1. Wordsworth's Revolution: From The Borderers to The White Doe of Rylstone

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Wordsworth’s Revolution:
From The Borderers to The White Doe of Rylstone

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus, the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action.

—William Shakespeare, Hamlet

In the Preface to Lyrical Ballads (1800), Wordsworth describes what makes his poems different from “the popular Poetry of the day; it is this, that the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling.” His ballads, a genre usually associated with the bold adventures of knights, damsels, and supernatural agents, will be lyrical, that is, nonnarrative and descriptive of emotions rather than events, of inner reactions rather than outer actions. The new emphasis is genuinely revolutionary—how much so can perhaps be registered when one considers the internalization of epic that occurs in The Prelude, the unnamed work referred to by Coleridge as “an unpublished Poem on the Growth and Revolutions of an Individual Mind.”

Revolution, in its specific historical sense, also lies behind Wordsworth’s poetic endeavors. In 1798 Coleridge wrote to Wordsworth, requesting the production of the work that was to become The Prelude: “I wish you would
write a poem [reviving the spirits of those who] in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution have thrown up all hopes of amelioration and given themselves over to [solitude] and the cultivation of the domestic affections.” Yet if the poem Wordsworth finally delivered brings hope to its readers, it does so precisely by suggesting the powerful benefits to be gained by cultivating the domestic affections. Here, as with the other works I will explore, the most important revolutions turn out to be internal ones, like the “turn of sentiment—that might be named / A revolution” experienced by Wordsworth when he discovered that England had declared war on France. Robert Browning’s judgment of “The Lost Leader,” the youthful radical poet who subsequently forsook political action in favor of establishment reactionism, demonstrates the strength of the myth of revolutionary disenchantment coming out of involvements with France.

The nature of Wordsworth’s own involvement remains a mystery. While his presence in France, first on an early walking tour with a Cambridge friend in 1790 and then for a longer stay in both Paris and Orleans for most of 1792, is sufficiently documented, the extent of his active work for revolutionary causes is unclear. Undoubtedly Wordsworth’s friendship with Beaupuy, the man so admiringly represented in The Prelude as one whom “circumstance / Hath called upon to embody his deep sense / In action, give it outwardly a shape” (Prelude IX.407–9), led at least to some impassioned conversation. But for all Wordsworth’s later descriptions of himself as an “active partisan” (Prelude IX.737), his only traceable act of solidarity—A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff (1793), an inflammatory extended apology for regicide—was never published during his lifetime.

Moreover, Wordsworth carefully fostered the mystery of his activities during the revolutionary years by his close editorial control over his past, both in his writing and outside of it. So, for example, the now-infamous affair with Annette Vallon, the royalist Frenchwoman who bore him a child, Caroline, in the heady atmosphere of Orleans in 1792, is translated in his poetry into the narrative of “Julia and Vaudracour” in The Prelude (which he subsequently excised from the autobiographical poem, although he published it separately). The affair remained the well-kept secret of a select few during Wordsworth’s lifetime. Wordsworth’s reticence—even concealment—is of course especially apparent and especially relevant because of the autobiographical nature of much of his work. When an admirer asked him in 1801 to provide an account of his life, he responded with a brief paragraph outlining the various places he had lived, notably
amending his year-long sojourn in revolutionary France to “travel[s] on the Continent.” Then he added a disclaimer: “but in truth my life has been unusually barren of events, and my opinions have grown slowly and, I may say, insensibly.”

Such an organic, even Burkean, model of development accords well with the poetics of the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. But is it true? Had Wordsworth really avoided the dangers of involvement in those “great national events” that produced an unhealthy addiction to plot, a “craving” for “incident” in literary work, or had he rather reacted against an overdose of events? Kenneth Johnston’s recent and adventurous biography, *The Hidden Wordsworth: Poet, Lover, Rebel, Spy*, suggests the latter version of the story, as its title implies. Yet even if one discards Johnston’s theory of youthful sexual indiscretions and belief that the poet acted as a spy for the British government during his 1799 stay in Germany, Wordsworth’s life in the 1790s could hardly be described as uneventful. That “revolution” “in sentiment” mentioned in *The Prelude* resulted from Wordsworth’s actions during a political Revolution, and the depths of his despair back in England must have stemmed in part, as Johnston argues, from his recognition that the declaration of war between England and France would prevent a reunion with his lover and daughter. Wordsworth had known the excitement of event; he is, after all, the author of the paradigmatic description of youthful revolutionary fervor: “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very Heaven!” (*Prelude* X.693–94).

Yet whatever his actions may have been, Wordsworth’s experiences with the French Revolution also anticipate the two plotlines concerning inaction on which this study will concentrate: the failed revolutionary plot (as the Terror set in and Wordsworth’s faith began to falter) and the failed marriage plot (Wordsworth eventually abandoned his attempts to marry Annette—although Johnston is but the most recent and most ardent proponent of the theory that he returned to France in September of 1793 in an effort, aborted by the escalation of the Terror, to “rescue” Annette and their baby). In what follows, rather than pondering any specific actions or inactions Wordsworth may have committed, I shall look at the way in which his sense of guilt about the revolutionary period of his life affected his treatment of action in his writing. But we should note that Wordsworth’s guilt seems to have been as much about what he did not do as what he did do, on both political and personal fronts.

Nowhere is this strange, double-edged quality more apparent than in the fraught handling of action in Wordsworth’s 1796–97 drama *The Borderers* and in his 1807 narrative poem *The White Doe of Rylstone; or, The
Fate of the Nortons. These works were written at the beginning and end of what can be thought of as Wordsworth’s great decade of poetic production, a fact that in itself suggests a connection between their concerns over action and the development of Wordsworth’s poetic talents. While the poems are considered minor in comparison to the greater achievements of the Lyrical Ballads and The Prelude, I believe that their troubled surfaces reveal depths that are concealed by the polished aspects of the more canonical texts. Although neither work is autobiographical (perhaps in part because neither work is autobiographical), both are steeped in an atmosphere of revolutionary involvement and guilt that cannot be divorced from their author’s experiences during the French Revolution. Moreover, in both texts the interest in revolution broadens into a general concern with problems of action, in particular with what Wordsworth thinks of as betrayals into action, and in both this concern has generic consequences, not only for the poem in question, but for Wordsworth’s wider project.11

Wordsworth was himself the first to note the thematic connection between the two works when in 1836 he appended as an epigraph to The White Doe of Rylstone the most famous lines from The Borderers:

Action is transitory, a step, a blow—
The motion of a muscle—this way or that—
’Tis done—and in the after vacancy
We wonder at ourselves like men betray’d
Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark,
And has the nature of infinity.12

I cannot think of six consecutive lines in the collected works that contain as characteristic a resonance. The passage, though not cited by Arnold, has something of the quality of an Arnoldian touchstone. Hazlitt, when recalling The Borderers in writing his 1825 essay on Wordsworth as a “spirit of the age,” quoted it from memory, and Coleridge, as we shall see, also lifted the lines from their context for the purposes of criticism.13 Yet the context is all important. For while the important terms remain the same—action, suffering, the permanent and the transitory, infinity, betrayal, wonder, and the peculiar “after vacancy” that stands at the very center of the quotation—how they relate to one another shifts subtly but crucially by the end of the decade.

When Wordsworth took these words out of the mouth of his youthful antihero, Rivers, and placed them at the head of a very different kind of
work, he implied an authorial continuity—a stable poetic project—that resembles the organically slow, insensible growth of the autobiographical self Wordsworth described to his readers. Again, he kept the revolution well under wraps; “I still stand now by what I said then” is the claim. Of course, the addition represents but one small instance of Wordsworth’s great revisionary scheme, his obsessive reworking of old texts, often with the object of bringing them into accordance with his present lines of thought. But it is an especially revealing example. At stake is the relationship between action and suffering and, more particularly, the relationship between action and consciousness, the self-directed wonder that fills the “after vacancy” of action. Is action necessary for the development of human consciousness, or does suffering suffice? When Geoffrey Hartman wonders whether “self-consciousness and Wordsworth’s lyricism are connected in an intrinsic and more than occasional way,” he asks a version of this question. Wordsworth himself pondered the connection, and as we shall see in what follows, he came up with different answers for different times.

The Borderers

Wordsworth sets The Borderers, his first and only drama, during the unrest of the Barons’ Wars in the north of England in the thirteenth century, when bands of robbers controlled the land. Among these bands is that headed by Mortimer, the hero of Wordsworth’s play. Its antihero, Rivers, tricks the benevolent Mortimer (who had saved his life in events preceding those depicted by Wordsworth) into believing that the blind old Baron Herbert, the father of Mortimer’s beloved Matilda, is not her real father. Rather, Rivers contrives to suggest that Herbert has adopted Matilda with the intention of selling her to the evil Baron Clifford. Mortimer is convinced and, in the absence of ordered government, feels it his duty to enforce justice himself. After much hesitation—mainly due to the confusion generated by the old man’s seeming goodness—he abandons Herbert upon a heath, crucially forgetting to give him his scrip of food. Herbert dies from the ordeal. In the meantime, Rivers reveals his plot to Mortimer. He explains that he had himself been betrayed into the commission of a similar deed in his youth, when he was persuaded by his shipmates to mutiny against their captain and leave him stranded on an island to perish. Only later did his mates inform him that the captain was innocent of the crime with which he had been charged. After this autobiographical
interlude, Mortimer’s band arrives and kills Rivers as punishment for his treachery. Finally, Mortimer resigns his leadership of the band, promising to embrace a life of Cain-like wandering.

