Content Synopsis

“London, 1802” is a sonnet inspired by, and in praise of, John Milton, one of the greatest poets of the English language and one of its most accomplished writers of sonnets. The form of the poem is thus particularly appropriate to its subject. The work opens by exclaiming Milton's name, which is metrically emphasized through the accented first syllable (a violation of strict iambic meter). Milton is treated as a kind of muse, capable of inspiring both the poet Wordsworth and the English nation. By expressing his wish that Milton should "be living at this hour" (1), Wordsworth helps bring that wish that pass: he uses this very poem to help revive Milton's memory and influence. The verb "living" is especially apt, since the poem is greatly concerned with restoring life to some of England's most important traditions and values, while the phrase "at this hour" stresses Wordsworth's sense of urgency. He believed that England in 1802 was at a moment of crisis, both domestically and because of its latest conflicts with France. Although he knew, of course, that Milton could not literally be revived, in this sonnet he seeks not only to reawaken and renew interest in his great predecessor, but also to adopt Milton's role as a public poet addressing the nation on issues of pressing ethical concern.

Just as Milton's name was metrically emphasized in line 1, so "England" is emphasized in the same way (and in the same initial, first-word position) in line 2. The great poet and his nation are already being linked in subtle ways as Wordsworth tries to underscore their essential connection. England is described metaphorically in line 2 as a female in need of a male rescuer, but in the next breath she is also called "a fen [swamp]/Of stagnant waters" (2-3). The image is powerful: it suggests lethargy, decay, and putrefaction, and it also sets up a compelling contrasting image that will come later in the poem. In the meantime, Wordsworth inaugurates a long, ever-growing list of nouns, each representing a different aspect of English society blighted by metaphorical rot: "altar" (i.e., church), "sword" (i.e., the military), "pen" (i.e., literature or the life of the mind more generally [3]), "Fireside" (i.e., the modest homes of the poor or middle class), and "the heroic wealth of hall and bower" (i.e., the stately homes of the wealthy or aristocrats [4]). Each new noun adds impact, like a spreading stain, to the catalogue of decay; hardly a single aspect of Britain seems left untouched by the atrophy Wordsworth indicts.

All these segments of English society have "forfeited heir ancient English dower / Of inward happiness" (lines 5-6). That is, they have not merely lost something but have actively given it up through error, offense, or crime, with the verb "forfeited" also carrying a secondary suggestion of loss of wealth. The word "dower" is especially significant, since it can refer not only to a widow's inheritance from her husband but also to the money a new wife brings (from her family) into a marriage. The first meaning reinforces the life/death contrast already implied by the first line. It also implies present-day England's irresponsibility, its self-indulgence, its lack of respect for its own past. Metaphorically, England has betrayed her dead spouse: her noble traditions. The word "dower" also, because of its economic connotations, looks back to the preceding reference to "heroic wealth." Ironically, although Wordsworth believed that rampant materialism was partly to blame for England's decline, he goes out of his way in this sonnet to give positive connotations to words associated with money. Yet the "wealth" and "dower" he has in mind are associated with heroism and communal traditions, not with mere financial self-interest. Wordsworth transvalues the normal meanings of these nouns, associating them not with outward financial success but with "inward happiness." England's decline has not been material (far from it: Britain was fast becoming the wealthiest nation on earth); instead, its decline (in Wordsworth's view) was spiritual. Its afflictions were first and foremost afflictions of the soul, and that is why both Milton and his successor Wordsworth are possible sources of help.

