The Victory Ode and National Narrative:  
William Wordsworth’s *Thanksgiving Ode*

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Abstract  
As a subgenre of the ode, the victory ode constitutes one type of national narrative that celebrates the military victories of the nation and promotes national consciousness, at the same time providing a subject position for the poet, who employs the generic and cultural codes to claim his right to be the national bard. After teasing out the basic structure and reasoning logic of this sub-genre, based on examples from William Congreve, Matthew Prior, and Elizabeth Cobbold, the author proceeds to examine the imperial discourse of Wordsworth’s *Thanksgiving Ode* (1816). The article argues that the poet employs the generic code of the traditional victory ode, but departs from it in order to explore the meaning of war and exorcize Napoleon’s satanic power. Wordsworth ostensibly succeeds in creating an idiosyncratic style of victory ode writing to build up his imagined empire-nation, while an aggressive overtone grows to destabilize the dichotomized signification cluster established previously, with the threat of the Other finally co-existing in tension with the British Empire.

Keywords  
William Wordsworth, *Thanksgiving Ode*, victory ode, national narrative, national bard
Introduction

In his writing career, Wordsworth wrote more than five hundred poems, but among them only nine had the genre description “ode” in their title. In 1816, however, he published three odes in the pamphlet *Thanksgiving Ode, January 18, 1816: With Other Short Pieces, Chiefly Referring to Recent Public Events* to celebrate the victory at Waterloo, all of which were later included in the category of “Poems Dedicated to National Independence and Liberty” in the 1845 edition of his collected poems. For someone who cherished the use of this genre title, such publication was an unusual phenomenon, one which has attracted very little critical attention in the research on the Romantic period. For some literary critics, the volume is testimony to “the nadir of Wordsworth’s career” and “proof of the poet’s declining power” (Garrett 81). Stephen Gill sees this volume as “a key to understanding his later years” (316), even though “the poems which were his public statement [responding to the victory at Waterloo]” are “lifeless” (319). As for the title poem, *Thanksgiving Ode*, Carl Woodring sees the poem as dully infused with nothing but “allegorical trappings and static positioning,” one whose only aim is to cater to public interest in the poet’s imaginary rendering of “the monuments to military glory that crowd the aisles of Westminster Abbey” (140). Even one of the most ardent sympathizers of Wordsworth, the biographer Mary Moorman, admits that “rhetorical bombast” and “baroque[ness] in style and feeling” are prevalent in the poem (288-89). On the other hand, another group of literary critics hold an opposite opinion: Richard Gravil argues that though the *Thanksgiving Ode* is “among Wordsworth’s least familiar works,” it “marks the extraordinary zenith of Wordsworth’s Bardic career” (236-37). For J. R. Watson, the importance of this poem as a national narrative lies in the fact that Waterloo was “a stirring part of national history” allowing Wordsworth, in “[response] to a national mood,” to express his feelings, which “would go down to posterity as major contributions to the sense of national identity and European history” (181-82). When commenting on the content of this poem, James M. Garrett notices the poet’s ambivalence towards his subject, in that it “reveals not a commemoration, but a vacillation between celebration and chastisement” (81). Simon Bainbridge sees the problematic

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ending in this poem as the result of “the final logical step in Wordsworth’s working out of his own world view” (176). In recent years, according to Anne Frey, the interval between the eras of High Romanticism and the Victorian Period has gradually become a focus in reevaluating this transition period, and the reason why the texts written after high Romantic poetry and before the Victorian novel had aroused little critical interest was that they were “resistant to critics’ strategies for understanding and rendering significant both forms” (3). In response to the reading recently put forward by Bainbridge, Watson, and Garrett, the present article offers an analysis of the Thanksgiving Ode that emphasizes its appropriation of the victory ode as a sub-genre. The first part of this paper identifies the basic structure of the athletic triumphal ode, which provides a basic frame of reference for the national narrative of the military victory ode. In the second part, I examine Wordsworth’s adaptation of and contribution to this genre. Instead of following the consistent tone of a traditional victory ode, Wordsworth develops a double writing on the nation that aims to empower national authority but turns out to challenge the legitimacy of an empire that claims to be based on morality and justice.

**From Athletic Triumphal Ode to Military Victory Ode**

With the rediscovery of Greek and Roman literature in the Renaissance, Italian and French men of letters translated and imitated the ode in their vernacular language, transforming and appropriating this genre for different occasions, “from weddings to funerals to celebrations of royal victories; they could be humble epistles to friends or hymns to sovereigns” (Revard, *Pindar* 2-3). The Pindaric celebration of athletic achievement, which did not fit into the habit and custom of these states, lost its appeal in the contemporary era. What was suitable to be applied, in the war-torn period of 15th- to 16th-century Europe, was the literal “victory ode,” the ode that described the feat of the King and the courage of his warriors. 2 The military victory ode distinguished itself from its origin in the athletic ode in that it was a national narrative. While in the athletic triumphal ode glory is reflected from the winner to the city-state, the military ode telling the story of victory generates pride of nation in the people.

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2 Vis-à-vis the appropriateness of the application of the Pindaric athletic ode to military victory, Stella P. Revard makes a brief comment on the thematic parallels: “As a composer of epinician odes, Pindar is granting to the victors in athletic contests the counterpart of praise that in the heroic society would have belonged to the victors in battle. It is one reason why Horace in the Augustan era and Ronsard and other poets in the Renaissance can so readily adapt the ode for athletic victory to the ode for military victory” (Revard, *Politics* 63).
In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that a community must be imagined, because no one has ever seen or contacted the majority of people who are said to be in the same community (6). With the material and cultural development of print capitalism and the circulation of the vernacular language, national consciousness was promoted and disseminated. An example of an effective means of spreading national consciousness through vernacular language is the press, which describes and refers to noteworthy events, imaginatively relating it to the community members. Having a function similar to that of the press, the victory ode re-affirms and consolidates the relationship between its readers and the community to which they are imagined to belong through its reference to “their” victory. The ode writer reported the event to those who had no detailed knowledge or hands-on experience of the war; moreover, he interpreted and manipulated the opinions about the war to consolidate the legitimacy of authority.\(^3\) In addition to a plain description of the war and praise for those in power, a qualified victory ode writer appropriates a nation’s cultural roots to arouse group mentality so as to intensify its bonds with those in power. As a type of cultural resource in itself, the victory ode shoulders the role of reminding the community members of their shared cultural background by recalling their traditions (cultural, religious, ethnic, historical), identifying the leader who has now won glory and honor for them, and pointing out the significance of the victory for them as well as for their posterity. To sum up, to commemorate the victory is to inculcate a shared historical heritage and perspective, a discipline that promotes national consciousness.

