WORDSWORTHIAN PILGRIMAGES IN THE LATE 1790’S

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Wordsworthian Pilgrimages in the late 1790’s

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to Quentin Bailey, my mentor as a scholar and a teacher.
From such verses the Poems in these volumes will be found distinguished at least by one mark of difference, that each of them has a worthy purpose. Not that I always began to write with a distinct purpose formerly conceived; but habits of meditation have, I trust, so prompted and regulated my feelings, that my descriptions of such objects as strongly excite those feelings, will be found to carry along with them a purpose. If this opinion be erroneous, I can have little right to the name of a Poet. For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: and though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply.

William Wordsworth, “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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This analysis follows Wordsworth’s development as a poet through the years just after his return from France in 1792, until publication of the famous Lyrical Ballads in 1798. Historically, the time period was one when France was undergoing a popular revolution with unexpected results – unexpected at least by young British radicals like Wordsworth who had supported the early revolutionaries’ democratic ideals – and also a time when England, weakened by expensive wars, and in the first stages of abandoning an agrarian-based society for one of urbanization and industrialization, experienced a number of dispossessed poor vagrants and other social challenges. This analysis begins with Wordsworth’s Salisbury Plains poems, written just after he had left his French mistress, Annette Vallon, and their newly born daughter, Caroline, on the other side of the channel and returned to England. His poetry in those years reflected an internal state as chaotic and violent as the external political and social situation.

As Wordsworth worked his way through his consuming personal crisis, he wrote a play, The Borderers, in 1796, which is particularly revealing regarding the changes that were taking place in his outlook, and which is the pivotal piece of this analysis. Mostly neglected by previous critics, who have focused more on Wordsworth’s landmark works of Adventures on Salisbury Plain and Lyrical Ballads, The Borderers is the poet's only venture into the genre of drama. If the play is examined with its unique choice of genre in mind, it reveals a key transition in Wordsworth’s aesthetic philosophy. The Salisbury Plain poems (1793-5) resound a last cry from the bitterly disappointed idealist who had once seen himself as a pure moral voice in support of the French Revolution. Lyrical Ballads (1798) presents an altered voice of the poet who, in his own eyes, has perhaps fallen from grace yet not beyond rescue; who balances loss with hope; who seeks redemption in contact with nature and compassion for others. In between lies The Borderers, in which the careful reader might discover Wordsworth’s focus shifting in emphasis from narcissistic self-justification to disinterested compassion for others. The corresponding dramatic action shifts from obsession with the tormented ethical arguments surrounding Wordsworth’s stand-in debater, Mortimer, to interest in and empathy for society’s marginalized poor, exemplified by the characters Robert and Margaret. The unsatisfactory ending of The Borderers, which has never been produced as a successful drama, finds resolution in Wordsworth’s subsequent poetry in Lyrical Ballads.

In Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth fully expressed his interest in, and compassion for, the dispossessed poor of late 18th century England. In the process of healing from personal disappointment in his radical political ideals, as well as remorse for his behavior toward Annette and Caroline, Wordsworth developed an aesthetic that emphasized the beneficial
influence of nature on a receptive disposition, both as a means of transcendental spiritual solace for the individual and, by extension, for society at large. In parallel with this major development in his personal philosophy, Wordsworth’s attitudes toward traditionalism, rationalism, and the role of women also underwent a change. The poetic philosophy that Wordsworth developed during the years under analysis in this thesis is summarized in its complete form in the final poem of *Lyrical Ballads*, “Tintern Abbey.”
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INTRODUCTION

During the period 1794 to 1797, sometimes known as Wordsworth’s “obscure years,” Wordsworth wrote a provocative poetic drama, *The Borderers*. Despite Wordsworth’s much-studied oeuvre, *The Borderers* has been a fairly neglected piece of work. Yet *The Borderers* illuminates a significant crisis and transformation in Wordsworth’s personal, social, and aesthetic philosophy. The play reveals a key transition in Wordsworth’s pilgrimage from the repressed remorse expressed in his more widely recognized 1795 poem, *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*; to the eventual self-forgiveness and compassion for others apparent in his much lauded collection of poems published with Samuel T. Coleridge in 1798, *Lyrical Ballads*. Significantly, *The Borderers* is the only drama Wordsworth wrote. It is not particularly propitious as a play: it has never been successfully produced. However, if the work is examined with this singular choice of genre in mind, when juxtaposed against historical events, it can be interpreted in revealing ways. In particular, the genre of drama is ideally suited for the expression of conflicting ideas, without requiring the playwright’s endorsement or condemnation of the relative merits of any of the speakers’ positions. This analysis posits that Wordsworth was wrestling through discordant inner points of view as he wrote the play, and he used various dramatic characters to debate and act out his inner conflicting values. Thus, *The Borderers* represents a psychological release as well as an artistic bridge between *Adventures on Salisbury Plains* and *Lyrical Ballads*.

At one side of the bridge, the *Salisbury Plain* poems (first written in 1793-5) resound Wordsworth’s last cry as a bitterly disappointed idealist who had once seen himself as a pure moral voice in support of the French Revolution, and who, in the aftermath of the Reign of Terror, “suffered an implosion of his former confidence” (Roe, “Wordsworth, Milton” 118). By late 1798, on the other side of the bridge, *Lyrical Ballads* presents an altered voice of the poet who, in his own eyes, has perhaps fallen from grace yet not beyond rescue; who

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1 James Campbell and Paul Mueschke (465). I’m indebted to Campbell and Mueschke for introducing the concept that Wordsworth felt “profound remorse evoked by his conduct toward Annette Vallon. He tried to suppress this emotion, but it escaped from his control and found furtive expression in this work” (465-66).
balances loss with hope; who seeks redemption in contact with nature and compassion for others; and who, as Quentin Bailey argues, strives in his art to answer the question: “if sympathy, compassion, and benevolence are not innate, how can they be developed?” (Vagrants 104). In between these two canonical texts lies this little-noticed 1796-7 drama, The Borderers, in which the careful reader might discover Wordsworth’s focus shifting in emphasis from gnawing guilt and narcissistic self-concern to disinterested compassion and love for others.

It is widely acknowledged that Wordsworth underwent some kind of personal crisis during the years between the writing of Salisbury Plain and the publication of Lyrical Ballads.² Wordsworth’s disillusion with the French Revolution, his 1793 abandonment of his French mistress, Annette Vallon, and their illegitimate child, Caroline, together with all the evidence of inner turmoil expressed in his poetry like “the product of a tormented spirit” (Gill, Cambridge Companion 2) have inspired numerous intriguing interpretations of just what was going on: Nicholas Roe presents a sensitive and meticulous case for a crisis resulting from Wordsworth’s involvement with the notorious Leonard Bourdon affair in France; Richard D. McGhee sees Wordsworth in this period as intent upon exploring the “horrible impulse in the development of masculine identity” to kill the father; John Hughes perceives Wordsworth’s delayed reaction to the loss of his parents; Kenneth R. Johnston speculates on Wordsworth’s troubling incestuous feelings for his sister Dorothy; and David Bromwich sums it all up as Wordsworth’s guilt over “who knows what crime.”³

Wordsworth’s first attempt to express his anguish artistically was the impetus behind the Salisbury Plain poems. Chapter 1 of this analysis will show how Wordsworth attempted to identify with the repentant, noble and dignified protagonist Sailor in Adventures on Salisbury Plain,⁴ a misunderstood and wronged man whose tragic death closes the poem – essentially a martyr who is redeemed in the eyes of the reader through his victimization by

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² Duncan Wu mentions that Wordsworth “published very little” at the time (Romanticism 413). John Hughes, quoting E. P. Thompson, David Bromwich, Kenneth R. Johnston and Nicholas Roe, refers to the period as “something secretive,” “mysterious,” a time alluded to in Wordsworth’s poetry “by effective kinds of avoidance or obscurity” (219).

³ Roe, “Politics”; McGhee (31); Johnston quoted in Hughes (219); Bromwich (49).

⁴ The Salisbury Plain Poems of William Wordsworth edited by S. Gill contains both “Salisbury Plain” and “Adventures on Salisbury Plain”.
social circumstances. However, unlike the Sailor in *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, Wordsworth didn’t nobly die, nor was he redeemed in his own eyes. Like Orestes with his Furies, Wordsworth continued to wander his inner landscapes persecuted by an unquiet mind. Influenced by Godwin—or, more likely, employing Godwinism to buttress his vacillating self-justifications—he attempted to abstract himself from his errors by adopting a rationalist attitude that finds later expression in the speeches of Rivers, Wordsworth’s dark alter-ego in *The Borderers*:

> As time advances, either we become
> The prey or masters of our own past deeds.
> …if good Angels fail, slack, in their duty,
> Substitutes, turn our faces where we may,
> Are still forthcoming; some which, though they bear
> Ill names, can render no ill services.  (1842 III. v. 1521-27)

The rationalization used to become the master of his own past deeds didn’t work; Wordsworth’s conscience still continued to torment him, driving him to compose *The Borderers*.

If viewed as a time of release from an emotional crisis, a better descriptor than Wordsworth’s ‘obscure years’ for 1795-7 might be Wordsworth’s ‘cathartic years,’ during which his catharsis was indicated, appropriately, in a theatrical piece. Chapter 2 details how, in *The Borderers*, Wordsworth dramatized the process of working through his personal remorse regarding both his conduct toward Annette and Caroline, and his experience of high hopes for and subsequent disillusion with the French revolution. Perhaps Wordsworth turned to drama not for the appeal of the genre (which he subsequently abandoned), but as a contrivance to release conflicting furies out of his conscience and into uncensored action, so that he might observe their worth and their consequences from a vantage point of semi-detachment. When the various characters of *The Borderers* are scrutinized with an actor or director’s penetration of motive, the theme of *The Borderers* resembles a distorted echo chamber of one man’s conflicting appeals for moral exoneration. Far from presenting a finished moral philosophy, the play is more of an inchoate inner debate: it represents an acting-out of the conflicting emotions and ideas that distressed the writer at the time, ending

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5 All quotes from *The Borderers* are from the 1797 version unless otherwise noted.
with a self-imposed confrontation of his true image in his own soul’s mirror. Every transgression is revealed, every excuse laid bare, in the motivations and behavior of either the protagonist Mortimer or one of the play’s other three semi-autobiographical characters: Rivers, Herbert, and Clifford. As Geoffrey H. Hartman perceptively notes, *The Borderers* “shows personal consciousness originatively in…the murder of innocence” (768). More precisely, the play shows the admission of the murder of innocence—a murder that occurred in 1793 and 1794, after Wordsworth’s return to England from France. The drama externalizes four years of internal conflict, which finally reach their dénouement in the poetry that immediately follows during the year after the last act of *The Borderers* was written. Read in isolation, *The Borderers* is inconclusive and unsatisfactory. But viewed as a necessary step to purge the self-delusion of *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* and to open the way for the emergence of a genuine sense of chastened identity and moral ethos in *Lyrical Ballads*, *The Borderers* lends key insights into the development of Wordsworth’s aesthetic vision. *The Borderers* marks Wordsworth’s transition from a forced fantasy of redemption to actual experience of self-forgiveness and compassion for others. The pilgrimage to resolution is completed in *Lyrical Ballads*, which is discussed in Chapter 3.

In later life, Wordsworth may have considered his evolution away from self-concern and towards more compassion for others to be one of his most valuable poetic resources. He remarks in his autobiographical epic, *The Prelude*, that he has been “withal a happy man, / And therefore bold to look on painful things” (XI. 276-7). ⁶ Barron Field records Wordsworth’s comment regarding Coleridge’s limitation as a poet: “It was poor dear Coleridge’s constant infelicity that prevented him from being the poet that Nature had given him the power to be. He had always too much personal…discontent to paint the sorrows of mankind.”⁷ These words underscore the transition Wordsworth himself seems to have made while writing *The Borderers*, away from a state of “too much personal discontent” and towards a painter of “the sorrows of mankind.” An interpretive signpost at the pivot of balance would point toward the early acts of *The Borderers* as ‘Focus on Moral Judgment of

⁶ All references to *The Prelude* are to the 1850 version.

Autobiographical Characters’ and the later acts as ‘Focus on Society’s Outcasts’. The corresponding dramatic action shifts from obsession with the tormented ethical arguments surrounding Wordsworth’s stand-in debater, Mortimer, to interest in and empathy for society’s marginalized poor, exemplified by the characters Robert and Margaret.

If Wordsworth’s writing from 1793 to 1798 is viewed in light of historical events in his life during that time, the interaction of his experiences with the development of his aesthetic philosophy lend support to my interpretation of his late 18th century poetry and play. The following analysis moves sequentially through the years 1791-1795, culminating with the writing of *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*; then through 1796-1797, culminating with the writing of *The Borderers*; and finally to 1798, culminating with *Lyrical Ballads*. 
CHAPTER 1

SELF-JUSTIFICATION IN ADVENTURES ON
SALISBURY PLAIN

Wordsworth was in France in 1791-1792, while the French revolution was in full force. His fervent support for the revolution held steady, although already he may have begun examining the sobering consequences, as evidenced in his descriptive lines written later in *The Prelude* about this time in his life, lines in which he seems to feel compelled to justify why the revolution appeared as a good thing. For example, Wordsworth almost seems at pains to explain himself when he describes Beauuy’s insistence of purpose as they behold the undernourished “hunger-bitten” peasant girl along the road:

And when we chanced
One day to meet a hunger-bitten girl,
Who crept along fitting her languid gait
Unto a heifer’s motion, by a cord
Tied to her arm, and picking thus from the lane
Its sustenance, while the girl with pallid hands
Was busy knitting in a heartless mood
Of solitude, and at the sight my friend
In agitation said, “’Tis against that
Which we are fighting’, I with him believed
That a benignant spirit was abroad
Which might not be withstood (IX, 510-21).

As has been well documented, in 1792, besides involving himself with supporters of the French revolutionary cause, Wordsworth had an affair with Annette Vallon in Orleans, resulting in the birth of their daughter, Caroline, who was baptized December 15, 1792. Wordsworth had returned to England a few weeks earlier, ostensibly to find work so that he could support his French family. George McLean Harper, piecing together historical records, presents an argument for how difficult it would have been for Annette and Wordsworth to marry, given the ambiguity of church and state institutional legalities at that turbulent time.

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8 George McLean Harper reprints Caroline Wordsworth’s baptism document, citing “Williams Wordswodsth, an Englishman” as her father (29-30).
Harper also points out that the Vallons were Catholics and royalists (“the Vallon family held Royalist views and were made to suffer for them” (14)), and as such were almost certain to object to Wordsworth’s Protestant faith and radical political orientation. Did Wordsworth really want to marry and spend his life with Annette and Caroline? The answer to that can only be inferred by the poetry he has left, which, as we shall see, suggests attachment, resentment, guilt, soul-searching, and much ambiguity.

