many instances might be given to prove that Wordsworth was as fond of quoting Milton for his ideas and sentiments as for his example as a poet, but an important one is supplied by a friend's account⁹⁸ of her conversation with Wordsworth:

We had been listening during one of these evening rides, to various sounds and notes of birds, which broke upon the stillness; and at last I said, 'Perhaps there may be still deeper and richer music pervading all nature than we are permitted, in this state, to hear.' He answered by reciting those glorious lines of Milton's:

Millions of spiritual creatures walk
the earth
Unseen, both when we wake and when we
sleep,

and this in tones that seemed rising from such depths of veneration! His tones of solemn earnestness, sinking, almost dying away into a murmur of veneration, as if the passage were breathed from the heart, I shall never forget.⁹⁹

⁹⁸Memoirs of Wordsworth, II, 476, Note, The Friend is referred to as Mrs. Helms.

⁹⁹Ibid.

This is especially suggestive as to the spirit in which Wordsworth quoted Milton, a habit that remained with him through life.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰Robinson, Diary, II, 224.

CHAPTER II

THE INFLUENCE OF MILTON ON WORDSWORTH'S POLITICAL VIEWS, PROSE, AND EARLY POETRY

In many respects the civil upheaval of the seventeenth century and the French Revolution were remarkably alike, and there is no more striking parallel between Milton and Wordsworth than that which grows out of political conditions during their lives and their own political interests. Both conflicts were the outgrowth of resistance to monarchical tyranny and were movements in the direction of national freedom; both resulted in dethronement and execution of a king; both ended in the failure of the cause of democracy; and both aroused the emotions of the people as a whole to a degree that has been unparalleled in the life of either nation. The struggle between the Puritans and the Royalists became acute during the early manhood of Milton and normal conditions were not restored until near the end of his career. The revolution in France began somewhat earlier in the life of Wordsworth, but was long drawn out also. "But if Charles' death shocked the English people as profoundly as the death of Louis did a later age, Milton

was the spokesman of the victorious party."¹ Wordsworth, like Milton, was an idealistic youth, and while the troubles of his time occurred in another country, he was interested and his life was affected as directly, and almost as profoundly, as that of Milton. Both men were disappointed in the failure of their hopes, although they did not come in the impressionable period of Milton as they did in the case of Wordsworth, but much of their most vigorous writing was called forth by great political issues. A biographer of Wordsworth says of him that, "instead of being remote from public life, he was, with the single exception of Milton, the most political of all our poets,"² and his influence was pronounced by George Hoar as "the greatest power for justice, and righteousness, and liberty, that has been on the planet since Milton."³ It is difficult to be very explicit as to the beginning of Milton's influence on the political views of Wordsworth, but there is something about the style and spirit of a letter to Watson, written in 1793, to suggest that he had read Milton's prose. Leslie

¹Herbert J.C. Grierson, Milton and Wordsworth, p. 158.

²G. M. Harper, William Wordsworth, I, Preface ix.

³Complete Poetical Works, quoted in Notes to "Ode on the Installation of His Royal Highness," p. 910.

Stephen says that Wordsworth's "republicanism resembles Milton's rather than Rousseau's",⁴ but Harper affirms that "his opinions, as revealed in 1793, were largely formed upon those of Rousseau."⁵ In the face of such different opinions, a positive conclusion cannot be attempted. All that can be said is that the letter to Watson reveals a temperamental kinship to Milton, and if the principles set out were not derived from Milton, they were at least supported by such tracts as that on the tenure of kings and the Ready and Easy Way. At least the "cause which engaged Milton and the earlier Wordsworth in controversy was the same -- that of human freedom."⁶

In June of next year (1794) Wordsworth corresponded with his friend William Matthews in regard to plans for the establishment of a monthly miscellany to be called The Philanthropist.⁷ He restates his political ideas and then proceeds to outline a plan for the magazine. Among other things there should be essays partly for instruction and partly for amusement, "such as biographical papers exhibiting the characters and opinions of

⁴Leslie Stephen, "Wordsworth's Youth," Living Age, CCXII, (1897), 864.

⁵Harper, William Wordsworth, I.; 180.

⁶Morrison, Poetry Review, XII, 126.

⁷Letters: Wordsworth Family, I, 68.

eminent men, particularly those distinguished for their exertion in the cause of liberty, as Turgot, Milton, Sidney, Machiavel, Bucaria,⁸ and others. The number and diversity of these names might indicate that Wordsworth knew them chiefly from reputation. The letter does have one passage of special significance.

Freedom of inquiry is all that I ask for; let nothing be deemed too sacred for investigation. Rather than restrain the liberty of the press, I would suffer the most atrocious doctrines to be recommended; let the field be open and unencumbered, and truth must be victorious.⁹

This certainly sounds very much like an echo from a famous passage in the Areopagitica.¹⁰

During the next four years Wordsworth passed through a period of intellectual change. For some time he was under the tutelage of Godwin, whose influence was finally dispelled by Coleridge and the sympathy of the faithful Dorothy. From 1794 to 1802 the influence of Milton on Wordsworth, in so far as it existed at all, was literary and not political. It was in May of the latter year that Dorothy read Milton's sonnets to him, causing him to gain inspiration to produce the first of his famous Sonnets

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Milton, Prose Works, II, 96.

Dedicated to Liberty.¹¹ In the Fenwick Note (1843) the poet speaks only of his interests in the literary qualities of the sonnets, but in a letter to Landor, many years earlier (1822) he remarks that he was likewise struck with "the gravity and republican austerity of those compositions."¹² We may be sure that his special interest in them on that occasion was one quite as much in their political character as in their artistic merits. At any rate, it cannot be doubted that Wordsworth's political poetry began with the incident mentioned of Dorothy's reading some of Milton's sonnets to him, causing him to take fire and write I Grieved for Bounaparte. The details of this incident are supplied in the Fenwick note of 1843, which is quoted in another chapter.¹³

Attention at the time was centered in the activities of Napoleon, and it would not fail to occur to Wordsworth that he had as good an occasion as that which inspired Milton's sonnets. It is not improbable that the sonnet To the Lord General Fairfax was the particular one of the six which Wordsworth mentions as his special favorites.¹⁴ It is the only one of these using the rime

¹¹Dorothy Wordsworth, Journals, edited by W.A. Knight, I, 123, hereafter referred to as Journals.

¹²Letters: Wordsworth Family, II, 180.

¹³See Chapter III of this thesis, p. 60.

¹⁴Memoirs of Wordsworth, I, 286.

scheme in the sestet that Wordsworth used in his first sonnet, I Grieved for Bounaparte; in no other one of the sonnets of 1802 do we find this formula. These opening lines of Milton's sonnet To the Lord General Fairfax:

Fairfax, whose name in arms through Europe rings,
Filling each month with envy or with praise,
And all her jealous monarchs with amaze,
And rumor loud, that daunt remotest kings,

would very naturally suggest comparison with the man whose name was then ringing through Europe and filling her jealous monarchs with amaze.

Two months after he wrote this sonnet on Napoleon, Wordsworth again visited France and saw:

Lords, lawyers, statesmen, squires of low degrees,
Men known, and men unknown, sick, lame, and blind,
Post forward all, like creatures of one kind,
With first-fruit offerings crowd to bend the knee
In France, before the new-born Majesty.¹⁵

The contrast with what he had seen on his former visit moved him to write a series of sonnets. In almost the first one he wrote after arriving in France, he denounces the "feeble heads, to slavery prone"¹⁶ with much the same feeling as Milton contemplated the approaching return to monarchy in England. Milton's denunciation

¹⁵"Calais, August 1802", ll. 3-7.

¹⁶Ibid., l. 14.

of those who "run their necks again into the yoke which they have broken and prostrate all the fruits of victory for nought at the feet of the vanquished" is not more severe.¹⁷ And when Wordsworth declares "that by the soul only, the nations shall be great and free,"¹⁸ a sentiment reiterated eight years later in the assertion that "from within proceeds a nation's health,"¹⁹ we recognize a favorite doctrine of Milton's:

What wise man and valiant would seek to free
These, thus degenerate, by themselves enslav'd?
Or could of inward slaves make outward free?²⁰

In his next sonnet, In London, September 1802, the poet again appears to have had the sonnet of Fairfax in mind, for his complaint:

Rapine, avarice, expense.
This is idolatry; and these we adore

echoes Milton's words:

In vain doth Valour bleed
While Avarice and Rapine share the Land.

And then, as if it were composed with the same breath,

¹⁷Milton, Prose Works, II, 119.

¹⁸"Near Dover, September 1802", ll. 13-14.

¹⁹"O'erweening Statesmen," l. 3.

²⁰John Milton, English Poems, Paradise Regained, Bk. IV, l. 145. All references of Milton are to this edition unless otherwise stated.

he bursts forth into his famous invocation to his predecessor:

Milton! thou should'st be living at this hour;
 England hath need of thee: she is a fen
 Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
 Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
 Have forfeited their ancient English dower
 Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
 Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
 And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.
 Thy soul was like a star, and dwelt apart;
 Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
 Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
 So didst thou travel on life's common way,
 In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
 The lowliest duties of herself did lay.²¹

One thing which caused Wordsworth to lose confidence in the French people was their lack of leaders who could command respect and admiration for integrity and high principles. How much better England had fared in this respect in her similar hour of trial is pointed out:

Great men have been among us; hands that penned
 And tongues that uttered wisdom — better none.
 The later Sidney, Marvel, Harrington,
 Young, Vane, and others who called Milton friend.²²

No doubt Milton is the central figure. There was a time when Wordsworth had lost faith in his country as the champion of liberty, but the thought of such great men caused him to repent, and he then thinks it inconceivable that English freedom should perish.

²¹"London, 1802."

²²Ibid., "Great Men Have Been Among Us," ll. 1-4.

We must be free or die, who speak the tongue
That Shakespeare spake; the faith and moral^s hold
Which Milton held.²³—

It is clearly indicated that the intensity of Wordsworth's veneration for Milton was a considerable factor in the revival of Wordsworth's faith in his country; and the fact that he was under the spell of his teachings from May until September (1802) and shows it in so much of what he wrote during that interval proves that it was not a momentary inspiration but a deep and abiding influence. Even two poems of the next year, There is a Bondage Worse, Far Worse to Bear and Lines on the Expected Invasion, would seem to indicate that the inspiration had not entirely passed away.