The idea of a betrayal into action stands at the center of the plot of *The Borderers* and also at the center of Wordsworth’s relationship to his own political doings. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth tells Coleridge of his romance with Godwinian rationalism during the early years of the Revolution in France:

> Time may come
> When some dramatic story may afford
> Shapes livelier to convey to thee, my Friend,
> What then I learned of truth,
> And the errors into which I was betrayed
> By present objects and by reasoning false. (*Prelude* X.878–83)

Most critics take this as a reference to what will be the Solitary’s tale in *The Excursion* (1814), but Wordsworth’s only truly “dramatic story”—his only play—had already addressed the topic of Wordsworth’s “betrayal” into the error of revolution. While *The Borderers* reads in many ways like a bastardization of Shakespeare’s tragedies and a few other famous works, the startling originality of the play has to do with the character of Rivers. Wordsworth was himself so fascinated by his antihero that he felt compelled to write a kind of apologia for him: the essay “On the Character of Rivers.” The language of betrayal he uses there of Rivers reveals a reason for Wordsworth’s investment: “Let us suppose a young Man of great intellectual powers, yet without any solid principles of genuine benevolence. His master passions are pride and the love of distinction. He has deeply imbibed the spirit of enterprize in a tumultuous age. He goes into the world and is betrayed into a great crime.”

The obvious autobiographical reading of the drama would see Mortimer (the hero facing a moral crisis) as Wordsworth’s stand-in. But Mary Moorman has suggested that the opening lines of the essay on Rivers are self-descriptive. The conflict resolves itself, though, when we recognize that the two characters are versions both of each other and of their poet. The complex nature of Wordsworth’s activity during the 1790s forced him to create not only a “second” but also a third “self” through which to reenact his experiences. This proliferation of selves should come as no surprise from the poet who requires four narrators—the Solitary, the Wanderer, the Pastor, and the Author—to negotiate the autobiographical
terrain of *The Excursion*. But what Charles Rzepka has called “the extended, but hardly suspenseful psychomachy” of the later narrative pales in comparison with the profound self-searching that characterizes *The Borderers*.\(^{21}\)

Wordsworth himself provides us with another clue to the autobiographical impulse behind his play. Many critics have noticed how the Godwinian rhetoric of Rivers’s rationalist creed,

> You have obeyed the only law that wisdom
> Can ever recognize: the immediate law
> Flashed from the light of circumstances
> Upon an independent intellect (III.v.30–33),

turns up again almost unaltered in *The Prelude* in reference to the poet’s own romance with Godwinianism:

> The freedom of the individual mind,
> Which, to the blind restraints of general laws
> Superior, magisterially adopts
> One guide, the light of circumstances, flashed
> Upon an independent intellect. (*Prelude* X.826)

In the Fenwick Note to *The Borderers* (1843), Wordsworth recalls that he wrote the essay on Rivers in part to show the kinds of thoughts that could lead a character like Rivers to act as he does, “but still more to preserve in my distinct remembrance what I had observed of transition in character & the reflections I had been led to make during the time I was a witness of the changes through which the French Revolution had passed.”\(^{22}\) One must ask, whose “transition in character”? Part of the answer must be, I think, Wordsworth’s own.

The burden of the passage from the essay on Rivers, and of *The Borderers*, too, rests on the threat posed by forgetting how to trace the changes in character that occur during a “tumultuous age” marked by “a spirit of enterprize,” a period of what the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* will call “great national events.”\(^{23}\) In other words, such times demand actions that endanger the very idea of a knowably coherent identity. “I cannot paint what then I was,” Wordsworth laments in “Tintern Abbey,” another poem that obliquely retraces his involvements in France.\(^{24}\) But in the essay, we are told how a character who has once been seduced into committing a great sin will discover autobiography as a form of coping mechanism: “in
sudden emergencies when he is called upon by surprise and thrown out of the path of his regular habits, or when dormant associations are awakened tracing the revolutions through which his character has passed, in painting his former self he really is great." It is hard to read the emphasis on that "is" as entirely ironic. The revolution through which Wordsworth passes enables revelations of character. Rivers's autobiographical tirade to Mortimer in IV.ii, in which he shows his disciple how they share a bond in their crimes, may represent the raving of an egomaniac, but it is also proof of a solidly constructed ego, for whom past, present, and future form a coherent picture.

For Wordsworth action almost always takes the form of transgression: just think of the early stealing episodes in *The Prelude* or of poems like "Nutting." Rivers's sense of his own agency connects ineluctably to what he calls a "salient spring of energy," with which he "mounted / From action up to action" (IV.ii.119–21). One is reminded of what Coleridge famously termed Iago's "motiveless malignity." Iago considers virtue to be "a fig," a hindrance to that true freedom of will by which, as he puts it, "'Tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus," and Wordsworth indicates his debt to Shakespeare's archvillain in the essay. But the rhetoric also resembles that of Milton's Satan, who notoriously asserts the connections among sin, agency, and selfhood.

Wordsworth clearly means to portray Rivers as fallen, yet he implies that his loss of innocence may be accompanied by some form of gain. Suggestively, he again echoes Rivers's discourse about the "light of circumstances" flashing upon an "independent intellect" in his description of the operations of the Imagination in the crossing of the Alps passage of *The Prelude*: "in such visitings / Of awful promise, when the light of sense / Goes out in flashes that have shown to us / The invisible world, doth greatness make abode" (*Prelude* VI.535). Sense replaces circumstance, indicating the shift in the paradigm from action to vision, but the point in both passages is the flash of recognition, a recognition of an imaginative power that can exist even within the limiting structures with which we are surrounded. Such recuperation forms the second movement in the Kantian experience of the sublime: after we face up to our inability to comprehend the phenomenal world, we grasp the existence of a noumenal self superior in its freedom to such circumscription. The resemblance between the Godwinian intellect and Wordsworth's hallowed Imagination, the fount of his poetry, supports David Bromwich's claim that Mortimer can reconstruct his own fall, so similar to that of Rivers, as a happy one on the basis of an argument about selfhood. Bromwich posits that because the
fall is his (because it has made Mortimer who he is) and because “he is interested in having a continuous identity,” “a devious logic may bind his self-love to any act he finally chooses to perform.” In other words, “Any act whatever may be supposed partly good for the agent who has come to associate it with himself.”

Bromwich’s argument rests on a sequential reading of the “Action is transitory” passage. Transitory action may be inferior to infinite suffering, but it also causes it. There is an inherent connection between doing and being. When “we wonder at ourselves like men betray’d,” the “after vacancy” of action fills up with self-consciousness. Compare the often-quoted “two consciousnesses” passage from The Prelude:

A tranquilizing spirit presses now
On my corporeal frame, so wide appears
The vacancy between me and those days
Which yet have such self-presence in my mind,
That sometimes when I think of it, I seem
Two consciousnesses, conscious of my self
And of some other being. (Prelude II.27–33)

In these lines, a wider temporal gap takes the place of the “after vacancy” of action, but both passages describe a threat to the concept of continuous identity. Yet it is only because of his ability to recognize the connection between those two seemingly separate consciousnesses that Wordsworth is able to have self-knowledge—hence that strange phrase, “self-presence,” which stands up against the sense of divided consciousness. The thought process resembles Descartes’s central meditation on the wax: precisely because Descartes knows that the wax is one and the same piece of wax, regardless of the change in form over time, he can posit the existence of a coherent self connecting the two observations. Without some change, the implication is, we cannot see what remains the same. Tellingly, Wordsworth goes one step beyond Descartes by suggesting that he does not require the external evidence of some object like the wax but can generate the same sense of identity of the basis of memories of himself.

But the process is not always as tranquil as in this early childhood passage from The Prelude. In “Tintern Abbey,” which returns Wordsworth to the period of his closest involvement with the Revolution, when like Mortimer he was twenty-three and right in the thick of things, Wordsworth needs the memory aid of Dorothy’s presence as a vessel of his former self (in whose voice he may still hear “The language of [his] former
heart” and in whose eyes he can see his “former pleasures”) in order to ensure his sense of continuity. Similarly, Rivers’s investment in Mortimer comes from the younger man’s resemblance to his own earlier self. In the later version of the play, he says as much to Mortimer when he reveals his plot:

Know then that I was urged,
(For other impulse let it pass) was driven,
To seek for sympathy, because I saw
In you a mirror of my youthful self. (1862–65)

But Mortimer has not had the life-changing experience of having been betrayed into action. It is as though this difference between them poses a threat to Rivers’s continuous identity; he needs to watch Mortimer commit a version of his own crime in order to close the gap between his “two consciousnesses,” his past and present selves. “I would have made you equal with myself,” Rivers declares (IV.ii.200). If he can witness Mortimer do the same thing he did and still remain the same person, then by analogy he will be assured of his own coherence.