Back in England, Wordsworth continued to justify his belief in the French Revolution, but perhaps with a heightened desperation. Louis XVI was executed by guillotine January 21, 1793. Responding to a sermon by Bishop Watson in January against regicide,9 Wordsworth wrote a “Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff” in a pamphlet, which was fortunately not published until much later, for it surely would have put Wordsworth under suspicion of treason with the English government.10 This letter shows Wordsworth leaning toward the rationalist argument of Necessity to justify one’s actions—an argument presented with sophistication in *The Borderers* in the speeches of Rivers. William Godwin had widely publicized the philosophy of Necessity in *Political Justice*, which he had published in February of 1793, and which Wordsworth may or may not have read before he wrote his pamphlet. Edward Niles Hooker presents a very thorough argument for the influence of Tom Paine rather than Godwin in Wordsworth’s arguments and syntax in the “Letter.” Yet the question of influence is moot. What matters is the evidence of Wordsworth’s predisposition to seize on Necessity as an argument to justify the increasing violence in France.

Wordsworth writes in “Letter” that from violence “a fairer order of things” is to come, and monarchy is denounced as particularly a “government of passions and caprice” (Hooker 525). Eve Walsh Stoddard quotes Wordsworth’s severe assertion in the pamphlet, “‘the sweet emotions of compassion’ are ‘evidently dangerous where traitors are to be

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9 Edward Niles Hooker points out that Wordsworth is replying to Burke as much as to Watson (522).

punished’” (96). Such confident arguments for violence would be dramatized later in the speeches of Rivers in *The Borderers*, for example:

> Benevolence that has not heart to use  
> The wholesome ministry of pain and evil  
> Is powerless and contemptible (II. i. 72-4)

On February 1, 1793, less than two month’s after Wordsworth’s return to England, France declared war on England, making it impossible for Wordsworth to return to France without great personal risk, both to himself and to his French family. Roe describes Wordsworth’s reaction: “The war left Wordsworth isolated and alienated in his own country, feeling the ‘ravage’ of Britain’s ‘unnatural strife’ with France in his own heart. At that ‘very moment’ Wordsworth suffered an implosion of his former confidence, and from ‘this hour’ onwards he would experience the political drama of France, Britain, and Europe as a personal, inner turmoil” (“Politics” 118). The words in quotes in Roe’s description are from Book X of *The Prelude*. A further passage from Book X underscores Wordsworth’s deep confusion and anxiety at that time:

> Thus I fared,  
> Dragging all passions, notions, shapes of faith  
> Like culprits to the bar, suspiciously  
> Calling the mind to establish in plain day  
> Her titles and her honours, now believing,  
> Now disbelieving, endlessly perplex’d  
> With impulse, motive, right and wrong, the ground  
> Of moral obligation, what the rule  
> And what the sanction, till, demanding proof,  
> And seeking it in everything, I lost  
> All feeling of conviction, and, in fine,  
> Sick, wearied out with contrarieties,  
> Yielded up moral questions in despair. (X 889-901)

The “moral questions” that Wordsworth yielded up in despair may well have included not only questions about the virtue of the French revolution, but questions about abandoning Annette, an unmarried mother, and Caroline, a helpless infant, in a war-torn country.

Consider Wordsworth’s overall position as he began his summer tour of 1793, a tour that took him through Portsmouth, where he saw the British Navy preparing its ships for war against France, and went on to include three days of walking through Salisbury Plain. He was twenty-three years old. He was an orphan (his mother died when he was 8; his father when he was 13). He had disappointed his family by not entering the clergy as they had
expected when they paid for his education, and perhaps that question hadn’t been completely settled with them. And of course, there were Annette and Caroline. Duncan Wu believes that Wordsworth’s “failure to return to Annette and their child caused Wordsworth profound distress—a remorse that strengthened his attachment to the French cause” (*Romanticism* 412). But that “French cause,” so far as the Vallons were concerned, was complicated by their anti-revolution views. Annette’s brother became a prisoner of the post-revolution regime. Harper records that Annette’s brother, Paul Leonard Vallon, for most of the period from March of 1793 to 1804, was “in prison, in exile, or under police surveillance, for complicity in a Royalist uprising [the Bourdon affair] … at the outbreak of the Revolution.”¹¹ Wordsworth could imagine Annette and his daughter in real danger from the very revolutionaries he had been supporting. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth reflects on his heightened imaginative state as he walked across Salisbury Plain:

There, as I ranged at will the pastoral downs  
Trackless and smooth, or pace the bare white roads  
Lengthening in solitude their dreary line,  
Time with his retinue of ages fled  
Backwards, nor checked his flight until I saw  
Our dim ancestral Past in vision clear;  
…  
I called on Darkness – but before the word  
Was uttered, midnight darkness seemed to take  
All objects from my sight; and lo! again  
The Desert visible by dismal flames;  
It is the sacrificial altar, fed  
With living men.  (XIII 315-332)

Something of the horrors of Wordsworth’s visions on Salisbury Plain, as well as his fears for Annette and Caroline, are captured in his poetry that immediately followed.

Wordsworth wrote the first version of *Salisbury Plain* in 1793, and it is all about the Female Vagrant, a woman who, having lost her husband and children in a war-torn country,

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¹¹ Harper quotes the memoirs of Marie-Catherine Puzela Vallon, completed in 1823: Marie-Catherine and Paul “were married in 1804, he having been, most of the time since March, 1793, in prison, in exile, or under police surveillance, for complicity in a Royalist uprising at Orleans, where he lived at the outbreak of the Revolution. This was the attempted assassination of Leonard Bourdon” (19).
is left to regret her decision to follow him to war, and to reflect on her two remaining choices:

Better far
In Want’s most lonely cave till death to pine
Unseen, unheard, unwatched by any star.
Or in the streets and walks where proud men are,
Better before proud Fortune’s sumptuous car
Obvious our dying bodies to obtrude,
Than dog-like, wading at the heels of War
Protract a cursed existence with the brood
That lap, their very nourishment, their brother’s blood (308-15).

As these reflections testify, Wordsworth was at this time depressed and distraught—not only with his and Annette’s personal situation, but with his social/political ideology that had provoked “the brood that lap their brother’s blood.”

In late 1793, France embarked on the infamous Reign of Terror (generally dated from Sept 1793 to July 1794), and Wordsworth’s disappointment with the revolution deepened, while his abhorrence of social injustice and human suffering continued unabated. Quentin Bailey describes how the 1793 version of Salisbury Plain expresses Wordsworth’s dismay at the “failure of the state to support its less-privileged citizens and the complicity of the legal system in this oppression,” and also how the poem suggests equivalence between the sacrifices of the ancient druids and the terrors of the modern age (“Strike” 237). Wu notes how, in Salisbury Plain, “the burning of ‘living men’ is an apt metaphor for the wastefulness of modern warfare; worse still, the victims of this sacrifice have been condemned against their will, in the same way that soldiers were conscripted into service, often by press-gangs. Those who preside over these rites shadow the influence of such bishops as Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff, who supported the war with Revolutionary France” (“Wordsworth’s Poetry,” 29).

In 1795, Wordsworth revises Salisbury Plain, maintaining the abhorrence of violence, but with a complete shift in the character of focus. The Female Vagrant and her story are

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12 Although the Female Vagrant’s war experience, in the story, involves the American Revolution, and the overt anti-war attitude of the poem is critical of the English government’s aggression, these lines were written during the far more immediate increase of violence in France, and it is not a very great leap to see the Female Vagrant’s complaint as a response to the sentiments in “Letter” that “from violence a fairer order of things is to come.”
included as a parenthetical tale told to the protagonist Sailor, as if the poet’s interest had shifted from the abandonee (evocative of Annette) to the abandoner, suggesting that Wordsworth may have been working on his self-image at the time. In *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, the protagonist Sailor’s hallucinations of druidic human sacrifices are elaborated on with imagery that resonates with Wordsworth’s future autobiographical lines in *The Prelude*:

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Thou hoary Pile! …
Even since thou sawest the giant Wicker rear
Its dismal chambers hung with living men,
Before thy face did ever wretch appear,
Who in his heart had groan’d with deadlier pain
Than he who travels now along thy bleak domain? (154-162)
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The poem’s sympathy is with “he who travels now along thy bleak domain.” Perhaps Wordsworth felt trapped by his responsibility to his French family, like the victims in the wicker; perhaps he felt pressured to enter into the clergy in order to support them, in which case he would have sacrificed his freedom and his integrity to social censure and religious dogma. Did Wordsworth see himself, in the guise of the Sailor, as the human sacrifice that haunts *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*?

The 1795 version of *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* reveals another development in Wordsworth’s philosophy between 1793 and 1795. Wordsworth had sought out the ideas of William Godwin. In 1794, a year after publishing *Political Justice*, Godwin published his second best-seller, *Caleb Williams*, which was Godwin’s attempt to express his philosophy in fictional format. Wordsworth read and discussed Godwin’s work throughout 1794. Bailey notes that Wordsworth met Godwin at William Frend’s house in Feb 1795. According to Godwin’s diary, there were 6 further meetings over the next two months.13 Barbara Peiffer seconds Basil Wiley in observing that “Godwin’s theory of necessity provided just the balm the remorse-stricken Wordsworth required” (20-21), whereas Campbell and Mueschke believe that Wordsworth “endeavored to cleanse his mind from that paralyzing emotion [remorse] by adopting the rational doctrines of Godwin, in the hope that they would

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13 Bailey (“Strike” page 247, footnote 5).
emancipate his will from the control of his feelings. These theories failed him completely. The remorse persisted” (466).

In the 1795 version of *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, the story of the Female Vagrant is contained in the poem as an independent insertion; it is almost an intrusion, like the breaking through of the unconscious in an otherwise well integrated story. If we overpass the interruption of the Female Vagrant as the poem invites us to do, we read the story of a good - even noble - Sailor, who meets his fate with heroic resignation, driven to it by Necessity.14 Godwin’s doctrine of Necessity offers the consolation that it is impossible for one to act in any other way than one has acted: “every act at which you arrive is necessary” (Godwin *PJ IV.5*: 173). In the case of the *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* protagonist, the Sailor has been driven to murder, social exclusion, and finally execution, by the pernicious forces of an unjust and inhumane society. His motivation has all along been to care for and protect his family: his act of violence - murder - was driven by their need; his abandonment of them was for their protection since he is now a criminal. This closely mirrored Wordsworth’s abandonment of Annette and Caroline, driven by need, and his protection of them by staying away. Further, both Wordsworth and the Sailor are in situations aggravated by war and inhumane justice systems, exhibited in *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* by the two gibbet scenes, the indigent, dying wife being heartlessly exported to another parish, and the exploitation by the military of the Sailor and the soldier (the Female Vagrant’s husband). However, the Sailor’s Want is not met with any leniency in *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*. In fact, if Wordsworth had completely and precisely adhered to Godwin’s tenet of Necessity, no punishment of the Sailor would have been just. In *Political Justice*, Godwin maintains, “The justice of punishment therefore, in the strict import of the word, can only be a deduction from the hypothesis of freewill, and must be false if human actions be necessary” (VII.1: 154; italics mine). While the Sailor’s acceptance of his execution at the end of *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* does not completely conform to Necessity, certainly Wordsworth condemned the 1790’s justice system. Bailey observes, “the 1795 poem [*Adventures on Salisbury Plain*] cannot resist a sideswipe at the ‘halls of terror’ (l. 818) from

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14 Campbell and Mueschke remark on how Wordsworth tried to suppress his “…profound remorse evoked by his conduct toward Annette Vallon, … but it escaped from his control and found furtive expression in [Adventures on Salisbury Plain]” (465).
which the sentence is passed nor does it fail to point out that Justice, with its 200 capital offences, has a ‘violated name’ (l. 819)” (“Strike” 246).

However, despite the rationalization for the Sailor’s crime of murder, Wordsworth could not abandon completely his belief in personal responsibility: hence the Sailor’s remorse. Bailey recognizes that “the Salisbury Plain poems…identify the importance of personal responsibility” (235). Bailey goes on to build a case for the Sailor’s realization that he deserves his fate: “the Sailor makes his way toward an acceptance of his crime and a determination to offer the necessary recompense” (241). Bailey recognizes that this doesn’t “sit comfortably” with readers and critics, however, he calls attention to the good cottagers who, having demonstrated compassion and charity towards the Sailor and his wife, discuss his case and decide to report their suspicions to the law. I would argue that the social conscience of the Sailor is of less import than his individual remorse and, even more, his sense of loss. With the death of his wife, the Sailor has lost any reason to live. He seeks not social justice so much as a quick death: if, for example, the penal code opted for life imprisonment as opposed to instant death for his crime, he wouldn’t be so ready to turn himself in. The poem relates that the night before his fatal decision, the Sailor had often groaned aloud “‘Oh god that I were dead!’” (Wordsworth, Salisbury Plains 792), and upon turning himself in, he declares, “‘now I wait, / Nor let them linger long, the murderer’s fate’” (814-15).

The Sailor’s devotion to his wife is not his only noble trait. From the beginning, the Sailor is a compassionate, repentant man. We witness one kind act after another: assisting a tired old soldier at the beginning of the poem (“‘Come, I am strong and stout, come lean on me’” (14)), comforting the Female Vagrant, intervening kindly and considerately in a brutal father’s punishment of his boy, administering to the boy and admonishing the father with almost cloying virtue:

Tis a bad world, and hard is the world’s law;
Each prowls to strip his brother of his fleece;

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15 I would agree with Bailey that Adventures on Salisbury Plain leads to the realization “that responsibility for one’s actions cannot be ceded to social conditions—an insight very much at odds with…Godwinian premises” (246), but I think Wordsworth tried very hard to combine social conditions and a noble martyr attitude to exempt his hero from blame.
Much need have ye that time more closely draw
The bond of nature, all unkindness cease,
And that among so few there still be peace;
Else can ye hope but with such num’rous foes
Your pains shall ever with your years increase.’
While his pale lips these homely truths disclose,
A correspondent calm stole gently on his woes. (658-666)

By the time the Sailor arrives, dignified and at peace, to the acceptance of his execution, he is
more like a faithful penitent who has already completed his atonement, who asks only to step
out of purgatory and into heavenly redemption. “Confirm’d of purpose, fearless and
prepared, / Not without pleasure, to the city strait / He went and all which he had done
declare’d” (811-13). Perhaps the Sailor’s necessary but heroic death at the end is to seal the
sympathy of the reader for the Sailor as a character; perhaps it expresses a death wish on the
part of Wordsworth to just escape the whole mess. Certainly, the focus is on the Sailor as a
noble protagonist, and not on the victim(s) of his crime, nor on his abandoned family. At the
end of Adventures on Salisbury Plain, in the reader’s mind, the Sailor is a good,
exceptionally sensitive and compassionate man who has been caught in a deterministic,
unjust social system. Notably, he loves his wife and family, and part of his exile on the plain
is motivated to protect them. In the final stanzas of Adventures on Salisbury Plain, one can
imagine the poet envisioning himself as the martyr, nobly suffering from society’s ills,
having atoned for and excused his abandonment of wife and child. As Bailey observes, the
Sailor exhibits a “Brutus-like commitment to do what is right” (246).

