

## Wordsworth's Sonnet: «Toussaint L'Ouverture»

*Bernard Hickey*

For Eurocentric scholars Toussaint L'Ouverture (1743-1803) remained for long a footnote – albeit an honoured one – to their main concerns. His life and works, his successes and failures are to be found in literatures in English, and committed literatures in various languages. His years in power are examined in histories dealing with the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, during which the liberation of African slaves in the diaspora of European colonies was a vexed issue. Toussaint's achievement has become increasingly important as an object lesson – with both positive and negative aspects – for some a dangerous precedent, for others an unchallengeable source of hope, an important Romantic legacy. No mere exotic, he was the first – and in many ways the finest – example of Afro-Antillian *négritude*. This was appropriately confirmed in Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939), which expresses a tough realism, an unshakable just pride, and an unbounded rage against white injustice, yet beautifully controlled and convincingly mannered:

Ce qui est à moi  
c'est un homme seul emprisonné de blanc  
c'est un homme seul qui défie les cris  
blancs de la mort blanche.

(“Toussaint, Toussaint/Louverture”)

For readers of mainstream English literature, however, the presence of Toussaint has been mediated through William Wordsworth's powerful, even disturbing, eponymous sonnet. François Dominique Toussaint, surnamed L'Ouverture, was governor of San Domingo, and chief of the African slaves enfranchised by the French Convention (1794). He resisted Napoleon's edict re-establishing slavery in San Domingo, was arrested and sent to Paris in June, 1802, and there died after ten months' imprisonment, in April, 1803.

TO TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE

(Composed probably August, 1802 – Published 2 February 1803,  
*Morning Post*, 1807)

Toussaint, the most unhappy man of men!  
Whether the whistling Rustic tend his plough  
Within thy hearing, or thy head be now  
Pillowed in some deep dungeon's earless den  
O miserable Chieftain! where and when  
Wilt thou find patience! Yet die not; do thou  
Wear rather in thy bonds a cheerful brow:  
Though fallen thyself, never to rise again,  
Live and take comfort. Thou hast left behind  
Powers that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies;  
There's not a breathing of the common wind  
That will forget thee; thou hast great allies;  
Thy friends are exaltations, agonies,  
And love, and man's unconquerable mind!

As in Césaire's *Cabier* it has Toussaint's imprisonment by and death under Bonaparte as a focal point.

It was published in the *Morning Post*, 2 February 1803, just a few months before Toussaint's death. Its aim is to praise the qualities of the leader of a liberty-loving nation who has been tricked and defeated by Napoleon, who was, among other things, set on re-establishing slavery in the manner of the *Ancien Régime*. Of course, like many other statements formulated during the 'tumultuous day' of the French Revolution, the sonnet can be profitably read on various levels. Behind it lie Wordsworth's own feelings – personal, political, artistic – at the time, and it also has a life of its own for those who have read Wordsworth's carefully revised and organized collected works.

First of all, at this time, Wordsworth had come to realize the importance of failure. He himself had been acutely conscious of his own political and personal failure a decade previously, in France. Nicholas Roe sums up the fallow time and what went before it when he states succinctly: «It was failure that made Wordsworth a poet».<sup>2</sup>

Returning to the sonnet and its motivation, Roe states that Wordsworth had been at the National Assembly when Briscot, founder of the *Amis des Noirs* proposed «a new colonial assembly for Saint-Dominique». He adds «In his memorial sonnet, Toussaint appears not as heroic rebel but as victim of imperial tyranny, 'the most unhappy man of men', an emblem of the many reverses of intervening years».<sup>3</sup>

It was there he came to understand what sort of nature poet he was going to be, and so was ready for the momentous years with Coleridge which were imminent. Toussaint had failed as a military leader, but morally he was not only not defeated, but had by his human qualities reached a stage of greatness so beloved of the Romantics, so different from mere glory as the military mind understood it, summed up later in Shelley's *Adonais*: «He is made one with Nature». Toussaint was also an ideal candidate for a political sonnet as both a champion for liberty and a victim of Napoleon as well, who now was coming to be regarded as the enemy personified.

Politically, Wordsworth, for his own ambivalent reasons, had at last reached the stage when he accepted the fact that France under Bonaparte was certainly not the France that he and so many others had supported from 1789 on. The final disillusionment came when Bonaparte had himself declared Consul for Life in 1802, the year of the Peace of Amiens, which was fully recognized on both sides as a short-term truce. It was also the year of Wordsworth's marriage to Mary Hutchinson.

