WORDSWORTH’S GOTHIC POETICS

BY

ROBERT J. LANG

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

English

December 2012

Winston-Salem, North Carolina

Approved By:

Eric Wilson, Ph.D., Advisor

Philip Kuberski, Ph.D., Chair

Omaar Hena, Ph.D.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ....................................................................................................................... iii  
CHAPTER 1 ........................................................................................................................1  
CHAPTER 2 ......................................................................................................................8  
CHAPTER 3 ......................................................................................................................27  
CHAPTER 4 ......................................................................................................................45  
CONCLUSION .................................................................................................................65  
WORKS CITED .............................................................................................................70  
VITA ..................................................................................................................................75
ABSTRACT

Wordsworth’s poetry is typically seen by critics as healthy-minded, rich in themes of transcendence, synthesis, and optimism. The poet in this respect is contrasted with the other great poets of the Romantic tradition—Coleridge, Shelley, Byron, Keats, Blake—who are all generally related to the Gothic, or the Dark Romantic tradition. However, Wordsworth does indeed share many of the darker elements found in the works of the above writers, elements that critics use to classify them as such. The Gothic, in fact, very heavily permeates Wordsworth’s writing, particularly in representations of the fragmented, psychologically disturbed self and in his tendency to vanish into the abyss of the mind in reaction to moments of sublimity and perversity. These gothic aspects appear not just in Wordsworth’s early experiments with the genre (The Borderers, The Vale of Esthwaite, Fragment of a Gothic Tale), but they also manifest throughout his later works, including The Prelude. This thesis seeks to show how the more affirmative parts of Wordsworth’s poetry and philosophy do not necessarily function as such when considered alongside the more pessimistic and disharmonious parts that disrupt this sense of affirmation.
Chapter 1

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) helped to forge the aesthetic of the English Romantic poetic tradition in 1798 with the first publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* with his friend and fellow poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Unlike Coleridge, however, as well as the rest of the giants of the movement—Shelley, Keats, Byron—Wordsworth would not be remembered as a Gothic poet. Though critic D. J. Moores has deemed him “the most influential Romantic in the Anglophonic tradition” (Moores 165), Moores has also deemed him one of the most “healthy-minded.” Indeed Wordsworth, also unlike the others, did not die tragically young, and perhaps there is something healthy in that; or perhaps Wordsworth’s life, which encompassed the deaths of the other Romantic poets, could just as easily have been said to be tragic. After all, Wordsworth did write more epitaphs than any other poet of his time save Southey—and yet he also wrote one for Southey.

Wordsworth’s (dis)placement outside the Gothic by the majority of critics (Hume, Punter Kilgour, Miles, Richter, Anne Williams, Moores) is shown through their exclusion of him (either explicitly or implicitly) from their theoreticizations of and conversations on the genre. Those critics who do mention him (Gamer, Mishra, Rodway) do so hesitantly, qualifying their citation with the basic idea that Wordsworth experimented with the Gothic in his early days, but that he then tossed it aside, dismissing its conventions in favor of a more “healthy mindedness” in the vein of Moores’s study. Critics do not tend to disagree on the fact that such early works as *The Borderers* and certain parts of the *Adventures of Salisbury Plain* are indeed Gothic, and rightfully so. Mishra, noting the
above distinction, proclaims of the poet, “Later he would transform Gothic dread into a positive Romantic sublime” (94). A definition of the Gothic seems to be merited here.

What is the Gothic? The term has several denotations and connotations depending on what subject and what era one is referring to. It has been used to describe visual art, architecture, historical periods, cultures, and literature, among other things. In the context of literature, there seem to be a few points of convergence of most critics past and present. As Punter points out, it is most commonly applied to a set of literary works (mostly novels) written in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, its principal writers usually being Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis, C. R. Marturin, and Mary Shelley. From these authors and their best-known works, we may derive a more or less definitive list of conventions: an emphasis on the terrifying, archaic or medieval settings of (haunted) castles (a move popularized by Burke), and the use of stock characters that include the “blackly lowering villain”; the distressed—oftentimes because of unnamed (implicitly sexual) horrors—heroine; ghosts; and monsters. However, the term is certainly more complex than these “original” tropes and motifs.

The confines of the Gothic have seemed to expand and bend over the years since its heyday in the long eighteenth century. Devendra P. Varma, writing in the mid-20th century defines the Gothic in *The Gothic Flame*:

Primarily the Gothic novels arose out of a quest for the numinous. They are characterized by an awestruck apprehension of Divine immanence penetrating diurnal reality. This sense of the numinous is an almost archetypal impulse inherited from primitive magic. The gothic quest was
not merely after horror—as simple succession of ghastly incidents could have satisfied that yearning—but after other-worldly gratification. (211)

Already we see a move away from those simple techniques of horror and suspense described above. More germane to this study, Punter outlines what he finds to be the requisite formulations for the Romantic Gothic in his foundational survey *The Literature of Terror* (1980). He describes three “principle symbolic figures”—the wanderer, the vampire, and the seeker after forbidden knowledge—in addition to placing the Romantic engagement with the genre historically as a reaction to the “coming of industry” and the implications thereof. Roland Paulson makes his own historicization of the Gothic in *Representations of Revolution*, wherein he places the “popularity of gothic fiction” in reaction to the “widespread anxieties and fears in Europe aroused by the turmoil in France” (220-21). Miles, reflecting Punter, expands (or narrows) the definition of the Gothic in his *Geneology*, in which he describes Gothic writing from two essential mindsets:

The first is that Gothic writing is ‘disjunctive’, fragmentary, inchoate, so that, as in the case of fantasy, theory is required to sound the Gothic’s deep structure in order to render the surface froth comprehensible. Second, the very repetitiousness of Gothic writing is regarded as mysteriously eloquent: in its inarticulate way, Gothic worries over a problem stirring within the foundations of the self. (1-2)

It is in this sense that most modern critics of the Gothic find its essence—that is, a kind of rupture or fragmentation within the psyche, a fragmented pair that, though it can be in
conversation with one another, cannot be reconciled in an absolute and transcendent fashion.

Moores claims that Wordsworth does in fact achieve this transcendence of psychological turmoil, having achieved an “individuated psyche” where the “poetic persona has not only engaged unconscious energies but also fully reconciled with these and enshrined them in the sanctity of a shared, sacred space in consciousness” (165). Critics have generally agreed with Moores here, placing Wordsworth into the Romantic tradition, but not the Romantic Gothic tradition, usually on the basis of this distinction. And this makes a lot of sense, especially considering Wordsworth’s own writing. The famous “spots of time” from the Prelude seem to suggest in a very passionate way the possibilities of this kind of “synthesis”; Wordsworth himself has claimed to let go of the genre that to him belonged to his “juvenilia.” However, we know that he was at times an extremely polemical and eristic critic, even though he would claim that he was not. As Earl R. Wasserman has observed, Wordsworth has proffered “almost every variety of epistemological hypothesis” in discussions of his poetic mind’s relationship with nature. William Blake, in an annotation to a copy of the 1815 volume of Wordsworth Poems, wrote, “I do not know who wrote these Prefaces: they are very mischievous & direct contrary to Wordsworth’s own Practise” (qtd. in Wlecke, vii). Curiously, Wordsworth in his Preface to the 1802 Lyrical Ballads rails against the tendency of “stupid German tragedies”—and going so far as to make very demeaning comments towards his co-author, Coleridge—while having just written what has come to be known as Fragment of
the Gothic Tale. Critics must therefore look to the verse in their diagnoses of Gothic versus Romantic.

Wordsworth’s poetry changed dramatically in the ways of style, content, and philosophy from his early poetry to the Ballads to the various versions of The Prelude to his more “baptized” work in his later life (critics generally agree as well that his best work occurred before the age of 40). Regarding Wordsworth’s engagement of the Gothic, Mishra qualifies his statement quoted above with the following pronouncement:

[I]t is clear that elements of the Gothic would always stalk Romantic transcendence, the dark side pursuing what it sees as an abrogation of the original design of the sublime. In this respect Wordsworth’s fragment is like a palimpsest, a relic of what Mary Shelley in The Last Man was to call the “Sybylline leaves.” Its status is, therefore, like that of a dream fragment, which, after all, is the ontology of the literary Gothic anyway.

(94-5).

In this sense, it very well may be that Wordsworth’s poetic voice does in fact betray a “disjunction,” a “rupture”, a kind of “fragmentation of the self” that he very explicitly—and with such enthusiasm—tries to reconcile. However, it is unclear that he actually does achieve this feat, and perhaps the more enthusiastically he tries, the more these attempts come off as desperation clanging for escape from an ineluctable psychological turmoil. This thesis takes up the argument that Wordsworth in fact does not escape this turbulence, even in The Prelude and beyond, and that, by most modern critics’ definition of the Gothic, Wordsworth may be considered Gothic in the same vein as the other Dark
Romantic writers. Seen in this light, the more affirmative parts of Wordsworth’s poetry and philosophy do not necessarily function as such when considered alongside the more pessimistic and disharmonious parts that disrupt this sense of affirmation. Moreover, his poetry as such betrays a more disturbed mindset, one whose apparent declarations of optimism and spiritual superiority are transformed into a defensive pathology.

Chapter 2 explores Punter’s criteria of the Romantic Gothic tradition as alluded to above. Special attention will be paid first to how Wordsworth’s writing falls under Punter’s literary and socio-political influences on the genre; the former mainly comprising Shakespeare and the graveyard poets, and the latter being the move in the late eighteenth century towards industry and the bourgeoisie lifestyle—i.e., a move away from nature and the natural. Next, this Chapter will show how Wordsworth uses Punter’s three principle gothic figures: the wanderer, the seeker after forbidden knowledge, and the vampire. This explication will illuminate the ways in which Wordsworth’s poetic personae do indeed contain a more Gothic element about them than previously imagined, even the later ones. The Wordsworthian character, it will be shown, is in fact idiosyncratically Gothic in its unresolvable psychological turmoil and anxiety. Particular attention will be paid to “We Are Seven,” the Essays Upon Epitaphs, The Borderers, The Prelude, and “Resolution and Independence.”

Chapter 3 examines Wordsworth’s conception of the sublime and how it relates to what critics have generally termed the Gothic Sublime as opposed to the Romantic Sublime. Wordsworth, according to the popular literature, was in fact the creator/forger of the Romantic Sublime as such. I will first trace the sublime through its various
philosophical iterations, ultimately showing how Wordsworth’s sublime actually fits quite well with the more Gothic type theorized by Schiller and Schopenhauer—that is, of a conception of the sublime as an oceanic abyss in which the observer flounders, attempts to free himself, and then retires in pessimism, madness, or in a perpetual state of discord. Death will be shown to be the primary “image” of the sublime insofar as it cannot be represented. Special attention will be paid to The Prelude and the Lucy poems in order to unpack these themes in Wordsworth’s poetry.