In 1700, the heirless Spanish King Charles II died, and his successor, Philip, Duke of Anjou, was seen as a closer ally to France and therefore a threat to other European colonial powers, including England. A series of wars of Spanish succession were waged between the colonial powers. In 1706, under the reign of Queen Ann and leadership of the Duke of Marlborough, the commander-in-chief of England and its allies, Austria and the Dutch Republic, won an important battle at the village of Ramillies and drove the French from the Spanish Netherlands. Both William Congreve and Matthew Prior wrote odes celebrating this hard-won victory in which they praised the virtues of the Queen and the courage of the Duke of Marlborough, thereby consolidating loyalty to the British Monarchy.

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\(^3\) One early example that did not fully correspond to the interests of the contemporary authorities is Andrew Marvell’s *An Horatian Ode: Upon Cromwell’s Return from Ireland*, in which Cromwell is depicted as a Machiavellian figure who schemed for Charles I’s escape. This scheming is shown to have led to the king’s execution and Cromwell’s succession, though praise for Cromwell still dominates the mood of the poem.
Both Congreve and Prior, at the beginning of their poems, pretend to be incompetent before the great task they have undertaken. Paradoxically, this humble gesture only implies that, in fact, they were wisely chosen, being the only ones who are capable of inciting the nation to celebrate the victory. Congreve resorts to the traditional invocation for the power of inspiration, while Prior adopts the apostrophe to ask for the permission of the “sovereign power,” the divinized Queen Anne. The function of both invocation and apostrophe is to signal “being-present to a transcendent, originary voice” (Fry 9), and to create the transcendental signifier so as to secure the legitimacy of the statements that follow. After the invocation comes the naming of the literary/cultural tradition: Spencer, Milton, and Shakespeare, who are the cultural icons shared by the imagined English community. The listing of literary masters constitutes a literary heritage (secured by the logos) that the two poets hope to succeed or supersede. When they were celebrating the victory of the nation, they saw themselves as succeeding and adding to the tradition of victory celebrations, in the name of the same nation. In celebrating the victory and exulting in the pride of the nation, the poet at the same time raised himself up as the national bard. The praise works mutually. When the poet praises the Queen, he presumably receives her endorsement as the national bard. Both ode poets seized this opportunity to commemorate the special day of victory in order to help promote national consciousness not only by articulating the story to the imagined community of the victory “they” have won but also by praising the virtue of “their” leader. Since celebrating this literary tradition is national through and through, the nation, the national authorities, national event, and national bard, therefore, are interlocked in this type of genre. Choosing this mode enables the poet to reveal his knowledge and skill in this genre, to present himself as successor in the literary tradition and acquire a national identity as the national bard.

The Victory Ode and the National Narrative

The idea of “nation” as a unified political entity is always problematic. As far as the formation of nation states is concerned, traditional Western philosophers such as Max Weber and Ernest Gellner have overemphasized the bright side of “modernity” in modern nations: human worth in the vast universe, progress in technology, the development of civilization, in order to differentiate it from the

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4 This “humility of the British bard,” as Richard Gravil terms it, has its origin in Aneirin’s line, translated by Thomas Gray: “And I, the meanest of them all, / That live to weep and sing their fall” (1).
feudal states of the Middle Ages. In their historical construction of these imagined modern states, however, the violence and brutality underlying the establishment of a modern nation is downplayed, i.e. the blood-shed in military actions in the process of seizing political power, and the oppression of the conquered, marginalized ethnic groups, classes, and women, are overlooked. In the nation’s claim to be unified and unitary, differences are bypassed, sacrificed, and forgotten. Homi K. Bhabha identifies the features of nationalist discourses that “produce the idea of the nation as a continuous narrative of national progress” as “the narcissism of self-generation, the primeval present of the Volk” (1; emphasis in original). A nationalist narrative usually applies a textual strategy to imagine a linear, stable tradition based upon reason and cultural heritage, and delineates its boundary to create a unified spatial-temporal political entity. The “ambivalent tension” of various polarities (be it the interest of public/private, progression and regression, political rationality and irrationality) resides in the “national space.” To explore the binary “ambivalent tension” in the cultural representation of a nation and to redefine these terms, according to Bhabha, one has to analyze “the nation as it is written” (2; emphasis in original), to contest “the traditional authority of those national objects of knowledge—Tradition, People, the Reason of State, High Culture,” the value of which “relies on their representation as holistic concepts located within an evolutionary narrative of historical continuity” (3).

The victory ode writers discussed above attempted to establish a linear political/cultural tradition in their nation writing, and boasted of their nation’s military and cultural superiority over their enemy on the battlefield. Military victory was an event allowing them to write a national narrative to celebrate the values and continuity of the nation. Their writings attest that the victory ode of this kind is a fine example of the nationalist narrative Bhabha portrays. Another important post-colonial theorist, Edward W. Said directs his attention to the hidden sides of colonial rhetoric. He points out that the colonial powers, in their competition for exploitation of the colonized, used “a whole slew of theories and rhetoric for justifying their plunder” (333). The real purposes of military invasion and colonial exploitation are silenced. They claimed their cultures “have a higher aim in life than others,” and justified their colonializing actions “in the name of a noble ideal” (333), be it justice or benevolence. In response to the colonizer’s rhetoric, the colonized resorted to the construction of a mentality of belonging, “us-versus-them” for their independence movements (334). In addition to the rhetoric of cultural specificity, Said also notes (having Huntington in mind), that in every civilizational camp:
[t]here are official representatives of that culture or civilization who make themselves into its mouthpiece, who assign themselves the role of articulating “our” (or for that matter “their”) essence. This always necessitates a fair amount of compression, reduction, and exaggeration. (334)

As seen in the examples of Congreve and Prior, the victory ode writers appointed themselves the mouthpiece for their civilization, and downplayed their self-serving colonial interests under the guise of benevolence: e.g., saving the world from the oppression of France. Said’s analysis of colonial rhetoric points to what really lies underneath the noble mission of colonial invasion, and explores the “ambivalent tension” in a national narrative when military victory is used to praise the “noble ideal” of a colonial power. After Waterloo, Elizabeth Cobbold wrote a victory ode to claim cultural superiority over France in a series of dichotomies of good/evil, liberty/anarchy, shelter/tempest, sympathetic/ruthless, God-favored/Satanic to disguise Britain’s imperial motivations. As shall be seen, when Wordsworth elaborates on this same event, he unwisely unraveled the “ambivalent tension” in these binary oppositions of England and its Other, France, to describe the war that lasted for more than 20 years.