Yet only great acts, such as those necessitated by periods of revolution, cause a break in identity, what both the Fenwick Note and Mortimer himself (II.i.92–93) call a “transition” in character. Habitual action, on the other hand, ensures our sense of a continuous self. Some lines from “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” a poem composed in early 1798 (just a year after the completion of *The Borderers*), suggest that Wordsworth was thinking about the relationship between large and small actions. In the later poem Wordsworth writes of the benefits brought to his community by the presence of an old beggar:

Where’er the aged Beggar takes his rounds,
The mild necessity of use compels
To acts of love; and habit does the work
Of reason, yet prepares that after joy
Which reason cherishes. And thus the soul,
By that sweet taste of pleasure unpursued
Doth find itself insensibly disposed
To virtue and true goodness. (lines 90–97)

These small, habitual acts of love, because they are repeated over time, stand in contrast with the transitory action portrayed by *The Borderers*. They replace the “work of reason,” the labors of the “independent intel-
lect.” Correspondingly, the “after joy” that results from such deeds markedly opposes what the drama describes as the “after vacancy” of action. In part, the emphasis on habitual action, which we shall see repeated in the works of Arthur Hugh Clough and George Eliot, represents a conservative response to the kind of unconstrained activity characteristic of revolutionary France, a place where, in the words of Mary Wollstonecraft, “vice, or, if you will, evil, is the grand mobile of action.”

While Wordsworth often links action to vice, he also commonly connects virtue to habit. In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth argues that poetry can provide a moral education by fostering habitual contemplation in a process analogous to the acts of charity described by “The Old Cumberland Beggar”: “by the repetition and continuance of this act feelings connected with important subjects will be nourished, till at length, . . . such habits of mind will be produced that by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits, . . . the understanding of the being to whom we address ourselves . . . must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, his taste exalted, and his affections ameliorated.”

Just think of those “little, nameless, unremembered acts / Of kindness and of love,” which in “Tintern Abbey” are said to make up the “best portion of a good man’s life” (lines 34–36). Yet the fact that such acts are “unremembered” should make us pause, given the cult of memory that Wordsworth embraces. Unremembered acts cannot be reflected upon and so cannot provide the basis of self-consciousness. Wordsworth implies as much in the essay on Rivers: “Perhaps there is no cause which has greater weight in preventing the return of bad men to virtue than that good actions, being for the most part in their nature silent and regularly progressive [like the unremembered acts of “Tintern Abbey”], they do not present those sudden results which can afford a sufficient stimulus to a troubled mind.” If one asks, “What needs stimulating?” the only satisfyingly Wordsworthian answer is self-awareness.

*The Borderers* suggests that while uncharacteristic acts, such as those we are betrayed into by revolutionary times, may pose a threat to our sense of a continuous self, they also set off their own healing mechanism: reflection. Macbeth, right after the murder of Duncan, lets out a cry of shame for his act: “To know my deed, ‘twere best not know myself.” Wordsworth reverses this formula; his claim is rather: “To know myself, ‘twere best to know my deed.” The reversal comes with his recognition that action causes suffering, and suffering entails self-consciousness. This is why right after having abandoned Herbert, Mortimer can describe an odd feeling of succumbing to a vast sense of calm: “I could believe that there was here / The only quiet heart
on earth.—In terror, / Remembered terror, there is love and peace” (III.v.2–4). If one capitalizes those t's one can transform Mortimer's statement into Wordsworth's response to his revolutionary involvement.

Yet the emphasis this argument places on the role of action in the production of self-consciousness leads me to another question: If action is so important, where is the action in this play? The center of the drama registers this ambivalence. It portrays a great crime that is hardly a crime at all, not only because Mortimer has been betrayed into it, but also because it is at most a crime of omission, an abandonment rather than a stabbing, a failure to do rather than a doing. Even the omission is twofold; that strange insistence on the forgotten scrip of food—and surely to abandon Herbert even with it would have been to consign him to death—must in part be intended to further narrow the gap between Mortimer's guilt and innocence.36 Consider Mortimer's own analysis of his deed:

A hideous plot, against the soul of man:
It took effect—and yet I baffled it,
In some degree. (2113–15)

Note the passive construction applied to the crime: the plot “took effect.” Mortimer reserves the active voice for his partial baffling of Rivers's plan, presumably referring to his decision to desert Herbert on the heath rather than kill him. Yet Wordsworth knew that crimes of omission are still crimes. In fact, in A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff he made precisely this point in reference to the lack of action on issues of reform that prevailed in English politics:

As a teacher of religion your lordship cannot be ignorant of a class of breaches of duty which may be denominated faults of omission. You profess to give your opinions upon the present turbulent crisis, expressing a wish that they may have some effect in tranquillizing the minds of the people. From your silence respecting the general call for a parliamentary reform, . . . what can be supposed but that you are a determined enemy to the redress of what the people of England call and feel to be grievances?37

Still, Wordsworth himself maintained his silence with regard to reform, not least by withholding the publication of this very pamphlet. Crimes of inaction play as great a role in his story in France as those of action: just think of his abandonment of Annette and Caroline. This failure to act must have stood as one of the psychologically most devastating aspects of his involve-
ment in France and must in part lie behind the crime of abandonment in \textit{The Borderers}.

Many critics have compared \textit{The Borderers} to \textit{Othello}, and Wordsworth (as the essay on Rivers makes clear) has Iago in mind when forming his antihero’s character. But his play also bears traces of reflection on \textit{Hamlet}, and the parallels between Mortimer and the Prince of Denmark, who both believe they must murder to secure justice and do so only after much hesitation, bring to the foreground a new set of concerns. While Rivers’s relation to Iago makes sense of Wordsworth’s position regarding his revolutionary \textit{actions}, Mortimer’s similarity to Hamlet provides a better entrance into an exploration of his guilt about his revolutionary \textit{inactions}. Looked at through the lens of \textit{Hamlet}, \textit{The Borderers} urges audiences to reconsider their understanding of action in a manner that will allow Wordsworth to redefine its nature, with important consequences for his poetic project. Wordsworth’s play hovers between asserting a connection between action and self-consciousness and asserting a connection between inaction and self-consciousness. To say this is to claim that Wordsworth was not resolved in his attitudes toward action when he wrote the play. But it is also to suggest that the process of writing \textit{The Borderers} helped him to formulate the question as one concerning action.

Wordsworth greatly admired \textit{Hamlet}. The poet who claimed “the mind of Man” as his “haunt and the main region of [his] song” said of the tragedy, “There is more mind in Hamlet than in any other play, more knowledge of human nature.” Hamlet’s infamous “conscience”—really his \textit{consciousness}, the quality of mind that here refuses to embrace that which it cannot know—causes the currents of enterprise to “turn awry, / And lose the name of action.” But critics since Coleridge have argued that Hamlet’s self-consciousness is both product and cause of his delay. Coleridge actually quotes the “Action is transitory” passage from \textit{The Borderers} in a lecture on \textit{Hamlet}, after noting the Prince’s “great, enormous, intellectual activity, and a consequent proportionate aversion to real action, with all its symptoms and accompanying qualities.” While Coleridge sees inaction as a consequence of Hamlet’s reflectiveness, we get the soliloquies that give us such a powerful sense of Hamlet’s identity largely because of his inaction. So if we saw previously how action could lead to self-consciousness, the connection of \textit{The Borderers} to \textit{Hamlet} suggests that inaction can foster reflection.

The comparison to Hamlet can also help make sense of the crime at the heart of \textit{The Borderers}. In Wordsworth’s tale, Mortimer’s hesitation at killing Herbert involves conscience in its modern sense:
I cannot do it:
Twice did I spring to grasp his withered throat,
When such a sudden weakness fell on me,
I could have dropped asleep upon his breast. (II.iii.195–98)

The image is startlingly vivid: the enraged Mortimer, about to pounce on the fatherly figure of the old man, collapses into a desire to return to the comforts of infancy. This wish to regress to the natural state of dependence upon the parent supplants the unnatural act of parricide. Faced with the need to serve as Herbert’s judge and executioner, Mortimer desires the escape of sleep. While Hamlet fears his dreams, Mortimer embraces them, almost narcoleptically. Hamlet’s situation is of course different: he is required to kill the unnatural father in order to avenge the natural. Yet each man refuses to act, attempting to avoid the pressures of political accountability. Moreover, for both protagonists, the act of parricide relates to issues of memory—not least because as David Erdman has pointed out in relation to *The Borderers*, it stands in place of regicide (in *Hamlet*, the “parricide” is literally also a regicide). The father represents the past, so for Wordsworth, parricide represents the ultimate crime: a break with one’s own past, a refusal of memory.

