



The Prose  
Works of  
William  
Wordsworth

Volume 1

*edited by W. J. B. Owen and Jane W. Smyser*

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This sample is provided to demonstrate the navigability of the electronic Prose Works; the clarity of the textual notes, as compared with the Clarendon edition; the value of the marginal 'paragraph' symbols indicating the presence of editorial commentary; the ease of movement between text and commentary using the above symbols.

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# Table of Sigla and Abbreviations

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as used in the textual notes

MS.	the first version in the manuscript
MS. <sup>2</sup>	the second version or first correction
MS. <sup>3</sup>	the third version or first correction
A <sup>2</sup>	the second version or first correction of MS. A.
[        ]	a blank space in the manuscript
[?]	an illegible letter or letters, or an illegible word or words
[? there]	the word may be <i>there</i>
[? there <i>or</i> their]	the word is either <i>there</i> or <i>their</i>
[there]	an editorial interpolation
273/4	occurring between lines 273 and 274
<i>corr.</i>	corrected
<i>del.</i>	deleted
<i>ins.</i>	inserted
<i>om.</i>	omitted
<i>subs.</i>	substituted

*A sample note:*

there 1822: their MS.: here MS.<sup>2</sup>, 1810–20.

The first occurrence of *there* is in the edition of 1822; the first version of the manuscript reads *their* (we avoid the use of *sic*); the second version of the manuscript and the editions of 1810 to 1820 read *here*.

3.

## Preface to *The Borderers*

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## INTRODUCTION: GENERAL

WORDSWORTH himself traced the origin of *The Borderers* and its Preface to his observation of men and motives in revolutionary France:

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 are there no limits to the hardening of the heart, and the perversion of the 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 eye-witness of this process, and it was while that knowledge was fresh upon my memory, that the Tragedy of 'The Borderers' was composed.

... while I was composing this Play I wrote a short essay illustrative of that constitution and those tendencies of human nature which make the apparently  *motiveless*  actions of bad men intelligible to careful observers. This was partly done with reference to the character of Oswald, and his persevering endeavour to lead the man he disliked into so heinous a crime; but still more to preserve in my distinct remembrance what I had observed of transition in character, and the reflections I had been led to make during the time I was a witness of the changes through which the French Revolution passed [*P.W.* i. 342–3].

Wordsworth was an effective observer of French affairs at first-hand from November 1791 until December 1792. During this period he was close to the following political events, which he records in the early lines of *The Prelude*, Book X: the fall of the King (9–10 August 1792; *Prel.* X. 8–9); the invasion of France by the allies and its repulse (August–October 1792; *Prel.* X. 9–20); the September massacres (2–4 September 1792; *Prel.* X. 64–6); the denunciation and triumph of Robespierre (29 October, 5 November 1792; *Prel.* X. 83–128). Of these, only the last two suggest the kind of event Wordsworth had in mind when he linked *The Borderers* to French affairs; and indeed *The Prelude* is not especially illuminating on the sort of mind which Wordsworth saw in France and which he might have thought he was portraying in Oswald. A few passages in Book X are perhaps relevant:

The indecision on their part whose aim  
Seem'd best, and the straightforward path of those  
Who in attack or in defence alike  
Were strong through their impiety ... (113–16)

[faith], theirs who throned  
The human understanding paramount  
And made of that their God ... (318–20)

In the depth  
 Of those enormities, even thinking minds  
 Forgot at seasons whence they had their being,  
 Forgot that such a sound was ever heard  
 As Liberty upon earth; yet all beneath  
 Her innocent authority was wrought,  
 Nor could have been, without her blessed name. (346–52)

Of these, the first two suggest the nature of Oswald as Preface and play present him; the third suggests the behaviour (in another context) of Marmaduke, or the starting of ‘sin and crime ... from their very opposite qualities’. This may also be the intention of certain items in the list, X. 316–22, even including, possibly, those described in 318–20, cited above.

The tone of *The Prelude* when it discusses these matters suggests in Wordsworth in late 1792 a frame of mind at first hopeful (X. 31–9), but later uneasy. Shortly he was answering Bishop Watson in *Llandaff*, which says little to our present purpose, except to note that in a nation newly released from tyranny excesses are likely but will eventually subside (cf. *Prel.* X. 34–7).

The possibility that Wordsworth visited France in October 1793 and, as he reported to Carlyle, actually witnessed the execution of Gorsas should be taken into account.<sup>1</sup> Prior to this date he had, so far as we know, never actually seen the brutality of the Jacobins in action. It is conceivable, though it certainly cannot be proved, that, if Wordsworth really saw this execution, the spectacle might have roused in him sufficient revulsion to account for the change in his attitude to France which is evident in a series of letters to William Mathews beginning in early 1794. The first of these (17 February 1794; *E.Y.*, p. 113) uses the jargon of progressive politics in some questions about Portugal; the second (23 May 1794; *E.Y.*, p. 119) identifies Wordsworth as ‘of that odious class of men called democrats’; and the third (8 June 1794; *E.Y.*, pp. 123–4) proceeds, in the manner of *Llandaff*, to ‘disapprove of monarchical and aristocratical governments ... Hereditary distinctions, and privileged orders of every species’, and the like. Yet ‘The destruction of those institutions which I condemn appears to me to be hastening on too rapidly. I recoil from the bare idea of a revolution’. A programme of education may assist a reform without violence. ‘I am a determined enemy to every species of violence ... I deplore the miserable situation of the French ... [we should express] our detestation of the execrable measures pursued in France [but also] hold up to the approbation of the world such of their regulations and

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1 See Reed, *Chronology of the Early Years*, p. 147.

decrees as are dictated by the spirit of Philosophy' (*E.Y.*, pp. 124–9).<sup>1</sup> In spite of the 'execrable measures pursued in France', Wordsworth in November still opposes the war and the government (*E.Y.*, p. 135), and in December 'rejoices' at the acquittal of Horne Tooke and others (*E.Y.*, p. 137). Between late 1795 and early 1797 his adaptation of Juvenal's eighth Satire (*E.Y.*, pp. 156 ff.) indicates that at the time of writing *The Borderers* (*E.Y.*, p. 177) his political sympathies were still with the Left, even though they had shifted from France.

