Not one of them... really gripped the imagination of the age, ...; not one of them produced a dramatic masterpiece which can be looked upon as the starting-point for further art development...each in his own way had something of a talent for the theatre, each produced works which may, even in this century, be read with pleasure...All this we may confess; but the fact remains that they did not provide that for which the age was seeking and which it found dimly suggested by Robertson and robustly by Ibsen.¹

This is what Allardyce Nicoll says about the dramatic writings of the English Romantic poets, and he sums up the critical verdict. William Archer's attack is even more severe and his comment on the slavish imitators of Shakespeare underlines the weaknesses of the Romantic poets as dramatists:

Dramatic literature was at a low ebb. The ghost of Romantic drama stalked the stage, decked out in threadbare frippery and gibbering blank verse... Whatever was least essential to Shakespeare's greatness was conscientiously imitated; his ease and flexibility of diction, his subtle characterization, and his occasional mastery of construction were all ignored. Laboured rhetoric, whether serious or comic, was held to be the only legitimate form of dramatic utterance.²

The main contention of Allardyce Nicoll and William Archer is that Romantic drama lacks realism, a grip on actuality. (The term "realism" is, however, ambiguous, and we may even say in defence of the dramatic writings of the Romantic poets that they are "realistic" in a deeper sense.) Despite a few protesting voices, the dramatic literature of
the early nineteenth century has been consigned to the "arid waste-land of indifference and contempt," and in the opinion of historians and critics, it is "a formless mass of mediocrity, dull and repetitive, lacking literary quality and thematic significance, a vast sea of trivia and down-right badness, a drama that slumbered fitfully for a hundred years while the glorious dawn of Shaw and Wilde waited in the East pregnant with momentous art." It is unfortunate that these plays have been judged through "second intentions" and they indeed await a revaluation. The following pages are, however, not an attempt at such revaluation or rehabilitation. The object of the present study is not to assess— or re-assess—the plays of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey as dramatic works, and the literary and theatrical issues have been discussed only incidentally. In reading these plays, the present writer has been struck by the recurrence of certain moral concerns, and what follows is an attempt at tracing the moral anxiety as revealed in the dramatic writings of the three Romantic poets.

The first thing that emerges from a study of these plays is the distinct departure from the Shakespearian tradition, although the influence of Shakespeare is quite unmistakable. The aim of these Romantic dramatists is not to present life in all its multiplicity, variety and particularity; they do not see life steadily and see it whole, they examine certain aspects of reality from a certain point of view — the
appellation "artist as thinker" may be fittingly applied to them, and the term "closet drama" need not be taken in a pejorative sense. The questions that they raise in their plays are rooted in the contemporary political climate, but these questions have also haunted sensitive men through generations. The questions are both political and moral, and it should be noted that the political problems are never divorced from moral considerations in the minds of the Romantic poets.* Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey show a revolutionary fervour in their early youth; but what is remarkable is that they submit their republican ardour to moral questioning, and the contemporary political situation, whirling round in eddies, has an obvious bearing on the moral and intellectual dilemma that we experience in their writings.

The liberal trend was quite strong in England — especially in the minds of undergraduates — in the 1780's, and the fall of the Bastille in 1789 was a momentous event of symbolic proportions ("and finally beheld / A living confirmation of the whole / Before us in a People risen up / Fresh as the