A casual allusion in *The Prelude* emphasizes how Wordsworth uses *Hamlet* to demonstrate his personalized sense of history and accountability:

I thought of those September massacres,
Divided from me by a little month,
And felt and touched them. (*Prelude* X.63–66)

That “little month” refers to the small space of time between Hamlet’s father’s death and his mother’s remarriage. Like Hamlet, Wordsworth is horrified by how much can change in a brief period, about how easily the rest of the world can forget. As Hamlet must watch helplessly while Claudius takes from him, in the month following his father’s death, both crown and mother, Wordsworth waits powerlessly on the sidelines during the French Revolution, divided by accidents of time and the fact of his foreignness from the history that rages about him. And like Mortimer, Wordsworth is unable to act, but his very impotence becomes a form of action for which he holds himself liable—he should have done something. Although the danger for Mortimer lies in a temptation to action (that is, to the murder of Herbert), his eventual crime is one of inaction. Incapable of attacking the old man physically, he leaves
Herbert to the elements, abdicating responsibility by declaring him God’s victim, not his own:

Here will I leave him—here—All-seeing God!
Such as he is, and sore perplexed as I am,
I will commit him to this final Ordeal! (1391–93)

Mortimer stands with Hamlet on the border between action and inaction. In this way, he expresses the duality of Wordsworth’s guilt: on the one hand, the complicity in action he feels for having supported the Revolution; on the other, his shame of inaction for not having worked to stop the Terror and for the abandonment of Annette and Caroline.

By making the action that lies at the very heart of his drama a kind of nonaction, Wordsworth, even as he writes The Borderers, has already aligned himself with the inward focus of his later poetry, in which concern for the “moving accident” is replaced by an interest in “silent suffering.” Wordsworth cares as much about inaction—internalized action—as about action, as his play’s well-documented relationship to closet drama (that favorite Romantic genre) indicates. While he seems originally to have intended the play for production, in the 1842 Note about the work, he (rather defensively) insists that “it was first written . . . without any view to its exhibition upon the stage.” Wordsworth’s one drama thus presents a fitting contribution from one who will later disparagingly dispense with “sickly and stupid German Tragedies.”

Charles Lamb argued that the Romantic love of closet drama stemmed from a fear of closure, from a longing for an infinitude that is incommensurable with the transitory nature of action. He described his response to having seen a great performance of a play by Shakespeare in his youth:

It seemed to embody and realize conceptions which had hitherto assumed no distinct shape. But dearly do we pay all our life after for this juvenile pleasure, this sense of distinctness. When the novelty is past, we find to our cost that instead of realizing an idea, we have only materialized and brought down a fine vision to the standard of flesh and blood. We have let go a dream, in quest of an unattainable substance.

Wordsworth expresses the same sense of disappointment upon first seeing Mont Blanc, when he “grieve[s] / To have a soulless image on the eye / Which had usurped upon a living thought” (Prelude VI.453–55). The sublime is incompatible with embodied action, the province of the theater.
Lamb wrote of the characters of Shakespeare (and he might well have had Rivers and Mortimer in mind, too) that they are so much the objects of meditation rather than of interest or curiosity as to their action that while we are reading any of his great criminal characters,—Macbeth, Richard, even Iago,—we think not so much of the crimes which they commit, as of the ambition, the aspiring spirit, the intellectual activity, which prompts them to overleap these moral fences. ... But when we see these things represented the acts which they do are comparatively every thing, their impulses nothing.49

Intellectual activity is what matters, not action. Self-consciousness represents the ultimate human experience, and self-consciousness is an act of mind, not of body.

So the mind can be a center of its own kind of drama—a psychic one. In the nightmare trial sequence from The Prelude, Wordsworth describes his response to his involvements in France as an internalized dialogue in which he plays the roles of accused and judge, defense and prosecution:

Through months, through years, long after the last beat
Of those atrocities . . .
I scarcely had one night of quiet sleep.
Such ghastly visions had I of despair,
And tyranny, and implements of death,
And long orations which in dreams I pleaded
Before unjust tribunals, with a voice
Labouring, a brain confounded, and a sense
Of treachery and desertion in the place
The holiest that I knew of—my own soul.50 (Prelude X.371–72, 374–81)

What he recounts bears some resemblance to the two-in-one of thinking that Hannah Arendt discusses in The Life of the Mind:

Nothing perhaps indicates more strongly that man exists essentially in the plural than that his solitude actualizes his merely being conscious of himself... into a duality during the thinking activity. It is this duality of myself with myself that makes thinking a true activity, in which I am both the one who asks and the one who answers. Thinking can become dialectical and critical because it goes through this questioning and answering process.51
Thinking is a “true activity” because soliloquy is dialogue. Out of this dialogue, both consciousness and conscience develop.\textsuperscript{52} For Wordsworth, the activity often has to do with memory—a conversation takes place between present and past selves—as in “Tintern Abbey” or the “Two consciousnesses” passage of \textit{The Prelude}. Bromwich has remarked that “About the time that he completed his work on the \textit{Lyrical Ballads}, [Wordsworth] began to see that the link between one moment and another in a single mind could have the resonance, and oddly something also of the moral weight, of a revelation between moments in two minds.”\textsuperscript{53} I believe that he realized this even earlier, when he was working on \textit{The Borderers}. In this play, as in \textit{Hamlet}, the dialogue between me and myself—soliloquy—stands behind much of the dramatic dialogue. The conversations between Rivers and Mortimer, Rivers’s “shadow” (V.i.33), are versions of a deeper conversation Wordsworth is having with both past and present selves.

And this conversation has lasting consequences for both Wordsworth’s poetry and his politics. In 1798, Coleridge sent a letter to his brother, concerning his dismissal of politics: “I wish to be a good man & a Christian—but I am no Whig, no Reformist, no Republican.” He had retired to the country “to muse on fundamental & general causes.” Then he added an extraordinary claim:

\begin{quote}
I love fields & woods & mountains with almost a visionary fondness—and because I have found benevolence & quietness growing within me as that fondness [has] increased, therefore I should wish to be the means of implanting it in others—& to destroy the bad passions not by combating them, but by keeping them in \textit{inaction}.\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

Coleridge sounds much more like Wordsworth than himself here. The letter testifies to his friend’s remarkable powers of influence. Yet inaction can be a public virtue as well as a private one—in fact, it can be public by virtue of its privacy, by virtue of its independence. Consider Hannah Arendt’s thoughts, arising out of the ashes of a Holocaust so much more devastating than the Reign of Terror. She sees thinking as being able to “prevent catastrophes” caused by the bureaucratization of cruelty by providing us with a stopping point. Paradoxically, thought becomes a form of action precisely in its tendency to oppose action:

\begin{quote}
When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join in is conspicuous and thereby becomes \textit{a kind of action}. In
such emergencies, it turns out that the purging component of thinking... is political by implication.55

For Wordsworth, though, thinking has as much to do with suffering as with action. When Rivers reveals his plot to Mortimer, he tells him that his sin will be his salvation: “Enough is done to save you from the curse / Of living without knowledge that you live. / You will be taught to think” (IV.ii.204–6). The later version of the play replaces the final line quoted with “Now you are suffering,” as though thought and suffering were equivalent processes. In the Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth reflects on the symbiotic relationship between thought and feeling: “our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of our past feelings.”56 Emotions (and suffering in particular), Wordsworth seems to want to argue, can be composed of ideas as forceful—as difficult and worthy of consideration—as those of any “independent intellect.” It is a belief worth keeping in mind when we consider his attitude toward characters like Johnny, the idiot boy, or Margaret, or the Leech Gatherer. And as Lionel Trilling points out, “if between sentiments and ideas there is a natural connection so close as to amount to a kind of identity, then the connection between literature and politics will be seen as a very immediate one.”57 The idea must have struck Wordsworth, also.

Yet while Wordsworth’s interest in internalization in The Borderers seems to suggest the moral possibilities of inaction and suffering in a time of revolutionary fervor, at the same time he is critical of such a stance. Because Mortimer does nothing, he kills a good man. Wordsworth’s confusion yields inevitable frustration. If we are not to act, what are we to do? Unlike Coleridge or Keats or Shelley, Wordsworth rarely strikes a convincingly sustained note of self-criticism. Usually, moments of doubt are quickly followed upon by compensatory recognition, as in “Resolution and Independence”; often, one gets the sense that Wordsworth is secretly proud of what he presents as a flaw. But in The Borderers, the critique feels very real, a fact that stands behind the genuine force of the work. Wordsworth articulates his frustration through Mortimer’s awareness of the apparent impotence of verbal appeals—like, for example, those made by poetry:

Why may we speak these things, and do no more,  
Why should a thrust of the arm have such a power,  
And words that tell these things be heard in vain? (2237–39)
Hence Mortimer’s envy of the worm

that, underneath a stone whose weight
Would crush the lion’s paw with mortal anguish,
Doth lodge, and feed, and coil, and sleep, in safety. (1794–96)

The intensity of Mortimer’s desire to be outside of the political fray must have some source in Wordsworth’s experiences in France. Note again the longing that Mortimer expresses for sleep, the ultimate in (living) physical inactivity.