There seems to be nothing more of importance pertaining to Milton's political influence on Wordsworth until the publication of the pamphlet on the Convention of Cintra, in January of 1809. Such men as Southey, Lamb, and Coleridge have already been quoted on the Miltonic character of Wordsworth's essay. The most particular obligation to Milton comes at the end of the pamphlet; it is apparently a somewhat loose recollection from memory of a passage from the Ready and Easy Way.²⁴

²³Ibid., "It Is Not to be Thought Of," ll. 11-12.

²⁴Grosart, Wordsworth's Prose, I, 174.

Wordsworth seemingly did not have access to Milton's prose while writing the essay; in a letter, written in 1809, he asked DeQuincey to send Milton's prose to him.²⁵ That he could quote the Ready and Easy Way from memory, however loosely, is indicative of a strong interest in that work. As A.C. Bradley has well said:

England, in the war against Napoleon, is to him almost what the England of the Long Parliament and the Commonwealth was to Milton — an elect people, the chosen agent of God's purpose on the earth. His ideal of life, unlike Milton's in the stress he lays on the domestic affections and the influence of nature, is otherwise of the same stoical cast. His country is to him, as to Milton

An old and haughty nation, proud in arms,

And his pride in it is, like Milton's in the highest degree haughty ... And, lastly, the character of his ideal and of this national pride, with him as with Milton, is connected with personal traits,—impatience of constraint, severity, a kind of austere passion, an inclination of imagination to the sublime.²⁶

Also W. J. Dawson has expressed an opinion that is typical of the many on this subject:

No poet, save Milton, has written with so large a touch upon national affairs, and has displayed so lofty a spirit. His prose does not indeed glow with so intense a passion, nor is it so gorgeous as Milton's but it is animated and inspired by the same spirit. And in its more passionate passages something of Milton's pomp of style is discernable — something of his overwhelming force of language and

²⁵Letters: Wordsworth Family, I, 468.

²⁶A. C. Bradley, Oxford Lectures on Poetry, p. 118.

cogency of thought, Wordsworth's tract on the "Convention of Cintra" belongs to the same class of writings as Milton's "Areopagitica", and while not its equal in sustained splendor of diction, it is distinguished by the same breadth of view and eager patriotism.²⁷

When Southey was writing to Scott in February of 1809, he said, "I impute Wordsworth's want of perspicuity to two causes, — his admiration of Milton's prose, and his habit of dictating instead of writing."²⁸ "The excellence of writing, whether in prose or verse," Wordsworth has said, "consists in the conjunction of reason and passion."²⁹ Dowden thinks this is the distinguishing quality of what is best in Wordsworth's prose,³⁰ and the same can be said of Milton's prose also; this may be the key to Wordsworth's admiration of it, considered apart from its political character.

Besides the Miltonic character of the essay on the Convention of Cintra and the quotation from the Ready and Easy Way at the end, there is evidence in the poems which shows that Milton was still in Wordsworth's mind at this time. Almost immediately after the two sonnets

²⁷W. J. Dawson, Makers of English Poetry, p. 137.

²⁸Southey, Life of Southey, III, 131.

²⁹Edward Dowden, "The Prose Works of Wordsworth," Living Age, CXXVIII (1876), 197. Quoting Wordsworth's Preface.

³⁰Ibid.

Composed While the Author was Engaged in Writing a Tract Occasioned by the Conviction of Cintra, occurs the sonnet beginning:

Advance — come forth from thy Tyrolean ground,
Dear Liberty! stern Nymph of soul untamed;
Sweet Nymph, O rightly of the mountain named!³¹

This is an obvious allusion to

The mountain nymph, sweet Liberty;
of Milton.³² And the next sonnet of Wordsworth's but one begins with:

Alas! What boots the long laborious quest
Of moral prudence, sought through good and ill.³³

which has a striking resemblance to some lines in Lycidas:

Alas! What boots it with uncessant care
To tend the homely slighted shepard's trade,
And strictly meditate the thankless muse,
Were it not better done as others use,
To sport with Amryllis in the shade,
Or with the tangles of Neaera's hair?
Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise
(That last infirmity of noble mind)
To scorn delights, and live laborious days;³⁴

The phrase "moral prudence" occurs in Paradise Regained, Book IV, line 263.

Concerning Wordsworth's political views after he reached middle life little is necessary to be said, since it is known that he became so perplexed with fear

³¹"Advance Come Forth from Thy Tyrolean Ground," ll. 1-3.

³²L'Allegro, l. 36.

³³"Alas What Boots the Long Laborious Quest," ll. 1-2.

³⁴Lycidas, ll. 64-72.

of change that he swung over to conservatism. If he still remained an apostle of freedom, it was freedom broadening slowly down from precedent to precedent. He himself insisted that he was still true to his principles,³⁵ but Harper expresses the conventional view when he states that "a careful study, not only of what he said and wrote, but of what others said and wrote to him and about him, makes it clear that in the second half of his life he cursed what he once blessed and blessed what he once cursed."³⁶ If this be true, exception must be taken in favor of Milton, because not only did Wordsworth's admiration for him as a poet remain unchanged from youth to old age, but nowhere did he acutally repudiate Milton's theory of national liberty.

However, supposedly as his own views underwent modification, the various parts of Milton's prose appealed to him in a different manner. As he once read Milton through the eyes of a radical, he later read him through those of a conservative. A remark of significance is one attributed to him by his nephew:

Milton is falsely represented by some as a democrat. He was an aristocrat from the truest sense of the

³⁵Grosart, Prose of Wordsworth, III, 268.

³⁶Harper, William Wordsworth, I. 6.

word. See the quotation from him in my "Convention of Cintra". Indeed he spoke in very proud and contemptuous terms of the populace.³⁷

Whether Wordsworth would have written thus in 1794, when he was making plans for The Philanthropist is doubtful, but, as in the case of Milton, the course of events in his own lifetime caused him to develop a distrust of the crowd. His idea of an individual, as stated in The Prelude,

Is for Society's unreasoning herd
A domineering instinct,³⁸

and in the Ecclesiastical Sonnets, he asserts that:

But habit rules the unreflecting herd,³⁹
not choice

and these expressions find a counterpart in Paradise Regained where the people are called

but a herd confused
A miscellaneous rabble, who extoll
Things vulgar.⁴⁰

In 1843, however, Wordsworth's conservatism had become so pronounced that he thought it necessary to explain, though somewhat apologetically, why in the poem At Vallombrosa, he had given such high praise

³⁷Memoirs of Wordsworth, II, 481.

³⁸The Prelude, Bk. X, l. 178.

³⁹Ecclesiastical Sonnets, Series II, no. 28, l. 10.

⁴⁰Paradise Regained, Bk. III, l. 49.

to Milton:

To praise great and good men has ever been deemed one of the worthiest employments of poetry, but the objects of admiration vary so much with time and circumstances, and the noblest of mankind have been found, when intimately known, to be of characters so imperfect, that no eulogist can find a subject which he will venture upon with the animation necessary to create sympathy, unless he confines himself to a particular art or he takes something of a one-sided view of the person he is disposed to celebrate. This is a melancholy truth, and affords a strong reason for the poetic mind being chiefly exercised in works of fiction: the poet can then follow wherever the spirit of admiration leads him, unchecked by such suggestions as will be too apt to cross his way if all that he is prompted to utter is to be tested by fact. Something in this spirit I have written in the note attached to the sonnet on the king of Sweden; and some will think in this poem and elsewhere I have spoken of the author of "Paradise Lost" in a strain of panegyric scarcely justifiable by the tenor of some of his opinions, whether theological or political, and by the temper he carried into public affairs in which, unfortunately for his genius, he was so much concerned.⁴¹

Strange as it may seem, this seems to be as near as Wordsworth the conservative ever came to a renunciation of Milton's political teachings.

There are those who maintain that, although Wordsworth at an early age could repeat large portions of Shakespeare, Milton, and Spenser, there are "no traces of the influence of any of these poets in his earlier writing,"⁴² and "that neither quotations nor allusions appear in the poems written before 1800."⁴³ But if it is certainly true that there are

⁴¹Complete Poetical Works, Memorial of a Tour in Italy, note to "At Vallombrosa," p. 754.

⁴²Lowell, Works of Lowell, IV, 360, note.

⁴³Squires, Poet Lore, IX, (1897), 545.

no indications of the influence of Milton in this part of Wordsworth's poetry, and if there are neither actual quotations nor allusions, there are, at least, a fairly large number of rather obvious verbal reminiscences, as well as other less direct evidences of influence. Harper, referring to An Evening Walk states:

Reminiscences of Shakespeare, and particularly of Milton, run like a sweet undertone through the whole poem. Some of the best things in "An Evening Walk" are echoes of "Comus" He displayed more ambition than most poets of the eighteenth century to achieve a rich variety of musical effects. In this respect he apparently had in mind "L'Allegro", "Il Penseroso," and "Comus".⁴⁴

Another critic of Wordsworth has noted the Miltonic influences in Evening Walk and Descriptive Sketches, since these employ the use of inversions⁴⁵ of the pronoun in imitation of the Latin construction. Another Miltonic device which is found in these poems is the use of adjectives both before and after the noun, as "faintly-answering farms remote,"⁴⁶ and "sunless glens profound."⁴⁷

Some lines in Wordsworth's earliest poem:

When Superstition left the golden light
And fled indignant to the shades of night.⁴⁸

⁴⁴Harper, William Wordsworth, I, 189-190.

⁴⁵Emile Legouis, La Jeunesse de William Wordsworth, English Translation by J.W. Matthews, as The Early Life of William Wordsworth, p. 139.

⁴⁶Evening Walk, l. 153.

⁴⁷Descriptive Sketches, l. 84.