It is our opinion that the documents we have cited do not fully substantiate Wordsworth's claim to have deduced the character of Oswald from his observation of Frenchmen and French affairs. There is ample evidence, to be sure, in French history for the statement that 'sin and crime are apt to start from their very opposite qualities', i.e. for the transformation of liberal thinkers into political tyrants whose tyranny seeks to be justified in the name of freedom; and hence there is empirical evidence for the kind of action which led Oswald into the career he describes in *Bord.* 1688 ff., and which will similarly lead Marmaduke into the crime of exposing Herbert in the belief that he is encouraging or permitting the operation of some divine or natural justice. The belief that a violent means is justified by an end of national importance can be seen time and again in the procedures of Robespierre and others. Two books by revolutionaries which came into Wordsworth's hands about the time he was writing the play make such a point (on Wordsworth's knowledge of these books see *E.Y.*, 166):

In relating a few facts of the political lives of our friends [the Girondins] ... I have imputed to them some faults: but let it be remembered ... that they are too great to be flattered. Besides, all their faults were the faults of virtue: they originated from the purity of their manners, from the extreme goodness of their hearts. They were too virtuous to credit crimes, till the very day they fell victims to them.<sup>2</sup>

It is not easy to command our passions in the time of a revolution: there is indeed no instance of one accomplished without their assistance. Great obstacles are to be overcome; and this cannot be effected without an ardour, and a devotion to the causes, bordering upon enthusiasm, or tending to produce it. Hence it is that we grasp with avidity at every thing that seems to serve our purpose, and lose the faculty of perceiving what may prove injurious.<sup>3</sup>

But neither these works nor Wordsworth's utterances on the Revolution outside our

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1 Godwin had written against violent revolution in *Political Justice*, Book IV, Ch. li (ed. F. E. L. Priestley (Toronto, 1946), i. 263 ff.; cf. for the version of 1793). Wordsworth would have had time to read Godwin by the date of this letter.

2 Jean-Baptiste Louvet, *Narrative of the Dangers to which I have been Exposed ...* (London, 1795), pp. v–vi.

3 *An Appeal to Impartial Posterity, by Madame Roland ...* (London, 1796), i., 60–1.

text and the immediately related notes seem to us to provide empirical authority for Oswald, the man who, having acted like some French revolutionaries in the mistaken belief that by violence he serves justice, supposes that, by the victory he secures over the remorse which follows upon the discovery of his error, he has made the decisive step towards an intellectual freedom otherwise unobtainable, and then proceeds to obtain satisfaction by vicariously repeating the crime. We find in French history the revolutionary who (rationally, perhaps) removes the reactionary, or supposedly reactionary, enemies of the progressive State at which the revolutionary aims. What we do not find is the revolutionary who supposes, as Oswald does or says he does, that the act of removal, is in itself a criterion whereby the right-mindedness of colleagues is to be judged.<sup>1</sup> The act of removal is judged by the criterion of expediency, not as an initiation into a condition of intellectual advancement or freedom, seen as the right intellectual milieu for a new political entity. No doubt many atrocities in France derived from power guided by ‘the immediate law, / From the clear light of circumstances, flashed / Upon an independent Intellect’ (*Bord.* 1494–6); but their aim, in their authors’ judgements, seems usually to have been to promote the interests of the State by obliterating its enemies. It is also true, no doubt, that many such atrocities arose when their authors supposed themselves guided by such a law as Oswald postulates, when in fact they were guided, perhaps unconsciously, by jealousy, personal fear, or other baser motives. But in neither instance does the act of terror seem to have been undertaken with the aim of educating the intellects of right-minded survivors.

Critics of the play have constantly discussed the character of Oswald and devised various explanations of it, related or unrelated to Wordsworth’s account of its origins in his observations in France. Since Émile Legouis’s notable exposition, in his *Early Life of William Wordsworth*,<sup>2</sup> the influence of William Godwin on the poet and one the character of Oswald has been canvassed or denied. Oswald has been seen as a warning against Godwin’s thinking,<sup>3</sup> as a failed Godwinian,<sup>4</sup> or as no Godwinian at all,<sup>5</sup> or merely a reflection of the over-rational thinking found in many theorists of politics and morals in the eighteenth century.<sup>6</sup> In view of Wordsworth’s known inter-

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1 Such criteria are not, of course, incredible in themselves..

2 Trans. J. W. Matthews, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London, 1921), pp. 253–78, especially pp. 269 ff.

3 By Legouis, and by Ernest de Selincourt, ‘Wordsworth’s Preface to “The Borderers”,’ in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (Oxford, 1934), pp. 157–79.