Yet the living Wordsworth was not in the Sailor’s position: he had not honestly faced
repentance and atonement. First, the poem did not delve into any of the protagonist’s
mistakes in judgment, nor into any possibly mean or self-serving motivations. Second, the
entire concern of the poet (except for the very significant interruption of the Female Vagrant,
which the poem excludes from the driving storyline) was with the Sailor - not with the fate of
his murdered victim, nor with his victim’s family, nor even with the fate of the Sailor’s lost
children and beloved wife other than their effect on the Sailor himself. Wordsworth
projected remorse, atonement, and redemption onto the Sailor, but so long as the poet
identified with an inherently noble and justified protagonist, ignoring the victims of the
protagonist’s actions, he had not yet achieved real remorse or real atonement, and his inner
anguish continued unresolved. As we shall see, Mortimer of The Borderers is a different
protagonist altogether from the Sailor in *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*. To understand the change in Wordsworth’s aesthetics requires a quick review of the events in Wordsworth’s life after the writing of *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* in 1795, up to the writing of *The Borderers* in 1796-7.
CHAPTER 2

FACING REMORSE IN THE BORDERERS

In late 1795, while the world reeled from the flow of blood in Paris and Caroline grew to be a toddler, Wordsworth left London to live with his sister Dorothy at Racedown Lodge in Dorset, a home described by Wu as an “obscure country retreat” (*Romanticism* 413). Wu remarks, “at this stage he published very little,” although Dorothy’s “healing and kindly influence provided the environment in which Wordsworth was able to compose the earliest version of *The Ruined Cottage*.”\(^{16}\) It was also the environment in which he was to write *The Borderers*. As William Ulmer surmises, “We know from Dorothy’s letters that Coleridge’s famous visit to Racedown in June, 1797 was celebrated by readings of *The Ruined Cottage*, [Coleridge’s] *Osorio*, and *The Borderers*” (234).

Wordsworth wrote about his 1796 spring in *The Prelude*. In this verse, he expresses his confusion and despair, his disillusion with the violence ensuing from the French post-revolution leadership under Robespierre, and the beginning of his introspective re-assessment of his role as a human being.

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    Domestic carnage now filled the whole year
    With feast-days; old men from the chimney-nook,
    The maiden from the bosom of her love,
    The mother from the cradle of her babe,
    The warrior from the field—all perished, all—
    Friends, enemies, of all parties, ages, ranks,
    Head after head, and never heads enough
    For those that bade them fall.
    …
    Through months, through years, long after the last beat
    Of those atrocities, the hour of sleep
    To me came rarely charged with natural gifts,
    Such ghastly visions had I of despair
    And tyranny, and implements of death;
    And innocent victims sinking under fear,
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\(^{16}\) *The Ruined Cottage* will be discussed in Chapter 3.
And momentary hope, and worn-out prayer,
Each in his separate cell, or penned in crowds
For sacrifice, and struggling with fond mirth
And levity in dungeons, where the dust
Was laid with tears. Then suddenly the scene
Changed, and the unbroken dream entangled me
In long orations, which I strove to plead
Before unjust tribunals, —with a voice
Labouring, a brain confounded, and a sense,
Death-like, of treacherous desertion, felt
In the last place of refuge—my own soul. (X: 336-363, 399-415)

The first lines describe the atrocities of post-revolution France, and the lines that follow are
Wordsworth’s unfailing denunciation of the inhumane justice system and prisons. The final
stanzas document his desperate attempts at self-justification and explanation, “with a voice
labouring, a brain confounded.” The last two lines articulate his disillusion with radical
politics, rationalism or any other external ideology, his “sense of treacherous desertion.”

Roe, in his book Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years, describes how Wordsworth
connected the Terror in France with Godwinian thinking, leading to Wordsworth’s disturbing
conclusion that he too could have been a Robespierre, with “a brain confounded,” bringing
ruin upon himself and those under his influence. Roe extends the concept: “Where
Robespierre had openly advocated the use of violence, Wordsworth hints darkly at the
similar end to which Godwinian rationalism tended. He does so by defining Godwin’s
philosophy, ‘—the light of circumstances, flashed / Upon an independent intellect’—in
words taken from the mouth of a man [Rivers in The Borderers] who would persuade
murder” (222).

Numerous critics besides Roe have commented on The Borderers as Wordsworth’s
disillusioned response to the Godwinism he had earlier relished, with a focus on the character
Rivers. Such interest in Rivers was encouraged by Wordsworth’s later comments: as Robert
Osborn observes, “[t]he ‘metaphysical obscurity’ of Rivers, the villain of The Borderers, so
preoccupied Wordsworth that he prefaced the … text with an essay on the subject, and the
complexity of Rivers’ character and motivation has been the center of attention for critics of
the play ever since” (“Meaningful Obscurity” 393-4).

As the following examples show, some see the evil Rivers as the embodiment of
Godwinian morality; others cite both Rivers and Mortimer as alter egos deluded by
Godwinism. Still others point out that neither Rivers nor Mortimer acts with Godwinian
rationality (overlooking, perhaps, the passions that drive the actions of Ferdinand Falkland and Caleb Williams in Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*) and that therefore the play actually supports Godwinism by showing the perils of departure from pure and honest rationality. Peiffer, in her 1988 critique, “Godwin Influences in Wordsworth’s *The Borderers*: Reconciling Head and Heart,” gives an excellent summary of the earlier critics (prior to 1988) who had analyzed Rivers and Mortimer in terms of Godwin’s ideology, concluding that “both Rivers and Mortimer fail to learn from their errors and integrate feeling into the rationally directed Godwinian philosophy” (27).17

More recent critics have developed subtler arguments surrounding Godwin’s influence (or lack thereof) in *The Borderers*. Donald G. Priestman argues that Wordsworth’s “departure from Godwin is not prompted by a disagreement with the philosopher’s theory but by reservations about its practice…In theory, proceeding solely according to the facts might be justified, but, in practice, it becomes virtually impossible because of the immensely complex nature of ‘truth’” (63). Stoddard focuses on the conflict between reason and feeling as moral agents, concluding: “ *The Borderers* does not seem…to take a side in the philosophical controversy over which faculty, reason or the emotions, is the guide of morality. Rather the play imitates the reality of a man faced with a moral decision, trying to weigh the facts” (96). Burtin R. Pollin traces the influence of Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* in the names Wordsworth used in early drafts of *The Borderers* (for example, the first name borne by Mortimer is “Ferdinand,” (32)). Ulmer returns to the original argument put forth by Legouis decades before: “in *The Borderers*, Wordsworth presents Rivers as a case study in the moral contingency promoted (in his judgment) by Godwinian Necessity” (233). Peter Mortensen chooses to focus on the British fascination with “techniques of supervision, penalization and imprisonment” that link plays like *The Borderers* with the Gothic heritage in fiction and drama that was in vogue in London in the 1790’s, asserting that the Romantic writers of that time capitalize on the genre’s success while “harnessing it to their own aesthetically and ideologically revisionist programme,” thus placing *The Borderer’s* Godwinian discourse in second place to its opportunistic Gothic elements (131).

All of these perspectives have merit, and the influence of Godwin in *The Borderers* is undeniable. However, to view *The Borderers* as primarily a response to Godwin is to miss the deeper, more wrenching drama of the piece. The play responded to Godwin only insofar as the poet worked through the conflicts of his individual heart and mind to face the trauma he had experienced, the choices he had made, and the man he had become. What Wordsworth was refuting in *The Borderers* wasn’t Godwinism so much as his own past assumption of Godwinian-type arguments to support his turn away from compassion, a turn he felt compelled to reverse. As Wordsworth wrote in *The Prelude*, looking back on his earlier enthusiasm for Godwinism:

This was the time, when, all things tending fast
To depravation, speculative schemes -
That promised to abstract the hopes of Man
Out of his feelings, to be fixed thenceforth
For ever in a purer element -
Found ready welcome. Tempting region 'that'
For Zeal to enter and refresh herself,
Where passions had the privilege to work,
And never hear the sound of their own names.

... How glorious! In self-knowledge and self-rule,
To look through all the frailties of the world,
And, with a resolute mastery shaking off
Infirmities of nature, time, and place,
Build social upon personal Liberty,
Which, to the blind restraints of general laws,
Superior, magisterially adopts
One guide, the light of circumstances, flashed
Upon an independent intellect.

Thus expectation rose again; thus hope,
From her first ground expelled, grew proud once more.
(XI: 223-42, italics mine)

In these lines, Wordsworth acknowledges how he had attempted to “shake off” his deeper convictions and intuitions, “the infirmities of nature,” how willfully and arrogantly—“with a resolute mastery”—he had assumed freedom from any other guidance than the impulse of the moment, “the light of circumstances, flashed /Upon an independent intellect.” The italicized lines are the ones that are repeated by the character Rivers in *The Borderers*—not to represent the thematic “One guide” for the play, but to dramatize how deceptive rationalization can lead to moral ruin and deep regret. As we shall see, in *The Borderers*, the
floodgates that so carefully justified conduct and contained remorse in *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* break open, and remorse combines with compassion and pours out over the following year into the poetry that has become famous as *Lyrical Ballads*.

The transition from the noble, necessity-driven protagonist in *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* to the complex, reproachable protagonist in *The Borderers* is foreshadowed in the commentary note Wordsworth wrote to *The Borderers*:

> The study of human nature suggests this awful truth, that, as in the trials to which life subjects us, sin and crime are apt to start from their very opposite qualities, so there are not limits to the hardening of the heart, and the perversion of understanding to which they may carry their slaves. During my long residence in France, while the revolution was rapidly advancing to its extreme of wickedness, I had frequent opportunities of being an eyewitness of this process, and it was while that knowledge was fresh upon my memory, that the Tragedy of “The Borderers” was composed. (1842 edition, quoted in Priestman (63))

A parallel transition from political/social idealism to individual ethical choice is highlighted in the play. Wordsworth places *The Borderers* along the thirteenth-century English/Scottish border, picking a time and place devoid of any external government or established social order. He divulges in the 1843 Fenwick note: “as to the scene & period of action, little more was required for my purpose than the absence of established Law and Government - so that the Agents might be at liberty to act on their own impulses” (qtd. in Bode, 319). The question at the start of *The Borderers* is: which Agent will experience the most redemptive impulses? Prospective Agents are: Wordsworth’s experimental stand-in, the indecisive Mortimer; the iniquitous spin artist and rationalist, Rivers; the libidinous rival, strongman Clifford; and the conscience from the past, the blind, dispossessed aristocrat Herbert. Each of these four characters can be interpreted as one of Wordsworth’s turbulent inner voices in what might be imagined as a schizophrenic showdown of conflicting values, and each vies for dominance in the play’s desperate ethical discourse. Yet equally significant are the characters that step into the drama in the later acts who do not represent Wordsworth’s moral conflict in any autobiographical sense: the poor cottagers, Robert and Margaret. The playwright appears to become gradually interested in their lives beyond Robert’s duplication of Mortimer’s choice to abandon Herbert on the heath; Wordsworth delves into their story independent of its effect on Mortimer. Eventually, Wordsworth finishes up the Mortimer quandary with a dismissive lack of conclusion, and moves on to explore more characters like Robert and Margaret in *Lyrical Ballads*. In terms of common wisdom, Wordsworth’s path out of his emotional crisis
may have turned on the shift of his attention away from himself and onto other people, not theoretically but specifically: this person, that person; Simon Lee, Harry Gill.

Rivers is perhaps the most completely drawn of the “prospective Agents” precisely because he represents a static personality from Wordsworth’s recent past, a self-image perceived with the clarity of current disillusion. Posturing as a disciple of Godwinian Necessity, Rivers represents the Wordsworth who wrote (but refrained from publishing) the 1793 “Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff,” defending regicide as a necessary violence to achieve “a fairer order of things” to come.18 However sincere Wordsworth may have been in his 1793 defense of the French Revolution, the analysis that follows will argue that Mortimer never really yields to Rivers’ rational arguments except to use them as an excuse for other, more covert designs. Far from working out a process of Godwinian seduction in *The Borderers*, Wordsworth shows that Rivers’ intimate association with Mortimer is already predetermined before the curtain rises. As Melynda Nuss astutely observes, “Mortimer is already self-seduced before Rivers even gets to him.”19 The first scene reveals that Mortimer has previously opted to establish Rivers as his advisor, in full knowledge that no love lies between them. Mortimer’s loyal follower Wilfred asserts, “Nobody loves this Rivers; / Yourself, you do not love him,” to which Mortimer responds, “I do more, / I honour him” (I. i.: 10-12). Mortimer uses Rivers to reinforce a choice he has previously made to adopt rationalism as a justification for his actions.

The character of Rivers has already been thoroughly and expertly analyzed in previous critiques. This chapter does not attempt to probe Rivers’ personality more deeply, but pursues the separate argument that Wordsworth, no longer enthralled with Godwin’s philosophy, was not interested in exploring the seduction of Godwinism in *The Borderers*; rather, he wanted to explore how his protagonist, Mortimer, might employ such arguments to pursue other, obscured motives. Thus Rivers becomes representative of a way of thinking that can be manipulated to mask other incentives, and the great villain of the play turns out to be not so much a rationalist as an exploiter of Mortimer’s subconscious impulses. In this analysis, the character Rivers is seen to be a tool employed to sometimes illuminate and

18 Reprinted in Edward Niles Hooker, 525.
19 *Literature Online*, web, not paginated.
sometimes obfuscate Mortimer’s covert hypocrisy. Further, Rivers is a device to deflect potential audience condemnation away from Mortimer (and thus obliquely from Wordsworth) and onto Rivers (and thus onto Godwinian philosophy), while the drama attempts to work out Wordsworth’s ethical dilemma more subtly and privately in the play’s subtext.

The play’s dramatic weaknesses stem from emotional factors to which the audience isn’t privy. Wordsworth’s stand-in, Mortimer, at the beginning of the play, has two crucial characteristics that are unexplained because, although they may be of dramatic and artistic importance to the play, they were not of moral importance to the writer. First, as noted above, Mortimer begins the play having made the choice of Rivers as his intimate advisor, in spite of the fact that Mortimer knows Rivers hates him, that Mortimer does not love but “honours” Rivers—for reasons unknown to the audience but thoroughly known to the writer as his moral condition in the throes of his crisis of guilt and remorse. Second, Mortimer at the opening of the play is a man known for benevolence and compassion. This is offered by the testimony of other characters, such as Matilda and some of the band of men, but without effort of proof on the writer’s part. Given the ineffectuality of *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* as balm for his conscience, Wordsworth had become impatient with attempts to convince himself of how his behavior might be construed as noble and compassionate, so the audience will do without much demonstration of these traits in Mortimer, beyond the assertion that he seemed good at the start. Like Mortimer’s choice of Rivers as an advisor, it is an unexplained “given” before the play opens, something not of interest to the writer for dramatic exploration, though the integrity of the play suffers for its omission. One can imagine Wordsworth choosing the starting point of his torment and confusion, and moving forward from there. Mortimer, supported by all the other characters and conflicts in the play, will act out the Furies that haunt the poet’s soul. In *The Borderers*, Wordsworth “seems unable to create any character who does not reflect the mental perturbations which he happens to be experiencing at the moment” (Campbell and Mueschke 472). Mortimer’s subsequent susceptibility to Rivers’ devious persuasions, as well as his anguish from self-deception, inevitably result from the two aforementioned predetermined characteristics—the

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20 For example, Matilda describes Mortimer, “He is one...all gentleness and love”(1.1: 134-6).
two guiding strands of the play’s conflict: deceptively self-serving arguments disguised as
Godwinian rationalism, and a wavering but instinctive commitment to compassion.