Besides Wordsworth's personal problems, acutely examined by Herbert Read in *Wordsworth*, several other external factors were influencing his decisions<sup>4</sup>. Various factors came into play. Wordsworth's political tendencies had wavered, even oscillated, between Girondist and Jacobin, but he was finally not impressed by the Revolutionary wars of aggrandizement, given a new dimension by the military genius of Bonaparte. They were in so many ways a negation of the revolutionary ideal. He also noticed how the French people themselves had changed from the heady days around 14 July 1790, when the people were rejoicing.

In 1802 there was no such feeling for the new Consul for Life. Added to that, Wordsworth realized with foreboding the intensity of anti-English feeling in France which increased his disenchantment with his natural allies, at this stage, the opposition Whigs at home in the English Parliament – who were ostentatiously treating the threatening situation primarily as a pretext to embarrass the Tory government. With his highly developed sense of his own importance as a spokesman, this sense of being part of a beleaguered Britain led largely by a corrupt, inefficient cabal directed Wordsworth to his radical tradition. For centuries it had looked to Milton as spokesman. Milton, the Arch-Dissenter, the quintessential 'free-born Englishman', was invoked for several reasons: on the thematic level for his ideas, for his diction and tone and, as Stuart Curran points out, for form, in this case, for the sonnet. This was a form revived by the Romantics, firstly via Milton with Shakespeare in second place. So it is that Toussaint is honoured by the coupling of his name with the form – at that time closely identified with the best Miltonic qualities.

The aim of presenting Toussaint as national leader, an expression of his people, 'a chieftain', is reinforced for present-day readers by the poem's being included in the section «Poems dedicated to National Independence and Liberty». This particular section, published as part of the 1807 *Poems* and included as such in the standard Oxford *Wordsworth*, unites and hence strengthens the moral quality of all those individuals, peoples and states that fought for liberty during the Wars from 1792-1815. This effect is further enhanced when sonnets, written at various times, are taken as an entity, so creating their individual impact along with group resonances. An example of this is with this sonnet VIII, «Toussaint L'Ouverture», read in conjunction with VII, «The King of Sweden», then IX, «Untitled», dated 1 September 1802, giving Wordsworth's observations of a Negro woman, expelled from France by decree, and Sonnet XXII, composed in 1809.

Commencing with VIII, «Toussaint», it is clear that this is to and for the Haitian leader as well as being an expression of the poet's own faith. It breaks into two sections, both for style and content. The first octet could either be directly influenced by Milton or through his Augustan or Pre-Romantic followers, in that there are declamatory apostrophes, e.g., «O miserable Chieftain!», and the stylized description of rustic life: «the whistling Rustic tend his plough». With the beginning

of the sestet, the due change for this kind of sonnet, Wordsworth's authentic diction breaks through: «Live and take comfort». This ushers in his profound union of Nature and man; not in a truly pantheistic sense but morally united in an organic vision of human and political values, whose all-embracing content is at one both with the eternal forces of nature and the deep tonalities of the language (worthy for the sheer sound of Milton himself), the reverberations of which create a type of numinous awe.

Thou hast left behind  
Powers that will work for thee; air, earth and skies  
There's not a breathing of the common wind  
That will forget thee; thou hast great allies;  
Thy friends are exultations, agonies,  
And love, and man's unconquerable mind.

Again, Sonnet VIII, directed to a chieftain, admittedly one defeated and imprisoned, follows Sonnet VII, «The King of Sweden»:

for the illustrious Swede hath done  
The thing that ought to be; is raised above  
All consequences: work he hath begun  
Of fortitude, of piety, and love  
Which all his glorious ancestors approve:  
The heroes bless him, him their rightful son.

While there are differences between the lives of these two at this point, both are dedicated to duty and to truth, and so are extended a welcome by the forces of nature or ancestors/archetypes. The registers of both sonnets reflect their subjects: VII's reflects the court of the legitimate ruler of Sweden in its abstractions, personifications and its formality, while VIII's evokes the conviction that Toussaint's very strengths – consecrated by defeat – coalesce in an eternal union with the forces of nature, the sorrows and joys common to all mankind. With his praise of an hereditary monarch, Wordsworth is beginning to move from an absolute republicanism, and is looking to the essence of leadership, rather than the trappings.

Sonnet IX opens up other points: the treatment of black people by the French authorities, either of the Revolution or under Napoleon.