4 By H.W. Garrod, *Wordsworth* (Oxford, 1923), p. 92.

5 By G. W. Meyer, *Wordsworth’s Formative Years* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1943), pp. 153 ff.

6 R. D. Havens, *The Mind of a Poet* (Baltimore, Md., 1941), p. 543; Alan Grob, ‘Wordsworth and Godwin: a Reassessment’, *Studies in Romanticism*, vi (1967), 98–119.

est in *Political Justice*,<sup>1</sup> his personal contacts with Godwin in 1795,<sup>2</sup> and his direct and critical reference to him in the fragmentary ‘Essay on Morals’ of 1798, we see no reason, until convincing parallels with other writers are discovered, against believing that the various ‘Godwinian’ utterances of Oswald in the play<sup>3</sup> arise from Wordsworth’s contact with and rejection of Godwin and his book.

Oswald has also been seen as a ‘Gothic’ villain of the type developed in the ‘frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies’, of which Wordsworth complained in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*,<sup>4</sup> and which will be more clearly defined in the Satanic, Faustean (or Promethean, according to point of view) figure which dominates some of the larger works of Byron and Shelley. As Legouis, again, made clear in one telling quotation from Mrs. Radcliffe, the Godwinian and Satanic types are by no means mutually exclusive.<sup>5</sup>

In the process of exposition, critical emphases are sometimes disconcertingly reversed. According to Lascelles Abercrombie, Oswald’s real interest is in manipulating Marmaduke’s mind, while his confessed jealousy and hatred are only superficial motives towards his seduction of Marmaduke. Thorslev, on the contrary, thinks that Oswald’s Satanic desire to spread intellectual freedom, which he achieves, or thinks he achieves, in the seduction of Marmaduke, is a rationalization and concealment of his real motives, ‘envy and wounded pride’.<sup>6</sup>

In our view, neither Wordsworth’s own claim that he found models in revolutionary France nor the invocation of literary types by some modern critics wholly explains the character of Oswald, though the suggestions are obviously not irrelevant. We tend to agree with critics such as Legouis and de Selincourt that the character springs rather from the impact of rational ways of thought (including Godwin’s) on Wordsworth’s mind as he sought to understand the collapse of his revolutionary ideals; and we would agree especially with the able analysis of Roger Sharrock,<sup>7</sup> when

1 *E.Y.*, pp. 124, 170.

2 *Moorman*, i. 262 ff.

3 e.g. *Bord.* 1484–98, 1560–7, 1834–7, 1855–7.

4 P. L. Thorslev, Jr., ‘Wordsworth’s *Borderers* and the Romantic Villain-Hero’, *Studies in Romanticism*, v (1966), 84–103.

5 Legouis, *Early Life*, pp. 271–2.

6 Lascelles Abercrombie, *The Art of Wordsworth* (London, 1952), p. 71; Thorslev, p. 100.

7 ‘*The Borderers: Wordsworth on the Moral Frontier*’, *Durham University Journal*, iv (1964), 170–83; the phrases quoted are on pp. 175–6. With Sharrock’s account of the play as emerging from ‘a state of disillusion with the liberal experience ... the suspension of all accepted codes, the rejection of traditional custom and habit, the fresh start *ex nihilo*’ (p. 171), cf. the subtle account in Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Wordsworth’s Poetry, 1787–1814* (New Haven, Conn., and London, 1964, 1964), pp. 125 ff. 369. See also Robert Osborn, ‘Meaningful Obscurity: The Antecedents and Character of Rivers’, in

he finds in Oswald and Marmaduke ‘the two aspects of [Wordsworth’s] divided mind’ and shows that Oswald is ‘a stage he [Wordsworth] himself could have taken’.

## INTRODUCTION: TEXTUAL

THE text of Wordsworth's Preface to *The Borderers* is derived from two manuscripts preserved in the Wordsworth Library, Grasmere. What appears to be the earlier (Grasmere MS. Verse 13; MS. A in our notes) consists of eight and a half pages, 9 in. × 7¼ in.; the first three pages down to 'sophism' are written in an unknown hand, the remainder in the hand of Dorothy Wordsworth, except the motto from Pope (184–7), which according to the Library Catalogue is in Wordsworth's hand. The later version (Grasmere MS. Verse 15; MS. B in our notes) is contained in a vellum-bound notebook, 7½ in. × 6 in., which contains also MS. B of *The Borderers* and MS. U of *The Prelude* (see *P.W.* i. 344; *Prel.*, p. Xxviii). The hand is Mary Wordsworth's, except for the heading 'A Tragedy' and the motto from Pope (168–71), which are perhaps in the hand of Dorothy Wordsworth. MS. A cannot be dated with any precision; the paper is watermarked 1795, and the writing is presumably not earlier than late 1796 or early 1797 (*P.W.* i. 343–4); MS. B belongs to 1799 or 1800 (*ibid.*).

Our text is based primarily on MS. B, mainly on the ground that it seems to be later than MS. A, and that its characteristic readings<sup>1</sup> are likely to represent Wordsworth's second thoughts. On the other hand, it is sometimes inferior to MS. A, for it contains copyist's errors<sup>2</sup> which can be corrected from MS. A. MS. A, however, can hardly serve as copy-text; for it is itself a copy,<sup>3</sup> and does not, therefore carry holograph authority; and its first three pages contain many curious and almost illiterate spellings ('tumuluous', 'desirts', 'talants'; 'exausts'; 'intrested', 'reccollection', 'folled', 'exhibition', 'sufficiant', 'Aristo' and (possibly) 'Candenio', 'scociety', 'dispises').<sup>4</sup> We have therefore followed MS. B, except where it is obviously or very probably in error.