At the end of *The Borderers*, when Rivers expresses his wish to go with Mortimer to Palestine, where they will find a less “paltry field for enterprise” (2251), Mortimer proves that he has learned his lesson:

Men are there, millions, Rivers,

Who with bare hands would have plucked out thy heart

And flung it to the dogs: but I am raised

Above, or sunk below, all further sense

Of provocation. (2260–64)

This is not simply Christian quietism, a “turn the other cheek” mentality. Mortimer now recognizes his capacity for action, but he also knows his duty: “there lies not now / Within the compass of a mortal thought, / A deed that I would shrink from;—but to endure, / That is my destiny” (2267–70). The field of action no longer appeals to him, although Mortimer seems unsure whether the change in him is a noble one—whether he has been “raised above” action or has “sunk below” it—as I have argued that Wordsworth is unsure in this play as to whether action or inaction is the best route toward self-consciousness. The play concludes appropriately with a final bow and flourish to *Hamlet*. Mortimer calls on Lacy, his Horatio, to “Raise on that dreary Waste a monument / That may record my story” (2294–95). Words take over from deeds as the curtain falls on the scene. It is as though Wordsworth were fulfilling the prophesy of the epigraph from Pope that he appended to his play:

Of human actions reason though you can,

It may be reason, but it is not man;

His principle of action once explore,

That instant ’tis his principle no more.”

Having explored the principle of action, Wordsworth abandons it.
The White Doe of Rylstone; or, The Fate of the Nortons

If The Borderers allows for two mutually exclusive and yet coexistent analyses of the relationship between action and consciousness, The White Doe of Rylstone also incorporates two perspectives on issues of action, indicated already by the titles Wordsworth offers for his poem. The preferred title suggests a lyrical treatment similar to “Hart-leap Well,” another poem by Wordsworth about a place in which a deer is the genius loci. But the alternative title hints at the action-filled ballad “The Rising in the North” that served as Wordsworth’s source for his tale, which he notably (given the epic intents of his poem) considers to be “much better than Virgil had for his Aeneid.” The split parallels the narrative’s two strands, one of which stays with Emily (whom the story associates with the Doe) in her sufferings at home, while the other follows her brother Francis’s participation in the revolt that brings on his family’s fate. Wordsworth’s ordering of his titles should be taken as a normative judgment about the relative importance and success of both the two plot lines and the kinds of action—or inaction—they portray.

Like The Borderers, The White Doe takes on the theme of revolution by representing a conflict far in the past, in this case the Catholic uprising against the Protestant Queen Elizabeth. Again, the locale is northern, and again we are presented with two main characters—here a brother and sister—who are versions not only of one another but also (as we shall see) of their poet. The opening canto of the poem provides a frame to which Wordsworth never returns that introduces the reader to the Doe and her environment in Bolton Priory and describes, in the manner of “The Thorn,” a series of interpretations of her presence offered by a collection of churchgoers. The narrator then promises an accurate interpretation, and the tale proper commences with a description of Emily, the sole daughter of the Norton household, who has been forced against her religious conscience to embroider a banner for the Nortons to take into battle. While her father and most of her brothers are Catholic, Emily, like Francis and their deceased mother, is Protestant. Francis also faces a crisis of conscience. At first he refuses to join his father and brothers in the revolt, trying instead to persuade Norton of the folly of his cause. But when this attempt proves unsuccessful, he succumbs to his sense of loyalty to family and decides to follow them into battle. He insists, however, that Emily stay at home, despite her desire to join the rest of her family; “Her duty is to stand and wait,” Francis declares, invoking Milton’s reflection that “They also serve who only stand and wait.”
The remaining five cantos alternate loosely between relating the story as Francis experiences it on the field of battle and as Emily hears it told back in Rylstone-hall by an old man whom she sends out as scout. Francis finds that his family has been imprisoned. His father makes of him one request: that he take from the enemy the banner that Emily had embroidered and return it to Bolton Priory. While Francis rescues the banner, he is killed before he can fulfill his mission. The final canto tells Emily's response to the tragedy. Initially, she succumbs to complete despair and—like Mortimer—"wander[s], long and far" (1630). Eventually Emily returns to the Priory, where she reencounters the White Doe. The Doe becomes her constant companion, giving her a renewed feeling of kinship with the world, to which she is again "tied" until her death (1883). The poem concludes by describing the Doe's loyal vigilance over Emily's grave.

As readers have argued from the start, Wordsworth ran into problems balancing the two strands of his narrative. In the initial version of the poem, Emily's role seems to have been much more limited in the opening cantos. For Coleridge, advising his friend in 1808 on the draft he had been sent, the imbalance was linked to what he called "a disproportion of the Accidents to the spiritual Incidents" in the work; in other words, Wordsworth's interest in the "filial Heroism" of Francis and his brothers was too divorced from the almost "separate (& doubtless most exquisit Poem) wholly of [Emily]." While Coleridge's complaint about disproportion in the poem targets its lack of outward action (what he calls "Accidents"), he seems nevertheless to prefer Emily's lyrical, "spiritual" portion of the narrative. Compare Geoffrey Hartman's assessment of Coleridge's comment: "Coleridge saw at once that there were really two stories: the ballad of Emily (almost totally Wordsworth's own) and the ballad of the revolt (based on historical tradition)." Both Coleridge and Hartman imply that there is something un-Wordsworthian about Francis's story. In part, in what follows, I am trying to revise this estimation of especially that latter "part" of the poem by suggesting that in *The White Doe of Rylstone*, we have in fact not two but three very Wordsworthian narratives (adding the story of the Doe herself, with whom the poem begins and ends): the first, of Wordsworth of the period of the French Revolution, as he actually had been; the second, of Wordsworth as he wished to be known, as he came to mythologize himself; and the third, of Wordsworth as he would strive (almost incomprehensibly) to become.

An earlier letter to Coleridge suggests Wordsworth would have been prepared for his friend's objection:
I also told Lamb that I did not think the Poem could ever be popular . . . because the main catastrophe was not a material but an intellectual one; I said to him further that it could not be popular because some of the principal objects and agents, such as the Banner and the Doe, produced their influences and effects not by powers naturally inherent in them, but such as they were endued with by the Imagination of the human minds on whom they operated.65

In both of these points, Wordsworth calls attention to his poem's interest in the inner life—the intellectual, the imaginative—rather than its outward manifestations. In this, it represents a narrative parallel to the closet drama. Note how no mention is made at this point of his human actors. Instead, Wordsworth writes first of two things at the center of the narrative that are important not because of their material nature but because of their effect on the subjects who encounter them.66 Moreover, Wordsworth describes the banner and the Doe as not just objects, but also “agents,” as though the agency of the people in his tale had been displaced onto them.

This choice of words makes sense, as Wordsworth recognized that the problem with his poem was one of action. He continues his letter:

further, that the principle of action in all the characters, as in the Old Man, and his Sons, and Francis, . . . was throughout imaginative; and that all action (save the main traditionary tragedy), i.e., all the action proceeding from the will of the chief agents, was fine-spun and inobtrusive, consonant in this to the principle from which it flowed, and in harmony with the shadowy influence of the Doe, by whom the poem is introduced, and in whom it ends.67

In calling his principle of action “imaginative” and his action “fine-spun and inobtrusive,” Wordsworth suggests that the Doe, in her very ghostliness, represents the principle of action expressed by the narrative as a whole. In part, Wordsworth wanted to distinguish the action of the poem from the action of traditional ballads—his own ballads are lyrical. As a reviewer in The Eclectic put it, in terms remarkably similar to Wordsworth’s description of his work, the reader expects “some busy narrative of lofty adventure, such as Walter Scott’s tales had led us to associate with the metre,” but instead is “forced to stand in Rylstone Church-yard and look all the while at a White Doe, and listen all the while to a rhapsody . . . upon its whiteness, and brightness, and famousness, and holiness.”68 In other words, the poem forces us to assume
Emily's position in regard to its events; like hers, our duty is to stand and wait—and think.

So when in 1843, in the Fenwick Note to the poem, Wordsworth reflected back on his work, his comments contain a certain ambiguity. “Everything that is attempted by the principal personages in ‘The White Doe’ fails, so far as its object is external and substantial,” he admitted, but “So far as it is moral and spiritual it succeeds.” On the one hand, Wordsworth is giving us an assessment of his poem as a literary work: like Coleridge, he seems to have thought he had succeeded with Emily’s plot but failed with that of the Norton uprising. But on the other hand, the passage can be read as an indictment of outward action in the world: “moral” in this analysis is the opposite of “external,” in the same way that “spiritual” obviously stands in contrast with “substantial.” So attempts at external acts will necessarily fail, because the structure of action contains inherent flaws. Consider, for example, the bind in which the narrative places Francis: he must betray either his family or his God; anything he does will involve him in sin.

Wordsworth’s remark calls to mind an observation from The Convention of Cintra (1808) (ironically, a political pamphlet arguing for English activism in fighting French oppression of the Spanish): “The true sorrow of humanity consists in this;—not that the mind of man fails; but that the course and demands of action and of life so rarely correspond with the dignity and intensity of human desires.” Both passages point to the necessary failure of action in comparison to possible successes in the mind of man. Action inadequately represents the mind, just as Wordsworth’s poem inadequately represents action. Thus when in 1836 Wordsworth declared that The White Doe was “in conception, the highest work he had ever produced,” he was really arguing for its achievement in the only realm in which genuine success is possible: the mind. As Hamlet’s Player King declares, “Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own.”