⁴⁸"Lines Written at a School Exercise, Anno Aetates" 11. 29-30 .

could have been modelled on some of Milton's:

The fiend lookt up and knew
His mounted scale aloft; nor more; but fled
Murmuring, and with him fled the shades of night.⁴⁹

Harper calls attention to Wordsworth's "huddling rill" in line 53 of Evening Walk as an appropriation of Milton's "huddling brook" in line 495 of Comus. Evening Walk, line 141, containing the phrase "Thunders heard remote", is borrowed from Paradise Lost, Book I, 477, where the noun is in the singular. The early variant of Evening Walk (1793) has in line 268 "interlunar cavern of the tomb", and brings to mind the "vacant interlunar cave" of Samson Agonistes in line 89. There are other suggestive phrases but the use of quotation marks with the phrase "parting genius" in line 71 of Descriptive Sketches points unmistakably to line 186 in the Nativity Hymn. These citations refute the intimation that the influence of Milton is not perceptible before 1800; the evidence is superficial, but it seems to be genuine.

Since the innumerable obligations to Milton begin to appear again in large numbers not later than 1802, it is difficult to explain their comparative absence from the preceding six or eight years. Clearly the answer is to be found in the author's theory of poetry

⁴⁹Milton, English Poems, Paradise Lost, Bk. IV, ll. 101-3.

as set forth in the famous prefaces which appeared at intervals during this period. Christopher Wordsworth declares that the clue to the poetical theory of Wordsworth "in some of its questionable details, may be found in his political principles."⁵⁰

Squires thinks Milton had much to do with freeing Wordsworth from enslavement to his theory of diction and says:

Immediately after the publication of the Lyrical Ballads, the young poet seems to have begun to grow more moderate. There are occasional relapses; but, in the main, the work from 1800 on is not glowing with the searchlight of truth, but it is softened and enhanced by

The light that never was on sea or land
The consecration, and the poet's dream.

Whence came this saving influence? Perhaps it was in part a natural reaction. We must also bear in mind the helpful friendship of Coleridge. but it seems to me that it must have been in a great measure due to suggestions from preceding writers, especially Milton ... I cannot escape the conviction that the influence of Milton was one of the strongest factors in rescuing Wordsworth from extreme realism, and in establishing his feet on rational poetic principles."⁵¹

To judge Wordsworth's theory of poetic diction by the worst passages in such poems as The Idiot Boy and Simon Lee is not right, but it should be judged rather

⁵⁰ Memoirs of Wordsworth, I, 127.

⁵¹ Squires, Poet Lore, (1897), IX, 550.

by Michael, The Brothers, and a few others. Dowden says that this theory of poetic diction has been misunderstood:

It was not the language of the peasant, as such, any more than the language of the courtier or the philosopher, as such, which seemed admirable to him: it was the permanent and passionate speech of man, wherever to be found, which he sought after; and in simple men Wordsworth found and believed that there was more of such stuff to retain, and less matter to be rejected as belonging to merely local or occasional uses, than in the speech of over-cultivated; artificial refinement.⁵²

It was the bad in the poetic diction of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that he condemned and not the good. Milton's influence, and very strong influence, would work for good, and it may have helped Wordsworth to grow in power, especially through his sonnets and blank verse. With reference to Wordsworth's attitude toward Milton in connection with his theory of poetic diction, it is probable that he did not recognize in Milton the originator of the false style,⁵³ but he evidently thought it advisable to free his own work from any verbal evidences of Miltonic influence as well as from that of any other poet of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He later came to see, however, that there was no particular necessity for t^his in the case of Milton.

⁵²Dowden, Living Age, CXXVIII, (1876), 203.

⁵³Leguois, Early Life of Wordsworth, p. 136.

Wordsworth says in his Preface that some of "the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose when prose is well written",⁵⁴ and then, adds "That the truth of this assertion might be demonstrated by innumerable passages from almost all the poetical writings, even of Milton himself."⁵⁵

By 1799 Wordsworth had become a thorough student of Milton's blank verse. This is indicated by the conversation with Klopstock, which Coleridge reports in the third of "Satyrane's Letters."⁵⁶ The Prelude was begun this same year, and whether or not it can be agreed that its verse is definitely Miltonic, there can be no doubt that Wordsworth consciously imitated Milton in the essentials. Attention can be directed at this point to The Recluse, which is assigned by most authorities to the year 1800. This poem or fragment seemingly contains three orders of Miltonic influence: first, a large number of verbal echoes and direct allusions; second, a verse-structure of a decidedly Miltonic quality; third, a Miltonic

⁵⁴Complete Poetical Works, Preface, p. 792.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶S. T. Coleridge, The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, edited by W.G.T. Snedds, III, 539.

cast of thought and sentiment.⁵⁷ In his shorter poems, of which nearly fifty were written in the years from 1799 to 1801, Wordsworth still adhered to his theory of simple style and diction which caused him to reject all verbal Miltonic signs, but in developing his blank verse and while attempting to map out a plan for a life work, as he certainly was doing at this time, he was under the dominant influence of Milton's example, as is sufficiently attested by The Recluse.

The first part of the poem is a description of the joys of the vale of Grasmere and of the emotions of the poet and his sister on settling here. He then gets to the point where he begins seriously to consider his life purpose:

Yet 'tis not to enjoy that we exist,
 For that end only; something must be done;
 I must not walk in unreprieved delight
 These narrow bounds, and think of nothing more,
 No duty that looks further, and no care.⁵⁸

So the "unreprieved delight" is rejected as Milton renounced "unreprieved pleasures free"⁵⁹ for the "studious cloister's pale" and the "peaceful hermitage" which symbolize the life of the dedicated spirit. For Wordsworth

⁵⁷Wm. Wordsworth, The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, Aldine Edition, edited by E. Dowden, VII, 332 note, hereafter referred to as Dowden, Aldine Edition of Wordsworth.

⁵⁸"The Recluse", ll. 664-668.

⁵⁹"L'Allegro", l. 40.

believes that to him

an internal brightness is vouchsafed
That must die, that must not pass away.⁶⁰

What others do not know has been made clear to him;
possessions he has that are solely his,

Something which power and effort may impart;
I would impart it, I would spread it wide;
Immortal in the world to come —
Forgive me if I add another claim —
And would not wholly perish even in this,⁶¹

This is a claim not unlike Milton's wish to "leave something so written to aftertimes, as they should not willingly let die", which Wordsworth himself was fond of quoting.

The last hundred lines of The Recluse show light and inspiration from the invocation of Paradise Lost.

It is not

Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of the forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe.
With loss of Eden,⁶²

but is a higher theme:

Of truth, of grandeur, beauty, love, and hope,
And melancholy fear subdued by faith;
Of blessed consolations in distress;
Of moral strength, and intellectual power;
Of joy in widest commonality spread;
Of the individual mind that keeps her own
Inviolable retirement, subject there
To conscience only, and the law supreme

⁶⁰"The Recluse", ll. 675-676.

⁶¹Ibid., ll. 689-690.

⁶²Paradise Lost, Bk. I, ll. 1-4.

Of that intelligence which governs all —
 I sing! — 'Tis audience let me find though few!"
 So prayed, more gaining than he asked, the Bard—
 In holiest word.⁶³

Harper commenting on the lines which immediately follow says, "Milton at his highest pitch, in the opening of the third and seventh books of Paradise Lost, if followed with a vigorous wing by his disciple."⁶⁴ It is in the seventh book that Milton addresses Urania and Wordsworth takes the same cue and proceeds:

Urania, I shall need
 Thy guidance, or a greater Muse, if such
 Decend on earth or dwell in highest heaven!
 For I must tread on shadowy ground must sink
 Deep — and, aloft ascending, breathe in worlds
 To which the heaven of heavens is but a vale.
 All strength — all terror, single or in bands,
 That ever was put forth in personal form —
 Jehovaⁿ with his thunder, and the choir
 Of shouting angels, and the emp^yfeal thrones—
 I pass them unalarmed. Not chaos, not
 The darkest pit of lowest Erebus.
 Nor aught of blinder vacancy, scooped out
 By help of dreams — can breed such fear and awe
 As fall upon us often when we look
 Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man —⁶⁵

A few lines later he asks,

Paradise, sand groves
 Elysian, Fortunate Fields — like those of old
 Sought in the Atlantic Main — why should they be
 A history only of departed things,
 Or a mere fiction of what never was?⁶⁶

which seems to compare his interest with the work of Milton.

⁶³"The Recluse", ll. 767-777.

⁶⁴Harper, William Wordsworth, II, 7.

⁶⁵"The Recluse", ll. 778-793.

⁶⁶ll. 799-803.

He sums up his purpose by adding that "This is our high argument", and these words are borrowed from the ninth book of Paradise Lost, line 42. Also, in book one, the Heavenly Spirit is addressed:

And chiefly Thou, O Spirit! thou dost prefer
Before all temples, th' upright heart and pure,
Instruct me for thou know'st.⁶⁷

And Wordsworth recalls the form and sentiment in the second invocation:

Decend, prophetic Spirit! that inspir'st
The human Soul of universal earth,
Dreaming on things to come; and dost possess
A metropolitan temple in the hearts
Of mighty Poets; upon me bestow
A gift of genuine insight; that my song
With star-like virtue in its place may shine,
Shedding benignant influence, and secure
Itself from all malevolent effect
Of those mutations that extend their sway
Throughout the nether sphere!⁶⁸

Whether the fragment which now bears the name The Recluse was composed in 1800 or five years later, as Knight believed,⁶⁹ it obviously bears a close relation in time to The Prelude, which was written from 1799 to 1805, and to the early part of The Excursion. In the preface to the first edition of The Excursion the last hundred lines of The Recluse is included; this part

⁶⁷Paradise Lost, Bk. I, ll. 17-19.

⁶⁸"The Recluse", ll. 836-846.

⁶⁹Dowden, Aldine Edition of Wordsworth, VII, p. 332.

contains many evidences of Miltonic influence.