Finally, Chapter 4 will follow Freud’s ideas from Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Poe’s definition of perversity as they relate to the psychology of the (especially Romantic) Gothic character, and how Wordsworth and his personae definitively fall under these trappings. Perversity, as laid out by Poe and as acted out by all the other Romantic Gothic writers’ characters, can most aptly be characterized as the tendency to do something against one’s sense of reason in the absence of reason. The character is then moved to confession. Freud’s concepts of the repetition compulsion and the death drive will be used as a psychoanalytical lens with which to “rationalize” this very irrational behavior. The Borderers will be the primary text in consideration of these themes, followed by other accounts from the poem “Nutting” and Book I of The Prelude.
Chapter 2

By the accounts of most Romantic critics, Wordsworth’s poetry does not contain those elements that would allow him to be classified as a Romantic Gothic writer alongside the others—Byron, Shelley, Keats, Blake, Mary Shelley, Coleridge, and Polidori. Aside from Wordsworth’s treatment of and experiments with the sublime (which will be discussed in Chapter 2)—wherein these critics proclaim a more complete, optimistic sublime as opposed to the Gothic sublime which lacks this sense of completion and optimism—these critics point out that Wordsworth forgoes the Gothic types, tropes, and figures of these other writers. One such critic, David Punter, devotes a chapter of his foundational work *The Literature of Terror* to the Gothic and Romanticism, wherein he acknowledges that the tale of terror did not merely exert its influence on these writers, but that they indeed “all played a part in shaping the Gothic, in articulating a set of images of terror which were to exercise a potent influence over later literary history” (99). Wordsworth, though Punter explicitly leaves him out of this declaration, perhaps more than any of the aforementioned writers had helped to shape the Gothic while at the same time excoriating it in his Preface to the *Ballads*.

This chapter seeks to show that Wordsworth does in fact contribute to this “genre” in a more than merely watered-down sense, while at the same time demonstrating that his writing evinces a darker, more ambivalent outlook than most critics see. An analysis of a few of Wordsworth’s texts of verse and prose (mainly *Essays upon Epitaphs*, *The Borderers*, *The Prelude*, “Resolution and Independence,” and “We Are Seven”) will be conducted with the intention of inserting him into Punter’s requirements
of the Romantic Gothic. Punter expounds upon three main Gothic figures—the wanderer, the seeker after forbidden knowledge, and the vampire—as well as historicizes the Romantic Gothic mode though an explication of both literary and social influences. By authenticating Wordsworth’s certain taxonomy as such, this Chapter will deepen our understanding of the poet as poet in the sense that we may view his world as more fragmentary than complete, more dark than light, and more disruptive than peaceful. Moreover, it will be shown that his characters reflect the Gothic sense of disillusionment from always striving for transcendence but never actually achieving it, revealing the poet’s precarious sense of optimism about the world around him, both physical and spiritual.

Punter, in the chapter “Gothic and Romanticism,” aside from naming three quintessential Gothic figures, theorizes on the historicization of the Gothic as it appeared in the works of the British Romantics. He does this by naming both literary and social influences. Of the latter, Punter ends his chapter on romanticism with an explanation of the historical source of the gothic moment:

Gothic is thus a form of response to the emergence of a middle-class-dominated capitalist economy, and if such an economy prevails in important respects through the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth, it may be possible to explain the persistence of the Gothic symbols in the same terms (128).

This pronouncement is fascinating because it pits the gothic ethos in counter-reaction against what Wordsworth himself (and later, the other poets—Byron and Coleridge
included) disparagingly decried as the gothic genre.¹ Wordsworth famously laments that “[t]he invaluable works of our elder writers, I had almost said the works of Shakespear and Milton, are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse” (The Major Works, 599). Wordsworth describes the principal cause of this blunting of the “discriminating powers of the mind” as the “accumulation of men in cities,² where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies” (599). This description certainly encompasses the “middle-class-dominated capitalist economy” Punter discusses above. Already in Wordsworth we see an element of resignation and fragmentation—that between the natural and “civilized” or political worlds—that will appear in his stories and characters throughout his literary career, particularly in his poem “We Are Seven,” which will be treated shortly. Wordsworth, as well as his character personae, cannot seem to reconcile these two landscapes, and so retreats to the natural world in a vain attempt to attain permanent solace.

Moreover, contrary to the materialistic, urban sources of “gross and violent stimulants,” Wordsworth chooses as his subject “low and rustic life,” and the character of “rural occupations.” Miles paints a gothic picture of Wordsworth’s treatment of the Other as manifesting in such “lowly” or “rustic” figures—ghostly figures of war veterans, peddlers, Cumberland beggars, sturdy peasants, and others—that he qualifies as

² Cf. Punter, as quoted later—“The coming of industry, the move towards the city [. . .]” (128, italics mine)—regarding what “Gothic” is a response to.
determinants of “unease.” Miles then relates this predilection for the common man with a revolutionary politic (a politic that Punter, along with a consensus of gothic scholars, relates to the Gothic): “Wordsworth’s encounters with others has frequently been a source of unease among his readers, solidifying Francis Jeffrey’s intuitive sense that Wordsworth’s demotic representation of his motley crew of the low and middling was ‘Jacobinical’ (65). Roland Paulson’s study Representations of Revolution provides a direct link of the instability as consequence of the French Revolution with the Gothic: “The gothic did in fact serve as a major metaphor with which some contemporaries in England tried to understand what was happening across the channel in the 1790s” (217). He continues:

I do not think there is any doubt,” explains Paulson, “that the popularity of gothic fiction in the 1790s and well into the nineteenth century was due in part to the widespread anxieties and fears in Europe aroused by the turmoil in France finding a kind of sublimation or catharsis in tales of darkness, confusion, blood, and horror. (220-21)

Wordsworth’s own experiments with such tales, then, exemplify an attempt to sublimate this “widespread anxiety” and “turmoil,” but where this sublimation does not achieve a lasting sense of catharsis by the very nature of these representations as turbulent.

Furthermore, Punter marks as essential the birth of the romantic gothic out of the “paranoia” engendered from the “coming of industry, the move towards the city, the regularization of patterns of labour in the late eighteenth century, set up in a world in which older, ‘natural’ ways of governing the individual life [. . .] become increasingly
irrelevant” (Punter, 128)—then we must certainly include Wordsworth in this paradigm, even if Wordsworth’s own appropriation of it is explicitly (though not, as will be shown, actually) anti-gothic.

One such text that showcases this seemingly irreparable disjunction between human civilization and the natural world is the poem “We Are Seven.” The poem reveals this disjunction by representing it in the form of another, more poetic distinction—that between life and death. This distinction is one that the graveyard poets had examined both poetically and philosophically, a group that Punter sees as having been a major literary influence on the Gothic mode of the Romantics. Punter’s discusses both Blake and Coleridge in his connection of the graveyard poets to gothic sensibilities. Of Coleridge he writes: “Coleridge returns constantly to the graveyard topics, to pain, disappointment and melancholy, and again imitates Ossianic poetic prose and the form of the ballad, from ‘Anna and Harland’ in 1790 to ‘Alice du Clos’ in 1828” (100). Again, it is difficult to reconcile how—with “graveyard topics,” “pain,” “disappointment and melancholy,” and “Ossianic poetic prose”—Wordsworth is left out of this context, for these themes are found ubiquitously in his collective works. Abbie Findlay Potts, in his Introduction to The Ecclesiastical Sonnets of William Wordsworth: A Critical Edition, observes that Wordsworth had “hailed evermore devotedly Ossian” (3) as his career moved further into the nineteenth century. He quotes from “Written in a Blank Leaf of Macpherson’s Ossian”: “The son of Fingal [. . .] such was blind / Meonides of ampler mind; / Such Milton, to the fountain head / Of glory by Urania led!” (“Composed or Suggested During a Tour in the Summer of 1833”). We see that Wordsworth, even much
later in his poetic career where the darker elements of his verse is typically seen to have been “baptized,” still attempts to hoist Milton above the grave, in both a figurative sense and more perverse physical sense, to reclaim his influence that, as recounted from the Preface to *The Ballads*, Wordsworth sees as dwindling, *dying*, in the coming of industrial society. The utter passion and heightened sense of enthusiasm with which Wordsworth speaks of such figures only serves to show how desperate and unsuccessful such an endeavor allows, again sinking into the Gothic ethos of incompleteness and madness (mad because of an impotent idealism).

Wordsworth deals with the topic of death as it relates to the living throughout his poetic career.³ “We Are Seven” is one of the earliest and most explicitly “Graveyard” poems of Wordsworth. While not emphatically Gothic, “We Are Seven,” certainly could be considered a late “Graveyard School” poem (Voller, *The Literary Gothic*). The poem opens with the poet-speaker asking, what should a child “know of death?”—or, *should* a child know of death? The subject, an eight-year-old cottage girl, has a “rustic, woodland air,” and is “wildly clad”—the quintessential Wordsworthian subject. She seems—at least to the speaker—to have no recognition of the boundaries, physical and social, between life and death. This little girl, then, transforms the speaker’s initial inquiry into a false premise: the child does not have knowledge of death; near the graves of her deceased siblings, she knits her stockings, hems her kerchief, eats her supper—as if the deceased were still alive. She sings to them and plays around their graves, and, most

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³ The “Lucy Poems” of the *Ballads* could very well be treated here, but I will forego their applicability to my project in this chapter in favor of their implications to the topics of the next chapters.
important, she continues to refer to her and her siblings as “seven,” not “five.” The final stanza is telling of Wordsworth’s perspective on death through child-like eyes:

‘But they are dead; those two are dead!
Their spirits are in heaven!’
‘Twas throwing words away; for still
The little Maid would have her will,
And said, ‘Nay, we are seven!’