In the Fenwick Note, Wordsworth related his success in the poem to its interest in the will rather than action: “The mere physical action was all unsuccessful; but the true action of the poem was spiritual—the subduing of the will and all inferior passion, to the perfect purifying and spiritualizing of the intellectual nature.” The subduing of the will is the subject of Wordsworth’s great “Ode to Duty” (composed 1804–7), which resonates deeply in Wordsworth’s treatment of Emily, as we shall see. But the comment also recalls the sonnet Advertisement to The White Doe, added in 1820, only to be removed in 1827. The sonnet begins:
Wordsworth somewhat counters this view in the rest of the sonnet, where he discourses on the healing powers of Imagination and Faith that are so central to his narrative. But in 1832, he replaced the prefatory poem with the lines from *The Borderers* (followed immediately by their own parallel religious appendix, describing the solace for suffering to be found by “toiling” with “patient thought” or being “wafted” on “wings of prayer”). I repeat them here for comparison:

Action is transitory—a step, a blow,
The motion of a muscle—this way or that—
’Tis done; & in the after-vacancy
We wonder at ourselves like men betrayed:
Suffering is permanent obscure & dark,
And has the nature of infinity. (p. 77)

The betrayal of action replaces that of hope, the transience of action stands in for that of joy, and the persecution of remembrance gives way to wonder at the after-vacancy of action.

Yet action differs from volition by its externality, by, to be precise, “the motion of a muscle.” Only in a narrative in which the will is allowed so little outlet in action can these passages be substituted for one another without a shift in meaning; it is as though Wordsworth—and the poem as a whole—forces volition and action to be equated: to will something (or even to hope for it) is as much as to do it. To say this is to claim that *The White Doe* works to push action off its narrative surface by internalizing it. I have argued for a sequential reading of the above passage: action is transitory, but it causes permanent suffering, and hence self-consciousness. I have also shown how the role of inaction in *The Borderers* complicates the connection between action and self-consciousness by suggesting that an act of omission can also generate reflection. But now, I shall demonstrate that in *The White Doe of Rylstone*, Wordsworth attempts to do away with the need for action altogether—just as he kills off the Norton men, including even the Mortimer-like Francis—and in the process rewrites his own history of involvement with the Revolution. Action is transitory and suffering permanent. Why then act at all?
If one were to search for a real proponent of action in Wordsworth’s *White Doe of Rylstone*, it would be found in old Norton, a figure of patriarchal heroism. Willard Spiegelman has argued that “thematically, the poem concerns types of heroic behavior, one active, the other passive, and refuses to acknowledge the superiority of either.” But Norton (whom Spiegelman properly takes to be the work’s advocate of action) seems to represent the impossibly simple, and therefore dangerously outmoded, virtue of a past era, and his bold action leads his family to its disastrous fate, the “traditional tragedy” of which Wordsworth wrote. Moreover, from the perspective of the poem, his Catholicism links his virtue inseparably to superstition. So Wordsworth lacks interest in Norton; his real concern is reserved for the comparison between the forms of action—or, rather, inaction—proposed by Francis and Emily, the poem’s two protagonists.

The first thing to notice is just how similar the state of affairs in the poem is to that Wordsworth faced during the French Revolution. Consider Old Norton’s remarks about the failure of the revolt:

Might this our enterprise have sped,
Change wide and deep the Land had seen,
A renovation from the dead,
A spring-tide of immortal green. (1276–79)

Such utopian hope was characteristic of France in the early 1790s, as experienced by the young Wordsworth. Yet Wordsworth’s position soon became complicated by conflicting loyalties. In a scenario represented in *The White Doe* by the split in the Norton family’s religious affiliations, Wordsworth’s republican beliefs stood in opposition to those of his royalist lover, who was increasingly endangered as the Terror progressed. Moreover, Wordsworth’s loyalty to France alienated him from his fellow citizens upon his return to England, as *The Prelude* movingly recounts. Tempestuous times sever the organic self from its well-rooted past:

I, who with the breeze
Had played, a green leaf on the blessèd tree
Of my belovèd country, nor had wished
For happier fortune than to wither there,
Now from my pleasant station was cut off
And tossed about in whirlwinds. (*Prelude* X.254)
Francis suffers just such alienation from his family and northern country-men. They label him a “coward” (928) for standing by his beliefs and avoiding the battle. And his religious brethren offer no alternative community. One recalls how in *The Borderers* Herbert had branded Mortimer a “wild Freebooter,” one who “upon the borders of the Tweed, / Doth prey alike on two distracted countries, / Traitor to both” (207, 208–10). Francis soon discovers that Elizabeth’s soldiers despise him for his disloyalty to his family:

*He did not arm, he walked aloof!*

*For why?—to save his Father’s Land;*

*Worst Traitor of them all is he,*

*A Traitor dark and cowardly! (1482–85)*

The sense of “treachery and desertion” (*Prelude* X.380) affects both Wordsworth and Francis strongly as they find themselves taking sides in a struggle against their compatriots.

So just as Wordsworth sits silently in church “like an uninvited guest . . . / Whom no one owned” (*Prelude* X.273–74), surrounded by his fellow Englishmen but feeling only more strongly for that the divide between him and them, Francis watches alone from above the field of battle, like

*One*

*With unparticipated gaze;*

*Who ’mong these thousands friend hath none,*

*And treads in solitary ways. (760–63)*

The idea of “unparticipated gaze”—marvelous phrase—hints at the curse of spectatorship that Wordsworth must have experienced while witnessing the whirlwind of revolutionary activity surrounding him. It also calls to mind what William Jewett has described in relationship to *The Borderers* as “the failure of the specular mechanism of moral discourse”—that is, the distinction between sympathetic spectatorship and action.8 Or as David Marshall puts it, Wordsworth’s play “insists that the eyewitnesses of its tragedy acknowledge their roles as eyewitnesses: in acting the role of an eyewitness who cannot cross the border of the stage and leave the silence and inaction, the audience enters the scene of the crime that the theater itself compulsively returns to and repeats night after night.”79 Wordsworth exhibits the compulsion of repetition in his work. He attempts to compensate for his own “inaction” by filling the “silence” with his obsessively
recurring memories. When he places Francis alone atop that hillside, gazing down upon the battle that rages below him, he is reliving the experience of his own Revolution.

Given that both Mortimer and Francis resemble Wordsworth, it should come as no surprise they also resemble one another. The connection between Wordsworth and his two heroes is hinted at by the fact that Francis is almost able to persuade one of his brothers, suggestively named Marmaduke—the name Wordsworth gives to Mortimer in the revised version of *The Borderers*—of the hopelessness of the Nortons’ cause. The “pensive” Marmaduke, who of all the Norton men is most like Francis, seems at first to be “yielding inwardly” to his brother’s arguments (495). The resemblance appears most distinctly, though, in the description of Francis’s chief action in the drama: his retrieval of the banner. With “a look of calm command,” Francis takes the banner from a soldier’s hand. But it is not until later that he realizes his deed:

He marked not, heard not as he fled;  
All but the suffering heart was dead  
For him abandoned to blank awe,  
To vacancy, and horror strong:  
And the first object which he saw,  
With conscious sight, as he swept along—  
It was the banner in his hand!  
He felt—and made a sudden stand.

He looked about like one betrayed:  
What hath he done? (p. 129)80

Once again, the by-now-familiar collection of terms: the vacancy, the blank awe, the suffering, and, above all, the betrayal into action. Somewhere between unconsciously being swept along and consciously seeing the banner in his hand (the source and locus of action), Francis has shared Mortimer’s experience in *The Borderers*. Wordsworth has compressed the crisis of action explored by his earlier work into a few lines, and his decision to annex the corresponding lines from the play to this new poem shows his conscious recognition of the connection between the texts.

Like Mortimer’s forgetting of Herbert’s scrip of food, Francis’s “crime”—if in fact crime it be—is involuntary. And in a way, this excuses it. Given that his loyalties are divided and that his duties to family and to
his religion are irreconcilable, anything he could do would have to go against his conscience. Again, we can see how Wordsworth's revolutionary experiences would have made him acutely aware of this difficulty. But to do nothing would be a choice in itself, as Wordsworth would have recognized. Wordsworth "saves" Francis by letting him act involuntarily. By dividing action from intention, Francis can remain in some sense "true" to both sets of responsibilities. Appropriately, he responds with his acts of body to the demands of his father, the poem's chief advocate of action, and with his intentions to his religion, the internally driven Protestantism.