Reverting now to Wordsworth's statement that when he began to decide on the profession of a poet for life, he was convinced that he must study and equal, if he could, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton, we find certain entries in Dorothy's Journal between November, 1801, and December, 1802, which indicate that he was actually making a study of these poets. In November and December of 1801 he wrote his paraphrases of Chaucer, and from that time until April frequent mention is made of their reading Spenser. Under the date of February 2nd, occurs an interesting entry: "After tea I read aloud the eleventh book of 'Paradise Lost'. We were much impressed and also moved to tears. The papers came in soon after I laid aside the book — a good thing for William."⁷⁰ These phrases show the effect of the reading on Wordsworth, and it was in May of the same year that Dorothy read Milton's sonnets to her brother, inspiring him to emulation. On June 3rd, she speaks of "sitting in the window reading Milton's 'Penseroso' to William",⁷¹ and again on December 24th she writes, "William is now sitting by me at half-past ten o'clock. I have been ... repeating some of his

⁷⁰Journals, I, 113.

⁷¹Ibid., I, 127.

sonnets to him, reading some of Milton's and the 'Allegro' and 'Penseroso'".⁷² Early in the poems of 1802 the quotations and verbal borrowings from Milton began to reappear as we have seen, and thereafter they are to be found continuously.

⁷²Ibid., I, 156.

CHAPTER III

WORDSWORTH'S SONNETS AND SHORTER POEMS IN BLANK VERSE

In no other capacity has Wordsworth more often been compared with Milton than as a sonneteer. There are at least three statements of Wordsworth's in which his debt to Milton in the sonnets is acknowledged. Wordsworth wrote Landor on April 20, 1822, that he had known Milton's sonnets by heart at the time Dorothy read them to him.¹ The prefatory advertisement to the Sonnets collected in one volume, dated May 21st, 1838, has already been cited.² The Fenwick note of 1843 supplies details of Wordsworth's admiration for Milton:

In the cottage, Town-end, Grasmere, one afternoon in 1801, my sister read to me the Sonnets of Milton. I had long been acquainted with them, but I was particularly struck on that occasion with the dignified simplicity and majestic harmony that runs through most of them, — in character so totally different from the Italian, and still more so from Shakespeare's fine Sonnets. I took fire, if I may be allowed to say so, and produced three Sonnets the same afternoon, the first I ever wrote except an irregular one at school. Of these three, the only one I distinctly remember is — "I grieved for Buonaparte." One was never written down: the third which was, I believe, preserved, I cannot particularise.³

¹Letters: Wordsworth Family, II, 180.

²See p. 9 of this thesis.

³Complete Poetical Works, Note to "Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Roam," p. 346.

Again, we have Dorothy's entry in the Journal on May 21, 1802, in which she says, "William wrote two sonnets on Buonaparte, after I had read Milton's sonnets to him."⁴ Long before Wordsworth had acknowledged his "innumerable obligation" to Milton, the fact of the imitation was noted by Jeffery as early as October, 1807:

All English writers of sonnets have imitated Milton; and, in this way, Mr. Wordsworth, when he writes sonnets, escapes again from the trammels of his unfortunate system; and the consequence is, that his sonnets are as much superior to the greater part of his other poems, as Milton's sonnets are superior to his.⁵

If Jeffery meant that Wordsworth escaped from the trammels of his system by doing the same kind of thing as Milton, then there may be some truth in his statement; otherwise there seems to be more in the opinion of De Vere:

Wordsworth's sonnets triumphed early over that part of his theory of diction which, though sound in the main, was incomplete. They sprang from a more passionate impulse than the average of his reflective poetry, and the condensation required by their structural limits forced the passion that inspired them to mount more high.⁶

It is in this expression of profound feeling that Wordsworth's sonnets manifest their closest kinship to those of Milton. This kinship may be noticed by comparing two

⁴Journals, I, 123.

⁵Jeffrey, Edinburgh Review, XI, (Oct. 1807), 230.

⁶Aubrey De Vere, Essay Chiefly on Poetry, Riverside Edition, I, 141.

of their sonnets, both of which defend basic human liberties. The occasion of Wordsworth's November 1806 was the battle of Jena and the battle of Austerlitz. The poet expresses his feelings as follows:

Another year! —another deadly blow!
 Another mighty Empire overthrown!
 And We are left, or shall be left, alone;
 The last that dare to struggle with the Foe.
 'T is we! from this day forward we shall know
 That in ourselves our safety must be sought;
 That in our own right hands it must be wrought;
 That we must stand unpropped, or be laid low
 O dastard whom such foretaste doth not cheer!
 We shall exult, if they who rule the land
 Be men who hold its many blessings dear,
 Wise, upright, valiant; not a servile band,
 Who are to judge of danger which they fear,
 And honour which they do not understand.

Milton's sonnet On The Late Massacre in Piedmont refers to the climax of a long religious persecution of the Waldenses and he says:

Avenge O Lord thy slaughter'd Saints, whose bones
 Lie scatter'd on the Alpine mountains cold,
 Ev'n them who kept thy truth so pure of old
 When all our Fathers worship'd Stocks and Stones,
 Forget not: in thy book record their groanes
 Who were thy Sheep and in their antient Fold
 Slayn by the bloody Piemontese that roll'd
 Mother with Infant down the Rocks. Their moans
 The Vales redoubl'd to the Hills, and they
 To Heav'n. Their martyr'd blood and ashes sow
 O're all th' Italian fields where still doth sway
 The triple Tyrant: that from these may grow
 A hunder'd-fold, who having learnt thy way
 Early may fly the Babylonian wo^o.

Both sonnets were written at a dark hour in the history of Europe. Milton appeals for the wrong to be avenged that was brought about by the edict of the Duke of Savoy, who

was also Prince of Piedmont. The Waldenses were ordered to become Papists or give up their property and leave the country; upon their resistance, troops were marched in and terrible atrocities followed. England stood alone to defend them; Cromwell took on himself the task of alleviating the sufferings of the survivors and calling the offenders to accounts. At the time Wordsworth's sonnet was written England saw oppressed people on every hand and was seemingly alone to defend the freedom of Europe. Both Prussia and Austria, England's allies at the time, had been shattered. Wordsworth voiced an appeal that England remain strong through the basic truths of righteousness. De Vere speaks of an "under-swelling intellectual and imaginative passion,"⁷ which characterizes the best work of both Milton and Wordsworth. He further states that Milton's sonnet On The Late Massacre in Piedmont, is the "most impassioned of his minor poems," and that most of Wordsworth's are constituted by passion of the same order. Alden Sampson thinks Wordsworth was endowed with a spirit akin to that of the art displayed in the sonnets of Milton and also states:

The conditions under which were composed Wordsworth's sonnets and those of Milton were as different as possible ... Solitude and fostering care were absolutely necessary to the accomplishments of that

⁷Ibid., I, 136.

which Wordsworth performed; on the contrary, Milton produced the work that we are considering amid the bustle and distractions of public affairs, and while occupied in fighting the disputatious battles of his parties.⁸

Coming now to the subject of structure, we find that, while he did not imitate with slavish exactness, Wordsworth based his theory on his own understanding of Milton's work. Early in his career as a writer of sonnets Wordsworth wrote to his brother John:

Milton's sonnets ... I think manly and dignified compositions, distinguished by simplicity and unity of aim, and undisfigured by false or vicious ornaments. They are in several places incorrect, and sometimes uncouth in language, and, perhaps, in some, inharmonious; yet upon the whole, I think the music exceedingly well suited to its end, that is, it has an energetic and varied flow of sound crowding into narrow room more of the combined effect of rime and blank verse than can be done by any other kind of verse that I know of.⁹

Wordsworth put into practice some of the qualities he had admired in Milton; this may be noticed in I Grieved for Buonaparte:

I grieved for Bounaparte, with a vain
 And an unthinking grief! The tenderest mood
 Of that Man's mind — what can it be? what food
 Fed his first hopes? what knowledge could he gain?
 'T is not in battles that from youth we train
 The Governor who must be wise and good,
 And temper with the sternness of the brain
 Thoughts motherly, and meek as womanhood.
 Wisdom doth live with children round her knees:
 Books, leisure, perfect freedom, and the talk
 Man holds with week-day man in the hourly walk

⁸Alden Sampson, Studies in Milton, 151 ff.

⁹Memoirs of Wordsworth, I, 287.

Of the mind's business: these are the degrees
 By which true Sway doth mount; this is the stalk
 True Power doth grow on; and her rights are these.

With the idea of structure in mind, J.B. McNulty says
 of this sonnet:

Here we find the very qualities which Wordsworth admired in Milton's sonnets: dignity, simplicity, unity of object, republican austerity, and the combined effect of rhyme and blank verse. This latter effect is achieved, in large part by interrupting the lines seven times with strong pauses, indicated by an exclamation point, a dash, two question marks, a colon, and two semicolons; and by ending independent clauses before the ends of lines in five places. Milton employed the same devices to achieve the same effects.¹⁰

Something has already been said in Chapter II relative to the fact that Milton's sonnet To My Lord Fairfax may have been decisive in formulating the tone of Wordsworth's I Grieved for Buonaparte.¹¹ In 1833 Alexander Dyce asked for permission to dedicate his Specimens of English Sonnets to Wordsworth. In answer to this request, Wordsworth wrote in part as follows:

Do you mean to have a short preface upon the construction of the sonnet? Though I have written so many, I have scarcely made up my mind on the subject. It should seem that the sonnet like every other legitimate composition, ought to have a beginning, a middle, and an end; in other words, to consist of three parts, like the three parts of a

¹⁰John B. McNulty, Milton's Influence on Wordsworth's Early Sonnets," Publications of the Modern Language Association, LXII, (1947), 748.

¹¹See page 39 of this thesis.

syllogism, if such an illustration may be used. But the frame of metre adopted by the Italians does not accord with this view; and, as adhered to by them, it seems to be, if not arbitrary, best fitted to a division of the sense into two parts, of eight and six lines each. Milton, however, has not submitted to this; in the better half of his sonnets the sense does not close with the rhyme at the eighth line, but overflows into the second portion of the metre. Now, it has struck me that this is not done merely to gratify the ear by variety and freedom of sound, but also to aid in giving that pervading sense of intense unity in which the excellence of the sonnet has always seemed to me mainly to consist. Instead of looking at this composition as a piece of architecture, making a whole out of three parts, I have been much in the habit of preferring the image of an orbicular body — a sphere, or a dewdrop. All this will appear to you a little fanciful; and I am well aware that a sonnet will often be found excellent, where the beginning, the middle, and the end are distinctly marked, and also where it is distinctly separated into two parts, to which, as I before observed, the strict Italian model, as they write it is, favorable.¹²

This statement shows that Wordsworth objected to the marked pause and turn between the octave and the sestet on the ground that they destroy the unity of the poem; he favored the "orbicular" structure. It is presumed he meant sonnets which move forward without a break, as does Milton's To Sir Henry Vane:

Vane, Young in years, but in Sage Council old,
 Than whom a better Senator ne're held
 The Helms of Rome, when Gowns, not arms repell'd
 The fierce Epirote, and the African bold,
 Whether to settle Peace, or to unfold
 The Drift of hollow States, hard to be Spell'd;
 Then to advise how War may best be upheld,
 Mann'd by her Two main Nerves, Iron and Gold,

¹² Letters: Wordsworth Family, III, 32.