**Napoleon as Satan: Elizabeth Cobbold’s**

**Ode on the Victory of Waterloo**

In late 1815 Elizabeth Cobbold published *Ode on the Victory of Waterloo* to celebrate this historical event, which represented the general feelings of the British public within the contemporary cultural codes. On the cover page she states clearly her intention in publishing the poem, which was dedicated to “His Royal Highness, George, Prince of Wales, Regent of the United British Empire”:

In Admiration of that exalted and unremitting Benevolence which in Adversity fostered and supported, and has twice pre-eminently led to the Restoration of the Royal House of France. . . . With the ardent Feelings of Patriotism, and the loyal Duty of an Englishwoman. (iii–iv)

The preface expresses the author’s knowledge of this generic code: the interpretation of the victory (England’s benevolence to France and Europe) and the
official attitude one carried towards this event ("ardent feelings of Patriotism"). In a way that provides a contrast with Congreve’s Pindaric and Prior’s Horatian prosody in their victory odes, Cobbold adopted the form of the irregular Pindaric ode, a popular poetic form with no specific metrical pattern or stanzaic formula. The whole poem contains twenty-one stanzas, varying from the shortest of six lines to the longest of twenty-two lines. In its content, Cobbold omits the invocation and the announcement of herself as the chosen national bard. In the first stanza, a Thomsonian description of personalized natural phenomena replaces the traditional invocation to the Muse of memory: “Bright Peace enthron’d in sunbeams sate,” “While Joy and Fancy round her head / Bright wreaths of rainbow lustre spread” (I 2, 5-6). Despite the absence of an invocation, Cobbold’s victory ode aims to promote national identity and consciousness. Cobbold exploits a self-righteous tone in her description of the war against France. The Seine is said to be “polluted,” which was “not innocuous to the main” (II 2-3). France under the rule of Napoleon is a place where “the Tempest’s bulky volume roll’d, / And Demons wild, of giant form, / Hung on the Darkness and embraced the Storm!” In this modern hell of war, Napoleon and his followers are compared to “Lucifer” and his “Demon band,” ravaging the Western world in “Anarchy Ambition,” “brutal Rage,” and “Murder’s deep tremendous yell” (14-20). In contrast, Britain is depicted as a benevolent force that has saved the world from disaster:

Brunswick’s Star benignant shed
Its influence on the drooping Flow’r [Europe];
She felt the dew of Pity’s tear,
The beam of Hope her faintness cheer,
And liv’d and bloom’d in Albion’s shelt’ring bow’r. (III 6-10)

Out of sympathy for the pain of other countries (instead of conflicts in colonial interests), the British fought for the liberty and autonomy of other nations.

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5 This type of ode was first attempted by Abraham Cowley (1618-67), who “reproduce[d] Pindar’s spirit and manner without imitating his metrical and stanzaic forms” (Jump 14). Cowley soon drew lots of followers who attempted to try this Greek prosody but lacked knowledge of Greek. In the eyes of some poets (such as William Congreve), the popularity of this “Cowleyian style” suggested the decline of contemporary literature.

6 The description of natural scenery and the usage of personification in the ode had its development in the early eighteenth century. James Thomson popularized the description of scenery in his well-read The Seasons, and the prevalent uses of personification in the odes can be found in the works of William Collins, Thomas Gray, and the Warton Brothers (Spacks 134-50).
Cobbold’s victory ode, or the national identity she helped shape, is founded on the series of dichotomies prevalent in this poem: good/evil, liberty/anarchy, shelter/tempest, sympathetic/ruthless, God-favored/Satanic. This series of dichotomies circles around the portrayal of Napoleon as the Biblical Satan. During the period of the French Revolution, images of evil, chaos, and Satan’s rebellion were applied to English Jacobians and William Pitt, while “[a]fter the coup d’état of 1799, Bonaparte was increasingly identified with the Devil and Antichrist” in literature and more prosaic writing (Schock 23). As the most threatening force against British colonial power, Napoleon was represented as Satan, with its accompanying description in the signification cluster.

**Imaging the Nation: Wordsworth’s Thanksgiving Ode**

Wordsworth’s three odes published in 1816 are collected in *Thanksgiving Ode, January 18, 1816: With Other Short Pieces, Chiefly Referring to Recent Public Events*. In the following versions of the collection, they were categorized as “Poems on National Independence and Liberty.” In the 1805 version of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth mentioned how he was disappointed with the progress of the French Revolution, from its defense of the liberty of the people to its tyranny and invasions. This transition led to his depression and his resorting to Godwinian rationalism and mathematics, but in vain. This loss of imagination was partially redeemed in the final episode, where he retrieved his power of imagination when crossing Mount Snowdon. However, the retrieval of his imaginative power at the same time transformed the essence of imagination in the poem. It was not the imagination of a poet-prophet, who had anchored his hope in the value of human liberty as realized in the French Revolution. Rather, it became the communicative ability of a nature poet, or a poet hiding his political ideas in his interaction with nature.

In 1805, when Wordsworth finished *The Prelude*, Britain was still at war with France (via the Battle of Trafalgar). Ten years later, Waterloo provided an opportunity for Wordsworth to directly engage with politics once again and seek a subject position

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7 As J. R. Watson points out, “[t]he dichotomy of good and evil was a prevalent sentiment during this period of time . . . from 1808 to 1815, there was only one appropriate course of action—God sanctioned, righteous. It is not surprising, perhaps, that the praise of righteousness should sound like national self-righteousness” (182).