To this “little Maid,” there is no separation between the living and the dead. The presumably grown speaker, experienced in the Blakean sense, dwells on this separation, and, as such, represents the confines of something dark, something forbidden whose pale should not be transgressed by man—and the child cannot conceptualize this terminus. This theme of the relationship between humanity and divine, between life and death, would become a major theme haunting most of Wordsworth’s life and works. If any one of the poets mentioned by Punter developed a concern with the grave and the dead, it was Wordsworth. Noted Romanticist Paul Fry relates Wordsworth’s penchant for the grave, a penchant, Fry notes, he shares with Byron: “Wordsworth himself wrote more epitaphs and cenotaphs, both original and translated, than any other notable poet of his period except Southey” (413). One merely has to peruse through a collected works of Wordsworth to acknowledge this fact in both his poetry and prose. And in the first of his Essays upon Epitaphs, written as a stop-gap essay in Coleridge’s The Friend in February of 1810 (Owen and Smyser 45), Wordsworth emphasizes the importance of the proximity between life and death: “[The epitaph] is to be accomplished, not in a general manner,
but, where it can, in close connection with the bodily remains of the deceased” (53, italics Wordsworth’s). The bridging of these realms—the living and the dead—stands as Punter’s most important factor of the Romantic Gothic mode, as it permeates each of his Gothic criteria: “The survival of death is clearly a root motif in all three [principal gothic] symbols” (Punter 120). This “survival,” however (as we will see with the analysis of the seeker of forbidden knowledge figure) remains nebulous and in vain; nowhere in Wordsworth do we actually witness a successful bridging of this “gap” between life and death, between the natural and the artificial as we have just seen with the child and adult figures of “We Are Seven,” and the attempt merely causes Wordsworth’s characters (as well as the poet himself) to retreat to the dark abyss of the “Mind of Man.”

One other major literary influence Punter marks as motivating the British Romantics into a more Gothic mode is Shakespeare. Wordsworth mentions Shakespeare explicitly in the Preface (at the same time as Milton) as well as references him in several works of verse, including The Prelude.4 Moreover, Shakespeare perhaps makes his most salient presence in Wordsworth’s lone dramatic endeavor, The Borderers. This early verse play contains some of the most explicitly gothic elements of perhaps any of Wordsworth’s works,5 with

4 “As Shakespeare in the Wood of Arden placed / Where Phoebe sighed for the false Ganymede [. . .] This, alas, / Was but a dream” (8.187-204).

See also Yimin (2011) in “A Comparative Study of Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Wordsworth’s Prelude”: “Wordsworth takes his root in Shakespeare, not only theoretically, but also practically.”

5 Elements of what Professor de Selincourt in 1940 pieced together as the “Fragment of a Gothic Tale” also made their way into The Borderers.

De Selincourt (Oxford Lectures, 173) along with Legouis (The Early Life of William Wordsworth, 272) also trace the influence of Schiller’s Die Rauber in Borderers, as well as themes redolent of the casuistic hero-villains of traditionally Gothic novels.
such conventions as stormy weather and mist (and sounds of eerie moans within), crime and justice, ambiguity and ambivalence in character motivation, revenge, the villain-hero, the distressed heroine, strong moral closure, sublime views, and, perhaps most suggestive of the genre, the ruined castle. Oswald’s mention of Clifford’s Castle is a case in point in the gothic aesthetic:

Before we enter

The barren Moor, hangs from a beetling rock

The shattered Castle in which Clifford oft

Has held infernal orgies—with the gloom,

And very superstition of the place,

Seasoning his wickedness. The Debauchee

Would there perhaps have gathered the first fruits

Of this mock Father’s guilt. (Late Version, 1842, 2.1.657-64)

Damnable, perverse sexual acts, gloominess, superstition, guilt, wickedness—all are prominent gothicisms, and they manifest throughout the play. Coleman notes, “No matter what form it takes [. . .] the Gothic castle underlines the passage of time,” where “contemporary figures are placed in ruins which suggest old or medieval settings, as in The Mysteries of Udolpho” (36). The passage of time, in the instance of Oswald’s invocation, displays the horror of an imagined past. Coleman, building off Varma, further explains, “[I]n the earlier products of the Gothic school the past is itself an object of terror” (36). Clifford’s castle, in this play, actually acts as the locus of all the Gothic tension present in the play and serves as the source of horror for Marmaduke and his
ultimate “murder” of Herbert, since he perceives that Herbert has given his betrothed—Idonea—up to the sick and disturbed vagaries of Clifford. The castle serves as a source of utter terror in the true sense of the Gothic here because it is so mysterious—that is, the reader is only allowed a vague reference to the depravities that have been reported to transpire there (Clifford in this sense recalls de Sade, a very likely antecedent of Clifford). In other words, the terror of the place is impossible to actual represent, and so remains unrepresented in Wordsworth’s play; this obscurity then parallels Marmaduke’s obscured vision of his position, leading to the chaos and confusion (and his ultimate confinement madness) that ensues.

Shakespeare’s actual presence in *The Borderers* is outlined *ad nauseum* in Charles J. Smith’s “The Effect of Shakespeare's Influence on Wordsworth's ‘The Borderers.’” According to Smith, Wordsworth’s adoption of Shakespeare’s four great tragedies (*Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *Othello*) occurs in four main ways: “1) [H]e imitated Shakespeare in the development of his theme; 2) his characters are composites of Shakespearean characters; 3) his situations are based on similar ones in the four tragedies; 4) he gave all this expression in a language which is markedly Shakespearean in vocabulary, cadence and phraseology” (627). Smith astutely demonstrates imitation upon imitation, one of the most striking being the description of the blind Herbert on the heath in the storm: “A poor forsaken famished blind old man” (5.2.2010), which mirrors Lear’s line regarding himself—“A poor, infirm, weak, and despis’d old man” (3.2.20). It becomes clear by dint of Smith’s exploration that Wordsworth’s own (in a sense, failed) foray into tragic playwriting borrows heavily from Shakespeare. Wordsworth, in fact,
considered himself an “eager student” of Shakespeare (de Selincourt 173), and, as David Bonnell Green makes clear, Wordsworth’s “characteristic attitude [towards Shakespeare] is reverential, indeed almost idealizing, and the views expressed in the letter to Britton are consistent with those found in The Prelude, in other poems, and in the letters” (400-01). Along these lines, Shakespeare’s own penchant for the gothic (ghosts, witches, castles, guilt-ridden/mad wanderers)—but especially for the ultimate fate of madness and tragedy—seems to have permeated Wordsworth’s own sensibilities in considerable measure, not only in the romantic poet’s early development, but doubtlessly throughout his corpus.

Moving on now to Punter’s Gothic figures, the theme of “knowledge of death” as recounted above in “We Are Seven” most closely concerns Punter’s third of his three “principal symbolic figures” that run through the Gothic work of the aforementioned romantic poets: the seeker after forbidden knowledge. Along with the Wanderer and the vampire, the seeker after forbidden knowledge has “desires which are socially insatiable; that is to say, their satiation would involve social disaster, as well as transgression of boundaries between the natural, the human and the divine” (120). “We Are Seven,” as discussed above, falls into this dynamic. Stuart Allen, furthermore, finds the affinity between those who seek after death and social transgression throughout the Ballads and The Prelude:

[T]he liminal figures that [. . .] populate his poetry—evictees, beggars, the mad, blind, maimed, etc.—testify to his awareness that suffering and pain

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Douglas B. Wilson (The Romantic Dream) finds a distinct parallel between Hamlet’s ghost and the haunting of Wordsworth by his father throughout his early career and beyond.
are the constant companions of those society rejects. He writes about the alienated minds and bodies of the living, reflecting upon human decay and death, in the belief that social transformation follows understanding. (3)

Evictees, beggars, the mad—these are the socially outcast of Wordsworth’s world, the world of the early nineteenth-century romantic writers. Allen’s use of the word “liminal” here illustrates as well the boundaries Punter describes above between the natural, the human, and the divine—these are characters on the threshold of the forbidden, between life and death, between mortality and immortality, between “madness” and “sanity.”

Punter uses lines from Shelley’s “Alastor: Or, the Spirit of Solitude” to help explicate his seeker after forbidden knowledge:

I have made my bed
In charnels and on coffins, where black death
Keeps record of the trophies won from thee,
Hoping to still these obstinate questionings
Of thee and thine, by forcing some lone ghost
Thy messenger, to render up the tale
Of what we are. (23-9)

Punter offers up the following reading of the above lines: “Like the graveyard poets, Shelley seeks these kinds of knowledge through the study of death” (120); with “these kinds” referring to “knowledge of eternal life, the philosopher’s stone, those kinds of knowledge which will make men gods.” Of course, Wordsworth, again, falls into the same paradigm. Regarding the first Essay Upon Epitaphs, Wordsworth equates the
desire to “live in remembrance” with “the consciousness of a principle of immorality in
the human soul” (50, italics mine)—i.e. of achieving eternal life through the medium,
textual or otherwise, of the epitaph. The Wordsworthian child seeks after a Punterean
forbidden knowledge at every turn, it seems: “Never did a child stand by the side of a
running stream, pondering within himself what power was the feeder of the perpetual
current, from what never-wearied sources the body of water was supplied, but he must
have been inevitably propelled to follow this question by another” (51, italics mine). I’ve
emphasized the word “propelled” as I believe it highlights the seeker’s insatiable quest
for this kind of divine knowledge: the seeker is, in a sense, impelled by some strange,
perverse force from within to seek, and this search is ineluctable and never quenched.
The question alluded to above, by the way, is as follows: “‘Towards what abyss is [the
stream] in progress? What receptacle can contain the mighty influx?’” (51). Wordsworth
then provides a possible answer, and this answer is, of course, transcendent of known
human bounds: “[T]he spirit of the answer must have been as inevitably,—a receptacle
without bounds or dimensions;—nothing less than infinity” (51, italics Wordsworth’s).
The philosophy and natural bent of the Wordsworthian subject—as outlined by himself—
is that of seeking after forbidden knowledge, and satisfaction will only arrive in infinity;
in other words, the seeker shall never be sated, as Punter suggests. Consider in this same
vein another late poem of Wordsworth’s, “Extempore Effusion Upon the Death of James
Hogg” (composed November 1835):

Yet I, whose lids from infant slumbers
Were earlier raised, remain to hear
A timid voice, that asks in whispers,

‘Who next will drop and disappear?’ (25-8)

For sure, this question—the speaker descending from the moorlands along the banks and among the ruins of his fallen heroes—seeks to know forbidden knowledge, that of Death’s dark interpreter, of God’s mysterious ways. It is of the same substance as the question that provoked Frankenstein’s creature on its quest for procreation, for love, for revenge; the same that compelled the doctor himself to create life (only to see it flounder in “social disaster”). And it is an eternal question, for “who will next drop and disappear” must be forever contemplated (men are born as do they die); Wordsworth continued to ask the question himself his whole long life—encompassing those of his Gothic partners, Punter’s seven—until he himself passed into the void.