In all her Equipage: Besides, to know
 Both Spiritual and Civil, what each means,
 What serves each, thou hast learn'd, which few have done.
 The bounds of either Sword to thee we owe;
 Therefore on thy Right hand Religion leans,
 And reckons thee in chief her Eldest Son.

Although Wordsworth states that he had not made up his mind on the subject of the sonnet, his practice proves that these principles had been long in his mind even if he had never formulated them. The difficulty Wordsworth had in making up his mind may have been increased by trying to reconcile what he thought should be done with what he was in the habit of doing. Another interesting critical opinion has been preserved by Robinson, who reports a conversation which he had with Wordsworth in 1836. The entry in the Diary is dated January 26:

I wish I could here write down all that Wordsworth has said about the sonnet lately, or record here the fourteen lines of Milton's "Paradise Lost", which he says are a perfect sonnet without rime, and essentially one in unity of thought. Wordsworth does not approve of uniformly closing the second quatrain with full stop, and of giving a turn to the thought in the terzines. This is the Italian mode; Milton lets the thought run over. He has used both forms indifferently. I prefer the Italian form. Wordsworth does not approve of closing the sonnet with a couplet, and holds it to be absolutely a vice to have a sharp turning at the end with an epigrammatic point.¹³

¹³Robinson, Diary, II, 223.

Wordsworth's theory of sonnet-structure can be summed up by saying, first, the music must be free and varied and have a flow of sound combining the effect of rime and blank verse; second, the best sonnets do not have beginning, middle, and end, distinctly marked, nor are they divided into octave and sestet, but the thought must be continuous, and the whole must have a sense of unity; finally the sonnet must not end with a couplet or have a sharp turning at the end with an epigrammatic point. Wordsworth did not always conform to all these principles even if he did have such ideals. This can be noted by the fact that he used the couplet ending one hundred times; thirty-seven of his octaves are legitimate, twenty have the three-rimed form abbaacca, and only one is irregular. Even the one Scorn not the Sonnet closes with a couplet:

The thing became a trumpet; whence he blew
Soul-animating strains—alas, too few!

In all points Milton is cited as the exemplar, except the last, but in this case the practice of the two poets is somewhat alike. A writer in the Edinburgh Review says:

In one point, the sonnets of Milton and Wordsworth are the safest models; more so, indeed, than the most celebrated among the Italians; they are above the littleness into which too many of the continental writers have fallen, of finishing off their sonnets, like a firework, with a flash as the close. They never confound the sonnet with the epigram.¹⁴

¹⁴"Glassford's Lyrical Translations", (Author not given), Edinburgh Review, LX, (1835), 357.

With reference to the rime formula of the sestet, Tomlinson finds that in more than two-thirds of Milton's sonnets the metrical arrangement follows the Italian types, but those of Wordsworth are irregular:

On attempting to make a similar analysis of the first thirty of Wordsworth's "Duddon" sonnets, it is found impossible to do so. Although the poet evidently endeavored to keep the quatrains tolerably regular, he could not, or did not, prevent the tercets from running wildly; so that there are no less than twenty-two variations in these thirty sonnets; while in Milton's there are but three — that is, three regular types and three variations. Moreover, there is no clear distinction between the quatrains and the tercets are frequently used, not for the sake of drawing a conclusion from the matter laid down in the quatrains, but merely for carrying on the description of some spot, or feature of a spot, with which the sonnet is opened. Hence these sonnets do not in many cases bear to be dissociated from their fellows, because it may happen that if one be taken out and presented as a specimen of an English sonnet, it would be unintelligible for want of the context.¹⁵

The last observation of Tomlinson's adds interest to Robinson's statement that Wordsworth quoted a passage from Paradise Lost as an illustration of a "perfect sonnet without rime, and essentially one in unity of thought." Although it is difficult to isolate any fourteen-line passage in Paradise Lost which is so independent of the context as to be called a unit, the statement is interesting as an indication of Wordsworth's conception of the sonnet.

¹⁵C. Tomlinson, The Sonnet, p. 76.

It also shows the attentiveness with which he studied Milton.

Another critic of Wordsworth thinks his sonnets can be classed either as a single unit or part of a succession:

Wordsworth, as far as I know, was the first who conceived a poem made up of a succession of Sonnets, each complete in itself, but each at the same time constituting, so to speak, a stanza of that larger poem whereof it formed a part; just as in a bracelet made up of a string of cameos, or mosaics, each may be a perfect little picture in itself, while at the same time contributing to the beauty and perfection of a larger whole.¹⁶

Sampson quotes F. T. Palgrave's opinion that Milton's sonnets stand supreme in stateliness, as Wordsworth's in depth and delicacy and thinks this a judgement in which most critics will concur.¹⁷ Most critics also note the Miltonic qualities of Wordsworth's sonnets, but opinions differ as to whether or not he has equalled his master.

In considering Wordsworth's blank verse the first step is to notice his early poetry. Milton cannot be said to have exerted any influence on this early poetry, for at that time Wordsworth adhered to the heroic couplet

¹⁶R. C. Trench, "The History of the English Sonnet," An essay in Sonnets of William Wordsworth, edited by Edward Maxon, p. xxiv.

¹⁷Sampson, Studies in Milton, p. 154.

as written by the pseudoclassical school. What changed Wordsworth from the use of the heroic couplet to blank verse is not known. Many poets imitate prevailing fashions or established customs in their youth and break away when their native genius asserts itself. This may be the explanation of the change in Wordsworth. Again, it might have been due to the growing popularity of non-dramatic blank verse. The earliest piece of blank verse by Wordsworth of which we have any record is the Lines Left in A Seat Under a Yew-Tree, which the author tells us was composed in part at school at Hawkshead.¹⁸ Obviously, this must have been before October, 1787, but how long before and to how much of the poem the remark refers cannot be determined. The significant thing is that Wordsworth began to write blank verse this early; and it is interesting to recall in this connection that The Task was published in 1785.

If Wordsworth's fondness for Paradise Lost had anything to do with his first attempt in unrimed verse, there seems to be no indication of the fact. He wrote nothing more of the kind until 1795, and a part of the "Yew-Tree" poem is assigned to this date. It was at this time also that he began The Borderers, which was finished

¹⁸Complete Poetical Works, Note to "Lines in A Seat Under a Yew-Tree," p. 31.

the next year. The blank verse of this work is not of the non-dramatic type, and it appears to have been modelled after that of Shakespeare and other Elizabethan playwrights. It may be an important part in helping Wordsworth to appreciate the beauties of unrimed heroics. It was about this time that his interest in the lower classes of society led him to investigate the subject of poetic diction and to reject the artificialities of eighteenth-century style, and this also may have been a leading factor in causing him to drop the pseudo-classic couplet. We have his own statement as proof of the fact that he began the use of blank verse as a medium for narrative in 1795.¹⁹

From Wordsworth's definition of blank verse, as reported by Coleridge, it must be concluded that he made a study of Milton's verse before he went to Germany in the autumn of 1798. In the conversation with Klopstock on the subject of Milton's poetry

Wordsworth gave his definition and notion of harmonious verse, that it consisted in the apt arrangement of pauses and cadences, and the sweep of whole paragraphs,

With many a winding bout
Of linked sweetness long drawn out,

and not in the even flow, much less in the prominence or antithetic vigor of single lines, which were indeed injurious to the total effect, except where

¹⁹Complete Poetical Works, Note to The Excursion, p. 410.

they were produced for some specific purpose.²⁰

The Lyrical Ballads contained about two hundred and forty lines of blank verse, including Tintern Abbey. Though it may not be granted that this verse is on the whole characteristically Miltonic, yet it will be conceded that it is constructed on the principle laid down by Wordsworth in the definition attributed to him, which he seems to have derived from an analysis of the lines of Paradise Lost. From this time on for many years blank verse was a favorite form with Wordsworth. The 1800 edition of Lyrical Ballads contained nearly fifteen hundred additional lines of unrimed verse; the fourteen books of The Prelude were completed by the spring of 1805. Whatever may be said, it is certain that the development of Wordsworth's fondness for blank verse coincided in the main with the rise of his special interest in Milton as an exemplar in art. It was in 1802 that he began writing sonnets under the inspiration of his great predecessor, and one thing about Milton's sonnets that was of special charm to him was their combination of the effects of rhyme and blank verse.

Besides the definition recorded by Coleridge there seems nothing of significance on the structure of blank verse said by Wordsworth during the period in which The

²⁰ Coleridge, Works of S.T. Coleridge, III, 538 ff.

Prelude and The Excursion were written. A few years later he did make a few critical remarks on the subject, which indicate how thoroughly he studied the question and to what extent he relied on the example of Milton.

The following passage, taken from a letter dated February 5, 1819, is valuable as suggesting in a general way the respect which Wordsworth had for the authority of his fellow-countrymen:

I have long been persuaded that Milton formed his blank verse upon the model of the "Georgics" and the "Aeneid," and I am so much struck with the resemblance that I should have attempted Virgil in blank verse, had I not been persuaded that no ancient author can be with advantage so rendered.²¹

In a letter written in November of 1831, Wordsworth has more to say on the subject:

Again and again I must repeat, that the composition of verse is infinitely more of an art than men are prepared to believe; and absolute success in it depends upon innumerable minutiae ... Milton talks of "pouring easy his unpremeditated verse." It would be harsh, untrue, and odious, to say there is anything like cant in this; but it is not true to the letter, and tends to mislead. I could point out to you five hundred passages in Milton upon which labor has been bestowed, and twice five hundred more to which additional labor would have been serviceable. Not that I regret the absence of such labor, because no poem contains more proof of skill acquired by practice.²²

²¹Letters: Wordsworth Family, II, 119.

