

British Reactions to the French Revolution

It is difficult to overemphasize the impact of the French Revolution on British thinking and, in particular, British Romanticism. As Professor Cody's brief overview of the impact of the French Revolution makes clear, the events of 1789 and the events immediately following drew disparate responses in England, as radical and conservative thinkers quickly turned to their pens to celebrate or denounce the overthrow of the French monarchy. As the French Revolution induced bloodshed, and as the French Republic declared war on England, British reactions became more complex and more polarized.

The three texts in this subunit reflect various positions. Richard Price, a dissenting minister, delivered his lecture, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, in November 1789. In this lecture, he connects the unfolding events in France with England's own Glorious Revolution of 1688 (the bloodless removal of the king by Parliament) and the American Revolution of a decade earlier as part of the march of reason, progress, and liberty. As a dissenter from the established Anglican Church, Price sees the Glorious Revolution as important for giving English people freedom of religion as well as establishing their right to choose their own leaders and to resist leaders who abuse power. At the same time, Price sees the revolution as incomplete: religious tests limit who can perform certain acts within the government and Parliament remains not truly representative of the people. With the French Revolution, he perceives the dawning of a new day of even greater freedom. Drawing on *Protestant millennialism*, the idea that God will usher in a new age culminating his design for humanity, Price embraces the Enlightenment promise – “a diffusion of knowledge, which has undermined superstition and error” – as leading directly to greater freedom. In this new age, according to Price, the revolutions taking place will replace monarchies with laws and religious tyranny with the rule of individual conscience and reason. At the same time that he celebrates the Glorious, American, and French Revolutions, Price warns those who support tyranny that they must reform immediately and must grant “mankind their rights,” or they will be swept away.

Price's lecture and pamphlet set in motion one of the most intense and interesting political arguments, a war of ideas waged in print. The most famous work to emerge from this battle was Edmund Burke's direct response to Price, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Burke's response, in turn, led to some of the most important late Enlightenment considerations of state power, natural rights, and human liberty, including Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1790) and Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* (1791–1792). Price, Wollstonecraft, and Paine all viewed the French Revolution as liberating the people of France from the tyrannical institutions of traditional aristocracy and the church by allowing them to pursue their individual natural rights, as guided by their own consciences and rationality. Burke's work, which remains a foundational text of conservative political thought, responds both to the events in France and to Price's celebration of them in the name of natural liberty

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and reason. Burke has greater faith in traditional institutions than in individual reason or conscience. Against unimpeded liberty, Burke, who had supported the American Revolution and had been generally seen as a liberal, aligns time-tested institutions and the slowly evolved English constitution. According to Burke, the problem with the French Revolution is that it eschews wisdom built up over the ages and embodied in institutions for the idea that the individuals of one generation could discover and enact truth. He directly attacks Price and the Revolution Society for their understanding of the meaning of the Glorious Revolution. In particular, he argues against their contention that the king is merely a servant to the people and that people have a right to form their own government, insisting that such ideas have no foundation in the English constitution. Instead, government and rights are inherited through the state; they do not exist outside the state as abstract principles. Where Price and other radicals try to found liberty and the right to establish government in nature, Burke proclaims that the grounding of rights in inheritance is “the happy effect of following nature, which is wisdom without reflection.” Traditional institutions, rather than abstract ideas, provide the best defense and only solid ground for individual rights. Burke warns that if those foundations in civil society are abandoned, nothing more than selfish motives will guide those in power, as nothing will restrain individuals from pursuing individualistic goals that will destroy the rights of others. In essence, Burke emphasizes the weaknesses of human nature, the power of undisciplined thinking and emotions, where his opponents focus on the potential of individuals to determine what is right for themselves and for their nation.