8 The three odes are *Ode: The Morning of the Day Appointed for a General Thanksgiving, January 18, 1816*, *Ode: Composed in 1816*, and *Ode*.

9 Wordsworth’s inclination to intentionally transform or relocate politics in aesthetic terms has been suggested by New Historicists, such as Jerome McGann, Marjorie Levinson, and Alan Liu.
in the political discourse. *Thanksgiving Ode* is the result of this attempt.

In the “Advertisement” of the volume *Thanksgiving Ode, January 18, 1816: With Other Short Pieces, Chiefly Referring to Recent Public Events*, Wordsworth explains his purpose in writing and publishing these poems following the end of the war, and expresses his attitude and sentiment as to this historical event, which he hopes will find sympathy among his readers. At the beginning of the advertisement, Wordsworth displays himself as different from others in the celebration of the national victory:

> It is not to bespeak *favour* or *indulgence*, but to *guard against* *misapprehension*, that the author presumes to state that the present publication owes its existence to a *patriotism*, anxious to exert itself in *commemorating* that course of action, by which Great Britain has, for some time past, distinguished herself above all other countries. (iii; emphasis added)

Following the general tone of the works published soon after Waterloo, which intended to show the writers’ love for country, praise of its values, and commemorate the historical event, Wordsworth expresses his “patriotism,” the impact of which led him to “commemorate” the course of action of the war. However, the aim of these poems is to inculcate right understanding. Wordsworth explains that his works, when dealing with the “present distress,” do not intend to “interpose a veil sufficiently thick to hide the splendor of this great moral triumph,” nor does he, when praising the greatness of his nation, “giv[e] way to exultation, unchecked by these distresses” suffered by his country (iii-iv). Bearing in mind the large-scale sacrifice on the battlefield and upcoming economic downturn, Wordsworth asks his readers not to “indulge in regrets and repining” or to deepen their sentimentality, nor to “feed a morbid satisfaction, by aggravating these burthens in *imagination*” (iv; emphasis added). He set this key tone to restrain the national mood from indulging in either excessive joy or helpless sorrow, and interpreted the victory as a moral triumph, instead of a military one:

> Nor is it at the expense of *rational patriotism*, or in disregard of sound philosophy, that the author hath given vent to feelings tending to encourage a martial spirit in the bosoms of my countrymen, at a time when there is a general outcry against the prevalence of these dispositions. (iv; emphasis added)
Throughout the preface, Wordsworth lays his focus on the idea of “rational patriotism” and “moral triumph,” two major sentiments the poet endeavored to inculcate into his readers. “Moral triumph” was the reason why Wordsworth believed the British had won/would win the war. The most typical example of this argument can be found in his 1811 letter to C. W. Pasley, the author of *The Military Policy and Institutions of the British Empire* (1810). Pasley compared the military power and domestic resources of Britain and France, asking the British not to underestimate the danger of Napoleon. In response to Pasley’s viewpoint, Wordsworth argued that Britain and France were two different types of nations. While the British had a long tradition of the “moral sentiments” of “justice” and “right,” France under the reign of Napoleon was in essence an “oppressive government.” The impetus of “moral character,” Wordsworth believed, was the reason why Britain waged the war to rescue those “unhappy nations,” from whom the power of the British grew. It would also be the decisive factor leading to “the emancipation of Europe” (*Letters of William Wordsworth* 139-43). Morality had been indispensable in the interpretation of victory, an important factor linking God, King, and the nation in the victory ode, as witnessed in the three previous works discussed. Nevertheless, the golden means Wordsworth attempted to achieve from the start in the advertisement contradicts the consistent tone in the victory ode. The victory odes of Congreve, Prior, and Cobbald are cheerful and self-righteous, and all of them praise the strong leadership of the royals and the prowess of soldiers on the battlefield, using the cultural tokens of Revenge, Fury, Bellona to appeal to the same cultural community and consolidate their national consciousness. The typical rhetoric of war never admits to a material interest in the war, and always justifies the fight by identifying it as out of benevolence towards nations under tyranny, and the conflict is won because of the praiseworthy leadership of the royals, and the favor of God. The three ode poets are skillful in practicing this logic. However, in the preface Wordsworth clarifies that his poems were the results of the sentiment of “rational patriotism,” not the national mood that encourages fervor and passion in a traditional victory ode.

Wordsworth’s differences from a traditional ode writer are best exemplified in the first poem of this volume, *Ode: The Morning of the Day Appointed for a General Thanksgiving. January 18, 1816*. It was written seven months after Waterloo, and the day was officially appointed by parliament as a national day to commemorate the special event. Written in the form of the irregular stanzas popularized by Abraham Cowley, *Thanksgiving Ode* is structurally divided into 14
stanzas: stanzas 1 to 3 (lines 1-82) promote a cheerful tone celebrating the national victory, stanza 4 (lines 83-91) constitutes a transitional section paving the way to stanza 5 (lines 92-110), which examines the dark side of the war and the horror of Napoleon’s regime. From stanza 6 (lines 111-24) to 7 (lines 125-36), the tone of praise for chastisement intervenes, bringing in the celebratory mood of national glory once again in stanza 8 (lines 136-61) and stanza 9 (lines 162-203), leading up to the commemoration in stanza 10 (lines 204-28), and an imagined ceremony in stanza 11 (lines 229-58). Stanza 12 (lines 259-87) attempts to explain the cause of the war, expressing gratitude to God in stanza 13 (lines 288-313), ending in the final imagined church celebration in stanza 14 (lines 314-53).

The *Thanksgiving Ode*’s major difference from other victory odes lies in its development of the structural triads of thesis, antithesis, synthesis, in which the British Empire is celebrated and questioned, reflected upon and empowered. In the thesis, an imperial discourse of the universal, the moral, and the unitary is established in politicized nature scenery; in the antithesis, England’s Other, France, is represented in the figure of Napoleon, whose threatening power not only reveals Britain’s weakness at war but also triggers the “ambivalent tension” in this imperial discourse. The unveiling of another aspect of the war casts doubt on the self-righteousness in the thesis; in the synthesis, Wordsworth returns to the theme of thanksgiving in the attempt to reconcile the contradictions between the national discourse and its hidden history: a ceremony is imaginarily held in Westminster Abbey to express gratitude for God’s favor and commemorate the victory at Waterloo.