However, just when the poem seems most accusatory, and just when Wordsworth seems to sit most obviously in somewhat superior judgment of his countrymen, he suddenly includes himself in the indictment. In a brief, matter-of-fact phrase that invites no objections or qualifications, he makes a simple, all-inclusive claim: "We are selfish men" (6). Paradoxically, by implicitly faulting himself as well as his fellows, he makes his charges more rhetorically persuasive. He shows the very humility he later praises in Milton (and, by doing so, he of course partially exempts himself from the charge of selfishness). In line seven Milton is addressed most clearly as a kind of muse or divine being—perhaps even as a kind of Christ figure whose second coming is devoutly desired. By continually using such words as "we" and "us," Wordsworth continues to identify himself with the people he had just been criticizing; he implicitly becomes what he implies Milton was also: the spokesman for, and the conscience of, the English nation. Milton himself is literally incapable of "return[ing]" to life, but can be (and is being, through this poem) reincarnated in the prophetic persona "Wordsworth" is here fashioning for himself.
Line 8 presents the second of the poem’s catalogue or lists, echoing (and answering) the list already presented in lines 3 and 4. Whereas the first list had emphasized all the aspects of English society presently in decline, the second list details some of the needed qualities that Milton can offer to help repair or reverse that slide. These include "manners, virtue, freedom, [and] power" (8). Clearly Wordsworth seeks not merely political change but a wholesale moral revolution. In other words, he wants not so much to alter external forms of government as to transform, at some quite fundamental level, the ways people think, feel, and behave. The word "manners" suggests the ways people treat each other; the word "virtue" suggests their deepest ethical instincts. Meanwhile, the word "freedom" may imply political liberty, but it probably also suggests freedom of soul or spirit (as in freedom from obsessive materialism). Finally, "power" almost certainly does not refer to political or military might but, once again, to spiritual and moral strength. The sonnet's eighth line is important not only because it lists answers to the problems already listed in lines 3 and 4, but also because, in a conventional Petrarchan sonnet, the eighth line is the end of the octave (the first main division of the poem). So far Wordsworth has followed Petrarchan structure precisely rather than adopting the looser and easier forms favored by other English sonneteers: in particular, he has given us, in the first eight lines, the standard Petrarchan rhyme scheme of abba abba ca. We should expect, then, that in line nine Wordsworth will not only begin a new pattern of rhyme but will also offer a significant shift of focus.

In the Petrarchan sestet, or last six lines of the poem, Wordsworth’s attention—which had heretofore been focused on England—now shifts to Milton himself. The poem’s earlier implied emphasis on spirituality here becomes explicit with the reference to Milton’s "soul," which is compared to a "star" (i.e., a small speck of light in the midst of surrounding darkness; a potential source of guidance; a lofty object of wondrous attention). Milton’s soul "dwell apart" (9) in the sense that Milton was focused on higher goals and aspirations than most of his own contemporaries, but it was precisely his spiritual distinctiveness from them that made him a valuable teacher. Effectively using alliteration to emphasize liquid "s" sounds, Wordsworth now proclaims that Milton possessed "a voice whose sound was like the sea" (10). The final noun not only contrasts powerfully with the earlier description of England as a "fen / Of stagnant waters" (2-3), but also carries its other relevant connotations, associating Milton with a broad, deep, inexhaustible and powerful force of nature. The expanse of the ocean is then linked, in the next line, to the expanse of the sky: "the naked heavens." Milton is paradoxically called both "majestic" (a word associated with royalty) and "free" (a word associated with democracy), and the line in which all these descriptions occur uses, once more, the technique of listing that Wordsworth has employed so effectively elsewhere in this poem. Yet just when Milton’s uniqueness is being so strongly stressed, Wordsworth next reminds us that Milton, like all people, had to "travel on life’s common way“ (12). Milton, the uncommon man, nevertheless made the same basic journey that all people must make from birth to death, facing all the usual tribulations (and then some) along the way. If the first three lines of the sestet emphasize Milton’s distinctive loftiness, the last three answer them by emphasizing his modesty and humility and the experiences he shared with every other human being. He journeyed down the common path, but he did so with devout good cheer and with a willingness to accept the "lowliest duties." The poem’s final words stress Milton’s free acceptance of obligations; unlike contemporary England, which has "forfeited" its heritage, Milton’s heart "The lowliest duties on herself did lay" (14). The poem ends with an active verb that also stresses submission and service; it concludes by stressing the paradox of freely chosen obligations. Although most of the poem has been spent exalting Milton as lofty, the final line stresses a humility that seems normal in one sense but quite uncommon in another. Milton, in his "cheerful godliness," experienced the kind of "inward happiness" that Wordsworth’s contemporaries have forfeited. His willingness to accept "The lowliest duties" did not conflict with real happiness, and it also reveals him to have been distinct from the "selfish men" Wordsworth’s sonnet indict. In these ways and others, details from the sestet recall and answer details from the octave, giving the poem the very kind of comprehensive, complex unity that Wordsworth admires in Milton himself.