The second of Punter’s three principal gothic symbolic figures—the Wanderer—offers easy access into the darker world of Wordsworth. Punter first sketches the wide-ranging influence this figure had on poets of the age: “[The Wanderer] figures in work by Coleridge, Shelley and Byron, as well as in Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* and a whole host of other poems and novels of the period—including, of course, *The Monk*” (114). Punter, again, leaves out the greatest proliferator of the motif during this era: Wordsworth. The Wanderer figures in most, if not all (literally) Wordsworth’s major works, including and especially *The Prelude*. Punter delineates his Wanderer as follows:

The essence of the body [. . .] concerns the idea of a man who, for an ultimate crime against God, often blasphemy or unbelief, is doomed to a

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7 This chapter will forgo an investigation into the “wanderers” of *The Prelude* to make room for their application to the themes discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis.
perpetual life on earth. This perpetual life is never pleasant, but the
interpretation of its significance varies a great deal. In some cases, it is
characterized by a perpetual weariness and tedium, the quintessence of
Weltschmerz and superhuman melancholy[.] (114)

Marmaduke of The Borderers is one such Wanderer, who after committing the murder of
a man whom he loves in a frenzy of psychological confusion, is doomed to a life of
misanthropic brooding and haunting guilt. Marmaduke here has murdered an innocent
man, in his eyes, the ultimate sin, requiring his wandering fate. We know that this is the
ultimate sin because he first lists the other, more mitigating fates of other sinners before
sentencing himself:

[I]in silence hear my doom:

A hermitage has furnished fit relief
To some offenders; other penitents,
Less patient in their wretchedness, have fallen,
Like the old Roman, on their own sword’s point.
They had their choice: a wanderer must I go[.] (V.iii.2307-12, italics

Wordsworth’s)

Wordsworth’s word choice here of “doom” directly matches Punter’s analysis. As the
lines above indicate, the fate of hermitage provides “relief” and still others have taken the
easy way out—suicide. However, Wordsworth’s emphasis on the word “must” is critical
here: it distinguishes those who have a choice and those who are doomed to an inexorable
fate of supreme wretchedness and melancholy. Marmaduke then recounts the utterly abject nature of his circumstances:

No human ear shall ever hear me speak;
No human dwelling ever give me food,
Or sleep, or rest: but, over waste and wild,
In search of nothing; that this earth can give,
But expiation, will I wander on—
A man by pain and thought compelled to live,
Yet loathing life— (V.iii. 2314-20)

Just as Punter points at above, this life is “never pleasant” for Marmaduke, and there is no hope in site, just as the Gothic figure presents itself in the other essential Gothic works of the long eighteenth century. Though Marmaduke does mention the vague hope of transcendence through death, the reader never sees this, and so, again, Wordsworth has only succeeded in not presenting what is unpresentable: death. The Wanderer is then subjected to the perpetual weariness and tedium that Punter describes, and this kind of Limbo becomes the fate of so many other Wordsworth’s wanderers, including the leech gatherer of “Resolution and Independence.”

The figure of the Leech Gatherer (as the poem was originally titled in 1802 five years before it was published), finally, figures into Punter’s third gothic figure: the vampire. Wordsworth may not have written into his work an actual vampire in the traditional sense, as in Byron’s Giaour or Polidori’s Vampyre; however, a case can certainly be made for Wordsworth’s use of the vampire trope in “Resolution and
Independence,” albeit, again, in a more refined sense. James B. Twitchell, in his study *The Living Dead: A Study of the Vampire in Romantic Literature*, approaches the subject as Wordsworth uses it in terms of energy exchange—the basis of the relationship between poet/artist and audience. Twitchell first notes Byron’s likening of the critic during this time to a vampire in *Don Juan*: “The insolent soldiery to soothe and flatter, / With the same feelings as you’d coax a vampire” (XI.62.492-3). The essential process of exchange in “Resolution and Independence” happens as the “life-force seems to have traveled from the old man to the tyro, rejuvenating the dejected young poet while not diminishing the indomitable veteran” (160). Twitchell frames this process in such a way that it mirrors the old man’s “hazardous employment”: “The usual way to gather leeches is with a net, but this old man must stir the muddy waters with a stick and then, using his legs as a bait, he must wade into the shallow water, allowing the leeches to attach themselves” (163). The physical act of sucking blood—of that between host and parasite—is established from the old man’s dealings with the leeches. He is described as “not all alive nor dead,” with “a fire about his eyes” and like “in a dream; / Or like a Man from some far region sent; / To give me human strength, and strong admonishment” (117-19). Twitchell sums up his own reading thusly: “[T]he poet has been in a trance, but it is the almost religious trance of art. And this trance is implied in the subtle analogy of vampirism. The artist gives energy by allowing the perceiver to leech from the strength of his perception, his art” (165). Of the vampire, Punter notes that “the symbol has many references” (117), but that it occurs at its “essence” as the “perverse union of passion and

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8 Cf. *The Prelude*: “His fixed face and sightless eyes, I looked / As if admonished from another world” (7.622-3).
death.” Certainly, there is such a “perverse union” between the old man and the poet of “Resolution and Independence.” However, what really establishes the poem as satisfying Punter’s use of the myth is its clear nature as a religious allegory. As Twitchell explains, “The artist [. . .] echoes Christ’s words, ‘He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood dwelleth in me, and I in him. As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me.’ Hence the last lines: ‘“God,” said I, “be my help and stay secure / I’ll think of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor!”’” (165-66). Twitchell completes his reading, “For all man needs to do to revitalize himself in times of depression is to remember the artistic experience, for in so doing he will be participating in the recharging of energy, the Eucharist of art” (166). This reading wonderfully correlates with Punter’s criteria: “[L]ike the Wanderer, [the vampire] is a curious inversion of the Christian myth of sacrifice” (117). Indeed Wordsworth—in not just his early, more saliently Gothic work, but also in his later endeavors—fulfills Punter’s inclusion criteria just as much, if not more so, than the other Gothic Romantic poets.

Though such an important critic of the Gothic as Punter deems it appropriate to leave Wordsworth out of the Gothic Romantic mode, clearly Wordsworth does deserve a spot on this list. Wordsworth, contrary to what critics have regarded as a Romantic sense of optimism and transcendence in his work, does not and cannot fulfill this attitude. Even the poet’s most lighthearted verse is punctuated with hints at their own desperation, and any thorough look into his career of writing will produce a certain sense of uncertainty in his outlook. Chapter 2 will deal with this same definition of the Gothic as it applies to
the *sublime*; as we shall see, Wordsworth’s exercises with this phenomenon do not invoke Romantic assurance, but rather Gothic obscurity.
Chapter 3

The concept of the sublime is perhaps the most important aspect of the Gothic. As opposed to the Romantic sublime, where most critics find Wordsworth’s own conception of the phenomenon, the Gothic sublime is not escapable through the power of Reason or of its predicate, God. Wordsworth’s version of the sublime has been analyzed again and again by critics, most often with the conclusion that it transcends obscurity and loss, that it achieves a state whereby the observer can circumvent the chaotic abyss of the unrepresentable and subsequently reconcile in a satisfactory way inharmonious contraries. Wordsworth’s texts are certainly fraught with this kind of rhetoric: the speaker of most of his poems, especially his later endeavors, declare passionately the arbitration of the kinds of abstract extremes that G. R. Thompson outlines in *The Gothic Imagination* as being quintessential to the Gothic character—“faith and skepticism, beatitude and horror, being and nothingness, love and hate” (3). However, for all of Wordsworth’s idealism and equanimity, neither he nor his characters ever actually achieve these destinations. For every instance of these wishes in the texts, there is always some allusion to uncertainty or of the ineluctable trappings of the ruinations of Nature; the almost constant hope of these wishes being fulfilled feels close to pathological. In particular, Wordsworth’s nearly exclusive operation within what he terms Imagination (as opposed to Reason) renders void the possibility of escaping the sublime abyss, for Wordsworth’s “Mind of Man” is an oceanic, dark, and terrifying abyss. An extended treatment of *The Prelude* in its various parts will be the main entrance into this topic, and the “Lucy” poems, as well as other more minor works, will serve as support for the kinds
of themes unpacked from *The Prelude*. First, it will be necessary to briefly sketch the history of the sublime in order to determine where Wordsworth’s version may be introduced.

The concept of the *sublime* has seen manifold iterations throughout the extensive history of inquiry devoted to it, and, as Knapp states, “[I]t is hard and a little dangerous to generalize about the sublime” (1007). The history of its philosophical inquiry seems to inhabit a trajectory from the sublime as cathartic and salubrious to the sublime as nightmarish and troubling (the Gothic sublime). The early eighteenth century perspectives of this topic (Cooper, Dennis, Addison) responded to Boileau’s 1674 translation of Longinus’s *Perì hýpsous* (*Traité du sublime*), in which they spoke not of a rhetorical sublime, but one along more “natural” lines. These “natural” phenomena—precipices, deep ravines, raging storms, vast stretches of moorland—incite reactions of amazement, terror, and the like in the visualizing subject; Dennis and Addison related these sublime encounters to religious experiences, as Albrecht observes: “Early writers on the sublime [. . .] found that certain natural objects or phenomena [. . .] suggest the infinite power of God and therefore give rise to the feelings of awe, fear, admiration, astonishment, and devotion associated with the Deity” (83). The sublime moment, in other words, creates a subjective space for meditating on the divine—in other words, it provides a way of knowing God, or of achieving transcendence as such. Dennis’s use of the word “Enthusiastick Terror” (as opposed to “Common Terror”) was meant to pertain to the wrath of God as the highest sublime moment, where eighteenth-century denotations of “enthusiasm” were based around the original Greek root, indicating
“possession by a god, supernatural inspiration, prophetic or poetic frenzy” and “pertaining to, or of the nature of, possession by a deity” (OED, as quoted by Mishra 29). Edmund Burke, in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, distinguished between the “beautiful” and the “sublime,” where the beautiful was symmetrical, ordered, and aesthetically pleasing; and where the sublime refers to the threat of death, where this fear of death is the cause of absolute terror, and yet also an artificial danger one can delight in. Burke’s sublime, though, still had as its “final cause” God triumphing over Satan in *Paradise Lost*, showing the primacy of God in the resolution of the sublime moment, and where the passions of pain and terror can be traced back to the instinct of self-preservation implanted by God (Turner 20).

Immanuel Kant then becomes the “grand patriarch who dominates the [sublime] scene” (Mishra 36) and from whom subsequent theorists of the sublime—Wordsworth included—take as their point of departure. Kant’s third *Critique*—*Critique of Judgement*—published in 1790, details his thoughts regarding the sublime, in large part a piecing together of what Burke had started, by Kant’s own admission. The aspect of Kant’s notion of the sublime relevant to this study is the exigency of reason for complimenting the loss of the imagination into the abyss when the sublime thing becomes too much for the imagination alone to consider. As Kant explains:

> For just as, when we judge the beautiful, imagination and *understanding* give rise to a subjective purposiveness of the mental powers by their *accordance*, so do imagination and *reason* here give rise to such a purposiveness by their *conflict*, namely, to a feeling that we have a pure
and independent reason, or a power for estimating magnitude, whose
superiority cannot be made intuitable by anything other than the
inadequacy of that power which in exhibiting magnitudes (of sensible
objects) is itself unbounded. (116, italics Kant’s, trans. Pluhar)

Kant, of course, ultimately refers to a religious insight here as the dominating force in the
above-mentioned conflict, where God acts as the predicate of reason, which mediates the
imagination and which rectifies or resolves the sublime terror. This is where the Gothic
sublime, as Mishra (rather effectively) defines it, diverges—that is, where it refuses to
accept the power of reason, or God, over the imaginative powers of the mind.