Paralyzed by indecision, Mortimer sets out to assess every major character in the play
morally, including himself. His fluctuations in judgment mirror the playwright’s uneven
portrayals of his character, which invoke, in turn, admiration and condemnation. What does
it mean to “honour” someone more than “love” him - that one acknowledges goodness but
doesn’t like it? Mortimer begins the play espousing noble sentiments like “today the truth /
Shall end her wrongs” (I. i.: 43-4), regarding Matilda; and “[t]here cannot be a time when I
shall cease / To love him” (I. i.: 61-2), regarding Herbert. Then he ducks behind a thicket to
spy on Herbert and Matilda as soon as they appear onstage a few lines later. Behind all the
contrary language and actions, a simple plotline becomes discernable: Mortimer wants
Matilda, and the obstacle to obtaining her is Matilda’s disapproving father, Herbert. When
Herbert worries in the first scene about who will care for Matilda when he dies, Matilda
replies: “Is he not strong? Is he not valiant?” (160-1). The next lines were left a blank, for
Wordsworth to fill in later, perhaps when he had worked out just the right balance of doubt
and validity in Herbert’s perception of Mortimer, but Herbert’s disapproval is definitively
implied by Matilda’s response: “Alas! You do not know him. … I guess not what bad tongue
has wronged him with you” (166-7). 21

Mortimer wants to be seen by himself (and perhaps also by the playwright) as a
morally laudable man - therefore his desire for Matilda and his opposition to Herbert must be
construed as something other than gratification of selfish lust, something more like a noble
rescue, which makes Mortimer particularly vulnerable to Rivers’ artful lie about Herbert not
being Matilda’s real father, but an imposter-exploiter who would deliver her to Clifford. In
yet another spiral of contradiction, Mortimer also seeks to uncover the relative purity of his
motives through self-scrutiny, and at the same time busily obscures any potentially ignoble
motive. While his outer conflict is to overcome the father and get the girl, his inner conflict
is one of self-deception versus self-revelation. Hence, as Mortimer employs rationalistic
excuses to proceed in the removal of the obstacle father, he feels the pricks of a guilty
conscience:

21 In the 1842 version, Herbert replies, “Thou wouldst be leaning on a broken reed – This Marmaduke - ”
Rivers! I have loved
To be the friend and father of the helpless,
A comforter of sorrow - there is something
Which looks like a transition in my soul,
And yet it is not.  - Let us lead him [Herbert] in.  (II. i.: 89-93)

Probing Mortimer’s determined self-deception, Wordsworth exposes some of Mortimer’s flaws while skirting others. Mortimer’s wavering compassion, for example, is openly debated. His compassion is touted by the flattering Rivers, who praises Mortimer to his face, “Your single virtue has transformed a band / Of fierce barbarians into ministers / Of beauty and of order” (II. i.: 65-7)) and also, more reliably, by Matilda, who defends Mortimer to her father, Herbert, “He is one … All gentleness and love” (I. i.: 134-6)). Most of all, compassion is professed by the ever self-conscious Mortimer, for example when he proclaims to Rivers, in reference to Herbert, “Never may I own / The heart which cannot feel for one so helpless” (I. i.: 39-40)). However, this purported compassion is contradicted by Mortimer’s impatient treatment of the garrulous beggar woman in Act I, when he tells her “We have no time for this. My babbling gossip …” (I. iii.: 34)), at one point treating her so roughly she fears physical harm (“You are angry, / And will misuse me, Sir!” (I. iii.: 127-8)).

Ultimately, Mortimer’s compassion hangs in the balance. Despite his eager acceptance of Rivers’ orchestrated accusations against Herbert, Mortimer is unable to murder Herbert - yet neither can he let the opportunity go. In a scene that anticipates the redemptive role nature will play in Wordsworth’s future poetry, Mortimer describes his hesitation to Rivers:

I tell thee I saw him, his face turned towards me - the very looks of Matilda… It put me to my prayers - I cast my eyes upwards, and through a crevice in the roof I beheld a star twinkling over my head, and by the living God, I could not do it - (II. iii.: 287-91)²²

Eventually, chastened by nature and influenced by his faithful follower, Lacy, Mortimer determines to bring Herbert to trial, in front of all, in the full light of day:

He shall be brought
Before the Camp, and would the good and just
Of every age might there be present.  - There

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²² The incident contrasts with Rivers’ story of his hardening of heart on the becalmed ship, when he felt no communion with, nor response from, nature: “if a breeze had blown, / It might have found its way into my heart” (IV, ii, ll.: 18-19).
His crimes shall be proclaimed - and for the rest,  
It shall be done as wisdom shall decide - (II. iii.: 430-4)

But once left alone with Rivers, Mortimer changes his mind and decides to kill Herbert himself. This decision is not based on Godwin’s doctrine of disinterested logic; it is rooted in Rivers’ clever manipulation of Mortimer’s covert urges and complicit hypocrisy, the domain “where passions had the privilege to work, / And never hear the sound of their own names” (Prelude XI.: 230-1). To dissuade Mortimer from his sober decision to bring Herbert to public trial and pursue judgment “as wisdom shall decide,” Rivers conjures up falsehoods to excite Mortimer’s jealousy and sexual frustration, thus spurring Mortimer into murderous action. In an aside to the audience, Rivers acknowledges his deliberate mix of false “proof” with calculated “passion” (III. ii.: 6-16). He then amplifies the fabricated story of Matilda’s ignominious rape by adding the element of her collusion in the seduction.

Rivers pretends to have overheard two of Clifford’s men talking about Matilda’s abduction:

‘She is’ - continued the detested slave,  
‘She is right willing - A fool if she were not  
‘… True,’ continued he,  
‘When we arrang’d the affair she wept a little  
‘(Not less the welcome to my Lord for that),  
‘And said, ‘my Father, he will have it so.’ (III. ii.: 47-56)

The jealous Mortimer, upon hearing Rivers’ false tale of Matilda’s willful infidelity, very suddenly changes from the responsible leader opting for a trial that will be decided by community wisdom, into the enraged lover dashing off to take revenge. Rather than concern himself with Matilda’s fate at the hands of a treacherous seducer, Mortimer becomes as devoid of empathy as Godwin’s ideal pupil who, “taught by pure, unadulterated justice,” could, with detached logic, calculate the superior merit of saving Fenelon versus saving his chambermaid (PJ II. 2). In a triumph of superior rationalist posturing, Mortimer proclaims:

Now for the corner stone of my philosophy:  
I would not give a denier for the man  
Who could not chuck his babe beneath the chin  
And send it with a fillip to its grave. (III. ii.: 92-5)

What did Wordsworth feel about his behavior toward Caroline when he wrote these lines? Remorse for the lack of remorse? In a much-quoted passage, rooted in Necessity doctrine, Rivers opines Godwinian contempt for remorse, dismissing the murder of Herbert as of no consequence:
Remorse,
It cannot live with thought; think on, think on,
And it will die. - What? In this universe,
Where the least things control the greatest, where
The faintest breath that breathes can move a world -
What, feel remorse where if a cat had sneezed,
A leaf had fallen, the thing had never been
Whose very shadow gnaws us to the vitals? (III. v.: 81-8)

Both overtly and covertly, Wordsworth faces his remorse head-on in the character of Mortimer. Described as noble and compassionate, we see him act with neither nobility nor compassion, but with self-interest. The sexual jealousy that employs such an extreme position, although it contorts Mortimer’s actions and decisions, is never explicitly debated before the audience, although it is implied. For example, when Mortimer is alone with Herbert on the heath preparatory to dispatching him, to stiffen his resolve while looking at Herbert, Mortimer reflects again on Matilda’s supposed infidelity, drawing on his jealousy to justify the killing:

And I have loved this man? and she hath loved him,
And I loved her, and she loved the Lord Clifford,
And there it ends … (III. iii.: 12-14)

However, most overt comments about sexual impulses in the drama are expressed not in reference to Mortimer, but more tangentially, in reference the text’s invisible libertine, the “prospective Agent” Clifford.

Clifford, the powerful feudal lord, is the obscure and omnipotent sexual threat that hovers over pure Matilda’s fate. He is utterly voiceless and off-stage, which is consistent with Wordsworth’s lifelong reserve regarding sexuality and the will to power. As the single acknowledged libidinous man in the play, Clifford represents masculine virility - carefully kept out of sight, and treated in the script with some ambiguity.23 Lacy alludes nonspecifically to Clifford’s excesses: “Clifford! Who ever heard of this wild castle / and doth not know him?” (II. iii.: 411-12) Otherwise, Clifford’s supposed sexual abominations and abuses of power are alleged only through the unreliable words of the play’s consummate liar, Rivers. Clifford’s abandonment of the mad mother may or may not be Rivers’

23 The only other male in the cast with a visible wife or lover is Robert, who has been emasculated by the corrupt social justice system.
malignant fabrication; the rape of Matilda certainly is. Herbert, a more credible source of information, speaks of Clifford as someone who may be sympathetic to him: “I have heard / That in his milder moods he has express’d /Compassion for me,” although he goes on to express distrust, “I do not like the man” (I. ii.: 52-4, 57). Further, Clifford is reported by Rivers (again, unreliably) to have charisma and charm; he supposedly seduces women with his musical voice, perhaps an allusion to the charismatic appeal of Wordsworth’s poetry.

But faith! to see him in his silken tunic
Fitting his low voice to the minstrel’s harp,
There’s witchery in’t. I never knew a maid
That could withstand it. (III. ii.: 50-3)

Interestingly, when the truth about the fabricated rape/seduction story is revealed at the end of the play, no remorse or retraction of slander is considered toward Clifford. Clifford isn’t even mentioned, but kept discretely off-stage and out of the action.

If one thinks of Mortimer’s aversion to Clifford as fear of his own lust, suddenly Mortimer’s odd behavior toward Matilda makes sense. As a lover, Mortimer is singularly passive. He is hesitant and furtive in courtship, as evidenced by his hiding in the thicket in Act I when Matilda enters, by his attempt to secure her through a letter and an envoy instead of in person, and by his reluctant behavior towards her in their physical encounters. The two times Mortimer and Matilda embrace, she is the one to initiate the action: “But take me to your arms - this breast, alas! / It throbs, and you have a heart that does not feel it” (III. v.: 141-2). Again, at Mortimer’s entrance in Act V scene iii, Matilda “throws herself upon his neck.” Mortimer, however, is perpetually reticent, tortured by constant uncertainty over either her purity (did she or did she not have sex with Clifford?) and/or his own purity (is he a father murderer? Is he betraying lust?). The rapidity with which Mortimer believes Rivers’ story of Matilda’s infidelity with Clifford underscores Mortimer’s insecurity, suspicion, and self-concern. This contrasts significantly with the Sailor in Adventures on Salisbury Plain, who is represented as a devoted husband, separated from his beloved family by social injustice and his unselfish wish to protect – perhaps the way Wordsworth, in 1795, wished to view his separation from Annette. By 1796, Wordsworth acts out a possibly more candid and complex scrutiny through the character of Mortimer.

Like Adventures on Salisbury Plain, The Borderers is interrupted with the story of an abandoned mother. Appealing to Mortimer’s sense of pathos, Rivers describes the mourning,
insane unwed mother, supposedly Clifford’s cast-off, who constantly mourns for her dead infant:

    A maid, who fell a prey to the Lord Clifford,
    And he grew weary of her, but alas!
    What she had seen and suffered—the poor wretch,
    It turned her brain—and now she lives alone, …
    … and so the wretch has lived
    Ten years; and no one ever heard her voice;
    …

    She paces round and round, still round and round,
    And in the church-yard sod her feet have worn
    A hollow ring.  

(I. iii.: 8-22)

As Campbell and Mueschke perceptively remark:

    Wordsworth’s emotions are peculiarly sensitive: first to the situation of the
    betrayed and abandoned mother; and second, to the relationship between a father
    and daughter.  The emotions aroused by these situations are generally intrusions
    into the story.  The dramatic unity is clearly disturbed so that Mortimer may
    intrude the horror which he feels at the sight of the woman who has been betrayed
    and cast off. … This relationship becomes time and again in the poem a point of
    intensity (473-4).

When Mortimer observes the abandoned mother and imagines Matilda in the same condition,
he might be expressing fear of his own exploitive urges for her.

    Poor Matilda:
    Oh Rivers! when I looked upon that woman
    I thought I saw a skeleton of Matilda (II. i.: 31-3)

However, any of Mortimer’s exploitive urges regarding Matilda are always implied
indirectly, while Clifford is explicitly painted as the lecher.  Mortimer wants at one and the
same time to vanquish the competition (Clifford) and remove the protective father, and to
construct it all as a noble, selfless, sexless act.  Step one is to keep Clifford, on whom all
concupiscent motives are projected, voiceless and off-stage.

    Clifford may be voiceless, but Herbert the traditionalist is given full expression.
Wordsworth’s ethical debate surrounding Herbert’s helplessness, a corollary to the debate
about Mortimer’s compassion, is directly displayed to the audience in such speeches as this
one by Herbert to Mortimer on the heath:

    I am weak!
    My daughter does not know how weak I am,
    And, as thou seest, beneath the arch of heaven
Here do I stand alone in helplessness
With which the God of heaven has visited me! (III. iii.: 83-7)

And later in the same scene, just before Mortimer abandons him:

Mercy!
What, me! would you destroy me? drink the blood
Of such a wretch as I am! (III. iv.: 138-40)

In total effect, the blind, helpless Herbert calls to mind to the blind London Beggar in The Prelude: 24

And on the shape of that unmoving Man,
His steadfast face, and sightless eyes, I gazed,
As if admonished from another world. (VII.: 647-9)

Indeed, Mortimer/Wordsworth is much admonished by the “prospective Agent” Herbert. Herbert might represent the playwright’s conscience with respect to traditional values and familial expectations, including the ideal father that Wordsworth will never be to Caroline. 25 Mortimer’s emphasis on the nobility of fatherhood permeates the play. He repeatedly speaks of Matilda not as his beloved, but as Herbert’s daughter. He fell in love with her when they were children and she told stories about her father. He says to Lacy, “I love the Father in thee” (II. iii.: 416). In Act I, after Rivers has persuaded Mortimer that Herbert is not Matilda’s real father but an exploitive imposter, Mortimer finishes the Act with the exclamation, “Father!—to God himself we cannot give / A holier name; … The firm foundation of my life appears / To sink from under me” (I. iii.: 177-82).