These debates – and the events in France they reflected upon – deeply influenced the canonical British Romantic poets. For the generation of poets coming of age with the French Revolution, at first revolution seemed to embody the best hope for the reformation of humankind. William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Robert Southey all fully embraced the cause of the French Revolution in their youth, but they all swung to a much more conservative position as they grew older. Because of this shift in their political beliefs, the next generation of Romantic poets, especially Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron, would see them as apostates to the cause of humanity and to what was best in their own poetry. As Shelley would write in his sonnet “To Wordsworth,” Wordsworth who had created songs “to truth and liberty” has “desert[ed]” them, leaving Shelley “to grieve” that having been, that thou shouldst cease to be” (12–14) a supporter of progressive politics.

Wordsworth provides his own account of his changing feelings and reactions to the French Revolution in his long autobiographical poem *The Prelude*. Wordsworth began the poem in 1798, at a time when his reactions to the French Revolution were shifting, and he continued to work on the poem until his death in 1850. Written in *blank verse* – unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter, e.g., the verse form that Milton uses in *Paradise Lost* – *The Prelude* is primarily seen as a narrative of Wordsworth’s development as a poet. Yet, it also contains his changing reflections on the events in France in the 1790s. Coleridge addresses the poem in a letter to Wordsworth as largely reflecting on the

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condition of those who had come to see the French Revolution as a complete failure and as evidence of the difficulty, if not impossibility, of renovating the condition of humankind. Some critics of Coleridge and Wordsworth have characterized their development of Romanticism, with its emphasis on the individual imagination, its engagement with nature, and its development of psychological and metaphysical insights, as a retreat from the possibility of social and political reformation into aesthetic contemplation.

In the excerpts from *The Prelude* for this section of the course, Wordsworth provides the most famous poetic account of the French Revolution. He begins book 9 by reflecting on his memory as a meandering river before describing himself as “Free as a colt” (23) in his youthful existence in London and then recounting his desire to journey to France. This occurred in November 1791, in the midst of the pamphlet wars over the Revolution, to which Wordsworth refers: “I had skimmed, and sometimes read/ With care, the master pamphlets of the day” (96–97). As he moves across France towards his destination in the Loire Valley, he visits and describes some of the key sites of the early parts of the Revolution, including the Bastille in lines 42–81, picking up a rock from the former prison as a souvenir, yet he finds himself strangely unmoved by these sights. Despite “their first shock” (75), he “looked for something that I could not find” as he “Affect[s] more emotion than I felt.” In other words, he pretends to feel more deeply than he truly does. Here, we begin to see his disappointment in the Revolution, particularly in his lack of deep reaction to what he had imagined as a transformative experience.

After commenting on his own detachment from the Revolution – which he may be exaggerating in his remembrance – Wordsworth describes settling in the town of Orleans, where his friends are military officers, who, with one important exception, are “bent upon undoing what was done” (131), i.e., in overturning the Revolution and returning the king to power. Although in the history of the Revolution this was a relatively quiet time, Wordsworth describes a country in turmoil: “in truth an hour / Of universal ferment” (161–162), “The land all swarmed with passion” (175), and “shocks repeated day by day, / And felt through every nook of town and field” (179–180). Wordsworth then reflects on why he felt sympathy with the Revolution, even as his friends attempt to “bring me over to their cause” (197). He comments that he was never very interested in political questions, but he was always innately repulsed by “the regal scepter, and the pomp / Of orders and degrees” (209–210). In part, he simply has not been exposed to much nobility, as he comes from a “poor district” (215), where virtually no one made “claims of wealth or blood” (222). Further, his experience in school was of an egalitarian society, “a Republic, where all stood thus far / Upon equal ground” (226–227) and “Distinction lay open to all” (230). His academic experience provides him with a foundation for valuing a meritocracy, a society in which each person can prove himself or herself, no matter his or her background. Wordsworth also cites his experience of nature as a child – one of the central themes of the earlier parts of *The Prelude* – “subservience from the first/ To presences of God’s mysterious power / Made manifest

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in Nature's sovereignty" (232–234). This experience makes him "look with awe/ Upon the faculties of man" (239–240) and leads to his faith in a "government of equal rights / And individual worth" (243–244). He even exclaims that his enthusiasm for the Revolution is tempered by his sense that the events are "nothing out of nature's certain course" (247). His faith in the goodness and promise of individuals was such that the Revolution did not even strike him as extraordinary.