* "Faith in the power of will strengthened romantic insistence on morality in politics"(Carl Woodring, Politics in English Romantic Poetry, Cam., Mass., Harvard Univ. Press, 1970, p. 44) "For Coleridge", John Colmer observes,"the structure of society was a direct reflection of man's present political consciousness and could only be changed by bringing about a revolution in the mind of man"(Coleridge: Critic of Society, OUP Clarendon Press, 1959, p. 170). This observation applies equally to Wordsworth and Southey, and even to Shelley: the insistence is on moral and spiritual revolution rather than a remedial action on the physical plane.
"Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive", and this revolutionary faith and ardour was reinforced by the Godwinian belief in individual reason. This bliss of assurance and certitude proved, however, only momentary, and a traumatic experience was the aftermath of the reign of terror that followed the Revolution. The extremity of disillusionment and despair deepened the anxiety of the poet-dramatists, and their perplexity is poignantly recorded in their poems and plays. Only two plays — The Fall of Robespierre and Wat Tyler — are overtly political; but whatever may be the ostensible themes of the other plays, they reflect the contemporary social and political climate. The contemporary situation brought into focus certain moral issues — the nature and potency of evil and the relation between means and ends — and they determine the spiritual fabric of the dramatic writings of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey. This disproves the contention that the plays are "unrealistic", a variation on Gothic extravaganza, and also the hypothesis that the young radicals turned into venerable monarchs of conservatism. The conservative strain is unmistakably discernible in their later writings, but what is not sufficiently recognized is the moral dubiety that makes its appearance in their earlier works. Critics and biographers who discover terminal points in their career show little awareness of the simultaneity and persistence of the moral questionings.
In Southey, the author of Acts II and III of *The Fall of Robespierre* and of *Wat Tyler*, the questionings are confined chiefly to the social and political level, and his main concern is the correspondence between means and ends. The ambiguity in his approach to Robespierre offers a glimpse into his moral convolutions, but the dilemma is not properly objectified. The two voices — of revolutionary violence and of moral conscience — are clearly audible in *Wat Tyler*; and in the hesitancy and vacillations of John Ball, he projects the moral wavering of the sensitive rebels. In Wordsworth, the questionings receive a philosophical dimension; and while the immediate stimulus is his reaction to the revolutionary violence in France and to the philosophy of Godwin, the play registers his concern with several perplexing issues: reason versus primal affections, the mystery of guilt and evil, and the consequences of violent methods in combating and remedying social iniquities. Marmaduke, like Schiller's Karl Moor (in *Die Räuber*), comes to the painful realization that through his apparently righteous action he has become an "instrument of Fiends" (*The Borderers*, Act V, line 2182). In the play, evil takes on the appearance of good and good seems evil, and Wordsworth writes in the prefatory essay that he thought to preserve in memory those transitions in character which he had witnessed during his residence in France. In Oswald, he portrays a character who turns truth and reason...
instruments of evil and seeks to separate the elements of virtue and vice; for him, benevolence, pity, remorse and all primal affections are contemptible, and the ease with which he clouds Marmaduke's moral vision and subverts the moral order shows the power of evil. The play is in a sense a record of Wordsworth's own self-exploration. The question whether the moral issues posed in the poet's prefatory essay have been adequately rendered is pertinent, and it relates to Wordsworth's power of dramatization; a discussion of this problem shows the strength and the weakness of the Romantic poets in their role as dramatists.

As Wordsworth's prefatory essay shows, his primary interest in writing The Borderers was the exploration of the complex psychological motivations of Oswald; this exploration — that was also in a sense a self-exploration — leads to certain moral issues that constitute the thematic texture of the play. The political background gives coherence to and buttresses the moral theme, but it is subordinated to the moral issues. In Coleridge's dramatic writings too — if we leave aside Act I of The Fall of Robespierre — the political theme is subordinated to the moral. And the dramatic method in Osorio — his first significant dramatic attempt — shows a certain similarity with Wordsworth's. Coleridge's
primary intention is to unravel the psychological complexities of Osorio's motivation and character, and in the development of the action, we trace a movement from the particular to the abstract: the triangular relationship that brings together the destinies of Osorio, Maria and Albert involves certain problems and questions that are fundamentally moral. Albert's chief intention is to arouse remorse in his erring and treacherous brother, and as the change of the title from Osorio to Remorse indicates, the theme receives a special emphasis in the revised version. The Alhacra - Ferdinand episode and the role of the Inquisitors provide the political background, and both the main plot and the sub-plot converge on one perplexing question: what is the proper means in combating evil, moral, social and political? The stress (particularly in Remorse) is on the means that is morally appropriate and righteous, although, as in Wat Tyler, we can hear another voice urging violent, retributive action. At one level, the moral design in Osorio (and Remorse) is simple, exhibiting the final triumph of good and the elimination of evil. The optimism is more pronounced in Zapolyva (Coleridge's last play), although the emphasis varies: in Osorio and Remorse, the human agent plays an active role in cleansing the moral order, while in Zapolyva the moral order is controlled and directed by a higher power. This optimism is, however, counterbalanced by doubts, and all the plays reflect Coleridge's intense preoccupation with the mystery and
frightening potency of evil. Osorio poses a disturbing question:

What have I done but that which nature destin'd
Or the blind elements stirr'd up within me?
If good were meant, why were we made these beings?

(Osorio, Act II, lines 114-16)

And in Zapolya, Sarolta observes:

Beasts in the shape of men are worse than
war-wolves.

(Act I, scene i, line 471)

She is perplexed by the mystery of evil and the enigmatic Will of God:

O they were innocent, and yet have perished
In their May of life; and Vice grows old in triumph.
Is it Mercy's hand, that for the bad man holds
Life's closing gate?
Still passing thence petitionary Hours
To woo the obdurate spirit to repentance?
Or would this chillness tell me, that there is
Guilt too enormous to be duly punished,
Save by increase of guilt? The Powers of Evil
Are jealous claimants. Guilt too hath its ordeal,
And hell its own probation!