Wordsworth had already emphasized the involuntary nature of Francis's actions at an earlier point in the text—as in *The Borderers*, it becomes clear that we are witnessing a tragedy of repetition. A remarkable sequence shows just how complicated the path from intention to action can be and demonstrates how the conflict Francis faces tears him apart, body and soul. Wordsworth tells us how Francis "unknowingly" grabs a lance to himself only seconds before declaring his inability to join his father and brothers: "With theirs my efforts cannot blend, / I cannot for such cause contend" (511–12). But pulled by love for his family, he revises his position by drawing on the distinction between will and deed: "Their aims I utterly forswear; / But I in body will be there" (513–14). Only after declaring his intention to follow his family with "an empty hand" (519) does he notice his hold on the lance. Immediately, he throws the weapon away: "Spurned it, like something that would stand / Between him and the pure intent / Of love on which his soul is bent" (522–24).

Both passage and poem demonstrate that pure intent and action can never coincide, precisely because intentions necessarily become muddied in the impure medium of the world; "the course and demands of action and of life so rarely correspond with the dignity and intensity of human desires" (as Wordsworth noted in *The Convention of Cintra*). Action fails to represent intent. So we need some better source for the self than in deeds—something more essential to it, less liable to the corruption that comes from external circumstances. Robert Langbaum makes this point in relation to *The Borderers* when he notes that although Rivers and Mortimer "do" the same thing, our moral judgment of them differs: "The difference depends not on what the characters *do* but on what they *are.*" Or consider Kant's observation: "even the strictest examination can never lead us entirely behind the secret incentives, for, when moral worth is in question, it is not a matter of actions which one sees but of their inner principles which one does not see." For Kant, the problem of recognizing moral worth is rendered almost impossible because of the difficulty in see-
ing behind the mechanism of action. Real worth lies veiled behind the accidents of the phenomenal world. The incompatibility of ends—like Francis’s desire to maintain loyalty to both his religion and his family—further obscures our ability to see character through action. Whether or not he joins in the battle, his actions will conceal an essential aspect of his character.

Hence the uneasy split we see in Francis between his active Norton self and his willing Protestant self. But the division between action and intention, while it rescues Francis from the dilemma in which he finds himself, proves costly. After retrieving the banner from the enemy, Francis is left wondering: “How has the Banner clung so fast / To a palsied and unconscious hand” (p. 130)? As in The Borderers, a sense of self-consciousness develops out of the wonder: “No choice is left, the deed is mine—” (1448). His act is constitutive of his self—it is his. But divorced from intention, it also creates a kind of emptiness in Francis, a loss of agency: “No choice is left.” Instead of acting for himself, Francis seems to be providing the body for the enactment of the wishes of his dead relatives. When earlier Francis had unconsciously grasped hold of the lance, he had simultaneously remarked (twice) on the departure of his father and brothers: “Gone are they” (459, 466). Now, as if to emphasize the parallels between the two moments of unconscious action, Wordsworth repeats the inverted word order. Francis turns from his admission of responsibility for his act, “the deed is mine—,” immediately to his next task, “Dead are they, dead!—and I will go” (1449). With his family “gone” in a deeper sense, Francis must “go” himself. And the odd slippage of vowel sounds between deed and dead proves prophetic. Having already relinquished his will, he now must relinquish his body; having done, he now must die. In his final act, appropriately committed “instinctively” (1505)—that is, once again, without conscious volition—Francis seizes a lance from a pikeman who has advanced to regain the banner only to be brought down in the general onslaught.

I want to suggest that in killing Francis, Wordsworth attempts to lay to rest the ghost of his revolutionary self and all that self’s involvements, however ambivalent, with the world of action. In place of that self he offers us another, revised version of who he was during the last decade of the eighteenth century: Emily. This might seem a curious claim, but we have seen already how closely Wordsworth affiliated himself with the poetics of her strand of The White Doe. The “passive stillness” (1090) she displays should be compared to the “wise passiveness” Wordsworth argues for in “Expostulation and Reply.” Moreover, for anyone acquainted with
the odd sense of removal from his fellow men so characteristic of much of Wordsworth’s mature poetry, his description of Emily’s self-containment should resonate strongly:

Her soul doth in itself stand fast,
Sustained by memory of the past
And strength of Reason; held above
The infirmities of mortal love;
Undaunted, lofty, calm and stable,
And awfully impenetrable. (1642–47)

Wordsworth shares his heroine’s capacity for radical disinterestedness and her tendency to retreat into memory. Like Emily, he has been “taught to feel, perhaps too much, / The self-sufficing power of Solitude” (Prelude II.78–79). Self-sufficiency puts, after all, a premium on the very selfhood that has been so threatened by the turmoil of revolution.

The connections between Emily’s narrative and the “Ode to Duty,” a poem so clearly written in Wordsworth’s own voice and completed at roughly the same time he wrote The White Doe, emphasize the link between the author and his creation. In the dedicatory poem to The White Doe, Wordsworth compares Emily’s story to that of Spenser’s Una; both tell “Of female patience winning firm repose” (p. 50). But in the Ode, in “long[ing] for a repose which ever is the same,” Wordsworth proves his own desire for such patience. In lines later excluded from the published poem, he puns on the meaning of his Christian name: “Denial and restraint I prize / No farther than they breed a second Will more wise”—wise, that is, in passiveness. With Emily, as with Dorothy in “Tintern Abbey,” the vessel for Wordsworth’s second self turns out to be female, and a sister. In “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth depicted Dorothy as possessing an animal-like innocence curiously like that of the Doe, who seems to serve in the final canto of the work, like Dorothy in the earlier poem, as a vessel for memories—“This lovely Chronicler of things / Long past, delights and sorrowings” (1694–95). In contrast, Emily’s womanhood does not detract from her rationality. Furthermore, her gender constrains her action in a fashion that saves her from the kind of the dilemmas in which Francis finds himself embroiled; her place cannot be on the battlefield with her brothers. So in choosing a female self, Wordsworth helps distance himself from his revolutionary actions and excuse his revolutionary inactions. Because “Her duty is to stand and wait,” Emily can reflect on the horrible events occurring around her without being implicated in them. Instead, she can focus on her suffering and the suppression of her will to act.
In the “Ode to Duty,” Wordsworth quotes Raphael’s injunction to Adam to be “lowly wise.” Milton’s influence is also pervasive in *The White Doe*, in spite of the Dedication’s reference to Spenser. And this makes sense if we consider that Wordsworth was thinking about his revolutionary experiences. Milton’s belief that “They also serve who only stand and wait” can be read to reflect and anticipate his own complicated relationship to political activity during a period of civil war and unrest. Emily’s heroism exhibits Miltonic ideals of restraint and denial, of resistance to the temptation of action. And like Milton, Wordsworth believes that such heroism can be figured as epic. In fact, in the Fenwick Note he quotes from Milton’s Invocation to book IX of *Paradise Lost* when referring to the superiority of mental struggle like Emily’s to the bodily battles that make up standard epic fare: “How insignificant a thing, for example, does personal prowess appear compared with the fortitude of patience and heroic martyrdom.” Wordsworth begins his epic quest of self-exploration, *The Prelude*, by alluding to the closing lines of *Paradise Lost*: “The earth is all before me” (*Prelude* I.17), but Emily’s epic more closely resembles Milton’s greatest poem of inaction: *Paradise Regained*. Geoffrey Hartman compares the “triumph of privacy” in *The White Doe* to Christ’s at the end of Milton’s poem. Like Christ, Emily must repeatedly resist temptations—“Ah tempt me not!” (1104)—first to act, by joining her brothers, and finally, shockingly, to hope for their well-being (recall how the Son must avoid even the temptation to charity). As Evan Radcliffe has shown, her suffering—and Wordsworth frequently refers to her as “the Sufferer” (1024, 1579, 1721)—emphasizes the degree to which her role should be perceived as an “imitatio Christi.”

Yet Emily does do something: she embroiders the banner. Like Wordsworth, she is an artist. Wordsworth actually invokes Miltonic creation (“Thou from the first / Wast present, and with mighty wings out-spread / Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss / And mad’st it pregnant”) in Old Norton’s representation of his daughter at work:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{A maid o’er whom the blessed Dove} \\
\text{Vouchsafed in gentleness to brood} \\
\text{While she the holy work pursued. (673–75)}
\end{align*}
\]

In implicitly comparing the banner to the poem on which so much of his own epic writing is based, he also compares Emily’s art to his own.