²²Memoirs of Wordsworth, II, 258.

Wordsworth was exceedingly observant of the "innumerable minutiae" of which he speaks in the foregoing quotation; it seems he regarded Milton as a worthy teacher. The extra care with which Wordsworth attended to the smallest details of his art is noted by the fact that he developed "an elaborate and ingenious system of punctuation for his blank verse."²³ On February of 1842, he wrote to John Peace:

Your Descant amused me, but I must protest against your system, which would discard punctuation to the extent you propose. It would, I think, destroy the harmony of blank verse when skillfully written. What would become of the pauses at the third syllable followed by an and, or any such word, without the rest which a comma, when consistent with the sense, calls upon the reader to make, and which being made, he starts with the weak syllable that follows, as from the beginning of a verse. I am sure Milton would have supported me in this opinion.²⁴

These quotations are of value as illustrating the degree and extent of his discipleship, and they indicate an attitude of respect and admiration that grew rather than diminished.

With reference to run-on lines, Milton had the idea that one important factor in true musical delight consists in "the sense variously drawn out from one verse to another,"²⁵

²³Dowden, Aldine Edition of Wordsworth, I, vi.

²⁴Letters: Wordsworth Family, III, 240.

²⁵Milton, Poetical Works, New Cambridge Edition, Preface to Paradise Lost, p. 154.

which corresponds closely to Wordsworth's assertion that "the true harmony of blank verse consisted in the periods, and not in the succession of musical lines."²⁶

Wordsworth states in his Preface that his purpose in the use of language "was to imitate, and, as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men."²⁷ Yet, so far as his blank verse is concerned, his language is certainly not the language of obscure humble people. His poem Old Cumberland Beggar, which deals in a simple way with a commonplace subject, has language like this:

All behold in him
A silent monitor, which on their minds
Must needs impress a transitory thought
Of self-congratulation, to the heart
Of each recalling his peculiar boons,
His charters and exemptions; and, perchance,
Though he to no one gives the fortitude
And circumspection needful to preserve
His present blessings, and to husband up
The respite of the season, he, at least,
And 'tis no vulgar service, makes them felt.²⁸

It could well have been Milton who led him in this direction and turned him towards such grandiose terms. And it is also noticed

When Wordsworth speaks of an "edifice" or a "habitation," or of "the embowered abode — our chosen seat," or of "striplings ... graced with shining weapons," is he not doing just what was done, what had to be done, in the epic of the fall of man?²⁹

²⁶W.A. Knight, Life of Wordsworth, I, 172.

²⁷Complete Poetical Works, Preface, p. 792.

²⁸Lines 122-132.

²⁹Havens, The Influence of Milton, p. 197.

CHAPTER IV

THE PRELUDE AND THE EXCURSION

It is difficult to work out the development of Milton's influence on The Prelude, due to Wordsworth's habit of revision, and the fact that it was not published until after Wordsworth's death. It was written between 1799 and 1805, but the revision was not completed until 1832. The period of its composition corresponds with the rise of Wordsworth's interest in Milton as a moral guide and literary exemplar; it was the period of The Recluse and The Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty. The Prelude has a fairly large number of obvious borrowings from Milton, and it seems unlikely that these were introduced during the long process of revision. A few of these may be cited:

Immortal verse
Thoughtfully fitted to Orphean lyre.¹

seems to have been borrowed from Milton's Paradise Lost

With other notes than the Orphean lyre
I sung²

¹The Prelude, Bk. I, ll. 232-233.

²Paradise Lost, Bk. III, ll. 17-18.

in determining the choice actually reached. Quoting lines 800-24, Dowden says, "This passage of 'The Recluse' supplies the key to the creative impulse of Wordsworth's imagination, in the exercise of which he has had no rival since the days of Milton."⁸ And Garrod say The Prelude is a "self-expression, enfolding the expression of an age of renewed nobility and manners."⁹ Quoting the following lines:

May my life
Express the image of a better time
More wise desires and simple manners.

he further says:

"There you have the conscious language of the saints—only those speak thus who carry within them an inalienable assurance of their own poetic salvation. The lines I have quoted are written with deliberate reminiscence of Milton; and perhaps only Milton and Wordsworth voice this assurance without absurdity. Both are consciously dedicated poets."¹⁰

The greater part of The Excursion was not written until 1808 to 1811, although a decision was made early as to the theme, and it was three years later before it was published. Before it appeared Wordsworth himself, by implication, compared it to the work of Milton, and he was especially gratified by the frequently expressed

⁸Edward Dowden, "The Recluse," Edinburgh Review, CL XIX, 415.

⁹H. W. Garrod, Wordsworth: Lectures and Essays, p. 27.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 27.

opinion that it was to be classed with Paradise Lost, as has already been noted.¹¹ The reviewer of the Monthly Review was "on the whole disposed to consider the blank verse of Wordsworth as one of the nearest approaches that has yet been made to the majesty of Milton."¹² This writer also said:

Still less can be denied ... those high moral and intellectual faculties which he constantly enlists in the service of his muse. In this last respect he does indeed resemble the great pattern of his imitation, Milton.¹³

Lamb probably had the same qualities in mind about The Excursion when he wrote:

Those who hate "Paradise Lost" will not love this poem. The steps of the great master are discernible in it; not in direct imitation or injurious parody, but in the following of the spirit, in free homage and generous subjection.¹⁴

Stopford Brooke thought the element of grandeur of style which belongs to Wordsworth and Milton came from the "solemn simplicity and the strength which a dignified and unbigoted faith in great realities beyond this world gave to the order of their thoughts,"¹⁵

¹¹See p. 7 of this thesis.

¹²A Review of The Excursion, (author not given), Monthly Review, LXXVI, (Feb. 1815), 136.

¹³Ibid., p. 128.

¹⁴Lamb, Quarterly Review, XII, (Oct. 1814), III.

¹⁵Brooke, Theology In The English Poets, p. 228.

And Barry Cerf has something to say along the same topic:

His ethical grandeur is in refreshing contrast to the moral uncertainty which surrounded him; he attains spiritual summits hardly approached since Milton's day; he misled all who followed him when he attempted to point out the road thither.¹⁶

It is interesting to associate with this Wordsworth's own comment on the mental constitution of Milton as he says, "However imbued the surface might be with classical literature, he was a Hebrew in soul; and all things tended in him toward the sublime."¹⁷ And A. C. Bradley states that "Wordsworth is indisputably the most sublime of our poets since Milton."¹⁸

Masson says of Wordsworth, "He did not create. In this, as well as in many other ways, he proves himself to belong to the Miltonic, not the Shakespearian family."¹⁹ We can understand the basis of this assertion while at the same time agreeing with Coleridge in his statement about Wordsworth that "in imaginative power he stands nearest of all modern writers to Shakespeare and Milton; and yet in a kind perfectly unborrowed and his own."²⁰ And Garrod says

¹⁶Barry Cerf, "Wordsworth's Gospel of Nature," Publication of the Modern Language Association, XXXVII, (1922), 620.

¹⁷Complete Poetical Works, "Preface of 1815, p. 805.

¹⁸Bradley, Oxford Lectures on Poetry, p. 211.

¹⁹Masson, "William Wordsworth", Living Age, LXI, (1871) p. 151.

²⁰Coleridge, Works of Coleridge, III, 495.

that

It is not difficult to feel the sway of great actions and passions as Shakespeare gives life to them for us; nor perhaps, to submit our souls to the solemn religious harmonies of Milton, to subdue ourselves to that immitigable grandeur. But among the commonplaces of life, environed by custom and the casual cares of the world, still to live imaginatively — this is not easy, and this, more than other poets, Wordsworth helps us to do.²¹

Dowden remarks that in the exercise of the imaginative faculty Wordsworth "has had no rival since the days of Milton."²² The fact of Wordsworth's originality in the use of imagination can be accepted and at the same time it can be seen that Milton was his model even in this department of his art. Southey wrote in 1815, "My mind is wholly unlike Milton's and my poetry has nothing of his imagination and distinguishing character; nor is there any poet who has, except Wordsworth; he possessed it in equal degree."²³ In the Preface to the Edition of 1815, we find that Wordsworth said:

The grand storehouses of enthusiastic and meditative imagination, of poetical, as contradistinguished from human and dramatic imagination, are the prophetic and lyrical parts of the Holy Scriptures, and the

²¹Garrod, Wordsworth, p. 141.

²²Edward Dowden, "The Recluse," Edinburgh Review, CLXIX, (1889), 430.

²³Southey, Life and Correspondences, Chapter XIX.

works of Milton; to which I cannot forebear to add those of Spenser."²⁴

The form of this expression gives special emphasis to the mention of Milton. It is also in the Preface to The Edition of 1815 that Wordsworth makes his study of imagination and fancy and he analyzes Milton's imaginative use of words in Paradise Lost in the effort to justify his own practice:

Hear again this mighty Poet, — speaking of the
Messiah going forth to expel from heaven the
rebellious angels,

"Attended by ten thousand Saints
He onward came: far off his coming shone."—

the retinue of Saints, and the Person of the Messiah himself, lost almost and merged in the splendour of that indefinite abstraction "His Coming"!²⁵

George L. Raymond writes that when Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton first conceived their greatest works, "it must have been a picture that appeared to loom before their imaginations. It is doubtful whether Wordsworth, Cowper, and Campbell thought of anything except an argument."²⁶
With reference to Milton and Wordsworth, at least, the

²⁴Complete Poetical Works, p. 804.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶G.L. Raymond, Poetry as A Representative Art, p. 338.

truth of this remark is so self-evident that, on account of it, it may seem unfair to compare them as philosophical poets on the basis of their achievement in Paradise Lost and The Excursion, since the purposes of the two poems are different. Coleridge, in his Table Talk, said, "I think Wordsworth possessed more of the genius of the great philosophical than any man I ever knew, or, as I believe, has existed in England since Milton."²⁷ But he was disappointed with The Excursion for the reason given by Hartley Coleridge:

He had looked for a second Milton who would put Lucretius to a double shame, for a "philosophic poem," which would justify anew "the ways of God to men"; and in lieu of this pageant of the imagination there was Wordsworth's prolific of moral discourse, of scenic and personal narrative—a prophet indeed, but "unmindful of the heavenly vision."²⁸

In a letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, Keats compares Wordsworth and Milton as philosophers. He credits Milton and Wordsworth as having somewhat equal powers, but Milton "did not think into the human heart as Wordsworth has done."²⁹ Keats attributes the superiority

²⁷S.T. Coleridge, Table Talk, II. 70.

