

In retrospect, pathetic abortive rebellions always seem unreal and the convictions of their leaders almost unintelligible.

— Malcolm I. Thomis and Peter Holt,
Threats of Revolution in Britain 1789—1848

The Man Who Was Not Napoleon

BY DAVID V. ERDMAN

William Wordsworth, born in 1770 and a "blissful" twenty-two when in Paris in the Year One of the new Republic, has given us *The Prelude* (1805), a very intelligible retrospective account of his enthusiasm and commitment during the heavenly dawn of the *great* Rebellion called the French Revolution. But he also hints, rather ambiguously, at involvement in some pathetic abortive rebellion during his "Residence in France," some murderous scheme of action in which, if he had continued in France, he might have "perished....A poor mistaken and bewildered offering."

Possibly this refers to the chance that he might have made "common cause with the opponents of Robespierre who perished by the guillotine. *The Prelude* contains much discussion of the justified assassination of a tyrant. And there is evidence of Wordsworth's initial fascination by, and later loathing of, Robespierre's ruthless leadership—including his uttering a "Hymn of triumph" at news of Robespierre's death.

The unanswered question is whether his feeling of guilt about "regicide" was not the ground of the poet's later "moral questions" and "despair." Both the *Prelude* account and Wordsworth's 1796 dramatization of revolutionary activism in his play *The Borderers* (begun soon after Edmund Burke's newspaper attack on negotiations for peace with "Regicide France") reverberate with themes of regicide and parricide—and action taken on principle but "without thought."

Wordsworth spent almost a year in France. The young poet was an enthusiastic witness and offstage participant in the major political debate of the Republic that culminated, ineluctably, in the execution of Louis XVI. Wordsworth, back in London when it took place, wrote a pamphlet of justification. During the trial in Paris he was almost certainly among those who wore their cravats "à la Brutus." So was a young Scottish Jacobin and military commander, John Oswald. In *The Borderers* a tender-hearted revolutionary named Marmaduke and a bloody-minded revolutionary named Oswald strive, with much brandishing of swords, to outdo each other in violent sentiments. It is clearly understood that these two revolutionaries in some sense

represent the willing and unwilling sides of Wordsworth's own spirit during the "interregnum" of the French Revolution. But there is now overwhelming evidence that the actual John Oswald was the prototype of the Oswald in Wordsworth's drama. (Oswald had moved from London to Paris in 1791 and joined Le Cercle Social—one of the sources to which Marx and Engels traced modern communism; he was one of the fourteen authors of *Le Chronique du Mois*, a poet as well as a military tactician, and later confused with Napoleon because both admired Ossian and perhaps looked something alike.

At one point in the drama Marmaduke is shown as giddy with his "higher creed" of revolutionary justice. Here Wordsworth is exposing his thoughtless Jacobinism when "The senselessness of joy was...sublime." And the words symbolically expose his regicidal thoughts. Marmaduke starts to argue that a king or a general is no different from the "carcasses" with which such leaders strew the meadows, but Marmaduke then collapses into wondering whether a king slaughtering multitudes and an idler who symbolically flings off the heads of kings by theoretically justifying regicide are not "both fools, or wise alike/Each in his way?"

In *The Borderers* Oswald inspires Marmaduke to an action that defines itself as regicide or at least parricide. Marmaduke's later feelings of guilt and remorse could be taken as representing Wordsworth's feelings at having approved of Louis's execution. But what Wordsworth confesses to in *The Prelude* is no simple matter of concurrence. In Paris in the autumn of 1792 to seek the death of the king would have been merely to go with the crowd. The undertaking in which Wordsworth says he might have perished he compares to the deeds of Roman Brutus and Greek Harmodius, who knew "that tyrannic power is weak" and "that nothing hath a natural right to last/But equity and reason." Wordsworth persuaded himself that at certain moments in history a decisive change can be achieved by "the virtue of one paramount mind," a leader who would abash the "impious crests" of tyranny—that "A spirit thoroughly faithful to itself" could serve "at once/For way and guide for Society's unreasoning herd."

Wordsworth seems to hint at a conspiracy to depose Robespierre and take on Robespierre's own task, but

with greater mental and moral strength. And yet for all the vagueness of his retrospective account, the idea of his offering himself to lead a parricidal action is pretty firmly dated autumn, 1792, before "Reluctantly to England I returned.../In this frame of mind."