But Emily’s work also parallels the more overt deed of her brother in rescuing the banner. Like Francis, she acts out of loyalty to her family, not from
internal conviction. The will behind her deed comes from her father: “She did in passiveness obey, / But her Faith leaned another way” (876–77). Her completion of the task set her is subjected to narrative criticism; we are told she fulfills her father’s “headstrong will” “Too perfectly,” as though she should have indicated her resistance more forcefully (353–54). Yet in a way, this resistance is encoded in the banner itself. As we shall see, “the banner of battle”91 becomes a standard emblem for writers who wish to resurrect the possibility of heroic action or lament its passing. But the symbolism of Emily’s banner is much more mixed. In another example of the way Wordsworth links Emily to Christ, the banner’s embroidered picture—the five wounds of Christ—represents the Passion. The OED’s second definition for passion is “The being passive.” Wordsworth’s choice of image confuses the symbolic value of the banner by making it combine a subject closely affiliated with a suffering passivity with an object that signifies military action. In a way, then, the banner can be aligned more properly with Francis, who, like it, is caught between alternate impulses to action and inaction, than with the other Norton men, who stand firmly in the camp of action. Hence the graphic mingling in death of Francis’s blood with that of Christ’s wounds on the banner; as Martin Price points out, “They are not stained with Francis’s blood but ‘tinged more deeply,’” as though to suggest a reciprocal ministering of a sacrament.92

Yet the conflation between active and passive significations of the banner need not indicate in Emily, as it does in relation to Francis, the presence of a lasting internal conflict. In fact, Wordsworth intends us to see a more positive paradox in Emily’s passivity, which, he wishes us to feel, is very much active. In the April 1808 letter to Coleridge, he told his friend that Emily “is intended to be honoured and loved for what she endures, and the manner in which she endures it; accomplishing a conquest over her own sorrows.”93 Conquest implies activity. As Radcliffe puts it, her resignation “appears as a willed choice, not as an abdication of will and choice”; recall how Wordsworth, in the “Ode to Duty” declares “That [his] submissive-ness was choice.” Wordsworth argues for a connection between passion and action in his “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface” (1815):

Passion, it must be observed, is derived from a word which signifies, suffering: but the connection which suffering has with effort, with exertion, and action, is immediate and inseparable. . . . To be moved . . . by a passion, is to be excited, often to external, and always to internal effort; whether for the continuance and strengthening of the passion, or for its suppression.”94 (original emphasis)
In Emily's case, her passion leads to an internal effort of suppression, as we have seen, and—after some years of very Wordsworthian wandering—yields the reward of her “lofty, calm, and stable, / And awfully impenetrable” consciousness. Emily's more resolute form of inaction, which finds outlet only in artistic (as opposed to bodily) deeds, allows her to survive intact the revolution that brought Francis to his death. Wordsworth disassociates himself from the kinds of autobiographical conflicts he presented through characters such as Rivers, Mortimer, and Francis, while Emily becomes the true representative of the poet's past: a revised “second self” who like her author has lived a life that “has been unusually barren of events.”

And her conquest proves to have generic ramifications. Wordsworth defended Emily's actionless story in the 1808 letter to Coleridge:

> When it is considered what has already been executed in Poetry, strange that a man cannot perceive . . . that this is the time when a man of genius may honourably take a station upon different ground. If he is to be a Dramatist, let him crowd his scene with gross and visible action; but if a narrative Poet, if the Poet is to be predominant over the Dramatist,—then let him see if there are no victories in the world of spirit, no changes, no commotions, no revolutions there, no fluxes and refluxes of the thoughts which may be made interesting by modest combination with the stiller actions of the bodily frame, or with the gentler movements and milder appearances of society and social intercourse, or the still more mild and gentle solicitations of irrational and inanimate nature.

Wordsworth's Revolution is finally completed. Gone are the days of flirtation with action, of forays into the dramatic; he has chosen the color of his flag, and it is to be white, like the Doe after whom he entitles his poem. From now on, his struggles, like Emily's, will take place in the world of spirit. Yet the letter suggests a greater revolution already set into play, for in those “gentler movements and milder appearances of society and social intercourse,” one can glimpse an opening onto a new domain: the world of the novel.

This is the world to which I wish to travel, although not before exploring a darkened passageway leading up to it: that inhabited by Arthur Hugh Clough and described in his “novel-in-verse,” *Amours de Voyage*. It is
important to recognize, though, that for all the usefulness of his ideas to the Victorian novelists, for all his influence upon them, Wordsworth has little of their everyday familiarity. If we are to see in Emily Wordsworth’s revisionist history of his revolutionary self, then the Doe herself surely must represent some form of further apotheosis toward which he strives: “the still more mild and gentle solicitations of irrational and inanimate nature.” From human to animal (“irrational” nature), and even further to mineral (“inanimate nature”), Wordsworth seems to be trying to extend to its utmost limits our comprehension of what can solicit from us a moral interest.

Emily already exhibits some of the genuine strangeness of Wordsworth’s moral vision as it develops in response to his revolutionary experiences: his sense that those who care about those who do are in some way more admirable—and perhaps also more truly themselves—than those who do. Initially, on her return from her wanderings, Emily is “held above / The infirmities of mortal love” (1625–26). Wordsworth recognizes a sinister element to her awful impenetrability that leads him to demand of her the Mariner-like salvation in tears brought on by the ministrations of the Doe, tears that once again tie her, albeit but “faintly, faintly,” to earth. Those ties, and their connection to tears, matter to him; as Wordsworth tells us at the start, he wishes to present us with “A tale of tears, a mortal story!” (336). After all, he is the poet for whom happiness must be found “in the very world which is the world / Of all of us, . . . / . . . or not at all” (Prelude X.726–28), who wishes to show his readers how the “Love of Nature” can “lead” to the “Love of Mankind,” as the subtitle to book VIII of The Prelude puts it, and as the Doe, presumably, teaches Emily. Yet Wordsworth’s morality can often appear a rather inhuman commodity. The Wanderer of The Excursion (the Pedlar of “The Ruined Cottage”), Wordsworth’s greatest purveyor of the milk of human kindness, can “afford to suffer / With those whom he saw suffer” precisely because he has felt “No piteous revolutions” (Excursion I.370–71, 359; original emphasis). It is a strange vision of sympathy, one that lacks the reciprocity of emotional experience one would expect from the poet who calls himself “a man speaking to men.”

Wordsworth seems to struggle over Emily’s humanity in a way that he need not struggle with the Doe herself. As a creature of nature the Doe requires no emotional ties to connect her to the earth; her very being belongs to it. Nevertheless, Wordsworth clearly intends her to represent a form if not of sympathy, at least of comfort. The Doe first appears to Emily just after Francis has admonished her, twice, to “Hope nothing”
We can think of her as a representative of a kind of pure hope, one divorced from any potential for action—a passive hope that stands in the same place in the building of the self that will and action might otherwise have occupied. She is also a symbol of memory, as her ghostly presence in the poem, her lingering over Emily’s grave, attests. In *The Excursion*, the Solitary expresses his desire for “The life where hope and memory are as one” (*Excursion* III.400), a life without revolutionary transitions in character. Yet such a life would also lack the genuine sense of time, of possible change, of action as an enabler of change. Where hope and memory are as one, can either be said truly to exist?

Wordsworth concludes *The White Doe of Rylstone* by musing on the Doe’s “smile” as she looks down upon Emily’s resting place: “Thou, thou art not a child of time, / But Daughter of the Eternal Prime!” (1928–29). Presumably, Emily’s humanity renders her time bound—that is, subject to a death from which the Doe is protected by her lack of a distinct self. I am reminded of Keats’s wonderful vision of “The vale of Soul-making”:

Call the world if you Please “The vale of Soul-making” Then you will find out the use of the world . . . I say ‘Soul making’ Soul as distinguished from an Intelligence—There may be intelligences or sparks of the divinity in millions—but they are not Souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself. I[n]telligences are atoms of perception—they know and they see and they are pure, in short they are God—how then are Souls to be made? How then are these sparks which are God to have identity given them—so as ever to possess a bliss peculiar to each ones individual existence? How but by the medium of a world like this?100

Keats’s humanism stands in stark contrast to Wordsworth’s moral vision. Wordsworth suggests that death is desirable precisely because it presents a release from human individuation as we understand it. He may yearn to have his voice preserved in perpetuity upon the earth by a whole chorus of “second selves,” but one feels that this is in part to compensate for the fact that identity in the Keatsian sense has no place in Wordsworth’s conception of the afterlife. Think of Lucy, being “Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course / With rocks and stones and trees.” Here lies Wordsworth’s most elementary understanding of the concept of Revolution.

Many of Wordsworth’s more memorable human figures seem almost to have returned to the state of nature. Consider the much-discussed simile in “Resolution and Independence,” where the Leech Gatherer melts first into the rock and then the sea beast, to which he is compared: “Such
seemed this Man, not all alive nor dead, / Nor all asleep” (71–72). Again we are presented with what the Solitary in *The Excursion* calls “the universal instinct of repose” (*Excursion* III.397), like Wordsworth’s longing in the “Ode to Duty” for “a repose which ever is the same,” like Emily’s tale of “female patience winning firm repose”—and also like Mortimer’s desire for sleep. Note that in each of these cases, Wordsworth has no interest in the standard romantic ideology of the dream as a space of freedom and imagination. Rather, he is concerned with a form of self-containment, a self-hood strangely divorced from the activity of life: “A slumber did my spirit seal.” While Wordsworth calls the Leech Gatherer “more than human,” he is so in part because he is less than human. He demonstrates what Lionel Trilling has called “the morality of inertia,” the morality of the lesser celandine, who withstands the storm not from “courage” nor from “choice,” but by “Its necessity in being old.” As Trilling reminds us, “How often the moral act is performed not because we are we but because we are there! This is the morality of habit, or the morality of biology.”

Wordsworth, though, would contest Trilling on one point: “because we are we” and “because we are there” need not represent such separate motivations. It is possible to be most oneself by standing still on a spot, by rooting oneself to it, by simply being there.