²⁸Letters of Coleridge, II. 647.

²⁹Letters of Keats, p. 105.

of his contemporary in this respect to the general advance of the human intellect. Thus, whenever we find Milton and Wordsworth mentioned together with reference to their philosophical abilities, the emphasis is almost always on their differences.

Soon after the publication of The Excursion Robinson wrote in his Diary:

What is good is of the best kind of goodness, and the passages are not few which place the author on a level with Milton. It is true that Wordsworth is not an epic poet; but it is also true what lives in the hearts of readers from the works of Milton is not the epic poem. Milton's story has merit unquestionably; but it is rather a lyric than an epic narrative. Wordsworth is purely and exclusively a lyric poet, in the extended use of that term.³⁰

Like The Prelude, The Excursion contains many expressions that appear to be echoes of Milton. In addition there are, as in many of Wordsworth's poems, occasional passages that seem to have a strong Miltonic flavor but which it would be unsafe to attribute to direct influence. Again, that which appears to be an instance of genuine influence may be explained on a different basis. As an illustration of a passage which may or may not contain strong Miltonic coloring, the following lines from The

³⁰Robinson, Diary, I, 301.

Excursion can be noted:

Upon the breast of new-created earth
 Man walked; and when and whereso'er he moved,
 Along or mated, solitude was not.
 He heard, borne on the wind, the articulate voice
 Of God; and Angels to his sight appeared
 Crowning the glorious hills of paradise;
 Or through the groves gliding like morning mist
 Enkindled by the sun. He sate — and talked
 With winged Messengers; who daily brought
 To his small island in the ethereal deep
 Tidings of joy and love. — From those pure heights
 (Whether of actual vision, sensible
 To sight and feeling, or that in this sort
 Have condescendingly been shadowed forth
 Communications spiritually maintained,
 And intuitions moral and divine)
 Fell Human-kind— to banishment condemned
 That flowing years repealed not: and distress
 And grief spread wide; but Man escaped the doom
 Of destitution; solitude was not.³¹

This quotation can be compared to such lines in Paradise

Lost as:

To sentence Man: the voice of God they heard
 Now walking in the garden, by soft winds
 Brought to their ears.³²

and

He err'd not; for by this the Heavenly bands
 Down from a sky of jasper lighted now,
 In Paradise, and on a hill made halt;³³

and one might be almost sure that it was a case of direct influence, but it may also have been derived solely from the Bible. It also might be said that it probably represents

³¹Book IV, ll. 631-650.

³²Book X, ll. 97-98.

³³Book XI, ll. 208-210.

a combination of sources but there is no way to be certain in the matter. Harper seems to be right about Wordsworth when he says,

There are passages in his poems that remind one of Milton especially, or make one feel the very breath of Spenser or Shakespeare, yet without a definite resemblance. It is as if the lifelong converse with the elder poets had given him, upon occasion, their mode of thought, and, above all, their melodies.³⁴

Such influences are easy to feel but somewhat difficult to describe in detail.

W.J. Dawson says that, with the exception of Laodamia and the Ode on the Intimations of Immortality, it is "impossible to trace the origin of any considerable poem of Wordsworth's to literary sources."³⁵ In this respect Milton is quite different; he draws his material almost wholly from external sources, but Wordsworth draws his in a large measure from within. This is strikingly true of The Excursion; it appears that Wordsworth deliberately sought to avoid any charge of literary contamination, and Milton is pointed out as one whose example, for once, was not good:

Had my poem (i.e. "The Excursion") been much colored by books as many parts of what I must be, I should have been accused (as Milton has been) of

³⁴ Harper, William Wordsworth, I, 24.

³⁵ Dawson, Makers of English Poetry, p. 118.

pedantry, and of having a mind which could not support itself by other men's labors. Do not you perceive that my conversations almost all take place out of doors, and all with grand objects of nature, surrounding the speaker, for the express purpose of their being alluded to in illustrations of the subjects treated of? Much imagery from books would have been an incumbrance; where it is required, it is found.³⁶

In the light of this aim, the wonder is that there are any evidences at all of Miltonic coloring in the style and matter of The Excursion.

Something should be said relative to the possible bearing of Wordsworth's discipleship to Milton on his theory of nature, since it is such an important factor in Wordsworth's career as a poet, and particularly in The Prelude and The Excursion. Garrod has this to say about Wordsworth:

He brings to us, as no one else does, images and intuitions which light the common face of life, throwing into new, and truer, relations the parts of that great, but confused, order of things which is nature.³⁷

Landor, in speaking of Milton's knowledge of nature said:

If there ever was a poet who knew her well, and described her in all her loveliness, it was Milton. In the "Paradise Lost" how profuse is his description! In the "Allegro" and "Penseroso", how excellent and select!"³⁸

³⁶Letters: Wordsworth Family, II, 44.

³⁷Garrod, Wordsworth, p. 141.

³⁸Landor, Imaginary Conversations, IV, 51.

Leslie Stephen couples Wordsworth with Milton as an observer of nature when he says, "Some men in the first half of the eighteenth century could feel the beauty of nature as deeply as Milton before them, or as Wordsworth after them."³⁹

Wordsworth himself, through a study of the history of English poetry, came to this conclusion:

That, excepting the nocturnal "Reverie of Lady Winchilsea," and a passage or two in the "Windsor Forest" of Pope, the poetry of the period intervening between the publication of the "Paradise Lost" and the "Seasons" does not contain a single new image of external nature, and scarcely presents a familiar one from which it can be inferred that the eye of the Poet had been steadily fixed upon his object, much less that his feelings had urged him to work upon it in the spirit of genuine imagination.⁴⁰

The implication is plain that, in the opinion of Wordsworth, Paradise Lost is, to some extent at least, characterized by these merits in its treatment of nature.

Marianna Woodhull says that "Cowper, Young, Gray, Wordsworth, and Coleridge are among the many who have seen nature under Milton's guidance."⁴¹ It is possible that Wordsworth had Milton in mind, as well as Chaucer, Shakespeare and Spenser, when he said that the youth

³⁹ Stephen, History of English Thought, II, 362.

⁴⁰ Complete Poetical Works, "Essay Supplementary to the Preface of 1815", p. 811.

⁴¹ Marianna Woodhull, The Epic of Paradise Lost, p. 304.

who is a lover of nature

doth receive
 In measure only dealt out to himself.
 Knowledge and increase of enduring joy
 From the great nature that exists in works
 Of mighty poets.⁴²

This opinion is supported by the fact that in his letters and essays Wordsworth often interpreted nature in terms of Milton. In a letter to George Beaumont in 1811 he wrote:

We had another fine sight one evening, walking along a rising ground about two miles from the shore. It was about the hour of sunset, and the sea was perfectly calm; and in a quarter where its surface was indistinguishable from the western sky, hazy and luminous with the setting sun, appeared a tall sloop-rigged vessel, magnified by the atmosphere through which it was viewed, and seeming rather to hang in the air than to float upon the waters. Milton compares the appearance of Satan to a fleet described far off at sea. The visionary grandeur and beautiful form of the single vessel would have suited his purpose as well as the largest company of vessels ever associated together, with the help of the trade wind, in the wide ocean. Yet not exactly so, and for this reason, that his image is a permanent one, not dependent upon action.⁴³

This gives evidence of the care with which Wordsworth studied Milton's use of nature. Another interesting observation made in A Guide Through the District of the Lakes is the following:

We may add, that whatever has been said upon the advantages derived to these scenes from a changeable

⁴²The Prelude, V, ll. 591-595.

⁴³William Wordsworth, Prose Writings, Selections, edited by W.A. Knight, Scott Library Edition, p. 82.

atmosphere, would apply, perhaps still more forcibly, to their appearance under the varied solemnities of night. Milton, it must be remembered, has given a clouded moon to Paradise itself.⁴⁴

This remark evidently refers to a passage in Paradise Lost:

Now glowed the firmament
With living sapphires! Hesperus, that led
The starry host, rode brightest; till the moon
Rising in clouded majesty, at length,
Apparent Queen, unveiled her peerless light,
And o'er the dark her silver mantle threw.⁴⁵

This quotation appears to have been a favorite with Wordsworth. As early as 1792 he wrote a sonnet containing an image which may have been derived from it. Like Milton, he associated the coming of the evening star with the clouded moon:

for through the thick-wove trees
Scarce peeps the curious Star till solemn gleams
The Clouded Moon.⁴⁶

Milton and Wordsworth do not make the same use of nature as a spiritual force, but their fundamental conceptions of it are not dissimilar. Milton sets forth his view in the Treatise on Christian Doctrine:

The providence of God is either ordinary or extraordinary. His ordinary providence is that whereby he upholds and preserves the immutable order of causes appointed by him in the beginning. This is commonly, and indeed too frequently, described by

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 148.

⁴⁵Book IV, ll. 604-610.

⁴⁶"Sweet Was the Walk", lines 11-13.

the name of nature; for nature cannot possibly mean anything but the mysterious power and efficacy of that divine voice which went forth in the beginning, and to which, as to a perpetual command, all things have since paid obedience.⁴⁷

And Wordsworth's view is given in The Prelude:

Nature's self, which is the breath of God,
Or his pure word by miracle revealed.⁴⁸

The essential kinship between Wordsworth and Milton is revealed by a remark in Marianna Woodhull's interesting analysis of Milton's attitude toward nature:

Milton's approach to nature is reverent... From this reverence, as a poet of nature, he gains his two striking characteristics, sublimity and mysticism, two phases of one attitude.⁴⁹

This would not have been less true if applied to Wordsworth. The same writer also thinks "Milton's lyrical influence takes its source in his conception of nature as the manifestation of God."⁵⁰ And Barry Cerf further notes the kinship between Wordsworth and Milton as nature poets:

The fact seems to be that Wordsworth misunderstood his own genius. At heart a conservative, he tried to make of himself a radical, interested primarily

⁴⁷Milton, Prose Works, IV, 211.