**Historical Context**

Wordsworth wrote this sonnet and a number of other such poems (many with a strong political emphasis) in the aftermath of a journey he made to France in 1802. There he had visited his illegitimate infant daughter and the girl’s mother, with whom he had had an affair during an earlier stay in that country. At one time Wordsworth had been sympathetic to, and inspired by, the aims of the French Revolution of 1789, but by 1802 the democratic fervor that had unleashed that revolt had produced years of turmoil and violence that had resulted in the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte. England had been at war with France in the period preceding Wordsworth’s visit, and it was clear that future war was likely. This poem,
then, was written during a time of intense domestic and international crisis. France, which had once symbolized for Wordsworth the best hope for freedom, had now become an aggressive dictatorship, with Napoleon bent on foreign conquest. England was an obstacle to his designs, and although (from the perspective of Wordsworth and other progressives) its political system was far from ideal, the English nation was now increasingly associated with liberty in opposition to Napoleonic tyranny. Wordsworth could easily have written a tritely patriotic poem, extolling the glories of Britain. Instead he offers a poem that tries to summon English allegiance to what he considered the best aspects of the nation's political heritage. In particular, he uses the poem to celebrate one of the greatest republican figures of the English past. Milton had been a vigorous supporter and defender of the English Revolution—a revolt against perceived political tyranny that had resulted in the execution of King Charles I. Milton spent many years in tireless service to the newly established Commonwealth; these are probably the "lowliest duties" Wordsworth mentions near the end of his sonnet. Although eventually the republican cause was defeated when the English chose to restore the monarchy, Milton never renounced his republican views or his disdain for tyranny. Little wonder, then, that Wordsworth found him an inspiring example in 1802. Milton, the one-time revolutionary now becomes, for the increasingly conservative Wordsworth, the symbol of the best English political traditions, including traditions of liberty dating back at least as far as the Magna Carta. Although the poem may seem to offer highly general praise of Milton, when the poem is read in light of its immediate historical context (as its title invites us to read it), its highly charged political dimensions become obvious.

Societal Context

Just as Wordsworth under-emphasizes any potentially divisive religious contexts in this sonnet, so he under-plays any social contexts that might split his readership. This subject of this poem provided Wordsworth with a wonderful opportunity to blame some particular segment of English society (such as capitalists, industrialists, aristocrats, the monarchy, or the mercantile classes) for the decline of the nation, but instead he spreads the blame broadly and somewhat blandly, even including himself in the indictment. Rather than indicting the king, the nobles, businessmen, or any other specific social group for the evils of society (as Shelley does, for instance, in his scathingly satirical sonnet "England in 1819"), he addresses the entire English nation. Paradoxically, this apparent disinterest in political finger-pointing is a most effective political tactic. By excluding language that might have pitted different segments of English society against each other, Wordsworth implicitly plays the role of unifier and national spokesman. His focus is primarily ethical rather than political; the reforms he seeks have more to do with morals than with any particular alterations in the structure of society.