Wordsworth, in Book VI of the 1850 Prelude, seems to be responding directly to Kant’s
assertions when recalling Simplon Pass:

Imagination—here the Power so called
Through sad incompetence of human speech,
That awful Power rose from the mind’s abyss
Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps,
At once, some lonely traveller. I was lost;
Halted without an effort to break through;
But to my conscious soul I now can say—
“I recognise thy glory.” In such strength
Of usurpation, when the light of sense
Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed
The invisible world, doth greatness make abode,
Our destiny, our being’s heart and home,
Is with infinitude, and only there; (592-605)

Wordsworth’s diction is consciously anti-Kantian in its dismissal of the superseding power of *reason* while endowing the Imagination with deific-like attributes. The “Power” of the Imagination is “awful”, having risen from an “abyss” like some indeterminate gnostic form sans knowledge with only pure, infinite potential, as the poet’s destiny indicates. It is “unfathered,” denoting the lack of a creator/prime mover god-like entity, and it is vaporous—amorphous, indefinite, chaotic. When, like a vapor, this power envelops a lonely traveler (here the poet speaker), the traveler is lost, both in the spatial sense as well as in the spiritual and psychological senses. Then, in a move anticipating Whitman, the speaker acknowledges the “glory” of his own soul, in this case using the early modern English genitive “thy” as a determiner, again displacing the power of God/Reason. Finally, when the “light of sense” has been vanquished, our home (whether we be “young or old”) is revealed in a flash—“infinitude.” Wordsworth submits to, rather than seeks to triumph over, the sublime, the fundamental distinction between that of the Romantic spirit and that of the Gothic.

Douglas B. Wilson, in his book *The Romantic Dream*, discusses at length Wordsworth’s concern with the unconscious, especially as it manifests as the uncanny in the Freudian and Schillerian sense. Wilson expounds upon the uncanny as it relates to sublimity: “If [...] sublime moments imply intimations of immortality, they also bring a sense of mortal shame for returning from such overmastering exposure [...] These
‘fallings from us, vanishings’ represent for Wordsworth an *Unheimliche* journey into the abyss” (35). These “fallings” occur often in Wordsworth’s body of both verse and prose and are in fact the bases for his poetic vision—that is, of the inward direction of phenomenological intentionality. The poet’s dismissal of the Kantian transcendental god, of the saving grace of the Christian God in favor of a Whitman-esque god can be found throughout his early as well as later works, with one of the more notable examples appearing in the fragment of *The Recluse* included in his preface to the 1814 version of *The Excursion*:

For I must tread on shadowy ground, must sink
Deep—and, aloft ascending, breathe in worlds
To which the heaven of heavens is but a veil.
All strength—all terror, single or in bands,
That ever was put forth in personal form;
Jehovah—with his thunder, and the choir
Of shouting Angels, and the empyreal thrones,
I pass them, unalarmed. (xi)

Wordsworth’s speaker in this passage pays no mind to God, in all His heavenly magnificence; as quoted from Book the Sixth of the *Prelude* above, Wordsworth perceives such glory in his own soul. The poet must “sink / Deep,” and in so doing ascends to lofty worlds of which even the “heaven of heavens” has no knowledge, as if Wordsworth’s conception of the mind—or imagination—were a Piranesian prison (*Carceri d'invenzione*) caprice, a subterranean lair of labyrinthine complexity, of
fanstastical structures opening up in prodigious scale, and with erratic aggregations of
“monumental architecture and ruin.” The passage from the Preface famously continues:

    Not Chaos, not
    The darkest pit of lowest Erebus,
    Nor aught of blinder vacancy, scooped out
    By help of dreams—can breed such fear and awe
    As fall upon us often when we look
    Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man—
    My haunt, and the main region of my song (xi-ii)

The ambiguity inherent in the use of the word “haunt” here suggests that the poet
frequents this place, but that he also derives a sense disturbing persistence from this
“region.” Wlecke observes in the above lines a “reflexive consciousness” that “discovers
no limiting contours to its introspective plunge and thus finds itself upon a fearful journey
into an open-ended abyss (26, italics mine). The notion of the abyss, of some apparently
bottomless or fathomless chasm or void, as we will see, illustrates one of the overriding
themes defined in Mishra’s theoretization of Gothic sublime.

    One of the essential distinguishing factors of the Gothic sublime lies in its
usurpation over the subject’s ability to transcend the chaos, to rise from the abyss; as we
have seen, Wordsworth’s speakers do not achieve this transcendence, dismissing Kantian
Reason in favor of the bowels of the Mind. When Derrida describes the imagination as
the “privileged presentation of the sublime,” it is in its tendency to lose itself in the abyss
(Abgrund) that opens up because of an over-(or super-)abundance (“excess”) created by a
dual process of attraction and repulsion (129). Mishra relates this idea to Kant: “Even Kant’s classic example of the ‘ocean’ is essentially an evocation of the abyss that threatens to consume and disintegrate phenomena through a diluvian agency” (227). Mishra finishes his thought with the consequence of this threat of a kind of apocalyptic, or life-threatening, flood: “[It] forces the subject to retreat back into the comfortable frame of the beautiful” (227).\(^9\) Wordsworth has said that the abyss—this “invisible world”—is his heart and his home.

Indeed, this “retreat” does not necessarily heal or overcome the source of anxiety or depression. Richard Lansdown discusses this process of retreat in several instances of the so-called “spots of time” in the *Prelude*. To Lansdown—as opposed to other critics (D. J. Moores, Beth Darlington, Duncan Wu) who focus on the renovating value of these “spots” and the psychological health they maintain—these instances are indeed indicative of a kind of pathology (Yu-san Yu has a similar diagnosis in her article on the Fall-Redemption Theme in the *Prelude*). In his discussion of the horse-waiting scene from Book XI, Lansdown acknowledges that Wordsworth would like for these images to provide a permanent sense of good health, but he does not find that they actually do this:

> It is because Wordsworth’s anxieties about his mother and guilt about his father were *not* resolved that they continue to require treatment [. . .] The poetry arises directly out of the feeling that his self-chastising fervor might *not* be ‘misplaced and ignorant’, that though these feelings were

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\(^9\) This apocalyptic flood becomes literal in the Arab story from Book IV of the *Prelude*, which I will treat later.
unconscious they were injurious, that they revealed his true feelings
towards his parents, and that that was the reason they would not go away.
As such they were not sources of nourishment, but something morally far
more rigorous, even humiliating. (31, italics original)

Lansdown’s psychoanalytical analysis of Wordsworth’s “spots of time”—cogent, though transgressive—firmly places Wordsworth’s poetic mind in the realm of the Gothic, where the subject, under the influence of the sublime, falls/retreats into the abyss precisely because he cannot overcome the psychological agitation and confusion. The sublime, in its chaos, is simultaneously perturbing and exciting.

Lansdown’s point can be illustrated with two representative passages near the end of Book XI. The first passage describes the speaker’s visit to Penrith beacon with his family, with his dead father notably missing:

And on the melancholy beacon, fell
The spirit of pleasure and youth’s golden gleam;
And think ye not with radiance more divine
From these remembrances, and from the power
They left behind? So feeling comes in aid
Of feeling, and diversity of strength
Attends us, if but once we have been strong.
Oh! mystery of Man, from what a depth
Proceed thy honours! (321-29)
The conclusion here seems firm, resolute, confident. And yet the very rhetoric of the lines gives the impression of a much less convincing conclusion. The very presence of these words strikes one as wishful thinking, of desperation—an unrelenting desire for psychological health, and yet this does not occur. One last passage from the end of this episode will act as a case in point for this less enthusiastic interpretation:

All these were spectacles and sounds to which
I would often repair and thence would drink,
As at a fountain; and I do not doubt
That in this later time, when storm and rain
Beat on my roof at midnight, or by day
When I am in the woods, unknown to me
The workings of my spirit thence are brought.

The last line is most crucial here: “thence are brought” implies a complete lack of agency with regard to the way in which these “spots of time” are supposed to “heal.” If indeed the mind/spirit is brought here each and every time the rain beats on the speaker’s roof, this implies a perpetual psychological crisis, where the memories only serve to temporarily mitigate. The deeper psychological issues here, that is, with the guilt induced from the death of the father (a very Gothic trope indeed) are not treated, and therefore remain ever perturbing. The very fact that Wordsworth published more versions of these scenes, culminating in the 1850 version, supports Lansdown’s thesis that Wordsworth could not attain a sense of peace from these trappings of the mind, these haunting reminders of a very turbulent and troublesome past (Wordsworth had to deal with the
deaths of many close friends and family members, for instance—this fact may be have been the cause for Wordsworth’s preeminent preoccupation with the epitaph as poetic mode). And, as noted in Chapter 1, the “passage of time” itself is one of the prime Gothic sources of implacable terror, and is one of the key components of the Gothic sublime as such.