⁴⁸Book V, ll. 221-222.

⁴⁹Woodhull, The Epic of Paradise Lost, p. 319.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 307.

in man, he made himself a priest of nature; in point of style akin in spirit to Pope or Milton, he insisted upon the virtues of unpolished diction; introspective and self-searching, he proclaimed the wisdom of unthinking men and children and shows an unusual interest in the mentally deficient; a man of fine spiritual temper, apparently not sensuously constituted, he preached the gospel of the senses.⁵¹

Yet throughout The Prelude nature's part in fostering man is dwelt upon. Coming suddenly upon a lonely shepherd glorified by the sunset he becomes "a solitary object and sublime."

Thus was man
Enobled outwardly before my sight,
And thus my heart was early introduced
To an unconscious love and reverence
Of human nature;⁵²

and some times he means mankind in general, not individuals:

The human nature unto which I felt
That I belonged, and revered with love,
Was not a punctual presence, but a spirit
Diffused through time and space.⁵³

⁵¹Cerf, Publications of Modern Language Association, XXXVII, (1922), 630.

⁵²The Prelude, Bk. VIII, ll. 275 ff.

⁵³Ibid., ll. 608-11.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In one respect the influence of Milton on Wordsworth is unique in the history of English literature. There seems to be no other instance of a poet's exercising so profound an influence throughout the life of another writer of such striking independence of intellect and genius as was possessed by Wordsworth. Many poets have been disciples of others at some state in their development, but it seems the discipleship of an equally original poet has never lasted for so long a time as Wordsworth remained under the tutelage of Milton. Beginning before he had fairly embarked on his literary career, his admiration for Milton suffered little abatement till the close of his work more than half a century later. Havens thinks there should be no feelings of regret to learn the degree to which Milton influenced Wordsworth:

He regarded Milton's authority as supreme, at least in diction, and accordingly may have thought that borrowing from him was like taking words from the dictionary. The similarity between his own exalted, orotund passages and those of Paradise Lost he undoubtedly felt and with pride.

Nor need those of us who look upon Wordsworth as one of the chief glories of English literature be disturbed to learn that he derived from another some of the materials and methods he used in the lofty building he erected. Surely one of the uses, and one of the best uses, of great poets is to furnish inspiration and guidance for those who come after them. This is not the least of the important functions that Paradise Lost has been performing for the last two and a half centuries. In Wordsworth's case it accomplished its purpose the more easily and effectively because what it offered was similar to what he himself had. Its influence on his poetry does not seem, for example, like Gothic vaulting in a Greek temple, for it did not tend to deflect him from his course, but merely strengthened him in it by showing him how to pursue it. That is why the last of the great Elizabethans became a power with one of the first of the great romanticists, why Wordsworth is the most Miltonic poet since Milton.¹

After 1814, with one exception, the spell of Milton ceased to some extent as a dynamic or formative power in any large sense. This exception is the poem Artegal and Elidure, which was written in 1815, the next year after the publication of The Excursion. We are informed by the author that it "was written at Rydal Mount, as a token of affectionate respect for the memory of Milton."² In this poem Wordsworth follows the narrative and phraseology of Milton very closely.

¹Havens, The Influence of Milton, p. 200.

²Complete Poetical Works, Note to "Artegal and Elidure," p. 534.

But Wordsworth's greatest creative work was done, and his inspiration was waning. Henceforth it seems he relied more and more upon conventional ideas and modes of expression. It may be for this reason that the verbal reminiscences of Milton are found in larger numbers, in proportion to the amount of verse written, than during the preceding period.

Wordsworth made a careful study of the diction of Milton and referred to him in defense of his own practice. He wrote to George Beaumont³ for this reason:

I remember Mr. Bowles the poet who objected to the word "ravishment" at the end of the sonnet to the winter garden: yet it has the authority of all the first rate poets, for instance Milton:

In whose sight all things joy, with ravishment,
Attracted by thy beauty to gaze.³

After 1815 Wordsworth's interest in Milton was chiefly that of an admiring critic; it seems that his comments on the art of the great epic poet of England are more numerous than those referring to any other writer. To Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton, Wordsworth frequently applies the epithet divine, and he not only made these poets, with Chaucer, the objects of his intimate study, but he recommended them to others, remarking that it was almost painful

³Letters: Wordsworth Family, I, 566. The quotation is from Paradise Lost, Bk. V, ll. 45-46.

to think how far these surpass all other poets.

He divided poets into two classes:

At the head of the first class I would place Homer and Shakespeare, whose universal minds are able to reach every variety of thought and feeling without bringing their own individuality before the reader. They infuse, they breathe life into every object they approach, but you never find themselves. At the head of the second class, those whom you can trace individually in all they write, I would place Spenser and Milton. In all that Spenser writes you can trace the gentle affectionate spirit of the man; in all that Milton writes you find the exalted sustained being that he was.⁴

Wordsworth thought of Milton as by nature a Hebrew in soul, in whom all things tended toward the sublime, and he classed his works and the Bible together as the two grand storehouses of enthusiastic and meditative poetical imagination, "the mightiest lever known to the moral world."⁵

Wordsworth does not say as much about Milton's shorter poems, besides the sonnets, as he does of the longer poems. To repeat here all that Wordsworth said on Milton's sonnets would be supererogatory. He liked them for their gravity and republican austerity, for their variety and freedom of sound, for the fact that they combined the effects of rime and blank verse, and because they neither divide the sense between the octave and the sestet nor end with a

⁴Memoirs of Wordsworth, I, 447.

⁵Ecclesiastical Sonnets, Series I, No. 34.

couplet.

Wordsworth's chief interest in Milton as an artist centered in the longer poems. His quotations, which are numerous throughout his writings and conversations, are usually from *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. It was in them that he found most inspiration for the work that was to have been his own masterpiece. His definition of epic poetry was framed with Homer, Virgil, and Milton in mind as the best examples. He expressed his idea about it in a letter to Southey:

Epic poetry, of the highest class requires in the first place an action eminently influential, an action with a grand or sublime train of consequences; it next requires the intervention and guidance of beings superior to man, what the critics I believe call machinery; and lastly, I think with Dennis that no subject but a religious one can answer the demand of the soul in the highest class of this species of poetry.⁶

As in the case of the sonnet, it is unnecessary to repeat all that Wordsworth said about Milton's blank verse. Wordsworth seemed to regard it as the standard of non-dramatic verse in England. He thought it had been modelled on the verse of the *Aeneid*; Wordsworth was in accord with Milton as to what constituted the peculiar excellence of the form, namely, the periods and cadences, rather than the succession of musical lines. He thought *Paradise Lost*

⁶ *Memoirs of Wordsworth*, II, 62.

showed evidence of much labor and that additional labor would have been serviceable; he thought the poem was proof of skill acquired by practice. "One of the noblest things in Milton," he says, "is the description of that sweet, quiet morning in 'Paradise Regained'⁷ after that terrible night of howling wind and storm. The contrast is divine."⁸ He also thought Paradise Regained surpassed Paradise Lost in the way it was written, though the theme seemed far below it and demanded less power.

Enough has already been said of Wordsworth's opinion that Milton erred in attempting to treat Christian doctrine in his poetry. He once complained that when Paradise Lost was read by the multitude, it was "almost exclusively not as a poem, but a religious book,"⁹ and said on another occasion that it might be as serviceable for the purpose as Law's Serious Call.

Now, to briefly summarize the observations and conclusions in order that the main points may be noticed, it is well to remember that Wordsworth lived in a time when Milton was held in unusually high esteem and when it was customary for writers and critics to refer to him as a

⁷Book IV, ll. 431 ff.

⁸Memoirs of Wordsworth, II, 432.

⁹Letters: Wordsworth Family, III, 234.

term of comparison and a standard for artistic excellence. The practice of judging Wordsworth in terms of Milton began early and became a fixed tradition soon after the publication of The Excursion. This was due to several causes, but mainly to Wordsworth's own attitude, the Miltonic character of his political writings, and the evidences of influence in The Excursion. Wordsworth became enamored of Milton at an early age, and while at Cambridge he felt the inspiration of his poetry. During their lives at Cambridge, Milton and Wordsworth resembled each other in their spirit of independence toward the university. The later lives of the two poets were alike in respect to their attitudes toward their art, their loneliness of soul, egotism, lack of humor, and theories of education and morals. Wordsworth's earlier political views were very similar to those of Milton; as he advanced in life, however, Wordsworth became more conservative, in contrast with Milton, who became more radical. Wordsworth's pamphlet on the Convention of Cintra appears to have been modelled in some respects on the political writings of Milton; it seems to have been the first work of Wordsworth's to elicit a definite assertion of similarity to the writings of Milton. The poems of Wordsworth written before 1793 show slight evidence of the influence of Milton,

except in the matter of verbal reminiscence, which is noticeable. About 1795 Wordsworth began to develop his theory of poetic diction, which reduced the number of verbal echoes from Milton, but they reappeared in The Recluse and in the poems of 1802, and are to be found plentifully in the poems written thereafter. Wordsworth made a study of Milton's blank verse as early as 1798; the verse of The Prelude and The Excursion is patterned after that of Milton in the manner in which pauses, cadences, and periods are handled. In the latter half of his career, Wordsworth's chief interest in Milton was that of an admiring critic, his critical interest centered more particularly upon Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained, and Samson Agonistes.

It is the conclusion of this writer that Milton did have a profound influence on Wordsworth, although his style was highly individualistic. The recommendation of this writer well agrees with Havens' idea that the reader of Wordsworth should feel no regret to learn of the influence of Milton, since the office of the poet is to inspire, guide, and be a model for others.

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