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1 See, for example, 119, 167, 172, textual notes.

2 See 21–2, 168, textual notes; probably 31, textual n. and Commentary; and perhaps 66, textual n. and Commentary.

3 At 110 the duplication of 'habit' is probably an error; at 112 'more' is dittographed; and at 115–6 the group 'where the mind ... in that action' is dittographed and deleted at a second writing.

4 These suggest an inaccurate speller following dictation rather than copying. Perhaps Wordsworth began to dictate, gave up when he saw the result, and then wrote a draft which Dorothy copied as a continuation of the work of the unknown amanuensis. Professor Mark L. Reed tells us that he believes the hand to be John Wordsworth's and the manuscript to have been written in 1800.

[PREFACE TO *THE BORDERERS*]

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 a spirit of enterprise in a tumultuous age. He goes into the world and is betrayed into a great crime.—That influence on which all his happiness is built immediately deserts him. His talents are robbed of their weight—his exertions are unavailing, and he quits the world in disgust, with strong misanthropic feelings. In his retirement, he is impelled to examine the reasonableness of established opinions, & the force of his mind exhausts itself in constant efforts to separate the elements of virtue and vice. It is his pleasure & his consolation to hunt out whatever is bad in actions usually esteemed virtuous, & to detect the good in actions which the universal sense of mankind teaches us to reprobate. While the general exertion of his intellect seduces him from the remembrance of his crime, the particular conclusions to which he is led have a tendency to reconcile him to himself. His feelings are interested in making him a moral sceptic, & as his scepticism increases, he is raised in his own esteem. After this process has been continued some time, his natural energy and restlessness impel him again into the world. In this state, pressed by the recollection of his guilt, he seeks relief from two sources, action and meditation. Of actions, those are most attractive which best exhibit his own powers, partly from the original pride of his character, and still more because the loss of authority and influence which followed upon his crime was the first circumstance which impressed him with the magnitude of that crime, & brought along with it those tormenting sensations by which he is assailed. The recovery of his original importance & the exhibition of his own powers are therefore in his mind almost identified with the extinction of those painful feeling which attend the recollection of his guilt. 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 & regularly progressive, they do not present those sudden results which can afford a sufficient stimulus

*The title is editorial.*  
12 exertion A<sup>2</sup>B: exertions A.

21–2 was the first ... crime A: *om.* crime B.  
27 than *Edd.*: then AB.

to a troubled mind. In processes of vice the effects are more frequently im- 30  
mediate, palpable, and extensive. Power is much more easily manifested in ¶  
destroying than in creating. A child, Rousseau has observed, will tear in pieces ¶  
fifty toys before he will think of making one. From these causes, assisted by ►  
disgust and misanthropic feeling, the character we are now contemplating will  
have a strong tendency to vice. His energies are most impressively manifested 35 ¶  
in works of devastation. He is the Orlando of Ariosto, the Cardenio of Cervan- ¶  
tes, who lays waste the groves that should shelter him. He has rebelled against ¶  
the world & the laws of the world, & he regards them as tyrannical masters;  
convinced that he is right in some of his conclusions, he nourishes a contempt  
for mankind the more dangerous because he has been led to it by reflexion. Be- 40  
ing in the habit of considering the world as a body which is in some sort at war ¶  
with him, he has a feeling borrowed from that habit which gives an additional  
zest to his hatred of those members of society whom he hates & to his contempt  
of those whom he despises. Add to this, that a mind fond of nourishing senti- ¶  
ments of contempt will be prone to the admission of those feelings which are 45  
considered under any uncommon bond of relation (as must be the case with a ►  
man who has quarrelled with the world), the feelings will mutually strengthen ¶  
each other. In this morbid state of mind he cannot exist without occupation, he  
requires constant provocatives, all his pleasures are prospective, he is perpetu-  
ally chasing a phantom, he commits new crimes to drive away the memory of 50  
the past. But the lenitives of his pain are twofold; meditation as well as action.  
Accordingly, his reason is almost exclusively employed in justifying his past ¶  
enormities & in enabling him to commit new ones. He is perpetually imposing  
upon himself, he has a sophism for every crime. The *mild* effusions of thought,  
the milk of human reason, are unknown to him. His imagination is powerful, 55 ¶  
being strengthened by the habit of picturing possible forms of society where his  
crimes would be no longer crimes, and he would enjoy that estimation to which,  
from his intellectual attainments, he deems himself entitled. The nicer shades  
of manners he disregards, but whenever, upon looking back upon past ages, or ¶  
in surveying the practices of different countries in the age in which he lives, he 60  
find such contrarities as seem to affect the principles of *morals*, he exults over

31 manifested A: magnifested B (*an attempt to correct magnified*) 49 provocatives AB: provocations [or provocation] A<sup>2</sup>.

35–6 manifested A: manifest B.

45 which B: *om.* A.

50 chasing A: ch[*tear*]ing B. ¶

51 twofold: *Edd.*: twofold, A: twofold B.