After commenting on his resistance to the officers' arguments against the Revolution and his sympathy for the patriots who would die in the wars that followed, Wordsworth introduces Michel Beaupuy (288), an officer, who supported the Revolution. Beaupuy was one of the greatest influences on Wordsworth, and in the lines that follow, Wordsworth details their conversation and camaraderie as they share their visions of human progress and "Man and his noble nature" (355) as epitomized by the Revolution's overturning of aristocratic power, "a living confirmation" (382) of their faith in "rational liberty, and hope in man, / Justice and peace" (395–396). The two take more pleasure in describing the horrors of aristocratic power, "In painting to ourselves the miseries / Of royal courts" (344–345). As much as Wordsworth supports the Revolution, he finds his mind wandering from politics during their walks in the woods: "A novel scene did often in his way / Master my fancy while I wandered on" (462–463). When they come across an old building destroyed by the Revolution (467), Wordsworth bewails the destruction of the Revolution. He celebrates his imagination (495) for restraining his patriotic fervor. When the two friends see a starving young girl leading a cow (509–515), they reflect on and justify the fight against this kind of poverty; their hope is "that poverty / Abject as this would in a little time / Be found no more, that we should see the earth/ Unthwarted in her wish to recompense / The meek, the lowly, patient child of toil" (520–524). Wordsworth continues to list some of the other perversions of power that the Revolution will overcome. Early in book 9, we see Wordsworth's hopes in the Revolution – hopes that are similar to those expressed by Price and others similar to him, but are based far less in political theory than in his poetic sense in the equality of individuals and in God and Earth providing enough for all. At the same time, that he "believed / That a benignant spirit was abroad" (518–519) hints at his later self's chastened view of things.

In book 10, those hints of some uncertainty are borne out as Wordsworth moves from enthusiastic supporter of the Revolution to being horrified by the Reign of Terror and wary of the claims of liberty. The book begins with Wordsworth leaving Orleans and going back to Paris, where the king has been deposed (12). In the meantime, the invading forces of Austria and Prussia, which had sought to restore the king, have been defeated (12–27). While Wordsworth celebrates the French victory, he hints that the Revolution is beginning to move forward too quickly, with the proclamation of a republic and the jailing of the king and his family. Further, he reflects on the massacres that have already occurred in lines 43 and 57, but at this point he still hopes that "these were past" (44) and that the "Earth [would be] free from them for ever" (45). The end of line 45, "as

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was thought,” emphasizes that these were Wordsworth’s and others’ thoughts at the time, visions that will soon prove to be wrong. In the streets of Paris, Wordsworth hears the political attacks on Robespierre, and he reflects (from his later perspective) on the failed attempts of those he favored to stop Robespierre’s advance towards absolute power, concluding that “Heaven’s best aid is wasted upon men / Who to themselves are false” (119–120). Again, we see Wordsworth moving from his enthusiasm at the time of October 1792 to reflecting on his chastened sense of mankind due to all that would follow as the Revolution rolled onward.

Over the next 100 lines or so, Wordsworth reflects on his desire to support the political forces he thinks will best promote the common welfare, reiterating his commitment to the ideals of the Revolution: “That nothing hath a natural right to last / But equity and reason” (205–206). The lines that follow again suggest his less optimistic view as an older man. By commenting that he was “not doubting at that time” (210), he suggests that, in fact, he does doubt now that it would be possible for the Revolution to “Have cleared a passage for just government” (218). In this stanza, he hints at the forces that the Revolution cannot overcome: “what the People long had been and were / Through ignorance and false teaching” (214–215). While Wordsworth does not explicitly state his later position, he suggests that the Revolution attempted too much and that the people themselves were incapable, due to “ignorance and false teaching,” of properly ruling themselves.