(Act III, scene i, lines 234-44)

The relentless massacres that followed the French Revolution raised the disturbing question whether evil was inherent in the scheme of things and whether it could be effectively eliminated. That Coleridge pondered these questions deeply is evident in his poems, plays and prose writings. One of his
many unrealized projects is an epic on the Origin of Evil, and the question constitutes a major issue in his speculative enquiries. In Notebook 26, Coleridge speaks of "the abysmal mystery of the Devil, the Evil One, the Contrary of God, absolute emptiness as God is the absolute Fullness", and says that the Evil Spirit cannot repent, "for the power of Repentance is potential good". In two later poems — "Limbo" and "Ne Plus Ultra" — he recognizes, however, "an evil spiritual principle permitted by God, yet nevertheless functioning as a divisive, destructive force in the world". The two views that the Evil Spirit is distinct from God and that the evil principle is permitted by God step into Coleridge's creative writings, and this explains both his assurance and anxiety. In Osorio, Remorse and Zapolya, evil is destructive, but it also destroys itself; and the working of the evil principle is seen as part of a complex design that vindicates truth and goodness. Albert in Osorio (Alfvar in Remorse) and Bethlen and Sarolta in Zapolya

* The duality in Coleridge's response may also be traced to his oscillation between the two poles: the view that the human mind is an image of the divine, and the view that the mind of man, after the Fall, is totally depraved. (See T. Spencer, Shakespeare and the Nature of Man, and J. B. Beer, Coleridge: The Visionary.)
serve as the chosen instruments of justice; and although Prince
Emerick (in Zanporya) dies unrepentant, Osorio (Ordonio in Remorse)
and Casimir (in Zanporya) repent and confess their guilt. The
impression, however, persists that the evil principle, a potent
and divisive power, inheres in human nature. We may recall, in
this connection, the concluding speech of Demogorgon in Shelley's
Prometheus Unbound, in which he warns that the moral order —
infirm or whimsical — may release the serpent again:

   Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom, and Endurance,
   These are the seals of that most firm assurance
   Which bars the pit over Destruction's strength;
   And if, with infirm hand, Eternity,
   Mother of many acts and hours, should free
   The serpent that would clasp her with his length;
   These are the spells by which to reassume
   An empire o'er the disentangled doom.*

The dramatic writings of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey thus
convey both assurance and anxiety — balancing and counterpointing
each other — and the object of the present study is to show
how this balancing and counterpointing enrich the texture of

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*This implies a refutation of the Godwinian thesis that evil
or error is just a "loathsome mask," a product of ignorance.
It may also be remarked that Shelley explores in the play
the question of means and ends. Prometheus says in Act I
that he speaks in grief, not exultation, for he hates no
more: the emphasis is on the value of passive suffering and
on the need for spiritual transformation of the sufferer.
Consider also Shelley's plea in The Mask of Anarchy for
spiritual resistance to tyranny.
their plays. It is true that their creative energy was considerably cramped by the conditions and conventions prevailing in the contemporary theatre, and it is also true that they show an inadequate grasp of dramatic art and dramatic dialogue, often indulging in declamatory speech and lyrical effusions; but what is remarkable in their dramatic writings is their capacity to seize and analyse the spiritual dilemma of the age: their persistent moral ardour exposes the ailments and iniquities afflicting the social order and also questions and scrutinizes the possible modes of freedom. The paradox is that the crusader, in his search for truth and deliverance, often turns into a lonely wanderer, carrying the burden of guilt and pain and alienated from the community of men; this is particularly true of Wordsworth's Marmaduke — but John Ball in Southey's Wat Tyler and Albert in Coleridge's Osorio (Alvar in Remorse) are also, in a sense, outsiders, and the true significance of their role is little perceived by the people around them.

The dramatic writings of the English Romantic poets have been my principal preoccupation for more than a decade, and in submitting this thesis I recall with pleasure and gratitude the assistance and encouragement I received from Professor G. Wilson Knight, Professor Roger Sharrock (University of Durham), Dr. Patricia M. Ball (Royal Holloway College, University of London), Mrs R. Haven (University of Massachusetts), Dr H. O. Dendurent (Northwestern
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July 1978

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NOTES AND REFERENCES


4. Ibid.


8. J. D. Boulger, op. cit., p. 203.