59 upon looking B: in looking A. ¶

his discovery, and applies it to his heart as the dearest of his consolations. Such a mind cannot but discover some truths, but he is unable to profit by them, and in his hands they become instruments of evil. ▶

He presses truth and falshood into the same service. He looks at society 65 through an optical glass of a peculiar tint; something of the forms of objects he takes from objects, but their colour is exclusively what he gives them; it is one, and it is his own. Having indulged a habit, dangerous in a man who has fallen, of dallying with moral calculations, he becomes an empiric, and a daring & 70 unfeeling empiric. He disguises from himself his own malignity by assuming the character of a spectator in morals, and one who has the hardihood to realize his speculations.

It will easily be perceived that to such a mind those enterprizes which are 75 the most extraordinary will in time appear the most inviting. His appetite from being exhausted becomes unnatural. Accordingly, he will struggle so [ ] 75 to characterize & to exalt actions, little and contemptible in themselves, by a forced greatness of *manner*, and will chequer & degrade enterprizes great in their atrocity by grotesque littleness of manner, and fantastic obliquities. He is like a worn out voluptuary—he finds his temptation in strangeness, he is unable to suppress a low hankering after the *double entendre* in vice; yet his thirst after 80 the extraordinary buoys him up, and, supported by a habit of constant reflexion, he frequently breaks out into what has the appearance of greatness; and, in sudden emergencies, when he is called upon by surprize & thrown out of the part of his regular habits, or when dormant associations are awakened tracing the 85 revolutions through which his character has passed, in painting his former self he really *is* great.

Benefits conferred on a man like this will be the seeds of a worse feeling 90 than ingratitude. They will give birth to positive hatred. Let him be deprived of power, though by means which he despises, & he will never forgive. It will scarcely be denied that such a mind, by very slight external motives, may be led to the commission of the greatest enormities. Let its malignant feelings be fixed on a particular object, & the rest follows of itself.

Having shaken off the obligations of religion & morality in a dark and tempestuous age, it is probable that such a character will be infected with a tinge ▶

65 service. A: service B.

75 A blank space after so in both manuscripts.

77 *manner*, A: *manner* B.

80 *entendre*] altered to *entente* in pencil in A.

84 regular A<sup>2</sup>B: general A.

of superstition. The period in which he lives teems with great events, which he feels he cannot controul. That influence which his pride makes him unwilling to allow to his fellow-men he has no reluctance to ascribe to invisible agents: his pride impels him to superstition and shapes out the nature of his belief: his creed is his own: it is made & not adopted.

A character like this, or some of its features at least, I have attempted to delineate in the following drama. I have introduced him deliberately prosecuting the destruction of an amiable young man by the most atrocious means, & with a pertinacity, as it should seem, not to be accounted for but on the supposition of the most malignant injuries. No such injuries, however, appear to have been sustained. What are, then, his motives? First, it must be observed that to make the non-existence of a common motive itself a motive to action is a practice which we are never so prone to attribute exclusively to madmen as when we forget ourselves. Our love of the marvellous is not confined to external things. There is no object on which it settles with more delight than on our own minds. This habit is in the very essence of the habit which we are delineating.

But there are particles of that poisonous mineral of which Iago speaks gnawing his inwards, his malevolent feelings are excited, & he hates the more deeply because he feels he ought not to hate.

We all know that the dissatisfaction accompanying the first impulses towards a criminal action, where the mind is familiar with guilt, acts as a stimulus to proceed in that action. Uneasiness must be driven away by fresh uneasiness, obstinacy, waywardness, & wilful blindness are alternatives resorted to, till there is an universal insurrection of every depraved feeling of the heart.

Besides, in a course of criminal conduct every fresh step that we make appears a justification of the one that preceded it, it seems to bring back again the moment of liberty and choice; it banishes the idea of repentance, and seems to remorse at defiance. Every time we plan a fresh accumulation of our guilt, we have restored to us something like that original state of mind, that perturbed pleasure, which first made the crime attractive.

If, after these general remarks, I am asked what are Rivers's motives to the atrocity detailed in the drama? I answer: they are founded chiefly in the very constitution of his character; in his pride which borders even upon madness, in

105 are, then, *Edd.*: are then B: then are A.  
 119–20 appears B, *written over deln.*: seems A.  
 120 that B: which A.  
 122 of B: to A.

125 I am asked] *inserted in pencil into a blank A:*  
 blank b. ¶  
 126 drama? B: drama A.  
 126 founded B: found A.

his restless disposition, in his disturbed mind, in his superstition, in irresistible propensities to embody in practical experiments his worst & most extravagant speculations, in his thoughts & in his feelings, in his general habits & his particular impulses, in his perverted reason justifying his perverted instincts. The general moral intended to be impressed by the delineation of such a character is obvious: it is to shew the dangerous use which may be made of reason when a man has committed a great crime. ▶ 130

There is a kind of superstition which makes us shudder when we find moral sentiments to which we attach a sacred importance applied to vicious purposes. In real life this is done every day, and we do not feel the disgust. The difference is here. In works of imagination we see the motive and the end. In real life we rarely see either the one or the other; and, when the distress comes, it prevents us from attending to the cause. This superstition of which I have spoken is not without its use; yet it appears to be one great source of our vices; it is our constant engine in seducing each other. We are lulled asleep by its agency, and betrayed before we know that an attempt is made to betray us. 135 140

I have endeavoured to shake this prejudice, persuaded that in so doing I was well employed. It has been a further object with me to shew that, from abuses interwoven with the texture of society, a bad man may be furnished with sophisms in support of his crimes which it would be difficult to answer. ▶ 145

One word more upon the subject of motives. In private life what is more common than, when we hear of law-suits prosecuted to the utter ruin of the parties, and the most deadly feuds in families, to find them attributed to trifling and apparently inadequate sources? But when our malignant passions operate, the original causes which called them forth are soon supplanted, yet when we account for the effect we forget the immediate impulse, and the whole is attributed to the force from which the first motion was received. The vessel keeps sailing on, and we attribute her progress in the voyage to the ropes which first towed her out of harbour. ▶ 150 160

To this must be added that we are too apt to apply our own moral sentiments

133 obvious: *Edd.*: obvious, AB.

