In August 1793, left alone after an accident, Wordsworth is crossing Salisbury Plain on the way to Wales. He is in a compound state of anxiety about the future of the nation (which is now preparing a fleet for war with France), his lover and daughter, and the fate of the revolution in France, where the first steps have been taken towards the great Terror. The Committee of Public Safety already exists. The Girondins have been expelled from the Convention; Wordsworth’s hero Jean-Baptiste Louvet is in hiding; other leaders are being hunted down, and they will be executed in October, starting with Gorsas on 7 October. Wordsworth may or may not be working out whether he can somehow return to France before the year ends (if there is any truth in the legend that he does, he will arrive in Paris in time to witness the first of these executions).\(^1\) It is a year since the invasion of the Tuileries by radical Parisian ‘sections’, when on 10 August 1792 some 400 *sansculottes* were slain by Louis XIV’s Swiss Guard, who were themselves slaughtered in reprisal. It is eleven months, more or less, since the September Massacres. Then, according to Helen Maria Williams, the authorities colluded in the murder of 1088 political and criminal prisoners, ostensibly to pre-empt any treasonable activities while the army of the revolution was on its way to defeat the Duke of Brunswick.\(^2\)

Alone on Salisbury Plain, having been separated from his companion William Calvert, Wordsworth may, or may not, like the anonymous traveller in the 1794 text of *Salisbury Plain*, have been warned by some kind of barrow-wight to avert his face from the ‘mountain-pile’ of Stonehenge:

\[
\begin{align*}
For oft at dead of night, & \text{ when dreadful fire} \\
& \text{Reveals that powerful circle’s reddening stones} \\
Mid priests and spectres grim and idols dire, & \\
Far heard the great flame utters human moans, & \\
Then all is hushed: again the desert groans, & \\
A dismal light its farthest bounds illumes, & \\
While warrior spectres of gigantic bones, & \\
Forth-issuing from a thousand rifted tombs, & \\
Wheel on their fiery steeds amid the infernal glooms. & \end{align*}
\]

The stanza offers two tonally contrasted scenes. The first reeks of Gaul. The poet, or the Gothic voice, envisions the famous giant wicker in which, according to such prejudiced sources as Caesar and Strabo, druid victims, captives or prisoners, were offered to the gods as burnt offerings. Wordsworth is likely to know the charmingly implausible illustration by Aylett Sammes of Caesar's equally implausible hint. Nor were such practices wholly antiquarian. Such wickers, according to Frazer, formed part of traditional mid-summer processions in some regions of France and Belgium, until well into the early years of the nineteenth century. In Brie a wicker giant was burnt annually on midsummer's eve. In Paris and elsewhere the preferred date was the nearest Sunday to the 7th July. In many areas animals—usually cats—substituted for the human sacrifices. In September 1792, however, London newspapers had carried reports of revivals of human sacrifice: the Countess Perignan and her daughters being burnt alive to the amusement of onlookers. By the time Wordsworth arrived in North Wales at the end of August—that is, some time before he 'wrote up' his Stonehenge experience—this picture may have fused with a more topical colossus. On 10 August 1793 the official artist of the Convention, Jacques Louis David designed a pageant of National Unity in which a Herculean figure strikes down the Monster of Federalism (or regional autonomy)—which autonomy the now proscribed Girondin deputies were busy promoting. In 1798 James Gillray would trope revolutionary indifference to human suffering in his cartoon of a French Colossus, guillotine in hand, devouring the people until struck down by Britannia's thunderbolts.

In the second half of the stanza, Wordsworth alludes to a different class of victim. 'Gigantic bones' invariably imply, in the antiquarian writers Wordsworth knew, ancient Britons. According to Clarke's Survey of the Lakes, the remains of King Arthur (supposedly buried in Glastonbury) and of Owain of Cumbria (supposedly buried in Penrith) were reported to be of superhuman stature. And Stonehenge, according to a story that originates with the Northumbrian chronicler Nennius, and is elaborated by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the twelfth century, was built by Merlin to memorialize the massacre of over 400 British chieftains by the perfidious Saxons. Detailed accounts of this event—once entertained by John Thelwall as a topic for a poem, and versified by Chatterton in 'The Battle of Hastings'—appear in such works as Camden's Britannia, and William Hutchinson's History and Antiquities of Cumberland (1794). What links the two facets of the vision is bloody murder, whether of 460 British chieftains or of the 1088 Parisian prisoners whose number seems closer to 'a thousand rifted tombs'. Either way, the tone of horror belongs less to the poet than to the dramatized voice of superstition.

When the same matter is elaborated by the Female Vagrant in stanzas