Wordsworth then narrates having to return to England out of “harsh necessity” (222), noting that if he had stayed, he would have been of little use and might have perished alongside many others in the Reign of Terror that would soon come. After commenting on having been gone for two winters, he describes the political scene of England, where debates are taking place over ending the slave trade. He takes these debates as reflecting the progressive forces unleashed by the French Revolution but then is shocked when Britain joins in the war against republican France (264). In the lines that follow, he comments that he had never felt such a “shock” (268) to his “moral nature” (269). Wordsworth describes, with shame, that he then was cheered when British forces were defeated, but uppermost are his feelings of alienation from his country and his countrymen as well as his own uncertainty. He sees the British war effort as fueling the increasingly irrational behavior of the leaders of France, as they “were glad / Of this new enemy” (332–333) and “The goaded land waxed mad” (336). The next 30 or so lines reflect on the Reign of Terror that followed Robespierre’s ascension to power in July 1793, as “Domestic carnage now filled the whole year” (356) in France and “all perished, all-- / Friends, enemies, of all parties, ages, ranks, / Head after head” fell to the guillotine (360–362). For Wordsworth, the Reign of Terror calls into question his faith in the Revolution’s ideals, for it was “A woful time for them whose hopes survived / The shock; most woful for those few who still / Were flattered and had trust in human kind” (386–388). Wordsworth, at that time, seems to be among those who flatter themselves, meaning giving themselves false hope, in trusting humankind. As the poem

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continues, he recounts how in the years that followed his dreams were consistently haunted by images of the Terror. In lines 416–436, he then contrasts the ease of the love of nature, of yielding one’s self to nature’s charms, with the difficulties of the “second love” (430) of human social connections. He goes on to see the blame for human failures as lying with us (470), but maintaining his limited faith in humankind, he rejects those who see the Terror as “the harvest that we reap / From popular government and equality” (472–473) and instead insists that the violence comes from “a terrific reservoir of guilt / And ignorance filled up from age to age, / That could no longer hold its loathsome charge, / But burst and spread in deluge through the land” (477–480). Wordsworth no longer has his youthful faith in the Revolution’s ability to set everything right. He cannot share the view espoused by Price and others. Yet, he does not reject the ideals of equality and popular rights, which he believes nature underlies. His position is not as conservative as Burke’s, although some scholars have demonstrated some deep connections, even as he seems to conclude that political change can only happen slowly. Book 10 concludes with him hearing the news of Robespierre’s removal from power on a day when he visits the grave of his favorite teacher, news that allows him (at the time) to return to his faith in the Revolution, a faith that will fade as the years pass by.

Summary

- By most accounts, the French Revolution was the most important and influential political and philosophical event for the Romantic era.
- Reactions to the French Revolution in England spurred ardent political pamphlets that revealed deep divisions in the nation.
- For radicals and progressives, such as Richard Price, the French Revolution followed in the footsteps of the British Glorious Revolution and the American Revolution in recognizing individuals’ natural rights and their power to decide for themselves.
- Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* became the most influential conservative reaction, viewing the Revolution as attempting to reshape humankind by abandoning the wisdom of tradition.
- At first, most British Romantics were enthusiastic about the French Revolution; however, many of those in the older generation – such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Southey, and William Wordsworth – ultimately rejected it as too radical and as a betrayal of human nature. The second generation British Romantics, most notably Percy Bysshe Shelley and George Gordon (Lord Byron), continued to celebrate its ideals.
- William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*, an autobiographical epic poem of his growth and development, provides the most famous poetic account of the French Revolution.

- In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth reflects on his enthusiasm for the Revolution during his time in France. His enthusiasm emerged from his experience in rural England as a youth and his sense of the equality of all in nature.
- *The Prelude* hints at Wordsworth's later chastened view of the Revolution as attempting too much too soon and reflects on his idealistic support for it.

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