In the thesis, Wordsworth builds up an imperial discourse that centers on “the sun,” the metaphorical replacement for and symbol of the divinization of the British Empire. The first stanza begins with the poet’s self-congratulatory apostrophe to the sun, now the savior of the world in distress: “Hail, universal Source of pure delight!” that “smite / The haughty towers where monarchs dwell” (1, 4-5). The traditional invocation of the deity for poetic legitimacy is replaced by the apostrophe to the naturalized nation, “impartial Sun,” the referent of which is the whole nation, not the royalty as in a traditional victory ode. It addresses the imagined nation, represented as the sun, which has now spread its influence on, and taken the control of, the “universe,” after it destroyed “[t]he haughty towers where monarchs dwell.” The apostrophe functions as the nexus of this political allegory, extending to the overall cultural signification of the nation and duplicating the colonial rhetoric of “the empire on which the sun never sets.”

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10 The colonial rhetoric “the empire on which the sun never sets” was first used in 1588, when
powerful colonial power in the world, now it “climb[s] the sky / In naked splendor, clear from mist or haze” (8-9), implying the defeat of other colonial powers, including France; therefore its sublime “power and majesty” “[d]azzl[es] the vision that presumes to gaze” (12-13). In addition to this sublime aspect, the sun also reveals “the silent grace” on “yon ethereal summits white with snow,” with “spotless purity” sending “[r]eport of storms gone by” (21-24). Integrating both the sublime and the beautiful, or majesty with “silent grace,” Wordsworth delineates the double aspects of England, which views its colonial ambition as the destiny of the nation, bringing higher culture (grace) to other countries through its military force (dazzling power).11 The politicized natural phenomenon of the sun stops the storms and brings peace, and the return to peace suggests its control over the universe. To justify its legitimacy, the sun that “smite[s]” the monarchs is said to be “[f]ramed in subjection to the chains / That bind thee to the path which God ordains / That thou shalt trace” (16-18). It is under the guidance of God that England won the victory over France, while the words “chains” and “bind” intensify the relation between the transcendental signifier and the signification “chain” that “the sun” has just constructed.

The apostrophe to the sun appropriately grasps the imperial temperament of the “noble ideal” noted by Said. As part of natural phenomena, the sun is distinct from the common world, and its rays, representing metaphorically colonial conquest and rule, are believed to bring pure de-light to its colonized nations. This cultural imperialism is fully embodied in the first stanza, and the politicized nature configured here finds a niche where only a nature poet can access such an exclusive source of inspiration, thereby claiming his legitimacy:

’[m]id the deep quiet of this morning hour,  
All nature seems to hear me while I speak,—
By feelings urged, that do not vainly seek  
Apt language, ready as the tuneful notes
That stream in blithe succession from the throats

the British, under the reign of Elizabeth I, defeated the Spanish Armada, and was popularly used after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815.

11 Concerning Wordsworth’s support for the extension of the British Empire, Tim Fulford and Peter J. Kitson point out that Wordsworth early displayed this self-aggrandized opinion on Britain’s ability to cultivate other countries in The Excursion (1814), in which Britain is urged to “complete / Her glorious destiny” of colonization (4). Marlon B. Ross also suggests that Romantics like Wordsworth helped “teach the English to universalize the experience of ‘I,’” and “celebrat[e] the universal validity of parochial English values” (31).
Turning to nature for the powers of spontaneous imagination is Wordsworth’s signature, and it is this trait that transfigures Wordsworth from a nature poet to the naturalized national bard, who is now being heard by nature/nation. The humble gesture of “All nature seems to hear me” is a variation of the generic code that a typical ode poet would use, as we found in Prior and Congreve. The reception of the poet’s voice (“I speak”) by the politicized “[a]ll nature” (nation) that “seems to hear me” completes an interactive circle and serves as witness to his status. The reciprocal relation between the poet and nature in his earlier poems is adopted, extended, and allegorized as the sublime nation (the sun) and the sublime poet, whose source of power is an extraordinary rather than a usual one:

—There is a radiant though a short-lived flame,
That burns for Poets in the dawning East;
And oft my soul hath kindled at the same,
When the captivity of sleep had ceased. (43-46)

In Congreve’s *A Pindarique Ode*, the poet hears the divine voice “[t]hat kindled Mantuan Fire, and rais’d Maeonian Flame” after his invocation of the Muse and is therefore granted the privilege to sing, following those bards who came before him, the song for the national victory. Claiming to own the same power as preceding poets, Wordsworth continues to suggest his superiority over others in his establishment of the continuity of cultural tradition. The origin of “this matin song” is “nobler” and “deeper far it lies” (53-55), paving the way for the development of the antithesis, where only those “[w]ho through the abyss of weakness dive” could discover the real aspects of the whole story (85-86). Wordsworth “saw the battle as calling for the loftiest poet to record it” (Watson 175), and through the portrayal of a naturalized nation in the discourse of the sublime and the more complicated aspects of the history, Wordsworth claims his visionary power over other victory ode poets.

The thesis culminates in the homogenization of the national spirit in the third stanza. Wordsworth follows the generic codes in a victory ode by describing and

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12 A similar idea of visionary power that delves into the two worlds of heaven and hell is found in the Prospectus to *The Excursion*, where Wordsworth pleads with the Muse to guide him to “tread on shadowy ground,” and “sink / Deep” even to “[t]he darkest pit of lowest Erebus” (28-29, 36). From *William Wordsworth: The Poems*. Vol. 2.
praising the prowess of the British soldiers on the battlefield. The British warriors persevere “[a]long a track of most unnatural years,” working “[i]n execution of heroic deeds” (62-63), and “[f]ierce as a flood-gate bursting in the night / To rouse the wicked from their giddy dream” (79-80). Different from other victory odes, Wordsworth’s praise is limited only to the British soldiers. The King and the Duke of Wellington, who would traditionally be the main subjects of praise and credited with victory in this genre, were not mentioned at all for different reasons. These British soldiers were, as a whole, the “loyal band” that “follow[s] their liege Lord” to fight the war in their “most unnatural years” (60, 62). Their “heroic deeds / Whose memory, spotless as the untrodden meads, /Shall live enrolled above the starry spheres” (63-65). After paying tribute to the soldiers at war, the poet turns to the chivalric morality to consolidate the national consciousness:

—Who to the murmurs of an earthly string
Of Britain’s acts would sing,
He with enraptured voice will tell
Of One whose spirit no reverse could quell;
Of One that mid the failing never failed. (67-71; emphasis added)

The imagining of the national spirit as “One” completes the thesis and culminates the national narrative, in that a homogeneous national spirit has been conjured up. Through the discourse of the sublime, cultural superiority is confirmed to extend over other national/natural phenomena, thereby justifying colonial ambitions, as its territory stretches over all the world, and it is the “universal Source of pure delight” that “shed[s] the bliss of gratitude.” By referring to the transcendental signifier, nation, people, nature, truth, and reason are connected into one form with different contents; this unity is consolidated with immortality, and its memory guaranteed through transformation into nature—“the crystal beads [o]f morning dew” “enrolled above the starry spheres.”