The bounded nature of this process of remembrance as explicated by the books of The Prelude represents a kind of perverse cycle of joy/idealism, followed by disenchantment or frustration, followed by suffering and vain attempts at sufficiently alleviating this suffering, followed by an ultimate fate of madness, mindless wandering, or emptiness in death, and this conception of the sublime is idiosyncratically Wordsworth. In his essay on the sublime, “The Sublime and the Beautiful,” Wordsworth explains that the mind tries “to grasp at something towards which it can make approaches but which it is incapable of attaining” (Prose II, 356). Matthew Brennan, in his discussion of Wordsworth’s essay, notes that (with “Tintern Abbey”) the poet, in an attempt to “depict the perceiving sublime consciousness” actually “dissolve[s] the topographical forms” [conventional subjects, which for Wordsworth, again, includes the suffering], “rendering their landscapes indistinct and obscure, [. . .] and obscurity is the essence of the Sublime” (52-3). These unfruitful attempts at portraying the sublime, or at attaining some kind of transcendent object or state, parallels the “quests” of both the Arab and the Vaudracour in the Prelude. G. R. Thompson, in his collection of essays on the gothic, The Gothic Imagination, explains that what the essays continually suggest is that “the kind of high Gothic represented by Melmoth, or Moby-Dick, or Heart of Darkness is
the embodiment of demonic-quest romance, in which a lonely, self-divided hero embarks on an insane pursuit of the Absolute” (2). From book V of the 1805 Prelude, the character of the Arab commences a kind of mad crusade to save Literature itself, or to prevent “Destruction to the Children of the Earth” (98). The Arab’s quest is mad because he already knows the prophecy—that these Books, the one “that held acquaintance with the stars” and the other that was a consolation of “many Gods”, will be destroyed from deluge (again recalling Mishra’s words above)—to be true. As the speaker watches the flood waters chasing and nearing the Arab, he cannot help but feel compassion for the Arab’s enterprise born from the “blind and awful lair / Of such a madness” (151-52). Wordsworth, even though he knows the quest to be doomed, sees a certain “reason” in striving nonetheless; he reveres the dreamed Arab for that point alone and wishes that he too could “share that Maniac’s anxiousness” (160). The Arab’s quest here perfectly confirms Thompson’s account of the Gothic quest outlined above: “This self-destructive [the Arab would surely have drowned had the speaker not woken] quest is metaphysical, mythic, and religious, defining the hero’s dark or equivocal relationship to the universe” (2). Wilson makes similar comments on this dream of the Arab: “Although Wordsworth follows the Romantic pattern of empathy for the questing Arab, he also recognizes, as we have seen, the pitfalls that lie in wait for imagination” (170, italics mine). The imagination succumbs to madness in the sublime apocalyptic moment, and Wilson himself relates the “doomed quest” of the Arab—the “holocaust as an irresistible force”—to a “stark type of the Kantian sublime” (170). This sublime is a “stark type” because it lacks the Kantian transcendence, and Wordsworth’s speakers are continually
drawn to such doomed errands, knowing that they will not avail, and as a result become
wanderers of the earth, much like the poet figure (in addition to the leech gatherer
himself) in “Resolution and Independence”: “We poets in our youth begin in gladness; /But thereof comes in the end despondency and madness” (48-9).

The above pattern of idealism-turned-madness also occurs in the story of
Vaudracour and Julia, which ends Book the Ninth of the Prelude. This poem, published
separately after it was removed from the 1805 version of the Prelude, tells the tale of the
woeful love of the title hero and heroine set against the backdrop of a protest against the
ancient régime’s abuses of citizens’ “natural” rights (Banks 275). Chester Shaver finds
that this tragedy may have derived from the same source as that of an abridged anecdote
in Joshua Lucock Wilkinson’s The Wanderer (55). Shaver makes this connection via the
dénouement of Wordsworth’s story, which he describes as “ultimate loss of sanity” (55).
The poem begins on the most optimistic of notes:

Oh! happy time of youthful lovers! thus
My Story may begin, Oh! balmy time
In which a Love-knot on a Lady’s brow
Is fairer than the fairest Star in heaven!
To such inheritance of blessedness
Young Vaudracour was brought […] (556-61)

Vaudracour’s story starts with the blessing of youthful love, and, with it, the idealism and
passion of youthful protest and resolve. However, by the end of the story, just as in
Lucock’s Wanderer, this valiant feeling goes away:
Thus lived the Youth
Cut off from all intelligence with Man,
And shunning even the light of common day;
Nor could the voice of Freedom, which through France
Soon afterwards resounded, public hope,
Or personal memory of his own deep wrongs,
Rouze him; but in those solitary shades
His days he wasted, an imbecile mind.

This ending conforms with Wilson and Thompson’s discussion of the “doomed quest” inherent in the Gothic sublime, where Vaudracour mirrors the Byronic hero-quest: in search of the *absolute* or the *ideal*, the subject’s entire environment turns “solitary,” and the hero wastes away an idiot in chains no longer resolute, but floundering under an irresolution of conflicting cultures. Mishra also mentions this character in the context of an “impossibly reactionary ideology” of the French Revolution with his discussion of the Gothic sublime: “It was the old régime that was the authoritarian law of the father against which a Wordsworthian Vaudracour [. . .] would rebel unsuccessfully” (14). This dynamic obviously follows much of the 18th century’s fixation on authority in the form of the king or the father, and the anxiety of usurpation thereof. Roland Paulson, it will be remembered from Chapter 1 of this thesis, finds a very convincing argument of the Gothic as a point of convergence for the cultural and political trends surrounding the French Revolution. Wordsworth’s 1805 Vaudracour may very well have been born of
this *sublimation*, where the representation of idealism crumbles in its own impossibility, giving way to an “oceanic” abyss of confusion and darkness.

The chaotic, apocalyptic sea of the Arab story recalls, in a sense, Kant’s classic example of the ocean as mind is likened to an abyss. Mishra, appropriating the appropriate parts of Kant’s ocean metaphor for his conception of the Gothic sublime, finds this imagery as well in Schopenhauer’s conception of consciousness, along with the other philosophers after Kant who moved the sublime into the domain of the gothic:

Schiller’s connection of the sublime with “the *pure daemon*” in us, as both an ontology and a phenomenology, Hegel’s incorporation of negativity in the miserable corporeality of the Real, and Schopenhauer’s decisive rewriting of the sublime through the nirvana principle (an oceanic consciousness that is clearly linked to the Indian sublime [. . .]) begin to shift the sublime toward the Gothic.

In this way, Mishra connects Schiller’s impression of the daemonic in us and Schopenhauer’s idea of oceanic dissolution with the inadequacy of presentation he finds at the “heart” of the gothic sublime. This inadequacy is due to the paradox of representation inherent in the sublime object, where this object offers a view of, as Žižek describes it, “the dimension of what is unrepresentable” (203). In other words, the sublime is unable to be represented or to be externalized imagistically or verbally. As Mishra points out, there was “no more sublime passage” for Kant “in the Jewish Law than the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image [. . .]” (127). The “no more sublime passage,” then, would be death itself, defined, as Mishra states, “in
terms of absolute negativity (36-7). Instead of a metaphysical human superiority offered by Kant, with the Gothic sublime, death becomes the focus—not because of a sense of overcoming it, but in light of the mode and act of death itself. Death is treated in a contemplative fashion, and it reminds the speaker and the reader of humanity’s inability to prevail over it. As noted in Chapter 1, Wordsworth—perhaps more than any other Romantic poet—writes about death. Mishra notes that in the Gothic sublime, death tempers human idealism and replaces it with “pessimism and human insignificance”. An epitaph is, for Wordsworth, the “epitome of poetry because it is analogous to the ‘spot of time’ and his own poetic mode” (Devlin 121). Even though the epitaph seeks to make something immortal (and Wordsworth’s essays on the subject are largely focused on this idea), we can see from most of the poetry—including the Lucy poems and the Prelude—that death is the end, “the end of narrative, and of history, as epic certainty is replaced by Gothic unpredictability” (Mishra 37).

The Lucy poems are perhaps the best examples of the Gothic sublime as death, where, again, death cannot be represented, and therefore the sublime takes control of observer rather than the other way around. Wordsworth’s Lucy, in “Three years she grew in the sun and shower” for instance, has died, and has bequeathed to the speaker a heath, a “calm and quiet scene; / The memory of what has been, / And never more will be” (39-42, italics mine). The poet in these lines acknowledges the finality of death and its power to supersede all else. Here there can be no special pleading; what’s gone is gone, and the natural world does not mind. In this sense, the Wordsworthian character—discharged soldiers, wanderers, imbeciles, beggars, the abject—exists in a rather Naturalist world
that might anticipate Stephen Crane or even Cormac McCarthy. The poet, in the lines immediately preceding those above, submits to nature’s dominance: “Thus Nature spake—The work was done— / How soon my Lucy’s race was run!” (37-8). This submission to the power of nature (or to the impotence of man) is again revealed in another Lucy poem—‘She dwelt among the untrodden ways’. Mark Jones, in his Case Study of the Lucy poems, discusses the deconstructionist “disenchantment-readings” of the lyrics, answering the question of whether or not Wordsworthian nature is benign. In the case of Lucy, nature is ambivalent, capricious, uncaring; Carson Hamilton furthers this point:

Wordsworth was not as mystical as some critics make him out to be in the [Lucy] series. The girl had something the matter with her that we might have called consumption. [. . .] Without healing, without so much as sustaining, Nature deserted her. The whole series presents a Nature that could not do anything to prevent change, either growth or decay, except to end all change (177-8).

Hamilton refers to a cancelled stanza in the “Song” poem that had originally shown up in Wordsworth’s and Dorothy’s letter to Coleridge from December 1798, having been placed before the third stanza:

And she was graceful as the broom

That flowers by Carron’s side;

But slow distemper checked her bloom,

And on the Heath she died.
If the series has one thing in common, it is that they start off in optimism and delight and end in death and despair. Though these poems may function as epitaphs, they do not immortalize the subject, just the delicate and confused memory of the subject.

As we have seen, Wordsworth, rather than inhabiting a conception of the sublime as inferior to the powers of the human mind, writes of one where the “Mind of Man” becomes its own sublime—chaotic, deep, and insurmountable. *The Prelude*, for all its moments of insubstantial cries for relent of Gothic anxiety, presents instance after instance of the failings of these moments. Ultimately, it is Nature that opens its storm clouds over the poet, and it is Nature that “leads” the poet towards trouble, and “transplants” him upon situations of inevitable dread and apprehension. And Nature, as shown above, is merely a projection of the visionary sublime—that is, of the “Mind of Man,” of Wordsworth’s own dark abyss.
Chapter 4

One main unifying aspect in the Gothic writing of the Romantic poets is their tendency to create characters haunted by an ineffable guilt derived from the perpetration of a crime committed against humanity or nature under perverse influences. In this phenomenon, the Gothic figure is often compelled into the corrupt action by unconscious or unknown forces from within, and this “offense” is usually followed by an almost immediate sense of dread or compunction manifested in the form of irrational or metaphysical terror. According to G. R. Thompson, principle components in the “vision of man” that the “Dark Romantics opposed to the mainstream of Romantic thought” included “a propensity for seemingly perverse or evil moral choices that had no firm or fixed measure for rule, and a sense of nameless guilt combined with a suspicion that the external world was a delusive projection of the mind” (5, italics mine). The idea of the external world being a “projection of the mind” fits well with Wordsworth’s theories and verse on the sublime and the Imagination as examined in the previous chapter. Nearly all of the so-called “Dark Romantics” created such a figure—Byron’s Manfred, Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, Mary Shelley’s Dr. Frankenstein—and Wordsworth was no exception. This chapter will explore the figure of the guild-ridden, perverted, and penitent “criminal” as it is embodied in three of Wordsworth’s works: The Borderers,¹⁰ “Nutting,” and The Prelude, with the first of these receiving the bulk of the treatment in light of its prefatory material. An investigation into Poe’s notion of perversity as well as Freud’s concepts from Beyond the Pleasure Principle will be conducted to help theorize the

¹⁰ All subsequent quotations from the play proper are from the 1842 version.
psychology behind this model. Aside from inserting Wordsworth into the Dark Romantic vein, this chapter will ultimately endeavor to show that these characters showcase a more pessimistic and generally disturbing facet of Wordsworth’s poetic universe. Where the poet’s outlook has widely been considered to contain an almost ubiquitous impression of resolution and coherence, I will show through this project that his writing presents a much more incomplete, vexatious sensibility regarding humanity and its relationship to social and natural environments.