"THAT OTHER HOPE"

What other sort of revolutionary plot was afoot in October—November, 1792? For several years I have been looking under the carpet of official history to find "classified" records of Wordsworth's radical military friend John Oswald—a man so visible to his contemporaries that he was mistaken for Napoleon. I have discovered that precisely in October, 1792 (when he was appointed commander of the first battalion of volunteer "*piquiers*," and when his name was put forward to be honored with French citizenship and then mysteriously withdrawn), Oswald was agitating for a radical military scheme—also suppressed from the record—which would fit Wordsworth's hint surprisingly well.

A military scheme? Wordsworth the poet? It is time to give close attention to a remark the poet made to note-taking neighbors in his seventy-fifth year:

He said that after he had finished his college course, he was in great doubt as to what his future employment should be. He did not feel himself good enough for the Church....He also shrank from the law....[On the other hand] He had studied military history with great interest, and the strategy of war; and he always fancied that he had talents for command; and he at one time thought of a military life, but then he was without the necessary [political] connections....

Since he ended up a poet, it is still difficult to entertain the image of Wordsworth as a military strategist, let alone a commander. When he wrote the first part of a poem to be called "The Recluse," he bade "farewell to the Warrior's Schemes" and "farewell" to "the forwardness of the soul which looks that way/Upon a less incitement than the Cause/Of Liberty endangered." Such schemes he distinguished from "That other hope, long mine, the hope to fill/The heroic trumpet with the Muse's breath!" Here it seems he is clearly distinguishing military from poetic action; yet the lines suggest that he would join an active cause by taking up the pen, not the sword.

Perhaps so, but perhaps this was not always the case. Modern historians and researchers are still disputing (having only recently discovered the problem) whether there was a real uprising of radicals in London in December, 1792, or only a fictional one concocted by the media. John Oswald's career is a case in point. Present at meetings of the Jacobin club in 1791 and 1792 up to the time he was made commandant of the first battalion of *piquiers* on October 1, Oswald then almost drops from the record until April, 1793, when he marched his *piquiers* to the Vendee in western France. Almost drops from the record, but not quite. A copy of the pamphlet dated February, 1793, published by the Jacobins has turned up in the Cornell University Library. It consists of speeches made in the Club by two Batavian sans culottes and by John Oswald, which suddenly put back into the record a report of what Oswald was up to, with

a group of fellow Jacobins, in October, 1792, precisely at the time when Wordsworth was in Paris and ripe for "Philosophic War."

In *The Prelude* Wordsworth tells us of his induction in the principles of "philosophic war" by the officer Michel Beaupuy. (Is the "good" Beaupuy to some extent a cover for the "evil" Oswald?) Beaupuy was Wordsworth's teacher, he says, as Plato was the instructor of Dion. And what was Plato instructing Dion to do? To lead a task force with other "Adventurers in Arms" to assassinate Dionysius the "Sicilian Tyrant." In Paris of October, 1792, what was comparable? Was a detachment of 600 Marseillais going to start yet another revolution? Yes, something like that. Listen to Oswald in the days following the French declaration of war on such tyrants as England's George III and the Stadtholder of the Netherlands.

[Oswald, February 4]: You have named the proper enemy, King George. But you won't find him on the battlefields of Europe; you won't find him in the South Seas. Just reach across the channel and seize him by the throat! All that's needed is a stout military body to land in the Thames and spark the zeal of the London sans culottes, who are miserable and hate their tyrant.

Very well, but this is February. Wordsworth left Paris for London before Christmas. Annette, his lover, was about to give birth to their child in Blois, and Wordsworth (the explanation has always troubled his biographers) suddenly decided he had to rush off to London to raise cash. He doubtless needed it. However, he may have had other ideas as well. Oswald points back to October (when he and Wordsworth were both in Paris) as the time he first agitated his London project.

THE "SOUL OF LIBERTY"

Scene: Paris, October, 1792 (wholly conjectural on my part). Oswald is introduced to William Wordsworth of London by some mutual friends. An Englishman! Meet a fellow Patriot from Edinburgh, exclaims Oswald. De ye ken Horne Tooke? Bookseller Johnson? He's published a pamphlet of mine, "The CRY of NATURE." Has an epic on the Revolution in the press, by William Blake. Wordsworth says he expects Johnson to publish his pamphlet poems. They go off arm in arm buzzing about a philosophic task force to storm the Bank and the Tower of London.