The question, “Have we conquered? / By the vengeful sword?,” temporarily casts doubt on the essence of the war (57), and delves into an “ambivalent tension.” Wordsworth did not use the traditional phrases of “revenge” to describe the attitude of a winning nation. In accordance with his belief in “moral triumph,” his

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13 In a letter to John Scott, Wordsworth explained why he despised the Duke of Wellington: “there is no magnanimity in his nature . . . the constitution of his mind is not generous, nor will he pass with posterity for a hero.” From Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, The Middle Years, Part II 1812-1820. 280-83.
self-answer is “Ah no, by dint of Magnanimity” (58). In the poems of Congreve, Prior, and Cobbond, the goddess of Revenge—used to describe the power and aggression of war—causes no problem for thematic unity because the boundary between the dark side of bloodshed on the battlefield and the missionary interpretation of war is maintained. For them, bloodshed and cruelty are necessary in war, and they do not challenge the necessity of victory. In their Christianized version of the English ode, the goddess of Revenge belongs to the theater of war, while God belongs to good causes and reason. Both of these two cultural icons are on the side of the winner, though they carry opposing meanings. Wordsworth’s self-questioning and self-answering temporarily expose this problem in his victory ode, at the same time paving the way to his antithesis, which attempts to resolve the conflict and tension.

In stanza 4, the transitional stanza, Wordsworth starts to probe into another aspect of the war. If one thought the war was easily won, “thus is missed the sole true glory / That can belong to human story!” (83-84). Extending the sublime to its opposite polarity in Burkean terms, the true glory of the war is said to be only for those “[w]ho through the abyss of weakness dive” (86) to understand. One is asked to be humble and not proud, because when one dives into “the abyss of weakness,” he may find an opposite answer to the nationalist discourse “that Almighty God to whom we owe, / Say not that we have vanquished—but that we survive” (90-91). Again, the end of the thesis (from stanzas 1 to 4) paves the way for the argument of the antithesis, starting from stanza 5, with the self-righteous tone shifted to self-questioning and confession.

The antithesis develops another form of the discourse of the sublime, based on the accumulation of feelings of terror and danger, and the atmosphere of obscurity, power, and darkness—with a bow to one theorist of the sublime, Edmund Burke—generated by and circling around the counterpart of the transcendental signifier, now metamorphosed into Napoleon. Contrary to the thesis, which develops a series of significations circling around and guaranteed by the

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14 Wordsworth’s extensive appropriation of Edmund Burke’s theory of the sublime and the beautiful in his poems hides a history of the poet’s changed attitude towards this Whiggish politician. Burke was best known for his revision of the aesthetic terms in A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757), and his attack against the French Revolution in Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790). In 1793 Wordsworth wrote A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff (unpublished) to condemn Burke’s anti-revolutionary stance through his attack against Llandaff. However, sometime between 1820 and 1828, as James K. Chandler points out, Wordsworth inserted a passage in Book 7 of The Prelude to praise Burke and the values of institutes, laws, and custom, which the poet harshly criticized in A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff.
transcendental signifier, God and the logos, the antithesis establishes an opposing cultural system based on God’s counterpart in the Bible. Stanza 5 laments “the dominion of the impure,” the “soul of Evil” who was “from Hell let loose” (92, 95). Presumably referring to Napoleon, Wordsworth builds up another type of discourse of the sublime to describe England’s Other and her most threatening colonial rival, developing a dichotomy of good and evil to attribute the Armageddon scene to the French emperor: “Wide-wasted regions—cities wrapped in flame— / Who sees, and feels, may lift a streaming eye / To Heaven,—who never saw may heave a sigh” (98-100). Seemingly rephrasing Cobbold’s description of the scene of war and the human sentiment it provoked, Wordsworth emphasized that the pain in the mind was stronger when the threat was against the very basis of British civilization: “the foundation of our nature shakes, / And with an infinite pain the spirit aches, / When desolated countries [appear], towns on fire” (101-03).

After the denunciation of evil, stanza 6 directs the charge back to the British party faction that had led to the extension of the war, the “crouching purpose” and “distracted will” that failed to end the war in due time and allowed Napoleon’s return (111), referring to Britain’s signing of the “Convention of Cintra” in 1808 during the Peninsular war. It is the miscalculation of Napoleon’s ambition that “[w]idens the fatal web—its lines extend, / And deadlier poisons in the chalice blend” (121-22). After reflecting on the mistakes Britain committed during the war, stanza 7 moves on to the scene where Wordsworth assumes the role of a priest-poet at the altar, naming and purging the sins of the empire:


16 In August 1807 Napoleon’s army seized Portugal’s capital, Lisbon, after its refusal to declare war against Britain, and following the conquest of Portugal, France initiated an invasion of Spain in the wake of the latter’s infighting at court. The Spanish King Charles IV signed a treaty abdicating his throne, but civil revolt broke out in the Spanish territory. In August 1808, British troops led by Sir Arthur Wellesley landed on the Portuguese coast and defeated the French army led by General Junot. In recognition of its defeat, Napoleonic France appealed to a convention, and Wellesley’s successor, Sir Hew Dalrymple, agreed as the treaty to let the French troops leave Spain peacefully. When the news arrived in London, it soon aroused public anger for throwing away the chance to deal Napoleon a severe blow. This event also resulted in Wordsworth’s publication of the pamphlet *Convention of Cintra* in 1809, in which Wordsworth accused Dalrymple and Wellesley in that “[t]hey had reversed every thing:—favour and honour for their enemies— insult for their friends— and robbery . . . and opprobrium for themselves;— to those over whom they had been masters, who had crouched to them by an open act of submission, they had made themselves servants” (*The Prose Works* I 252; emphasis added).
No more— the guilt is banished,
And, with the Guilt the Shame is fled;
And with the Guilt and Shame, the Woe hath vanished,
Shaking the dust and ashes from her head! (125-28)

The identifying of guilt and shame is not so much an admission of fault as a path to consolidation and empowerment. As Ross Poole suggests, the moral agenda of pride, shame and guilt attest to the “shared identity” of a nation, in which people “take pride in the achievement of our co-nationals,” “embarrassed at the behavior of my fellow nationals [shame],” and “responsible for their poor behavior [guilt]” (273). Through the confession of guilt and shame, a new national identity and consciousness are established.