All of the above aspects of the gothic hero as exemplified in the Dark Romantic poets—including Wordsworth—have been most adequately externalized (to the extent that they can be defined) in Edgar Allan Poe’s texts centered on what he terms Perversity. It should first be noted that Poe’s writings, especially his early experiments in verse, were very much influenced by these poets. James M. Hutchisson, for instance, finds that the greatest inspiration for Poe’s *Tamerlane and Other Poems* came from Byron (21). Joseph Krutch further finds that these early works were inspired in part by the poetry of Percy Shelley and Coleridge (65). Woodberry—in *Life of Poe*—states that Coleridge was the “guiding genius of Poe's entire intellectual life” (qtd. in Baker, 94). And Michael Hinden reveals Poe’s debt to Wordsworth in what is considered to be Poe’s most incoherent work, the “Stanzas.” There is no question that Poe had read, studied, and employed many of the same mechanisms exercised by the great Romantic poets he revered so deeply, and so it is no surprise to find this influence so heavily exhibited in some of Poe’s most discomfiting works of prose, namely *The Black Cat* and *The Imp of the Perverse*. The Wordsworthian—and, consequently, the Romantic—appeal for the
emotion or Imagination over the faculty of Reason appears in the very first sentence of
*The Imp of the Perverse*, where the narrator describes a “propensity which, although
obviously existing as a radical, primitive, irreducible sentiment, has been equally
overlooked by all the moralists who have preceded them. In the *pure arrogance of
reason*, we have all overlooked it” (309, italics mine). We have overlooked it precisely
because this motive defies reason; the narrator would later describe this *primum mobile*
as a “*mobile* without motive, a motive not *motivirt*” and that ‘through its promptings we
act, for the reason that we should *not*’ (311, italics Poe’s). The narrator would attribute
the influence of these promptings to one’s procrastination, one’s destruction from falling
over the edge of a precipice looked over, and finally to his confession of a crime, the
prosecution of which he otherwise would have escaped. As we shall see, this last
instance parallels the fate of Marmaduke in *The Borderers*; further explication of this
phenomenon of *perversity*, however, is merited beforehand.

The madman’s commission of a heinous crime, heinous at least as perceived by the
perpetrator, presupposes a sense of perversion inhabiting and influencing the body and mind of
the afflicted being. The OED defines perversion as a “distort[ion] or corrupt[ion of] the original
course, meaning, or state of (something),” and so in the first sense perversity simply indicates a
devation of or a straying from the norm. One is said to be perverted if he or she commits an act
contrary to the prevailing standards of common law or decency. The appellation of “pervert” to a
child molester, pedophile, or even just a person with a penchant for the sexually explicit falls into
this mold of moving against the established paradigms of propriety and morality. The OED’s
second sense of the word concerns our attention more: to “lead (someone) away from what is
considered natural or acceptable.” The difference between the two denotations, while simple,
alerts us to the true implications of perversity: while the first sense speaks of someone breaking with an abstraction such as law or religion, the second (related to our study) implies corruption of the person himself. In other words, someone or something causes the person to stray. In each of the works treated in this project—Marmaduke, the speaker of “Nutting,” and the child speaker of Book I of The Prelude—the “something” in question lies within the individual committing the act; a crisis of the mind occurs wherein the body finds itself impelled towards perversion by internal, apparently involuntary forces (a kind of “imp”). Finally, after the perverted act has been committed, an equally perverse drive impels the individual to broadcast his crime. Joswick writes of Poe’s troubled narrators, “The madman succumbs to compulsions of a deep torment: his is a mind divided against itself, obsessed with phantoms of its own hidden devising and betrayed into self-exposure and self-destruction by an uncontrollable impulse to confess” (236). The impulse to confess seems to stem from a desire for the torment induced by guilt to relent; however, this confession does nothing to mitigate the emotional suffering, and yet the individual continues to confess anyway in a kind of Freudian repetition compulsion. The madman is consequently left to wander in perpetual agony over the deed, just as in the character of Marmaduke, whose story will now be examined.

Wordsworth’s play The Borderers concerns an individual, Marmaduke, who, in a fit of psychological confliction, murders an innocent man, the father of the woman he loves. Wordsworth describes in a preface to the Early Version (1797) the motivations behind his tragic hero:

[T]hey are [. . .] in his restless disposition, in his disturbed mind, in his superstition, in irresistible propensities to embody in practical experiments his worse and most extravagant speculations, in his thoughts and in his
feelings, in his general habits and his particular impulses, in his perverted reason justifying his perverted instincts. (67)

Wordsworth’s diction here nearly mirrors that of Poe in his stories of “perverseness,” and Wordsworth uses the word “perverted” as a modifier for Marmaduke’s instincts. For instance, Poe, in *The Imp of the Perverse*, broaches his subject by talking about how the idea of this imp, because it is so primal, has never really occurred to our empirical, reasoning selves: “We saw no need of the impulse—for the propensity” (309). The words “impulse” and “propensity” are used by both authors here to describe the same concept. The acting individual’s mind gives way completely to irrationality, and one’s darker unconscious (in the Jungian sense) is allowed to reign; what is worst in the individual takes hold over any sense of ethics, morality, sympathy, and—most of all—reason. In fact, Wordsworth’s epigraph to the 1799 version of the play also reflects Poe’s words regarding perversity. Wordsworth quotes Pope:

> 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.  

11 (72)

Wordsworth clearly wanted to frame the actions and motivations of his characters, particularly his chief character Marmaduke (or Mortimer in the Early Version), with this notion in mind—that is, reason cannot suffice as a faculty that one may analyze or unpack the vagaries of humankind. As Poe proclaims, this instinct escapes the scope and

faculties of the reasoning intellectual, philosopher, or (in Poe’s day) phrenologist. There is no explanation for the behavior, unless that explanation be that it occurs because it should not.

Poe suggests that the source of this type of perverted conduct may be beyond the purview of deduction because of its “supererogation”—the fundamental aspect of it. Poe observes that “it is a radical, a primitive impulse—elementary. This “paradoxical something” is an “innate and primitive principle of human action” (310). These words reiterate the point that this unknown force that impels the body forth to commit the deed comes from within; it is an inherent aspect of all humans, and it exists within the psyche. Both Marmaduke and the narrator of The Black Cat are propelled into their deeds, they say, from some daemon force. Marmaduke, for instance, laments, “I am the man [. . .] Who, casting as I thought a guilt Person / Upon Heaven’s righteous judgment, did become / An instrument of Fiends” (V.iii.2177-82). Poe’s narrator uses the exact same terminology to describe the corruption of his character into a criminal: “[M]y general temperance and character—through the instrumentality of the Fiend Intemperance—had [. . .] experienced a radical alteration for the worse” (281). Of course, these fiends reside inside one’s mind. Wordsworth, in the Preface to The Borderers, in an attempt to delineate the features of his character, states, “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” (66). It is within one’s own mind, then, that the individual possessed with some preternatural determinant finds a cause as well as an effect for the crime. Just before this line, Wordsworth elaborates on how a motive may be derived from the
absence of an actual motive—that is, within the individual: “What are then his motives? First it must be observed that to make the nonexistence 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” (66). We attain two themes from this passage. The former puts forward the idea that the determination of a motive may arise from the complete absence of one (at least consciously); this of course mirrors, again, the language of poe: “[I]t is, if fact, a mobile without motive, a motive not motivirt (310). In other words, the motive is found a priori within the abyss (void) of the mind, and this motive is sustained by its own non-existence—the very fact that there is no motive becomes the new motive, where the madman acts because he has no reason to act. The latter makes the point that this psychological creation incites more than just madmen, that we are all inflicted with this disposition. Wordsworth here, just like Pope in his first Epistle to his Moral Essays, universalizes the pathology of the perverse. What person (as Poe would similarly ask his readers) has not been compelled into action thusly? The Wordsworthian character—not just common, but held back by something, whether it is poverty, sickness, psychological turmoil, guilt, or the like—besides using his or her mind as a lenitive or a source of beauty, resolution and coherence of a fragmented self (indeed far from it, actually) will also indulge this darker side of the human psyche and suffer the confounding implications as such. The speaker of “Nutting,” the boy of the Book I of The Prelude, the Arab of Book V, Vaudracour of Book IX, the narrator of the “spots of time” pieces in the later books, and the leech gatherer of Resolution and Independence all fall prey to this ailment.
Related to the idea of this retreat into the abyss of the “Mind of Man” (“a thousand times more beautiful than the earth on which he dwells”) is the Gothic idea of the conflicted self. This conflict usually resides between a conscious and an unconscious, an ego and an id, a grasping for faith and a predilection for chaos and violence. Robert Miles summarizes this overriding Gothicism in his *Geneology* of the genre: “The Gothic may evince no single dialectic, but there is broad agreement that the Gothic represents the subject in a state of deracination, of the self finding itself dispossessed in its own house, in a condition of rupture, disjunction, fragmentation” (3). Miles then attempts to stray from what he sees as a general tendency of theorists to let these disjointed parts remain as such; he in fact perceives a potential for, if not a reconciliation, a dialogue of sorts whereby these parts might be thrust into play with one another. This is precisely the mode within Wordsworth operates, as Chapter 2 explicates—the constant tension (a Blakean marriage) between categorically opposed, yet eternally related, concepts. G. R. Thompson confirms Miles’s supposition about the Gothic for the Romantic writers: “Romantic Gothic deals with the tormented condition of a creature suspended between the extremes of faith and skepticism, beatitude and horror, being and nothingness, love and hate—and anguished by an indefinable guilt for some crime” (3). These oppositional abstractions—faith and skepticism, beatitude and horror, and the like—exist within Wordsworth’s universe as ever present and ever conflicted, and yet they are thrust into a dialogue with each other of the type Miles achieves in his book. But this does not mean that the person through whom these components interact is made better off for it, or that this person achieves some kind of transcendence and divine knowledge because of it, as
many Wordsworth critics of a more Romantic-sans-Gothic bent would have it. All of the characters from Wordsworth’s verse mentioned above end up either a wanderer, in madness, or in perpetual anguish over an obscure sense of indiscretion, and Marmaduke falls into all three of these categories.