By the time Wordsworth was writing *The Borderers* (1796-97) he deeply wished peace between the warring nations, not military victories. Yet he still hoped (evidently) that a truly revolutionary leader would win French freedom—else why, years later, must he confess that he had "grieved for Buonaparte," albeit "with a vain and an unthinking grief"? A full measure of contempt for "Kings and Sons of Kings" is still to be found in the verses in imitation of Juvenalian satire that in 1797 Wordsworth exchanged with his English Jacobin college friend Francis Wrangham, stressing how "ripe for the block" some English kings *had been*—and *were*, including "The nation's hope," the Prince of Wales, "As rich in folly as the past in crime." No sword play is in the picture, however.

But if we introduce the hypothesis that Words-

worth's potential involvement in Paris in the autumn of 1792 was with the Oswaldian scheme of a direct cross-channel attack on London, and the establishment of "just tribunals," then a number of things fall into a coherent pattern: his keen interest in the "philosophic war" that Plato taught to Dion; his praying (in the summer of 1793) for French victories and his veiled hope that God's lightning would strike the British fleet in Portsmouth every time he heard the sunset cannon; and in his autobiographical *Prelude* his discussion of the tempting subjects that he had abandoned to tell his own story. The tempting heroic subjects all involve a military commander warring against tyranny who, though driven to strategic retreat, sustains his troops to fight another time or preserves the "Soul of Liberty" and hence the morale of a free people.

His own experiences, the poet believed, domestic as they largely were, supplied firmer ground for the kind of leadership the cause of liberty required than the

battlefield experiences of Oswald—or the famous but false "champion of Jacobinism," Napoleon:

The tenderest mood
Of that Man's mind— what can it be? what food
Fed his first hopes? what knowledge could *he* gain?
"Tis 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.

Standard British courage, in peacetime in 1802, to defy the great Buonaparte. Sixteen months later war resumed and Wordsworth joined the Grasmere Volunteers, surprising his wife and sister by entering into the mustering and marching "heart and soul." Wordsworth was not given a commission and the excitement subsided; but when telling of the Volunteers in his poem *The Excursion*, he called the Grasmere commander "Oswald," still a name for his alter ego.

Angel Cuadra Landrove, a lawyer and poet, is currently held at Boniato Prison in Cuba. Cuadra was first imprisoned from 1967 until 1976 charged with "conspiracy"; he again was imprisoned in March of 1977 after his book Impromptus was published in the United States. A year later there were rumors that, after accepting the government's "reeducation" plan, he was to be released. Unfortunately, Cuban authorities discovered that a new book of Cuadra's poetry had been published—A correspondence of Poems (Solar Press, 1979). He was then transferred to Boniato Prison, the worst penal institution in Cuba.

At Boniato, Cuadra is forbidden to write letters or, even to possess pencil and paper. His case has been adopted by Amnesty International.

POLICE EFFICIENCY

*Poetry is the height of letters
JUANA ROSA*

Your poems have got lost.
I wasn't in the house.
But they came in with arms, with orders,
with many evil intentions,
prying into corners.
A gust of terror
scattered papers across the floor.
They went looking for crimes preserved in envelopes,
words that let their echoes trail
like the gossamer of the stars.
They found crimes like these:
"the first year of the dream,
we are poets; therefore we love,
as a child I remember a courtyard,
on my elbows in the rainbow,
the violet ash,
or April that stood on tiptoe to brush your angel..."
And they finally came upon the accomplished crime
under your name of distance,
a perfect epistolary crime:
your poems,
"the height of letters."

THE TASK

*like one who can
display against the light
a chalice territory.
JUANA ROSA*

when you go about the world
with overcoat and hair,
with the exact brand of skin
and abstract papers that keep falling from your hands;
when you drop my name in the carelessness of a gesture,
and have to give explanations—
because they always ask for them—
concerning a mystery so simple
that it has no need for alphabets;
and they ask you about my face, which you don't know,
and about my character which you have known since birth,
because you bore it
in a birth of bread and tears...
don't utter, of the shadows of my iron bars, more than the
sign,
don't speak of the vultures that scratch at me
for crumbs of hatred
and take light from the human clay;
speak to them of the poem that I defend
against a corrosion not from my iron bars,
tell them about the strophe—symbol in which I am
the link of a transparent fire
on the move from the depths of time,
of the leaf beneath the north wind that persists
in the timeless verdure;
of the clear duty
to cultivate "a chalice territory"
for the possible display against the light
and confess to them that is why
you have wished to save the verse of which I am composed.

From A correspondence of Poems, translated by Donald D. Walsh and reprinted with permission of Solar Press.