136 vicious A<sup>2</sup>B: virtuous A.

151 sources? *Edd.*: sources. AB.

as a measure of the conduct of others. We insensibly suppose that a criminal action assumes the same form to the agent as to ourselves. We forget that his feelings and his reason are equally busy in contracting its dimensions and pleading for its necessity. ▶ 165



### A Tragedy

On 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.  
Pope.



170

167 A tragedy B: *om.* A.

168 On A *recte*: Of B.

172 Pope. B: *om.* A.

## COMMENTARY

**2. benevolence]** Godwin's usual criterion for moral worth: *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, ed. F. E. L. Priestley (Toronto, 1946), i. 149: 'virtue [is] any action or actions of an intelligent being, proceeding from kind and benevolent intentions, and having a tendency to contribute to general happiness'; i. 433: 'Benevolent intention is essential to virtue.'

**4. betrayed into a great crime]** See *Bord.* 1689 ff. Oswald explains how he was duped by a ship's company into marooning the ship's captain, and thus ensuring his death, in the mistaken belief that the captain had plotted 'Against my honour' (1691); so that what appeared an act of justice turned out to be a virtual murder.

**4. influence]** Oswald's influence over others; cf. 21: 'the loss of authority and influence which followed upon his crime'; *Bord.*, 1761–3: 'my power at once / Shrunk from me; plans and schemes, and lofty hopes – / All vanished.'

**6–7. he quits the world in disgust]** See *Bord.* 1766–8: 'I hid my head within a Convent, there / Lay passive as a dormouse in mid winter. / That was no life for me.'

**7–19. In his retirement ... action & meditation]** See Oswald's account, *Bord.* 1771–94; note the reading of MS. B (1782–7, textual n.): 'Thirsting for some exploits of power and terror.'

**8. examine the reasonableness of established opinions]** Cf. *Bord.* 1815–16: 'I turned to contemplate / The World's opinions and her usages.'

**12–13. While ... crime]** Cf. *Bord.* 1560–2: 'Remorse— / It cannot live with thought; think on, think on, / And it will die.' Oswald indulges in purely rational speculations to escape from his emotions, like Coleridge: 'not to think of what I needs must feel, / But ... by abstruse research to steal / From my own nature all the natural man' ('Dejection', 87–90).

**17. his natural energy ... into the world]** Cf. *Bord.* 1780–1: 'I saw that every possible shape of action / Might lead to good—I saw it and burst forth'; 1787–90: 'I had within me evermore / A salient spring of energy; I mounted / From action up to action with a mind / That never rested.'

**19. meditation]** See 57 ff.

**21–2, textual n.** The copyist of MS. B copied down to 'crime' (24) and resumed

after 'crime' (25).

**27–31. good actions ... extensive]** Cf. *E. E. II. 55–61*: 'it is the nature of Vice to force itself upon notice, both in the act and by its consequences.... on the contrary, the virtues ... are retired.'

**31–2. Power ... creating]** Cf. *Bord.* 1432–4: 'Power is life to him / And breath and being; where he cannot govern, / He will destroy.'

**32–3. A child ... one]** The nearest parallel we have found in Rousseau is in *Émile*, in *Œuvres complètes de J. J. Rousseau* (Paris, 1882), ii. 36:

Avant l'âge de raison, nous faisons le bien et le mal sans le connoître; et il n'y a point de moralité dans nos actions ... Un enfant veut déranger tout ce qu'il voit; il casse, il brise tout ce qu'il peut atteindre; il empoigne un oiseau comme il empoignerait une pierre, et l'étouffe sans savoir ce qu'il fait ... L'activité défailante se concentre dans le cœur du viellard; dans celui de l'enfant elle est surabondante et s'étend au dehors; il se sent, pour ainsi dire, assez de vie pour animer tout ce qui l'environne. Qu'il fasse ou qu'il défasse, il n'importe; il suffit qu'il change l'état des choses, et tout changement est une action. Que s'il semble avoir plus de penchant à détruire, ce n'est point par méchanceté, c'est que l'action qui forme est toujours lente, et que celle qui détruit, ce n'est point par méchanceté, c'est que l'action qui forme est toujours lente, et que celle qui détruit, étant plus rapide, convient mieux à sa vivacité.

**35. manifested]** MS. B ('manifest') makes sense, but the reading of MS. A is probably correct: cf. 32 above. The ending *-ed* in MS. A is now very close to the right-hand margin of a verso page, and was probably at one time obscured by stitching (now removed from the manuscript); it may therefore have escaped the copyist's notice.

**36. Orlando ... shelter him]** *Orlando Furioso*, xxiii. 131–5. In *Don Quixote*, Book III, Chs. ix–x, Cardenio is seen, and described as being, in a savage state, and in Ch. xiii he himself relates his lapse into savage madness. He does not, however, appear to 'lay waste the groves that should shelter him'. Wordsworth is perhaps confused, since in this context (Ch. xi) Don Quixote himself proposes to emulate the violence of Orlando's madness.