Religious Context

Just as Wordsworth under-emphasizes modern science and technology in this poem, so he pays little explicit or particular attention to religion. He makes a highly general reference to the "altar" as one of many aspects of English life he felt were in decline, and later he commends Milton's "cheerful godliness." For the most part, however, his religious language in this poem is general and imprecise; thus he refers to the "naked heavens," but this phrase seems to imply the sky rather than a supernatural Christian realm. He mentions Milton's "soul," but the word seems to lack any particular religious connotations. Line 7 speaks of Milton almost as if he were a second Christ, but the resemblance is never explicitly spelled out. All in all, religious language in this poem is either subtle or vague. This fact is all the more surprising since Milton was himself a highly controversial religious figure. Milton was a strongly committed Puritan and an avowed, even violent opponent of both the Anglican and Catholic churches. He was also (allegedly) highly unorthodox in some of his doctrinal views, and he was, in addition, the author of perhaps the most famous religious poem in the English language. Wordsworth, if he had wanted to, could have emphasized all these facts. Instead, however, he presents Milton as the embodiment of broadly appealing, even fairly secular, values. He wants to present Milton as a symbol of national unity rather than as a representative of sectarian division. He thus under-plays any sense of Milton the religious radical, making him instead the symbol of a kind of "cheerful godliness" that few Christians (or even non-Christians) could fail to admire.

Scientific & Technological Context

Science and technology, at first glance, seem irrelevant to Wordsworth's poem, but that fact in itself is significant. The poem emphasizes natural and spiritual imagery and thus seems (despite the date in its title) to appeal to timeless values. Wordsworth uses language that seems, in some ways,
deliberately archaic in order to emphasize a sense of the ancient traditions he extols. Thus, when alluding to the military, he uses the word "sword," rather than the more modern and relevant "gun" or "rifle." Likewise, when alluding to writers or intellectuals he uses the word "pen," rather than mentioning the modern printing press or the kinds of mass-circulation newspapers in which this very poem was first published. By excluding references to up-to-date scientific or technological developments, Wordsworth makes the language of his poem reflect the kind of timeless, long-standing traditions the sonnet exalts.

Biographical Context

Wordsworth (1770-1850) is usually considered one of the major poets of the Romantic period. Along with his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge, he helped usher in a new kind of writing in reaction against the neo-classicism that had predominated in the eighteenth century. Wordsworth and Coleridge championed a kind of poetry that was intended to be simpler, less artificial, more "natural," more colloquial, and more attuned to the expression of common emotions. At first these innovations met with much resistance, but eventually Wordsworth became a respected and much-loved writer, and in the final years of his life he was even appointed the nation's official Poet Laureate. Although Wordsworth remarked that at one point he had considered the sonnet form "egregiously absurd" (qtd. in Moorman 565), he changed his mind when his sister Dorothy re-acquainted him with some of Milton's sonnets by reading them to him in May of 1802. (Eventually he composed more than 500 poems using this form [Hall 70].) Wordsworth admired the "dignified simplicity" and "majestic harmony" (qtd in Moorman 565) of Milton's poems, and the experience of hearing the works inspired his own outburst of sonnet-writing that year. These sonnets of 1802 contain some of the most explicit political commentary Wordsworth had offered in some time, although the poems are not as propagandistic as they could have been. Wordsworth himself later called attention to the "simplicity of style" and "grandeur of moral sentiment" he had sought to achieve in these works (qtd in Hall 71), and certainly "London, 1802" seems to exemplify those traits. The sonnets of 1802 are part of the poet's general movement away from the intense lyricism of his early career; they signal instead his growing status as a public poet (he would eventually be named England's official Poet Laureate) as well as his movement towards a more conservative cultural and political stance. Wordsworth married in 1802, and in various other ways he began, more and more, to submit to the various public and social "duties" he mentions in the sonnet praising Milton. In that poem and in others he began to associate the ideal of liberty with the ideal of order, and he began to think, increasingly, that England best represented the union of those ideals, especially in its conflict with a France that seemed, in its allegiance to Napoleon, to have betrayed the promise of the Revolution Wordsworth had once admired.