As the antithesis continues, the martial description moves to the closing years of the war, presumably 1814-15, before Waterloo. The life-threatening power of Napoleonic France requires an equal and opposite force to stop its colonial ambitions, so stanza 8 begins by praising the “gallant chivalry” of British tradition (138), the “virtue” of the English, who are always “foremost in the field” (146, 154), as in the war against Napoleon. “Providence,” “in preference to the mightiest names,” gave the British the “exterminating sword,” as a “[d]read mark of approbation” (157-60). When describing the war against Napoleon, Wordsworth turns the spirit of chivalry toward the extreme of the “exterminating sword,” the image of Revenge, the “vengeful sword” which he denied in the thesis, when he believed Britain conquered by its “[m]agnanimity” rather than any “vengeful sword.” For Wordsworth this “exterminating sword” has its dual functions: it is granted to the British army to destroy Napoleon on the battlefield, and at the same time to expel this French emperor from the poet’s imagination. In Wordsworth: The Sense of History, Alan Liu argues that the figure of Napoleon usurps Wordsworth’s imagination in the poet’s description of the Simplon Pass in The Prelude. Following Liu’s argument, Simon Bainbridge in his Napoleon and English Romanticism points out that Napoleon had been a ghost-like presence occupying Wordsworth’s imagination, as evidenced by his 1802-04 sonnets. The extermination of Napoleon foreshadows the termination of Wordsworth’s obsession, who now performs the rite of exorcism to release, to set free the imprisoned imagination. Therefore, once the exorcism is granted, the poet feels free to exclaim his newly discovered

Imagination [that], ne’er before content,
But aye ascending, restless in her pride
From all that man’s performance could present,
Stoops to that closing deed magnificent,
And with the embrace is satisfied. (162-66)

The imperial power of imagination reaches its climax after the recognition of its freedom, as delineated in *The Prelude*.[17] Together with the British army, it “travel[led] faster than the shower / That land-ward stretches from the sea,” and as

It pierced the caverns of the sluggish *North*—
It found no barrier on the ridge
Of *Andes*—frozen gulphs became its bridge—
The vast Pacific gladdens with the freight—
Upon the *Lakes of Asia* ‘tis bestowed—
The *Arabian desert* shapes a willing road
Across her burning breast,
For this refreshing incense from the West!— (179-86; emphasis added)

Surveying its colonies on the world map of the British Empire, the imagination proudly exclaims the accomplishment of that on which the “sun never sets”: “While the Sun rules, and cross the shades of night— / The unwearyed arrow hath pursued its flight! (191-92).” The “exterminating sword” makes “the Adversaries bleed” (176), and the tone of praise for the British becomes closer to the traditional self-righteous rhetoric of Congreve, Prior, and Cobb. The world has witnessed “[h]ow Virtue triumphs, from her bondage freed!” (195) as the “closing deed magnificent” (165) of the British has “healing power” and is blessed by the “heart-sick Europe” (175). Even “conquered France” (200) would “utter England’s name with sadly-plausible [i.e., approving] voice” (203). The “ambivalent tension” in the antithesis is to identify and champion the victorious British Empire, whether it has overwhelmingly conquered or just survived, and to justify its legitimacy, while the assumption as to whether it has morality as its foundation (magnanimity) goes unquestioned. At the end of the antithesis, the boundary dividing “[m]agnanimity” from revenge has been crossed, while the supplement of the fiendish Napoleon as Britain’s Other substantially legitimizes the essence of the

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[17] One of the most famous episodes in *The Prelude* (1805) is that where the poet describes his experience of crossing the Alps without knowing it, followed by his recognition of his own spontaneous power. He begins Book VI by apostrophizing “Imagination!—lifting up itself / Before the eye and progress of my song / Like an unfathered vapour” (Book VI lines 525-27).
empire. The uncanny presence of the Other only evokes the familiar terror already residing in the British army, which will be exposed further in the problematic synthesis.

As the antithesis finishes the description of the progress of the war, the synthesis, starting from stanza 10, aims to resolve the contradictions between the glory of victory and the history explored “through the abyss of weakness” by returning to the theme of the poem: giving thanks to God. In stanza 10, sincere thanks “within our hearts” are offered to God, the “transcendent monument,” from the “labour of the soul” (204, 212, 215). In stanza 11, the “[c]ommemoration holy that unites / The living generations with the dead” (238-39) is proposed, and at the end of stanza 11, the calling for the “imagined community” to participate in the ceremony ostensibly ends the poem and the synthesis in terms of its poetic structure. Though still full of contradictions, with “exterminating sword” here opposing the self-righteousness of magnanimity in the thesis, and the idea of conquest contrasting with survival in the antithesis, statements “sweet and threatening harmony,” and the “[s]oft notes, awful as the omen / Of destructive tempests coming” in the imagined commemoration (243-45) express the mixed feelings of peace after war and the unstilled anxiety of empire. These are the mixed feelings that challenge the imperatives of the traditional sentiments of victory. As a victory ode it breaks all the rules with these opposing voices. Nevertheless, Wordsworth continued the poem and wrote three more stanzas. Wordsworth might have meant to bring all these contractions to a full circle, but what follows unexpectedly breaks down the boundary between good/evil, merciful/vengeful, the two lines of reasoning respectively represented by a merciful God and a Revenge bent on a strict weighing of the scales of justice.