**37. He has rebelled ... laws of the world]** Cf. *Bord.* 596–7: 'these disputed tracts, that own / No law but what each man makes for himself.'

**41–2. Being ... war with him]** Cf. *Bord.* 1827–30: 'I felt that merit has no surer test / Than obloquy; that, if we wish to serve / The world ... / We must become obnoxious to its hate.'

**44–5. Add ... contempt]** Cf. *Bord.* 18–19: 'he [Oswald] despised alike Moham- medan and Christian'; 553–4: 'The insult bred / More of contempt than hatred [in Oswald].'

**45–6. which are considered under any uncommon bond of relation]** A difficult phrase; if the text is right, the sense is perhaps: ‘which are not usually considered in such mutual connection as that in which he considers them’. Cf. the discussion of unwarranted antithesis in Popean epitaphs, *E.E. II. 447 ff.*

**47–8. the feelings ... other]** Cf. *Prel.* XI. 326–7: ‘feeling comes in aid / Of feeling.’

**50, textual n.** The reading of MS. A is more like ‘chusing’ than ‘chasing’. MS. B has been rubbed or scraped to a hole at this point, possibly in an attempt to correct ‘chusing’ (or ‘choosing’) when it was realized that this reading hardly gives sense.

**52–4. his reason ... crime]** Cf. *Morals*, 46–52: ‘when we have been unworthily employed...we are all activity & keenness; then it is that we repair to systems of morality for arguments in defence of ourselves;& sure enough are we to find them... lifeless words, & abstract propositions, will not be destitute of power to lay asleep the spirit of self-accusation & exclude the uneasiness of repentance.’ For the last phrase in the present passage, cf. 146–7: ‘sophisms in support of his crimes which it would be difficult to answer’.

**55. the milk of human reason]** *Macbeth*, I. V. 18: ‘the milk of human kindness’. Cf. *Bord.* 620–8, textual n.: ‘compassion’s milk’ (reading of MS. B).

**56–7. possible forms ... no longer crimes]** Cf. *Bord.* 1818–19: ‘a region of futurity / Whose natural element was freedom’, 1855–6: ‘Let us be fellow-labourers, then, to enlarge / Man’s intellectual empire.’

**59, textual n.** MS. B ‘upon looking’ may be an anticipation of ‘upon past ages’; MS. A ‘in looking ... or in surveying’ is perhaps more natural idiom.

**73–4. those enterprizes ... inviting]** Cf. *Bord.* 1436: ‘There is no crime from which this man would shrink.’

**75, textual n.** The blank space after ‘so’ in both MSS. seems to have been left for the insertion of an adverb; but in fact the sentence would be expected to take the form: ‘so to characterize ... that...’. As it stands, it would be incomplete without ‘so’.

**84–6. when dormant ... is great]** Oswald is engaged in ‘painting his former self’ in *Bord.* 1684–1844; and though the revelation is perhaps the most fascinating part of the play, it is not clear in what sense he is ‘really ... great’ in this passage.

**87–8. Benefits ... hatred]** Cf. *Bord.* 27–31: ‘You know that you have saved his life ... / And that he hates you! ... gratitude’s a heavy burden / To a proud Soul’; 918–21: ‘this Stripling / Must needs step in, and save my life. The look / With which he gave the boon—I see it now! / The same that tempted me to loathe the gift.’ Gratitude is excluded from virtue by Godwin, *Political Justice*, ed. cit., i. 128–9:

Every voluntary benefit ... entitles the bestower to some kindness and retribution. Why? Because a voluntary benefit is an evidence of benevolent intention, that is, in a certain degree, of virtue ... But the merit of this disposition is equal, whether the benefit were conferred upon me or upon another ... Gratitude therefore, if by gratitude we understand a sentiment of preference which I entertain towards another, upon the ground of my having been the subject of his benefits, is no part either of justice or virtue.

Godwin does not, however, claim that gratitude is a burden on the mind of the man benefited.

**88–9. Let him ... forgive]** Oswald is insulted because the Borderers chose Marmaduke for their chief, instead of himself (*Bord.* 551–5).

**94–8. a tinge of superstition ... his pride impels him to superstition]** Cf. *Bord.* 1440–1: ‘his pride has built / Some uncouth superstition of its own’; and the following anecdote, *Bord.* 1442–7.

**96–7. That influence ... agents]** Cf. *Bord.* 1452–5: ‘Such Minds as find amid their fellow-men / No heart that loves them, none that they can love, / Will turn perforce and seek for sympathy / In dim relation to imagined Beings.’

**99. his creed ... adopted]** Cf. n. on 41–2.

**105–8. What are ... ourselves]** Cf. *Bord.* 1427–32: ‘But for the motive? Natures such as his / Spin motives out of their own bowels ... there needs no other motive / Than that most strange incontinence in crime / Which haunts this Oswald.’ Did a recollection of this passage suggest Coleridge’s remark on Iago’s ‘motive-hunting of motiveless malignity’ (*S.C.* i. 44)?

**108–9. Our love ... minds]** Cf. *Bord.* 1168–70: ‘the mind of man, upturned, / Is in all natures a strange spectacle; / In some a hideous one [Is a strange spectacle! MS. B].’