SEPTEMBER 1, 1802

(Composed 1 September 1802 – Published 11 February 1803,  
*Morning Post*, 1807)

We had a female Passenger who came  
From Calais with us, spotless in array, –  
A white-robed Negro, like a lady gay,  
Yet downcast as a woman fearing blame;  
Meek, destitute, as seemed, of hope or aim  
She sate, from notice turning not away,  
But on all proffered intercourse did lay  
A weight of languid speech, or to the same  
No sign of answer made by word or face:  
Yet still her eyes retained their tropic fire,

That, burning independent of the mind,  
Joined with the lustre of her rich attire  
To mock the Outcast – O ye Heavens, be kind!  
And feel, thou Earth, for this afflicted Race!

Sonnet IX begins with the comment:

Among the capricious acts of tyranny that disgraced those times, was the chasing of all Negroes from France by decree of the government: we had a Fellow-passenger who was one of the expelled<sup>5</sup>.

With these notes France stands condemned as hypocritical in its attitude to human rights, which further strengthened anti-French feelings at the time. Further, the sonnet is followed immediately by IX, of September 1, 1802, which arises from the expulsion of the Negroes from France, so adding to the concept of 'perfidious France' as in the note about Napoleon, absolutely untrustworthy in her treatment of the black people, so hypocritical in the country boasting of its civil rights.

By such placing, Wordsworth increases the effect of his heightened respect for 'the common man', of whatever colour or provenance, even more so as she is a woman, despised and rejected. Her dignity in bearing suffering, however, ennobles her simplicity. Even though in the eyes of French bigots she is degraded because she is black, her human qualities, the very natural forces of her barely concealed sentiments, her independence, her clothing – for it is impossible for a person of her stamp not to be striking even in her attire – mark her as having qualities beyond the ordinary. Wordsworth's strength of emotion in his pitiful, courageous appeal to the powers on behalf of the outcast causes him to break the bounds of his normal parameters with the apostrophes «O ye Heavens!» and «thou Earth!» which throw into relief his stoic approval in VIII of the qualities of the black general, Toussaint, acknowledged leader of men. His role has been to bear witness to the never-ending struggle for freedom, and so will always have his place, an integral part of human qualities, human joys and sufferings.

To these sonnets can be added other poems. The first is Sonnet XXII composed probably in 1809. It is contemporaneous with the freeing of the slaves in British colonies in 1808. Also from the way relations were going between the UK and the independent kingdom of Haiti, there were hopes that the long nightmare of carnage and repression was finally over. (This hope was unfulfilled). As well there were the preoccupations with prison reform, the question of transportation of British felons to the new Penal Colonies in New South Wales as the dawn of a new era in replacing crime and punishment by exercising the possibilities contained in the concept of the perfectibility of man. Wordsworth's and Coleridge's interest shows in the former's «The Convict» and the latter's «The Dungeon», included in *Lyrical Ballads*, 1798, products of Godwin's *Political Justice*.

For Wordsworth, later on, Toussaint was the convict, par excellence, gradually and inexorably wasting to death, in the tyrant's dungeon, par excellence.

Wordsworth's role as the main English sonnet-writer, in so many ways successor to Milton, has been overlooked until fairly recently, so that, in 1970, Northrop Frye could justifiably write:

And yet, fourth, though selective romanticism is not a voluntary category. It does not see Byron as the successor to Pope or Wordsworth as the successor to Milton, which would have been acceptable enough to both poets: it associates Byron and Wordsworth, to their mutual disgust, with each other<sup>6</sup>.

The association of Wordsworth and Byron, however, could go further, especially if Wordsworth's changing attitudes are kept in mind. In the 1820s the "final" Wordsworth and the "final" Byron were certainly poles apart. Yet, if the historical Byron had been of age in 1792, he and the young revolutionary Wordsworth would have had much in common. Byron's own unquestioned devotion to the victims of tyranny in due course matched that of the young Wordsworth, nowhere more nobly expressed than in the sonnet "To Toussaint L'Ouverture".

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> William Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, edited by Thomas Hutchinson, new edition revised by Ernest De Sélincourt, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989 (1904, 1936), p. 242.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Roe, p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert Read, *Wordsworth*, London, Faber, 1930.

<sup>5</sup> *Wordsworth*, p. 243.

<sup>6</sup> Northrop Frye, "The Drunken Boat: The Revolutionary Element in Romanticism", *Romanticism, Points of View*, edited by Robert F. Gleckner and Gerald E. Enscoe, 2nd edition, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1970, pp. 299.