Herbert’s death is symbolic in many ways. The religious imagery of human sacrifice combined with a desolate landscape pounded by a wild storm, which was so significant in Adventures on Salisbury Plain, is repeated in The Borderers. However, in The Borderers, the protagonist is not the victim of the sacrifice, but the perpetrator. When he abandons Herbert to die, Mortimer “kills” not only innocence and idealized fatherhood, but, in a much broader sense, political idealism. Perhaps the death of Herbert symbolizes the extinguishment of Wordsworth’s own innocence, not only regarding the impossibility of his

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24 Hartman compares Herbert’s blindness to the blind beggar of The Prelude VII, in that his blindness “suggests a visionary faculty that cannot be mutilated,” (767-8).

25 In Herbert, the poet portrays both the doting and adored father, and also the husband/father who left behind a wife and child (Matilda’s brother) to perish in the war fires of Antioch. Wordsworth might have imagined himself in either role.
role as a good father to Caroline, but also regarding his disillusion with the radical ideology that he once supported with such fervor. As a deposed aristocrat, Herbert represents the royalist Vallons and the ousted aristocracy of France in the appalling wake of the Reign of Terror - and like them, he is blind (to the realities of the suffering poor in pre-revolution France), helpless, dependent, bewildered. Portrayed as noble and pious, Herbert is a crusader and dispossessed baron. He is a religious, chivalrous relic, wandering back from the lost wars in the Holy Land. As a defeated crusader, he is a reminder of the church that Wordsworth has rejected as a vocation, and, even more, he suggests the Catholic institution of pre-revolution France.26 Ill and rapidly failing, he is someone to be pitied. Herbert is a sympathetic character, treated in the play with respect, even reverence. In one sense Herbert, abandoned to die in the play, could be Wordsworth’s apology to tradition and his lament for lost innocence. There will be no more “Letters” justifying regicide.

Ultimately, even a sexually frustrated, jealous, enraged Mortimer is incapable of directly killing the defenseless Herbert. Refusing Herbert compassion (much as Wordsworth had refused compassion for the French aristocracy), Mortimer puts Herbert to a trial by Ordeal. In Mortimer’s words, when he later confesses to Matilda, “on the Ordeal / Of the bleak Waste—left him” (1842 V. iii.: 2235-6).27 The Ordeal is a medieval concept of justice rooted in the belief that the spiritual holds supremacy over the physical, and thus physical suffering is of little consequence, and God will punish the guilty and protect the innocent regardless of human contrivance.28 The philosophy behind the Ordeal mimics the philosophy of Necessity, all dressed up as Piety. Either way, personal responsibility is circumvented, in much the same way that social-political injustice “excused” the Sailor.

26 Stephen Prickett, in an unusual piece of *The Borderers* scholarship, finds parallels between eighteenth century maps of England and maps of the Holy Land, finding “symbolic geography…connected with contemporary cartography,” thus elliptically supporting my designation of Herbert as a representative of the old religious order (179).

27 The word “Ordeal” is introduced in the later version of the play.

28 Foucault invokes the concept of spiritual over physical when he depicts how early 18th century torture was linked to older “trials by ordeal” that were practiced in accusatory procedures even before the Inquisition (40). Perhaps the most famous example of Medieval emphasis on the spiritual over the physical is in the much-quoted (perhaps misquoted) comment of the Abbot of Citeaux during the Albigensian Crusade, when he ordered the massacre of the entire population of the town of Beziers, Cathar heretics and Catholic believers alike, with the comforting reassurance that “God will know His own.” Denis DeRougement traces the impact on Western thought of the Medieval disdain for the physical in *Love in the Western World*. 
Herbert’s purity of spirit almost triumphs over the Ordeal: although blind, he follows the sound of a chapel bell that turns out to be, significantly, a useless relic of an abandoned church, a symbol of the no longer vital religion that supported the French aristocracy. However, Herbert still might have been saved in the person of Robert, who discovers him at the chapel, except for the fact that Robert has been the victim of the ruling order’s inhumane justice system. Robert’s experience in prison has permanently traumatized him to the extent that he is too afraid to show Herbert compassion for fear that he will be blamed for Herbert’s death and then be returned to prison. The impact of imprisonment on Robert, whether or not he was guilty of a crime (a matter of ambiguity in the play), is to diminish his humanity. Robert’s wife Margaret tells Matilda, “Poor Robert! Lady, / Has a kind heart, but his confinement / Has made him fearful, and he’ll never be / The man he was” (IV. iii.: 19-22). Thus Wordsworth alludes to the French aristocracy’s responsibility, to some degree, for their present harsh treatment because it results from their tyrannical and brutal justice system.

During the twenty-four hours before his death, Herbert (alternately frightened and trusting toward Mortimer) spends the night in the dungeon of a half ruined castle—a metaphor for the horrific legacy of injustice left by the French monarchial system. Wordsworth may have felt remorse for the suffering of the royalists in France, but he still condemned the pre-revolution prisons and justice system.

By the end of the play, in an act of partial self-realization, Mortimer condemns himself for the death of Herbert. But, with the same uneven portrayal of Mortimer’s character as at the beginning of the play, Mortimer’s self-condemnation is calculated to arouse esteem or - at least protest - among those who witness him. The playwright refuses to subject Mortimer to unmixed scorn. Act V displays an ostensibly guilty Mortimer who

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29 In the apolitical space of The Borderers, one wonders by whose authority the justice system is administered in the play. It appears to fall by chance to the currently strongest overlord. The Borderers contains at least two charismatic leaders who have risen in the void of government, Clifford and Mortimer—the former supposedly violent and exploitive, the latter, until the action of the play, supposedly benevolent. Presumably, were Herbert restored to his inheritance, he would provide compassionate local government. Yet government by a strong leader appears to be a risky business, a matter of caprice. The tyranny of the captain on Rivers’ ship brought out the worst in men, leading them to deception and murder. Henry III’s save-the-day-too-late intervention to restore Herbert’s position is unrelated to any ideological base for exemplary political/social order. It is as if, in The Borderers, Wordsworth has given up adherence to any political ideal whatsoever.

30 Mortimer’s mix of self-condemnation expressed in a manner to evoke admiration is markedly similar to that of Caleb at the conclusion of Godwin’s Caleb Williams.
still holds the admiration and love of the band of men, and the love and forgiveness of the idealized heroine. In fact, we are told by a self-effacing (or is it self-aggrandizing?) Mortimer that Matilda will do more than forgive; she will excuse: “she will wake and she will weep for me / And say no blame was mine” (V. iii.: 176-7). It is as if Mortimer asserts his right to absolution even while he cannot cease confessing. In the same final act, Mortimer’s loyal band disposes of Rivers in an almost perfunctory act of righteous punishment. The killing of Rivers occurs off-stage without dramatic impact, as if the playwright, like Mortimer, has lost interest in Rivers. Rivers becomes an expeditious villain to help diffuse and confuse the audience’s moral verdict regarding Mortimer. The play finishes not with a bang, but with what Bromwich refers to as Wordsworth’s “muttered self-inquest” (19).

While the script brings Mortimer’s irresolute moral gymnastics through the final acts, the playwright seems to weary of the whole self-absorbed debate over “who knows what crime.” The first discrepancy - which is perhaps more a shift of moral nuance from righteous judgment to human interest - occurs with the detailed account of Rivers’ background in Act IV, as Wordsworth speculates on what psychological past could possibly result in such a personality. Rivers’ story not only expounds the script’s pervasive fascination with guilt and judgment but goes on to explore a more rounded, human dimension of Rivers’ character:

\[
\text{Three nights} \\
\text{Did constant meditation dry my blood,} \\
\text{Three sleepless nights I passed in sounding on} \\
\text{Through words and things, a dim and perilous way;} \\
\text{And wheresoe’er I turned me, I beheld} \\
\text{A slavery, compared to which the dungeon} \\
\text{And clanking chain are perfect liberty.} \quad (IV. ii.: 100-106)
\]

As the text moves toward a more human characterization of Rivers as one whose only escape from overwhelming remorse and humiliation was the adoption of arrogant amorality, Wordsworth constructs a potentially temporizing past that gives even Rivers a claim for compassion. In this respect, Rivers presents a picture of what Mortimer/Wordsworth might have become, had Mortimer reacted to disillusion in the same manner as Rivers.

Similarly, the beggar woman takes on more human depth towards the end of the drama when she steps beyond the perimeters of her role as a device manipulated to forward
the plot, and begins to express feelings of remorse and trepidation: “Poor Gentleman! and I have wrought this evil. ... – What will become of me?” (V. iii.: 214-17).

But the most compelling digression from Mortimer’s moral dilemma occurs late in Act IV with the dialog between Robert and Margaret, which vivifies their characters in a way that moves beyond the conceit of Robert as an aesthetic parallel to Mortimer in his abandonment of Herbert. Robert and Margaret’s lives become of interest totally independent of Mortimer’s conflict. While Mortimer, Rivers, Herbert, and Clifford personify abstract concepts, Robert and Margaret develop into flesh-and-blood people with believable day-to-day concerns. For a while, the play exhibits a visceral urgency as the action diverges into Robert and Margaret’s story: his imprisonment that has sapped him of courage and moral fortitude, her love and concern, their basic good nature and their fear. When Robert reveals to Margaret that he discovered and left Herbert abandoned on the moor, it provokes a riveting exchange:

ROBERT: I thought he grasped my hand while he was muttering something about his child - his daughter…

MARGARET: Robert, you are a father.

ROBERT (with a faltering voice): God knows what was in my heart and will not curse my son for my sake.

MARGARET: But you prayed for him? You waited the hour of his release?

ROBERT: It was far from home - the night was wasting fast; I have no friend - I am spited by the world - if I had brought him along with me and he had died in my arms …

MARGARET: Oh! Robert, you will die alone - you will have nobody to close your eyes … A curse will attend us all -

ROBERT (sternly): Have you forgot the bed on which you lay when I was in dungeon?

MARGARET: And you left him alive?

ROBERT: Alive! The damps of death were upon him, he could not have survived an hour.

MARGARET (weeps): In the cold, cold night.

ROBERT (in a savage manner): Aye, and his head was bare. - I suppose you would have had me leave my bonnet to cover him. (Checking himself) You will never rest till I meet with a felon’s end.

MARGARET (with feeling): Is there nothing to be done - cannot we go to the Convent?
ROBERT: Certainly! And say at once that I have murdered him.

(IV. iii.: 61-83)

Robert and Margaret depict believable struggles of conscience and anxiety in a dangerous, concrete world. Their frantic debate contrasts with the contrived, theoretical exchanges of Rivers and Mortimer or the romanticized sentiments of Herbert. Robert and Margaret, essentially powerless but doing the best that they can, are examples of the human suffering that Wordsworth set out to remedy in his youthful idealism, and they are no longer an abstract concept (a “hunger-bitten girl”) but unique individuals, with virtues and flaws, strengths and weaknesses, singular histories.

Robert and Margaret are also the only visible couple in the play (in fact, they are a complete family with children) and, as such, they stand in contrast to the remarkably solitary cast of characters that are bound only by comradeship and/or ideas, with no visible familial relationships beyond the father-daughter relationship between Herbert and Matilda. Robert and Margaret represent marriage and family, the basis for community. Robert, while diminished by his prison experience, yet stands firmly by his family. When Mortimer chastises him for abandoning Herbert, Robert replies, “My wife and children came into my mind” (V. ii.: 55), to which Mortimer replies histrionically, “Oh monster! monster! there are three of us, / And we shall howl together,” as if Robert had had the same sinister intentions toward Herbert as Mortimer and Rivers, and as if this single act of concern for safety and family condemns Robert completely. Robert is not a noble martyr like the Sailor in Adventures on Salisbury Plain, but neither is he a monster. Though guilty of abandoning Herbert, Robert still functions as a basically decent man. His concern for his safety, and for the welfare of his family, contrast with Mortimer’s subordination of Matilda’s welfare to his personal drama, leaving her in a swoon at the end of the play while he goes off to wander the heath.

Margaret, too, is a survivor. It’s hard to imagine Margaret lapsing into passive despair while her children go into servitude or starve, as does her namesake in The Ruined Cottage. Despite Robert’s sojourn in prison, Margaret has not become pathetic and victimized: she is a strong, compassionate source of solace for others. As representatives of marriage and community, Robert and Margaret echo the good cottagers from Adventures on Salisbury Plain, except that the cottagers from Adventures on Salisbury Plain were stick
figures that served a function for the development of the poem’s protagonist, whereas Margaret and Robert are fully fleshed characters who live, significantly, outside of Mortimer’s story. Further, Margaret and Robert have a more realistic and fearful attitude toward the oppressive justice system. More than a refrain from *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, they are precursors for *Lyrical Ballads* and Wordsworth’s abundance of poems based on interest in, and concern for, realistic characters among the suffering poor.31

Act V never quite recovers the emphatic energy of purpose manifested in Margaret and Robert’s Act IV exchange, as Mortimer meanders miserably and somewhat pointlessly to the play’s conclusion. As an isolated work of art, *The Borderers*, which Geoffrey H. Hartman designates “Wordsworth’s problem play,” is an unfinished, unsatisfactory piece (768). However, as a device to release Wordsworth’s voice from ever-tighter coils of ethical psychomachia, the job is complete. Although the curtain drops on an inconclusive and unsatisfying final scene, prompting Peiffer to observe, “human duality remains unresolved at the drama’s end. No lesson is learned by the characters; no solution to their errors is offered by Wordsworth,” (26-7), when the play is viewed as part of a continuum, the resolution of *The Borderers* emerges in Wordsworth’s subsequent poetry. The fates of Wordsworth’s various voices at the end of Act V provide an indication of what will become Wordsworth’s aesthetic path forward.