**110. habit ... habit]** Though this is clearly the reading of both MSS., the sense is unconvincing, and possibly the second ‘habit’ has been written for some word now irrecoverable, such as ‘man’ or ‘character’; cf. 100: ‘A character like this...I have attempted to delineate’, 126–7: ‘Rivers’s [Oswald’s] motives...are founded chiefly in the very constitution of his character’. In the following paragraph, the pronouns ‘his’ and ‘he’, clearly referring to Oswald (except in the phrase ‘his [Iago’s] inwards’), seem to require a personal antecedent, not the abstract ‘habit’, and there is no such antecedent nearby in the present text.

**111–2, that poisonous ... inwards]** *Othello*, II. i. 308–9: ‘the thought ... / Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards’. Cf. *Bord.* 1566–7: ‘the thing had never been / Whose very shadow gnaws us to the vitals.’

**119–24.** Cf. *Bord.* 1431–2, cited above, n. to 105–8.

**125, textual n. I am asked]** In his printing of *P. Bord.* In *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (Oxford, 1934), pp. 157–79 (there reprinted from *Nineteenth Century*, Nov. 1926), de Selincourt notes (p. 169) that he ‘supplied these words to fill a blank space in the manuscript’. At this date, or at any rate in 1926, de Selincourt knew only our MS. B of *P. Bord.* (*Lectures*, pp. 164–5). It seems likely, therefore, that the pencilled insertion in MS. A derives directly or indirectly from de Selincourt rather than from a Wordsworthian source; but as some such phrase is required by the sense, we have accepted it in our text. The proper name ‘Rivers’ belongs to the state of the play represented by MS. B of *Bord.*, of which MS. B of *P. Bord.* is a part. There is not sufficient evidence to determine when the alteration in our MS. A was made, but it may have been in 1842 or even later (*P.W.* i. 343–4).

**127. his pride which borders even upon madness ... his restless disposition]** Cf. *Bord.* 1448 ff.: ‘A most subtle doctor / Were that man, who could draw the line that parts / Pride ... from Madness, / ... Restless Minds... / Will ... seek for sympathy / In dim relation to imagined Beings’; 1788–90: ‘I mounted / From action up to action with a mind / That never rested.’

**129. practical experiments]** Cf. *Bord.* 1782–7, textual n. (reading of MS. B): ‘my brain ... teemed with projects / Which seemed to have no limit’. Coleridge called Iago ‘a preconceiving *experimenter*’ (*S.C.* i. 40).

**135–43.** A possible explanation of this difficult paragraph, and of the use of ‘superstition’, is given in Moorman, i. 305. Another follows:

In real life, moral sentiments are constantly applied to vicious purposes, but usually we do not feel any disgust because the total situation is not clear to us, i.e. we usually do not see the viciousness of the purpose, and therefore we do not see the incongruity between the sentiment and the purpose which would, if seen, occasion the disgust. In art, the total situation is clear, and so, therefore, is the incongruity. In real life, moreover, the distress arising from a vicious action, if we happen to be the victims of it, helps to prevent us from seeing the total situation. We shudder, however, when we do see, or think we see, the incongruity (in real life or in art); and our shuddering is, as it were, that of a superstitious man in the presence of what he regards as the supernatural.

This superstition can be morally useful because, when the shudder occurs, we recognize it as a sign or warning that moral sentiments are being perverted to vicious purposes. If, however, the shudder can be roused in us when the situation does not in fact warrant it, it may serve as an ‘engine in seducing each other’, because the man subject to it supposes that he sees the whole situation clearly, whereas his view of it is false or partial, and he is therefore an easy target for ‘betrayal’. It is thus an unreliable moral guide, and Wordsworth wishes to expose its unreliability.

*Superstition* in this version means ‘superstitious cast of mind’ (as in 95, 98 above), rather than ‘superstitious belief’, which is represented rather by Wordsworth’s ‘prej-

udice' (144). Situations of the kind envisaged are those of *Othello* and *The Borderers*: Iago induces Othello to see an incongruity between Desdemona's protestations of innocence and generous behaviour on behalf of Cassio, and her supposed sexual infidelity; Oswald induces Marmaduke to see an incongruity between Herbert's language of tender fatherhood and his supposed aim of virtually selling his daughter into prostitution (cf. *Bord.* 249: 'Her [Idonea's] virtues are his [Herbert's] instruments'). In each case, the 'shudder' of the betrayed hero leads him to bring about the destruction of the innocent victim.—We are indebted to Julian Patrick for suggestions towards this note.

**145. abuses**] The evil reputation of Lord Clifford (*Bord.* 279–80, 540–2, 568–9, etc.)? The false witness of the beggar-woman, or, rather, her poverty which leaves her open to bribery (*Bord.* 364 ff., etc.)?

**148–51. In private ... sources?**] On Wordsworth's experience with lawsuits see Moorman, i. 167–9. He would hardly have attributed the efforts of his own family against Lord Lonsdale to 'trifling and apparently inadequate sources'. Cf. *Llandaff*, 541–54 and n.

**165–6. pleading for its necessity**] Cf. *Paradise Lost*, IV. 393–4: 'necessitie / The Tyrants plea'; *Prel.* X. 310–1 (of the reaction in France to the British declaration of war in 1793): 'Tyrants, strong before, / In devilish pleas were ten times stronger now.'

**168–71. On human ... no more**] Pope, 'Epistle to Cobham', 35–8 [25–8]. No authoritative text appears to read 'Of' (184), which is no doubt a copyist's error in MS. B.

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