The beginning of stanza 12 connects with the ceremony at the end of stanza 11 in a surprising way: the “God of peace and love” would not “[s]uch martial service disapprove” (259-60). God is brought in to endorse the imagined ceremony of the previous stanza, but the ceremony, as stated in stanza 10, is from the very beginning meant to present man’s gratitude for the favor of God. Therefore, the aim of the extended stanza is nothing but an interpretation of the war. As the prowess of chivalry is balanced with the fact of survival, all responsibility for the war is now attributed to God:

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18 Stanzas 9, 10, 12, and part of stanza 11 were later removed from this poem and given the name Ode. It is not certain whether this is the result of the disparagement of Wordsworth’s contemporaries or his recognition of the structural inconsistency, as the following paragraph will argue.
He guides the Pestilence—the cloud
Of locusts travels on his breath;
The region that in hope was ploughed
His drought consumes, his mildew taints with death. (261-64)

God generates natural disasters to inflict on men, whose hopes for life can be
destroyed at any time, because humans are nothing but God’s puppets:

But thy most dreaded instrument,
In working out a pure intent;
Is Man—arrayed for mutual slaughter,—
Yea, Carnage is thy daughter! (278-81)

Contemporary poets such as Byron, Shelley, and Landor disparaged these lines for
being “insensitive to the sufferings of war” (Watson 180). Commenting on these
lines, Wordsworth’s celebrated biographer and defender Mary Moorman cites the
God of the Old Testament to endorse Wordsworth’s choice of description.19 The
tumult caused by these lines among his contemporaries is understandable, for the
poet “confronts his audience with a disjunctive, isolated image, one that impresses
the reader with a sense of the violent underpinnings of national unanimity” (Shaw
145). A traditional victory ode has God’s endorsement and God as the witness
approving of the victory, but God is not involved in the battle. The deity
participating in the war is Revenge, the cultural icon employed by the winning side
to emphasize the distribution of justice and the bloody inevitability of war. These
lines, however, associate God with the war, and replace Revenge with Carnage,
mutual slaughter. Carnage does not fight against an enemy for the favored side;
instead, she destroys everything. Wordsworth may not be so much directly making
God responsible for the war as seeking a better interpretation for the “unnatural years;”
however, relating this to the cruelty of war blurs the line between justifiable
conflict and arbitrary judgment, and, most importantly, it destabilizes the logos that
legitimates the whole signification chain through the close association of God and

19 Mary Moorman defends Wordsworth thus: “It was not until 1845 that he cut out the last two
lines. Yet, distasteful as it is to find Wordsworth celebrating the God of Battles in this way, it is
easy to misjudge him. He was not delighting in the bloodshed of victory, but proclaiming the
same faith that had made Isaiah describe the Assyrian as ‘the rod of anger’ in the hand of Jehovah.
Wordsworth was no militarist, though tyrants had to be resisted and overthrown” (290).
Carnage. As Bainbridge suggests,

These lines need also to be seen as Wordsworth pushing to the extreme his own conclusion. . . . Wordsworth comes to terms with the physical destruction, the “slaughter” of the battle and the war of the last twenty-three years by making it a part of the divine plan, akin to natural disasters. The representation of this God is thus the final logical step in Wordsworth’s working out of his own world view. (176; emphasis added)

To answer the question of whether the British opposed their enemy out of revenge or magnanimity, Wordsworth has attempted to blend together two opposing statements in his victory ode. James M. Garrett points out that this poem “reveals not a commemoration, but a vacillation between celebration and chastisement” (81). If seeing God as the author of everything is the only way to explain the “unnatural years,” this “final logical step” thoroughly destroys not only the one consistent voice in a traditional victory ode, but also the logos of all statements. Toward the end of the poem, the oxymoronic “sweet and threatening harmony” coexists in this imperial discourse, and one is asked to meditate on this “earthly revolution” and “final retribution” (243, 349, 350). Wordsworth’s “rational patriotism,” when following its own “logical step,” discloses in the end the irrational aspects of the British Empire and its mouthpiece. The demonic description of Napoleon and France underwent a substantial change in Britain’s self-discovery in the imperial discourse which was based on the traditional dichotomy of the moral and the immoral. Wordsworth’s belief in “moral triumph” is finally challenged by his ambivalent “rational [not to say, rationalizing] patriotism,” which questions the aftermath of Britain’s victory and its new imperial designs along with his people’s overwrought lamentations over the loss of their loved ones who fell in the war.

Conclusion

Wordsworth’s structural triad of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis aims to give a persuasive explanation to the war, but as the antithesis that centers on Napoleon develops, the ambivalent tension between magnanimity and revenge is exposed as the poet’s nation crosses sides and takes up the role of the Other. Wielding the “exterminating sword,” Britain is no less cruel than its Other in its ambition to conquer “the sluggish North,” “the ridge of Andes,” “the Lakes of Asia.” Anne Frey
argues that the post-Waterloo Wordsworth took up the role of cultural agent between the British government and the civil society. The *Ecclesiastic Sonnets*, according to Frey, performs “the state’s functions of cultivating individuals and shaping communities” (4). Though written during the same period under a similar ambition, the *Thanksgiving Ode* failed to present an applicable way of thinking about their great victory or instill a consistent national consciousness in the reader, except for his duplication of Cobbold’s argument in the thesis. Compared with Cobbold’s contemporary praise for the British Empire, Wordsworth’s logical inference based on the facts he observed did not result in a victory ode in its traditional sense. The failure to compose a straightforward victory ode lies not so much in his “vacillation between celebration and chastisement” but in the exposition of the unforgiving God of the Old Testament and the forgiving One of the New at the same time, or the co-presentation of a moral explanation for the victory and the excessive violence of the war. The chastisement is exploited to empower the imperial discourse, to some extent a successful one, but as Wordsworth attempts to rationalize every aspect of the war, the result is confusing and self-destructive. What were the British citizens to think? “Being in the right, God rewarded us with victory and we should be glad of it, but naturally we are sad over the loss of our loved ones. But could a just God really let loose his ‘daughter,’ Carnage, to punish so severely those who fell when many of them were clearly innocent of serious fault?” In the end, the practice of “rational patriotism” becomes nothing but an oxymoron. Wordsworth’s God becomes inscrutable and his explanation of the rationality of events provides no rational explanation at all.

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