Wordsworth’s provisional stand-in, Mortimer, at the end of the play has taken his moral anguish to the moors, perhaps to be immersed in the healing influence of nature. In one respect, Mortimer brings us full circle to the beginning of *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* again, as he vows to wander the wilds in a state of remorse, much like the Sailor at the opening of *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*. However, there are several important differences. First, the focus of *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* was on the martyred and noble character of the Sailor as a subject of more importance than the disruptive tale of the Female Vagrant; 31

31 In some respects, the Female Vagrant in *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* is more anticipatory of *Lyrical Ballads* than are that poem’s cottagers, and in fact she reappears in the later work along with multiple other abandoned mothers in such poems as “The Thorn,” “The Mad Mother,” “Ruth,” and “The Forsaken Indian Woman.” These abandoned mothers are not representative of resilience, endurance, and community as are Margaret and Robert, but are more expressive of what Campbell and Mueschke call Wordsworth’s “peculiar concern” for abandoned women, with the added development that Wordsworth’s focus has shifted away from the husbands and lovers (be they guilty or exonerated), and toward the situation of the women themselves.
whereas the focus of Mortimer’s wanderings, expressed in _Lyrical Ballads_, will put the suffering of others center-stage. Second, the natural elements in _Adventures on Salisbury Plain_ were horrific and pernicious, whereas nature in Wordsworth’s future poetry will represent a source of solace and spiritual nourishment. The voice of a less-tormented Mortimer, exhibiting a similar turn from self-absorption in the opening stanzas to consideration of another (his sister Dorothy) at the close, will emerge in “Tintern Abbey,” which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

At the final curtain of _The Borderers_, Rivers, the facsimile of Wordsworth’s past rationalism, now exposed as a mask for hypocrisy, is dead and disregarded. Rivers’ epitaph might be heard in “Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree,” an early poem of _Lyrical Ballads_, written in 1797. In “Yew-Tree,” Wordsworth’s moral dispute is reduced to only two characters, with the narrator clearly dominant. An older-but-wiser Mortimer/narrator speaks from the dispassionate position of one who has (to some extent) learned humility. He advises an unknown potential wanderer who may happen by, and he describes a young man (such as Rivers or Mortimer) “who owned / No common soul,” who went forth into the world with great hopes of doing great things, but through his disappointment and pride became solitary and unproductive like the bent old tree—yet still retained a beautiful vision like the beautiful view around the tree. The bent old tree could be Rivers, proud in his alienated state.

However, the beautiful vision belongs to an unvanquished Mortimer. The poem concludes,

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    Stranger, henceforth be warned—and know that pride,
    Howe’er disguised in its own majesty,
    Is littleness; that he who feels contempt
    For any living thing hath faculties
    Which he has never used;…
        The man whose eye
    Is ever on himself doth look on one
    The least of nature’s works…
        Oh be wiser thou!
    Instructed that true knowledge leads to love,
    True dignity abides with him alone
    Who, in the silent hour of inward thought,
    Can still suspect, and still revere himself,
    In lowliness of heart. (46-60)
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One can hear the poet’s judgment of Rivers in “the man whose eye is ever on himself doth look on one the least of nature’s works.” The narrator might be Mortimer’s voice from the moors, and, although the shift from pride to humility is marked, the narrator yet retains an
authoritative moral tone, at times acknowledging remorse, at times admonishing. The balance has shifted in nuance, but Wordsworth’s signature duality lives on in his verse.

At *The Borderer*’s conclusion, Herbert, symbol of traditional nobility, morality, and religion is also dead: abandoned and mourned. He will reappear from time to time in poems like *The Discharged Soldier* (written in early 1798) with a sense of admonition and loss:

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Solemn and sublime
He might have seemed, but that in all he said
There was a strange half-absence, and a tone
Of weakness and indifference, as of one
Remembering the importance of his theme
But feeling it no longer. (139-44)
```

*The Discharged Soldier* is written in the first person singular. In the poem’s story, the narrator (presumed to be Wordsworth’s own voice) meets the soldier on a deserted moonlit road, and leads the weakened, famished ghostly figure to a friend’s home, where food, lodging, and warmth await him. *The Discharged Soldier* might be read as an alternative ending to the Herbert-Mortimer conflict in *The Borderers*, expressing an alternative, redemptive choice on the part of Mortimer.

When *The Borderers* ends, the virile, powerful, dangerous, and, it turns out, not-so-villainous Clifford is alive and well - unmentioned and off-stage, shielded by what Roe terms Wordsworth’s “innate reserve as a person” (“Politics” 196). Perhaps Clifford receives a nod in the “Tintern Abbey” parenthetical reference to “the coarser pleasures of my boyish days / And their glad animal movements all gone by” (75-6). Perhaps we hear his muffled lament in the Lucy poems. But, for the most part, Clifford as libido is exiled from Wordsworth’s future poetry.32 One can respect Wordsworth’s “innate reserve” and still conjecture that, parallel with the overt debate about rationalism in *The Borderers*, the poet was also working through a sub-textual debate about lust, possessiveness, jealousy and abandonment – possibly exemplified by his affair with Annette Vallon. The implication is that some personal errors needed to be faced and resolved before Wordsworth’s poetry - and indeed his life - could move forward, freed from the restraints of guilt and self-justification. This supposition is

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32 As a poetic exile, Clifford may be in company with Matilda, the potential ideal mate. At the end of the play, Matilda is pure and waiting with - from Mortimer’s point of view - a very promising attitude. Her reappearance in Wordsworth’s private life as a potential mate will not be documented in his poetry.
supported by the constraint Wordsworth appears to have felt regarding his marriage to Mary Hutchinson: their marriage was postponed until two months after he had visited France and made a settlement with Annette in 1802. The implication is that the poet had a deeply conscientious mind that could not gloss over what he deemed to be past errors and just move on, but rather that he required of himself that he return and correct past aberrations – a pattern that was echoed in his lifelong habit of correcting and revising earlier verse.\textsuperscript{33}

While Clifford the Libertine may have been excluded from future poetic expression, Clifford the Strongman never quite yields defeat. We hear his voice, for example, in Wordsworth’s presumption of authority as the dispenser of moral advice (characteristically mixed with humility) in such poems as “Yew Tree,” and in his paternalistic attitude toward Dorothy in the final stanzas of “Tintern Abbey.”

This analysis of \textit{The Borderers}’ cast would be incomplete without mention of the play’s eminent female character, Matilda. Matilda and Margaret are the only major characters the playwright exempts from the scourge of guilt. They enter the play virtuous in themselves and compassionate toward others, and they emerge from five acts of ethical carnage morally unscathed. Artistically, Matilda might represent Wordsworth’s genuine commitment to compassion and moral virtue, by gender one step removed from his ravaged conscience like a pure rib from a debased body. When Rivers argues for rationality over compassion, Rivers uses phrases like “feminine wiles” and “emasculate,” implying the association of Matilda with something undesirable in Mortimer’s feelings, perhaps highlighting Wordsworth’s sense of alienation from his innate compassion. Certainly, Mortimer’s enraged referral to the Matilda’s “loss of innocence” is a “passion whose sound is another name”: jealousy (Prelude XI: 230-231). It is only when Mortimer looks into Matilda’s face and leaves his detached thinking behind that he trusts her. Psychologically, Matilda represents both the abandoned lover and the abandoned daughter: in murdering Herbert, Mortimer deprives her of lover and father by one act.

From the audience’s viewpoint, Matilda’s behavior is irreproachable. Matilda’s actions among the poor contrast with Mortimer’s treatment of the beggar woman. Matilda

\textsuperscript{33} If, during 1793-8, Wordsworth was grappling with the unsavory taint that lust, possessiveness and jealousy brought to romantic attachment, it must have been a tremendous relief to share uncomplicated, straightforward love with Dorothy and Coleridge – a joy that is also expressed in his verse at that time.
easily and naturally befriends the pilgrims in Act II and Margaret in Act IV. The difference is even more marked in Wordsworth’s earlier manuscript, *Ur-Borderers*, in which Mortimer directly threatens the Beggar in Act I (“your life is at my mercy” (I. iii.: 131)), and in which Matilda nurses a pilgrim among the peasants in a Churchyard Scene (“there is a power / Even in the common offices of love” (96-7)).

Nuss calls attention to the difference between Matilda’s charity of practice, and Mortimer’s self-described charity: “whereas Mortimer’s charity is expressed negatively, and in general principles (‘never may I own / The heart which cannot feel for one so helpless’ (1.1.39-40), Matilda’s is an active charity.” Even Matilda’s curse, provoked by what Osborn calls “Mortimer’s lust for judgment” (*The Borderers’* Introduction: 35), is more a desire for the murderer to feel remorse and repentance, and could be construed as a spiritually charitable wish for the killer’s redemption rather than damnation. She follows this “curse” by counseling Mortimer, with respect to Herbert’s alleged murderer, to “Leave him to the pangs / Of his own breast” (V. iii.: 80-1).

Ever compassionate, Matilda’s last words in the play are a plea of mercy for Rivers – or conceivably for Mortimer. As Rivers is dragged offstage by the vengeful band of men, Matilda rushes to Mortimer crying, “It is a strong disease – Oh, save him, save him - ” (V. iii.: 257). Significantly, her last breath onstage urges “save him,” not “save me.” Morally, Matilda does not need saving, although physically and emotionally she is in a swoon.

It is worth noting that although Matilda is relentlessly virtuous, she is not a prude; rather she exhibits warm, loving emotions (“But take me to your arms - this breast, alas! / It throbs, and you have a heart that does not feel it”), thereby integrating physical with moral love (Prelude XI: 230-231). Matilda’s warmth suggests the possibility of a future in which the playwright can be both virtuous and an active participant in marriage and community.

The final characters to consider as the curtain falls on Act V of *The Borderers* are Robert and Margaret, who finish the play very much alive and struggling, trying to make their way - physically, morally, and poetically - in a hard world. As previously noted, they will be among the characters who people Wordsworth’s poetic landscape in *Lyrical Ballads*.

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34 “MS. I,” the Rough Notebook, *The Borderers* (327, 373-95)

35 *Literature Online*, web, not paginated.
The voices of Robert and Margaret herald the Wordsworth that emerges from “personal discontent” to become “the poet that Nature had given him the power to be.”

Although some critics still see in The Borderers Wordsworth’s continued involvement in radical ideology,36 the drama’s dénouement indicates that Wordsworth is through with political systems as the means to bring about human morality and happiness.37 Compassion can’t be legislated. The single exception to Wordsworth’s disillusion with social reforms, as mentioned above, is his condemnation of imprisonment and the justice system. Later recollections in The Prelude about the French revolution underscore this enduring conviction, which Wordsworth still held as perhaps the sole remaining justification for the revolution:

Was not this single confidence enough To animate the mind that ever turned A thought to human welfare? That henceforth Captivity by mandate without law Should cease; and open accusation lead To sentence in the hearing of the world, And open punishment, if not the air Be free to breathe in, and the heart of man Dread nothing. (IX: 532-40)

The lack of a viable solution, either social or individual, at the conclusion of The Borderers is unsatisfying to many critics. Christoph Bode complains that what The Borderers does is “pose a question and stage an insoluble dilemma,” and that “Mortimer’s self-imposed solitary wanderings at the end of the play are no viable alternative, on a larger social scale,” (321). Hartman asserts, “The Borderers provides no solution.” (768). Stoddard’s verdict is even more pessimistic: “Mortimer’s fall from grace does not offer even

36 Citing parallels with famous court cases of the 1790s, Victoria Myers concludes, “Wordsworth certainly asserts that the Pitt government was trying to imitate the arbitrary and terrorizing tactics of the French Jacobins” (12). Myers sees allusions in The Borderers to the trial of Fletcher Christian and 10 other sailors for mutiny against Captain Bligh of the H. M. S. Bounty (which illustrates how evidence was rewritten and reinterpreted by opposing sides, dramatizing how indeterminacy afflicts evidence); the debates before the French Convention over the fate of Louis XVI (which illustrates the ambiguity in institutional authority); and the 1794 treason trial of Thomas Hardy (which convolutes simple terms until the law is rendered indefinite, metaphorical, and paradoxical).

37 Jonathan Bate notes that “politics is what you get when you fall from nature,” and Romanticism is in effect, Enlightenment’s antagonist, “a protest against the objectification of the spirit.” Whereas Enlightenment prefers “to sit in judgment than to feel,” with Wordsworth, “nature is made capable of feeling,” (268, 78, 139).
a hint of redemption. Together with *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, *The Borderers* represents the nadir of Wordsworth’s hopes for man” (97). However, I would argue that having just staged his cathartic breakthrough, Wordsworth doesn’t leave a totally despairing picture of humanity. There are many good people in *The Borderers* - not only named characters like Matilda, Wilfred, and Margaret, but also unnamed background characters like the forester-guide, the host at the inn, the pilgrims who meet Matilda - all of whom act with kindness. In *The Borderers*, Wordsworth turns away from irresolvable social ideologies, and toward individual solutions involving personal relationships and interaction with nature.

Still, as critics have noted, *The Borderers* as an independent aesthetic unit ends without resolution. The resolution was yet to be developed in *Lyrical Ballads*, and finally summarized in “Tintern Abbey.”
CHAPTER 3

PATH TO RESOLUTION IN *LYRICAL BALLADS*

Wordsworth’s poems for *Lyrical Ballads* were written mostly during 1798, at Alfoxden House, where William and Dorothy Wordsworth moved in June of 1797 to be nearer to their friend, Coleridge. However, Wordsworth wrote several poems earlier, at about the same time as *The Borderers* in 1797 or just after that, and these are worth investigating. The first, which has already been discussed (and which is included in *Lyrical Ballads*, but was written in 1797), is “Lines left upon a seat in a Yew-Tree.” Did Wordsworth identify with the reflective old man who is bent like the yew tree, or the young man who is encouraged to recognize pride as littleness, to love others and himself with “lowliness of heart?” Perhaps both. One can see Mortimer, in disguised pride, “feeling contempt” for Howard, much like the Wordsworth who, writing the 1793 “Letter,” felt contempt for royalists. But Mortimer wandering the moors, or Wordsworth under the yew tree - that is a changed man.

The second poem that precedes the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, written in 1797 and revised in 1798, is *The Ruined Cottage*. It tells the tale of an abandoned mother, Margaret, with the familiar ingredients of a husband lost to war, subsequent poverty and depression, lost or dead children, and ultimately a pauper’s death. Between the first 1797 version of *The Ruined Cottage* and the later 1798 version, Coleridge visited Wordsworth and they began their famous friendship. Numerous scholars have pointed to the influence of Coleridge as an intimate friend and guide during Wordsworth’s crisis, to the extent that Seamus Perry concludes, “Wordsworth’s restoration was largely a matter of his becoming, at least for a time and however equivocally, a Coleridgean” (162). The influence of Coleridge is apparent in the pantheism expressed in the rewritten 1798 version of *The Ruined Cottage*. Coleridge summarized his individual pantheism, positing the unity of all created things, in his poem, *Religious Musings*: “‘tis God / Diffused through all that doth make all one whole”

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38 Dates of poems are listed in the Appendix.
The profession of pantheistic ideas in *The Ruined Cottage* is facilitated by the use of framed narration. In the 1798 version, Margaret’s story is told to the narrator by an idealized Pedlar, complete with a concluding pantheistic commentary that removes the reader several degrees from the suffering of Margaret, and encourages a transcendental calm evoked by the idea of the deceased Margaret at one with all nature:

Be wise and cheerful, and no longer read
The form of things with an unworthy eye:
She sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here.
...
What we feel of sorrow and despair
From ruin and from change, and all the grief
The passing shows of being leave behind,
Appeared an idle dream that could not live
Where meditation was. I turned away,
And walked along my road in happiness. (510-524)

*The Ruined Cottage* represents Wordsworth’s final attempt to seek solace in an exterior philosophy.39 The 1798 poems in *Lyrical Ballads*, although containing traces of pantheism, express less of a learned and adopted ideology, and more of reflections originating from the poet’s own feelings - as will be discussed in more detail in the analysis of “Tintern Abbey,” below.

*The Ruined Cottage* is noteworthy for more than a testimony to Wordsworth’s ephemeral brush with pantheism. In *The Ruined Cottage*, Wordsworth presents a changed point of view regarding abandoned mothers, in that his attention is on the woman, and not on the forces driving the man who abandoned her. In one respect, the focus on Margaret’s plight cycles back to Wordsworth’s first *Salisbury Plain* poem, written just after he had left Annette and before his concern shifted from sympathy for the abandoned mothers to defense for the abandoning fathers. However, *Salisbury Plain* can be read as an antiwar poem, a story that displays the Female Vagrant as an argument against the Pitt Administration’s aggressive war policies; whereas Margaret in *The Ruined Cottage* is the subject of individual interest and sympathy, not an example used to make a political point. Wordsworth’s passion

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39 Ulmer records the transformation of *The Ruined Cottage*: “As read to Coleridge on his arrival at Racedown, *The Ruined Cottage* was a grimly tragic narrative that concluded simply by reporting Margaret’s death. By March 1798 Wordsworth had projected a new consolatory ending for the poem and was at work on his account of how the Pedlar, as a boy, ‘saw one life, and felt that it was joy’ (*Pedlar* 177)” (242).
has moved away from generalized ideals and toward compassion for discrete individuals, a
trait that continues in *Lyrical Ballads*.

In *Lyrical Ballads*, the abandoned mother is back in full force, in such poems as “The
Thorn,” “The Mad Mother,” and “The Forsaken Indian Woman.” The Female Vagrant is
also back. However, except for “The Female Vagrant” (excerpted from *Adventures on
Salisbury Plain*, and composed four years earlier), the abandonment of the poor mothers is
casted not by war nor other external social impositions, but by husbands or lovers who have
ceased to care for them. Further, the poet’s attention is focused on the mothers with almost
no discussion of the husbands/lovers who abandoned them. The fathers get no excuses; the
mothers are the center of interest. “The Thorn,” mentions only the father’s cruelty:

She was with child, and she was mad,
Yet often she was sober sad
From her exceeding pain.
Oh me! ten thousand times I’d rather
That he had died, that cruel father! (*LB* 139–43)

Similarly, “The Mad Mother” mentions a heartless father, but otherwise the poem doesn’t
refer to him:

Dread not their taunts, my little life!
I am thy father’s wedded wife;
And underneathe the spreading tree
We two will live in honesty.
If his sweet boy he could forsake,
With me he never would have stay’d. (*LB* 71–6)

The Forsaken Indian Woman never even mentions her child’s father at all, but only her infant
son and lost companions:

My child! They gave thee to another,
A woman who was not thy mother.
When from my arms my babe they took,
On me how strangely did he look!

... My poor forsaken child! if I
For once could have thee close to me,
With happy heart I then would die,
And my last thoughts would happy be. (*LB* 31-4, 65-8)

Taken altogether, along with *The Ruined Cottage*, they paint a picture of the poet’s remorse
for abandoning Annette and Caroline, with no excuses offered. (After all, why did he not
marry Annette before leaving France except that he did not want to marry her?) Over and
over, the *Lyrical Ballads* poems empathize with the suffering mothers. The poet’s eye is no longer “ever on himself.” The absent fathers are hardly mentioned, and - with the exception of “The Thorn,” discussed below - there are few intrusive narrators to moralize or rationalize. When narrators do appear in the poems, they merit careful scrutiny.

A cursory examination of the narrators’ roles in various *Lyrical Ballads* poems reveals that Wordsworth had mastered the technique of presenting potentially deceptive narrators - something he may have learned from the stories Rivers and Mortimer told to justify their behavior. As Wordsworth extracted himself from his experiment with drama and returned to verse in 1798, some elements of the dramatic genre lingered, particularly in those poems in which the narrator is cast as a fictional character – often a signal that Wordsworth might have been working out a potentially unflattering autobiographical conflict. Two such poems in *Lyrical Ballads* are particularly interesting.

The first is “The Thorn,” which, according to Wordsworth in a 1798 advertisement, “is not supposed to be spoken in the author’s own person: the character of the loquacious narrator will sufficiently shew itself in the course of the story” (*Lyrical Ballads* 331). This narrator-character, in his elaborations on a salacious story about a local abandoned mother implicated with infanticide, is exposed as a sensationalist gossip devoid of genuine human sympathy for the woman’s pathetic situation. Far from expressing compassion for her plight, he enjoys dropping hints at dire signs of the sinful and the supernatural:

I cannot tell; I wish I could;  
For the true reason no one knows,  
But if you’d gladly view the spot,  
The spot to which she goes;  
The heap that’s like an infant’s grave,  
The pond – and thorn, so old and grey,  
...

I’ve heard the scarlet moss is red  
With drops of that poor infant’s blood;  
But kill a new-born infant thus!  
I do not think she could.  
Some say, if to the pond you go,  
And fix on it a steady view,  
The shadow of a babe you trace,  
A baby and a baby’s face,  
And that it looks at you;  
Whene’er you look on it, ‘tis plain  
The baby looks at you again. (*LB* 89-99, 221-31)
Although Wordsworth had advertised that “The Thorn” was not “spoken in the author’s own person,” apparently it raised enough controversy that Wordsworth felt compelled to address the character-narrator more thoroughly in an accompanying note in the 1800 publication of *Lyrical Ballads* by describing a probable narrator who was:

> a Captain of a small trading vessel for example, who being past the middle age of life, had retired upon an annuity or small independent income to some village or country town of which he was not a native, or in which he had not been accustomed to live. Such men having little to do become credulous and talkative from indolence, and from the same cause and other predisposing causes by which it is probable that such men may have been affected, they are prone to superstition. (*LB* 331-2)

A careful reader of “The Thorn” would immediately recognize the narrator’s difference from Wordsworth in the quality of “The Thorn” narrator’s imagination, which lacks originality. The inferred story in “The Thorn” is borrowed by the narrator from a traditional ballad, “The Cruel Mother,” Child Ballad no. 20, which contains the essential elements of an unwed mother, birth at the site of a forlorn thorn, and infanticide; and which was made popular by broadsides in the last quarter of the 18th century (with earlier versions published as far back as the 1600’s). Further, the name of the unwed mother in “The Thorn,” Martha Ray, was borrowed by the narrator from a highly publicized account of the love-triangle murder of singer Martha Ray in 1779, which formed the basis of Herbert Croft’s popular 1780 novel, *Love and Madness*.

Yet despite the obvious distancing of the poet from the narrator, “The Thorn” can be read as an introspection, not quite an apology nor yet an exoneration, about whether storytellers exploit the suffering of others as a means to provide provocative subject matter. Wordsworth might have been conscientiously examining his motives for writing the multiple stories of victimized mothers in *Lyrical Ballads*, an undertaking that was commercial as well as aesthetic, arguing with himself about whether or not he was still exploitive with regard to his experience with Annette. Did some part of him relish their unhappy affair for its addition to his wealth of poetic material? As in *The Borderers*, he would have questioned his dubious motives by assigning them to a fictional character.

The second poem of interest told by a narrator-character in *Lyrical Ballads* is “We are Seven,” which describes an altercation between a gentleman-narrator near a graveyard, and a little girl who insists her family consists of seven persons, some of whom happen to be
deceased, but still count. In “We are Seven,” we hear the strong, clear voices of Wordsworth’s two female heroines from The Borderers: Matilda and Margaret. The loving little girl in “We are Seven,” significantly part of family and community, is not only, like Matilda and Margaret, undefeatable in her assertion of faith in the face of loss, but also not intimidated by a severe examiner who is her physical, economic, social and intellectual superior. As the narrator relentlessly queries and corrects the little girl with increasing egotism, opacity, and something like desperation, he betrays his lack of sensitivity to the feelings of others, as well as his fear of loss and death. Like an echo of the debate between Margaret and Robert, the woman/girl in “We are Seven” argues courage and love, and the man responds with fear and rationality.

Perhaps the little girl in “We are Seven” serves as a tribute not only to Wordsworth’s acknowledgment of feminine strength and virtue, but specifically to those attributes in his constant, loving sister, Dorothy. Dorothy not only embodied unwavering love and faith for Wordsworth; she also provided a check against over-indulgence in remorse and sorrow. This quality is illuminated in “We are Seven,” which stands out from the rest of the Lyrical Ballads poems in that suffering and grief are absolutely denied victory over hope and good cheer. The child who refuses to dismiss her siblings simply because they are no longer physically present on earth is representative of adamant faith and commitment to life in the face of death. It takes little imagination to see this as an aesthetic reference to Dorothy, in which case the querulous, superior-sounding, and insistent questioner might represent an older brother, working through his rationalist thinking and painful past – a brother who recalls Dorothy’s steadfast support when he was on the verge of nervous collapse. As with The Borderers, a potentially unflattering autobiographical portrait is disguised as a fictional character in dialog with a conflicting point of view.

The remaining narrators in Lyrical Ballads poems written after 1797 tend to serve as humble witnesses to enhance the dramatic impact of the poems’ subject protagonists, and

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40 The Sailor in ASP or Caleb in Caleb Williams might have profited from such a check.

41 Taken altogether, the representation of female moral leadership in “We are Seven,” along with the characters Matilda and Margaret from The Borderers, anticipate Tonya Moutray’s conclusions from Wordsworth’s later 19th century poetry regarding his “radical re-conceptualization of Christian community, his advocacy of women’s leadership within this context, and his sense that agrarian sustainability underwrites the entire endeavor” (821).
exhibit few if any personality traits of their own. In fact, for many of the poems in *Lyrical Ballads*, the narrators retreat almost to invisibility, as the poems hone in on the humanity and suffering of the poor, the dispossessed vagrants, and other victims of war, neglect, a dysfunctional social system, and exploitation by the powerful. The process of transition in the narrator’s role from a self-centered psychoanalyst (as in “Yew Tree”) to concern for others (as in “Simon Lee,” “Old Man Travelling,” or “The Last of the Flock”) is apparent in “The Convict,” an early *Lyrical Ballads* poem composed in 1796, about the same time as *The Borderers* was written. Although the content of the “The Convict” delves more into the condition of the convict than that of the narrator, the narrator, like Mortimer, is still unusually attentive to his self-image. The poem finishes with the narrator speaking to the convict (as if the convict cares what sort of man the narrator is):

> ‘Poor victim! No idle intruder has stood
> ‘With o’erweening complacence our state to compare,
> ‘But one, whose first wish is the wish to be good,
> ‘Is come as a brother thy sorrows to share.
> …
> ‘At thy name though compassion her nature resign,
> ‘Though in virtue’s proud mouth thy report be a stain,
> ‘My care, if the arm of the mighty were mine,
> ‘Would plant thee where yet thou might’st blossom again.’ (*LB* 45-52)

Although the convict’s plight is the poem’s concern, we hear something of Mortimer’s narcissism and arrogance not only in the narrator’s virtuous posturing, but also in his assumption of superior moral benevolence such that he would have the solution to “correct” the convict’s moral state.

Narrators in subsequent *Lyrical Ballads* poems written in 1798 have more humility. The narrator of “Simon Lee,” for example, speaks of a poor, old, one-eyed man, whom he has known to be a vigorous huntsman in his youth. The old man, Simon, is trying to chop a tree root without success, due to his age and weakness. Moved by charity and fellow-feeling, in perhaps something of the same spirit as the narrator of “The Convict” but with more practical effort and more effective result, the narrator chops the root for Simon. The point of the poem, as in “The Convict,” dwells on the narrator’s emotional response to the situation. However, rather than aggrandizing himself with benevolent philosophy, the narrator is touched and humbled by Simon Lee’s gratitude. Both poems imply some moral instruction to the reader, but with a significant difference in self-awareness and technique. The narrator
of “The Convict” implies that the reader should emulate the narrator’s noble principles. The narrator of “Simon Lee” evokes respect and compassion for Simon, with a sense of loss for what Simon has lost. Simon’s profuse gratitude becomes an almost unbearable reminder of the narrator’s unworthiness for such praise. The last lines capture this:

The tears into his eyes were brought,  
And thanks and praises seemed to run  
So fast out of his heart, I thought  
They never would have done.  
- I’ve heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds  
with coldness still returning,  
Alas! the gratitude of men  
has oftner left me mourning. (LB 97-104)

Similarly, “Old Man Travelling” leaves the reader in a state of startled compassion, a feeling shared with, and evoked by, the narrator. First the narrator describes his absorption with an unusually quiet, self-possessed man:

A man who does not move with pain, but moves  
With thought – He is insensibly subdued  
To settled quiet: he is one by whom  
All effort seems forgotten, one to whom  
Long patience has such mild composure given,  
That patience now doth seem a thing, of which  
He hath no need. He is by nature led… (LB 6-12)

The overall tone is one of respect. The dramatic final lines of the poem are given to the old man, who is the character of focus. The old man explains the depth of his resignation by revealing that he is on his way for a last visit to his sailor-son, who is dying in a hospital. The reader, who has come to deeply respect this old man, experiences a shock of loss. The narrator as a distinct character is neither here nor there; he is merely the reader’s witness to the deep humanity of the old man, and the poignancy of his situation. The narrator brings the reader to fellow feeling by the poem’s careful relation of events. One can imagine a reader, perhaps the parent of a son killed in the war, feeling comforted by the narrator’s understanding, or another reader being awakened to compassion he hadn’t previously felt.

The moral lesson of the poem comes across not as an admonition from a superior teacher, but through the technique of shared feeling with a humble, compassionate witness.

The narrator in “Last of the Flock” is similar to the narrator of “Old Man Traveling,” in that he is a humble witness, and not the character of focus. The narrator sees a countryman carrying a lamb, crying. The narrator “follow’d him, and said, ‘My friend /
‘What ails you? Wherefore weep you so?’ (LB 15-16). The rest of the poem is given to the shepherd, who explains how his entire flock has dwindled to this single lamb, which now must also be sold in order to purchase food. As in “Old Man Traveling,” the reader shares fellow feeling with the unobtrusive narrator, mourning the countryman’s loss.

At times the narrator of a *Lyrical Ballads* poem is deliberately painted as a flawed counterpoint to the subject of the poem, as already seen in “We are Seven” and “The Thorn.” One other such narrator, in “Anecdote for Fathers,” experiences self-realization after a patronizing interrogation of his son, during which the narrator reveals his underlying emotional neediness, while his young son, in a sub-text to his courteous answers, strives to comfort the father. The narrator acknowledges both his son’s compassion and his own lack of wisdom in the final stanza:

> Oh dearest, dearest boy! my heart
> For better lore would seldom yearn,
> Could I but teach the hundredth part
> Of what from thee I learn. (*LB* 57-60)

Not all *Lyrical Ballads* have narrators. Those written in the first person, with the unabashed tone of Wordsworth’s own voice (“Lines written at a small distance from my House, and sent by my little Boy to the Person to whom they are addressed,” “Lines written in early spring,” “Lines written near Richmond, upon the Thames, at Evening,” and “The Tables Turned”), are invariably about nature, and frequently addressed to Dorothy or some other friend. These poems deliver a straightforward message of Wordsworth’s newfound philosophy centered on love of nature and love of fellow beings. The earliest of these (composed in 1797), “Lines written near Richmond, upon the Thames, at Evening,” is written in remembrance of the poet William Collins. The verse combines remembrance, love, loss, and the beauty of nature with spiritual overtones:

> Remembrance! as we glide along,
> For him suspend the dashing oar,
> And pray that never child of Song
> May know his freezing sorrows more.
> How calm! how still! the only sound,
> The dripping of the oar suspended!
> - The evening darkness gathers round
> By virtue’s holiest powers attended. (*LB* 33-40)
By 1798, Wordsworth’s tone has become more natural, less constrained. In “Lines Written at a Small Distance from my House,” Wordsworth calls Dorothy to join him in the “blessing” and “joy” of the first mild day of March 1798:

There is a blessing in the air,
Which seems a sense of joy to yield
To the bare trees, and mountains bare,
And grass in the green field.

My Sister! (‘tis a wish of mine)
Now that our morning meal is done,
Make haste, your morning task resign;
Come forth and feel the sun (LB 5-12)

Composed the next month, “Lines written in the early spring” strikes a more somber note. Wordsworth’s lyrical descriptions of nature are contrasted with the regrettable political/social workings of humans, perhaps echoing a recovered Wordsworth who reflected on the way he had thought a few years previously:

I heard a thousand blended notes,
While in a grove I sate reclined,
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
Bring sad thoughts to the mind.

To her fair works did nature link
The human soul that through me ran;
And much it griev’d my heart to think
What man has made of man. (LB 1-8)

A third example of a 1798 _Lyrical Ballads_ poem written in the first person, “The Tables Turned,” was addressed to Wordsworth’s friend, William Hazlitt. Just as in his earlier poem to Dorothy when Wordsworth bid his sister to leave her tasks and come relish the beautiful first warm day in March, the poet exhorts his friend to abandon his bookish studies, and “Come forth into the light of things” (15). However, Wordsworth is even stricter in the comparison between the life inherent in lessons from nature versus the death of rationalistic, intellectual thinking:

Books! ‘tis a dull and endless strife,
Come, hear the woodland linnet,
How sweet his music on my life
There’s more of wisdom in it.
One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man;
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.

Sweet is the lore which nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Missshapes the beauteous forms of things;
We murder to dissect.  (LB 9-12, 21-8)

In the midst of the wise and moral influence from the natural world, the image of a “meddling intellect” that “misshapes” things, that “murders,” brings Rivers to mind. However, Wordsworth doesn’t end his urging on a negative note, but finishes with the lines:

   Enough of science and of art;
   Close up these barren leaves;
   Come forth, and bring with you a heart
   That watches and receives. (LB 29-32)

Notice the comparison of the “barren leaves” of a book in contrast with the living leaves of the forest, the importance of acquiring an attentive and receptive feeling toward nature, and that these lines are not general abstract observations but specific communications to a friend. These two healing influences—nature, which takes on the elevated role of spiritual and moral guide for mankind, and the disinterested love between friends, were key ingredients in Wordsworth’s emerging moral aesthetic.

So far, this analysis has traced a path showing how Wordsworth forced a personal crisis of remorse through his discourse in The Borderers, which spilled into creativity to produce Lyrical Ballads. As he wrote, the poet passed from remorse through catharsis and self-forgiveness, opening the way to compassion for others. The Furies spoke their piece and left, until, finally, the resolution to The Borderers is fully revealed in the last poem of Lyrical Ballads, “Lines Written a few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour.” After the title, Wordsworth wrote a date: July 13, 1798 – the day before the anniversary of the storming of the Bastille nine years before.

Significantly, in “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth speaks in his own, first-person singular voice without any narrator-characters to introduce conflictive, prevaricating, or ambiguous points of view. The very first lines refer to the crisis Wordsworth endured from 1793 to 1798:

   Five years have passed; five summers, with the length
   Of five long winters!  And again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain springs  
With a sweet inland murmur. (*LB* 1-4)

Note that the waters are “inland,” far from the coast of France. Further lines contain reflections of all that he has passed through, as viewed through the perception of a settled mind, at peace at last. There is an oblique reference to the ever-reserved poet’s affair with Annette. Describing himself five years previously, Wordsworth writes:

```
I bounded o’er the mountains by the sides  
Of the deep rivers and the lonely streams  
Wherever nature led, more like a man  
Flying from something that he dreads than one  
Who sought the thing he loved. For nature then  
(The coarser pleasures of my boyish days  
And their glad animal movements all gone by)  
To me was all in all. (*LB* 70-77)
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The confession of “flying from something that he dreads” suggests that Wordsworth never wished to marry Annette, that his affair was the result of careless passion—“glad animal movements” that now are “all gone by,” implying that part of his newfound moral code is celibacy, as further emphasized in the subsequent lines:

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That time is past,  
And all its aching joys are now no more,  
And all its dizzy raptures. Not for this  
Faint I, nor mourn, nor murmur; other gifts  
Have followed—for such loss, I would believe,  
Abundant recompense. (*LB* 87-92)
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The implication is that Clifford the libertine is now under regulation.

The abbey described in “Tintern Abbey” is a relic of the abandoned, inactive Catholic religion - a sort of architectural representative of the same things Herbert stood for in *The Borderers*: the old Catholic institution and social order, religious piety, the powers in pre-revolutionary France, the clerical expectations of Wordsworth’s family. The religious imagery from *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* to “Tintern Abbey” follows a coherent path. It began with horrific visions of human sacrifice by the old Druids in *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, a metaphor for the sacrifice of the Sailor to a pitiless legality/morality, which was in turn a possible metaphor for Wordsworth’s potential sacrifice of his hopes and beliefs as he considered entering a clergy he didn’t respect in order to support a family he didn’t want. In *The Borderers*, the image of religious sacrifice on the wild plains repeats, but this time the poet’s representative ego, Mortimer, is the inexorable perpetrator, and the victim is the
idealized father that Wordsworth will never be for Caroline, as well as the doomed Catholic church-state, all of which is represented in the person of Howard, Matilda’s father, the blind crusader who is put to death by Ordeal near an abandoned church. In “Tintern Abbey,” the vestiges of the old church-state are no longer either threatening or pitiful, but transformed into an aesthetic tribute to a past that is now resolved. Like Wordsworth’s once overwrought conscience, the abbey has been overwhelmed by nature, has grown beautiful and peaceful, an object for reflective contemplation:

For I have learned
To look on nature not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Not harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts, a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man—
A motion and a spirit that impels
All things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still
… well-pleased to recognize
In nature and the language of the sense,
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being. (LB 91-114)

In “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth turns to nature with a more responsible and attentive response, not just the careless joy of his younger years. Unlike Mortimer, he trusts in neither impulsive passion nor the rationalizing mind. The spirituality that was at one time presumed by the old religious order is now attributed to nature as it strikes the sensibilities of a receptive soul. Seth Reno observes how, in the first six lines quoted above, “Wordsworth’s intellectual love of nature leads to a love of humankind, represented by the harmony of the ‘still, sad music’ that can ‘chasten and subdue’ the moments of ‘thoughtless youth.’ The Wordsworth of 1798 in ‘Tintern Abbey’ has learned to see the ‘things’ that he could not in 1793” (191). Yet these somber thoughts in the poem are immediately followed by lines that describe “joy” and a “sense sublime.” Wordsworth’s characteristic duality remains, as the
poem alternates between faith and loss, light and shadow, like the vacillating leaf patterns on a sunlit forest floor.

Jonathan Bate addresses Wordsworth’s duality by asserting that Wordsworth “regards poetic language as a special kind of expression which may effect an imaginative reunification of mind and nature, though it also has a melancholy awareness of the illusoriness of its own utopian vision” (245). However, for many readers (including this one), Wordsworth doesn’t project the irony, cynicism, or despair that might be supposed to accompany a “melancholy awareness” of the “illusoriness” of his “vision.” Rather, he proclaims his vision in universal axioms (“we see into the life of things”), and this ability to pen verse that sustains sorrow and sublimity in the same, transcendent spot of time contributes to his enduring appeal. Wordsworth’s ability to recognize poetically the duality inherent in the human condition is one of his outstanding gifts. In fact, perhaps pantheism’s insistence on a constantly positive interpretation of events is one reason Wordsworth discarded Coleridge’s creed.

To be sure, elements of pantheism are apparent in the lines quoted above, in the “presence” that “rolls through all things.” However, the overall moral philosophy is personal to Wordsworth, and grew with him through the rest of his poetic life. Stephen Gill distinguishes Wordsworth’s philosophy in “Tintern Abbey” from Coleridge’s pantheistic ideology thus: “Wordsworth characteristically suggests much more than Coleridge the ‘ennobling interchange’ of the mind and the external world. … the poet is passively brought to the experience. But, once the climax of passivity is reached and we are ‘laid asleep,’ the language suddenly suggests the vital power of the mind that can penetrate a ‘living soul,’ into the ‘life of things’” (209).

In fact, all ghosts are laid to rest in “Tintern Abbey.” The poem even provides a response to the blindness/visionary potential suggested by Herbert in The Borderers:

> …we are laid asleep
> In body, and become a living soul,

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42 Bate uses this description of Wordsworth’s approach to exemplify Romanticism’s contribution to ‘ecopoetics’. In his recent scholarly summary, Seth Reno comments on Bate’s quoted observation in terms of Theodor Adorno’s aesthetic theory of negative dialectics: “‘Tintern Abbey’ is the kind of great artwork that embraces the negative dialectic. The poem continually defers synthesis and reconciliation in favor of dialectical process and accumulation” (190).
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things. (LB 46-50)

Thus the specter of Herbert has transcended into healing, spiritual nourishment provided by receptivity to nature and beauty. Nuss aptly compares Mortimer’s “vision”—his ability to see those ‘general shapes of things,’ which is purchased at the cost of blindness to another type of vision,” (612) with the lines in “Tintern Abbey” that describe vision from “a feeling and a love, / That had no need of a remoter charm, / By thought supplied” (81-81). If loving relationships are developed with nature and intimate friends, love will extend to mankind, though a sense of loss lingers.

In the last stanza of the poem, the poet suddenly addresses his sister Dorothy, who apparently has been with him throughout. But why are we surprised? This sister, who shone like a steadfast light in “We are Seven,” witnesses Wordsworth’s expression of a personal pilgrimage completed. However, Wordsworth is no longer represented as the insistent, distressed narrator in “We are Seven.” He has resumed the position of confident older brother: loving, caring, slightly paternal as he advises her, with the important difference that his empathy and respect for women have come to the forefront of his consciousness. His first referral to her echoes the reassurance of the 23rd Psalm:

For thou are with me, here, upon the banks
Of this fair river—thou, my dearest friend,
My dear, dear friend… (LB 119-21)

His subsequent advice to Dorothy calls to mind another phrase from the 23rd psalm, “I will fear no evil.” He recites the evils that may assault her - rash judgments, the sneers of selfish men, lack of kindness, the dreary intercourse of daily life - with the reminder that “Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her” (126-27), and advises that if Dorothy will tap into the deep impressions that nature has made on her sensibility, she will be strengthened and blessed. His tone is loving (“my dear, dear Friend”), but it also echoes of the paternalistic advisor from “Yew Tree” as he admonishes her to “remember me, / And these my exhortations!” And as with “Yew Tree,” the poet may be speaking to himself as much as to Dorothy or the reader.

Wordsworth’s last lines in “Tintern Abbey” are a prayer for Dorothy should he not be near to help her, and a recognition that “these steep woods and lofty cliffs / And this green pastoral landscape, were to me / More dear, both for themselves, and for thy sake” (160-63).
The sentiment is not just one of love, beauty and peace, but also acknowledgement of his faith in Dorothy, as well as recognition of the trials one must endure in the world. One has the sense that Wordsworth is looking not just back at the past, but also forward to the future. He is ready to re-enter the business of the world again, armed with “the anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, / The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul / Of all my moral being.”

With “Tintern Abbey,” Mortimer is back from the moor—not to surrender himself to a martyr’s escape like the Sailor in Adventures on Salisbury Plain, but ready to re-enter the “sneers of selfish men, and the dreary intercourse of daily life,” with his moral being well anchored. Thus Wordsworth discovered solutions for human suffering in the very character of human beings themselves, through their contact with nature, through loving relationships, and - it surely follows - through poetry such as “Tintern Abbey.”
AFTERWORD

After his settlement with Annette in 1802, Wordsworth maintained contact with Caroline throughout the remainder of his life, visiting her again later in the 19th century.
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**WORKS CONSULTED**


APPENDIX

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS
CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS 1792 - 1798

November 1791: Wordsworth goes to France, forms a friendship with French republican Michel Beaupuy.

December 1792: Wordsworth returns to England

December 15, 1792: Caroline Wordsworth born to Annette Vallon in Orleans, France

January 1793: Louis XVI beheaded

February 1793: William Godwin publishes Political Justice

February 1793: Wordsworth writes but does not publish Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff

February 1793: France and England go to war

Summer 1793: Wordsworth’s walking tour of Portsmouth and Salisbury Plain

September 1793: “Reign of Terror” (Robespierre) begins in France

Autumn 1793: Wordsworth composes Salisbury Plain

1793: Wordsworth visits Tintern Abbey for the first time

1794: Godwin publishes Caleb Williams

July 1794: Robespierre guillotined in France

1795: Wordsworth writes the revision, Adventures on Salisbury Plain

1795: Wordsworth regularly meets with Godwin in London

1795: Wordsworth moves to Racedown with his sister, Dorothy Wordsworth

1796: Wordsworth writes the first version of The Ruined Cottage

1796: Wordsworth writes “The Convict”

1796-7: Wordsworth writes The Borderers

April-May 1797: Wordsworth writes “Yew Tree”

June 1797: Samuel T. Coleridge visits Racedown, and hears The Ruined Cottage and The Borderers

1797: William and Dorothy Wordsworth move to Alfoxden

January 1798: Wordsworth writes The Discharged Soldier

Feb-March 1798: Wordsworth revises The Ruined Cottage

March - May 1798: Wordsworth writes the following Lyrical Ballads poems: “Lines Written a Small Distance from my House,” “Lines Written near Richmond,” “Lines Written in Early Spring,” “The Thorn,” “We are Seven,” “The Mad Mother,” “The Tables
Turned,” “The Last of the Flock,” “Anecdote for Fathers,” “Simon Lee,” “The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman.”

June 1798: Wordsworth writes “Old Man Travelling”

July 1798: Wordsworth writes “Tintern Abbey”

1798: Wordsworth and Coleridge publish *Lyrical Ballads*