The character of Marmaduke in *The Borderers* undergoes each of the extremes outlined by Thompson above. The entirety of the play, in fact, presents the emotional torment of Marmaduke brought about through his inability to resolve his conflicting circumstance. There are very few moments when he actually seems sure of himself, and these are punctuated not by end stops, but by question marks and ellipses. The only moment when Marmaduke seems cognitively coherent about something is at the *dénouement* of the final Act, where the audience is left with Marmaduke’s self-assured doom:

    a wanderer must I go,

    The Spectre of that innocent Man, my guide.

    No human hear shall ever hear me speak;

    No human dwelling ever give me food,

    Or sleep, or rest: but, over waste and wild,

    In search of nothing, that this earth can give,

    But expiation, will I wander on—

    A Man by pain and thought compelled to live,

    Yet loathing life—(2312-20)
His fate, as in so many other Wordsworth characters and speakers, is ceaseless *agony* (in the Greek sense of the word), the wayward way of the wanderer. There is some vague promise in the final line of the play of appeasement “In Heaven” and a death given by “Mercy,” but the audience does not witness this—the moment never comes. If Wordsworth may be considered to be the optimistic type Romantic (in the sense that Mishra invokes) as opposed to the Dark or Gothic Romantic, then it is only in this artificial, false capacity, the impotent residue of faith or the cracked and smoked glass of the blind man’s rose-colored spectacles. Elsewhere in the play the reader discovers lines like “And what are a few throes of bodily suffering / If they can waken one pang of remorse?” and:

‘Twas dark—dark as the grave; yet did I see,
Saw him—his face turned toward me; and I tell thee
Idonea’s filial countenance was there
To baffle me—it put me to my prayers.
Upwards I cast my eyes, and, through a crevice,
Beheld a star twinkling above my head,
And, by the living God, I could not [commit murder]. (984-90)

Marmaduke’s appeals to God are not met, or if they ever were the answers were predicated on deception since his story ends in a strong feeling of betrayal yet an even more overriding feeling of self-loathing. The “dialogue” between faith and skepticism, between love and hate—his love for the man he leaves on the deserted moor to die expressed multiple times throughout the various Acts (“There cannot come a day when I
shall cease / To love him”) only to be supplanted by the urge to destroy—produces no synthesis, only despair.

The love-hate dynamic expressed above, particularly in the sense of having the perverse urge to destroy that which you love, exists as a major motif within the Romantic Gothic ethos. Aside from Marmaduke’s actual “murder” of the person whom he could never cease to love, this relationship is also expressed when he begins to confess to Idonea his crime:

Proof after proof was pressed upon me ; guilt
Made evident, as seemed, by blacker guilt,
Whose impious folds enwrapped even thee ; and truth
And innocence, embodied in his looks,
His words and tones and gestures, did but serve
With me to aggravate his crimes, and heaped
Ruin upon the cause for which they pleaded. (2226-32)

The more innocent and truthful—and therefore loving—Herbert’s gestures and mannerisms showed, the more they only served to fuel Marmaduke’s perversity. The sensibilities of Marmaduke here parallel those of the narrator in The Black Cat, where the cat’s indications of affection and companionship no longer provide a cause for comfort and love for the narrator, but a source of intransigent contempt:

Whenever I sat, it would crouch beneath my chair, or spring upon my knees, covering me with its loathsome caresses. If I arose to walk it would get between my feet and thus nearly throw me down, or, fastening its long
and sharp claws in my dress, clamber, in this manner, to my breast. At such times, although I longed to destroy it with a blow, I was yet withheld from so doing, [. . .] by absolute dread of the beast. (285)

In both cases, perversity causes the individual to project fear and enmity onto the former object of love, to interpret as threatening and dubious that behavior that had previously (or would in other circumstances) been understood as amatory. The perverse has taken hold. In the Preface of the 1799 version of the play, Wordsworth writes, “But there are particles of that poisonous mineral of which Iago speaks gnawing his inwards; his malevolent feelings are excited and he hates the more deeply because he feels he ought not to hate” (66). This “poisonous mineral [. . .] gnawing his inwards” seems to be the imp of which Poe speaks, and indeed Poe uses the same language to explicate this backwards tendency: “[T]hrough its promptings we act, for the reason that we should not” (310). Such a character who hates because he feels he ought not to, or for the reason that he “should not,” can be found in both Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, the latter being perhaps the prime example of the Romantic Gothic (Punter sees it as such). In the *Rime*, the Ancient Mariner destroys the albatross whom he loves and who is loved by the whole crew for guiding them out of the icy chaos. Similarly, Dr. Frankenstein is moved to despise and to destroy that which he created out of the love for science and pursuit of the mysteries of the cosmos. We shall see this act repeated throughout Wordsworth’s verse.

One last common aspect I wish to show in these characters is the unrelenting urge within them all to confess their crime. For example, the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* acts
as one long confession, where the wedding guest is made to hear the Mariner’s story; it is implied that this act of recounting the story will go on for the rest of the Mariner’s life (and beyond, since we are still reading his story today), where the Mariner here becomes a kind of Sisyphean raconteur insofar as he will never attain peace. Victor Frankenstein, in the same way, must relate his deeds to Captain Walton. Wordsworth’s character of Marmaduke is, again, no exception. Marmaduke describes his need to confess (to Idonea, the daughter of Herbert) as a kind of curse:

There is a malady—

*(Striking his heart and forehead) And here, and here,

A mortal malady.—I am accurst:

All nature curses me, and in my heart

*Thy* curse is fixed; the truth must be laid bare.

It must be told, and borne. I am the man,

[. . .]

Through me, through me,

*Thy* father perished. (V.iii.2172-83)

The fact that Marmaduke feels “accurst” here implies that he is compelled into confession. The guilt in his heart has overrun him; even though no one saw him last with Herbert on the moor, he could not contain himself in his proclamation to the world, especially to the one he loves, Idonea, the daughter of the man he killed. Poe’s narrator in *The Imp of the Perverse* similarly goes through the pangs of being cursed with guilt: “I became blind, and deaf, and giddy; and then, some invisible fiend, I thought, struck me
with his broad palm upon the back. The long-imprisoned secret burst forth from my soul” (314); *The Black Cat* narrator goes through the same process. The psychology behind this compulsion towards one’s own doom marks a reversal of Foucault’s conception of the “self-enclosed expression” of the epic poets of the past, which was a drive towards immortality: “[W]riting so as not to die. . . . is a task undoubtedly as old as the world” (53).12 Wordsworth describes this same desire for immortality in his 1810 *Essays upon Epitaphs*, wherein he discusses the possibility of the dead living on past their remains through the language of their gravestones and other writings left behind. Mishra writes, “The great epic poets, [ . . .] through their glorification of personality and a conception of utterance as *endless repetition* indeed got around the compulsion toward death by effectively stilling narratives” (23, italics mine). However, in the Gothic sphere, this process is reversed, where this “endless repetition” is instead used towards the opposite end—towards death. These Gothic writers, Wordsworth included, can only repeat an ambition for representing the sublime without ever being able to find sufficient means of imagistic or verbal externalization. Foucault expounds upon this reversal shortly after the text quoted above in “Language to Infinity”: [The Gothics] were not meant to be read at the level of their writing or the specific dimensions of their language; they wished to be read for the things they recounted, for this emotion, fear, horror, or pity” (63). It is this type of perverse repetition that Freud discusses at length in relation to his conception of the death drive.

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Sigmund Freud invokes the “repetition-compulsion” in his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where the phenomenon is first illustrated with the case study of a neurotic child in chapter II; Bartlett H. Stoodley summarizes the significance of the case: “The tendency [of the child] to play the game again and again with the same tension-producing situation presumably would produce a balance of pleasure through the ‘satisfaction’ or ‘gratification’ of the drive for mastery” (174). So we may understand one’s compulsion to repeat an experience, even if—as in the case of the child—the experience may be painful one (here we also see a glimpse of the *imp* described above), as the attempt to “master” or control a situation—that is, to mitigate the sense of anxiety or fear that might accompany or plague the mind of the “neurotic.” This sense of the *repetition-compulsion* as alleviation of anxiety is clearly the case with the Mariner and the others as shown above. Freud’s examination of this phenomenon, however, delves deeper than the aforementioned utility:

The manifestations of a compulsion to repeat (which we have described as occurring in the early activities of infantile mental life as well as among the events of psycho-analytic treatment) exhibit to a high degree an instinctual [“*Triebhaft*”—bears much more of a feeling of urgency than the English ‘instinct’” (Strachey, trans.)] character and, when they act in opposition to the pleasure principle, give the appearance of some ‘daemonic’ force at work. (Freud 41)
So the repetition-compulsion, when working against the pleasure principle, acts in such a way as to render the individual passively responding to his or her instinct. The translator’s note offers valuable insight here, for the sense of urgency connoted by ‘treiben’ furthers the understanding of this compulsion as aiding in Romantic Gothic’s sense of perversity, which operates in such a compulsive, pressing way, especially with regards to the poets’ characters’ imperative sense of confession. Obviously, the reader will recall Freud’s concept of the passive ‘treiben’ here manifesting in numerous places in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, particularly in the mention in Part V of the Polar Spirit’s “fellow-daemons” who altogether determine the extent of the Mariner’s hellish penance and who also guide the ship for the otherwise feeble Mariner. Freud’s phenomenon of neurotic repetition as aided by “daemons” or “fiends” gains expression in Marmaduke, and, as will now be investigated, the speakers of Nutting and The Prelude.

In the poem “Nutting,” Wordsworth describes an initially auspicious scene where the speaker “sallied from [his] cottage-door,” a “nutting crook in hand” towards a distant wooded area, “Tricked out in proud disguise of Beggar’s weeds,” an admittedly unnecessary attire; already the poem has a strange sense of eeriness here. The first two-thirds of the poem relates the speaker’s utmost joy and delight in the “virgin scene” of the woods; the speaker’s emphasis on the uncorrupted nature of the scene—“Unvisited,

13 Freud then expands on this point to eventually relate these instincts to the death drive of all organisms: “It seems, then, that an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things [. . .]. They are component instincts whose function is to assure that the organism shall follow is own path to death . . .” (43-7, italics Freud’s).

14 Martin notes, “It has been suggested [by Lowes, 1927] that Coleridge saw in Wordsworth’s tutelary spirits something akin to neoplatonic daemons—creatures intermediate between gods and men, not ill disposed towards men.

60
where not a broken bough / Drooped with its withered leaves, ungracious sign / Of
devastation” (15-17, italics mine)—suggests an already-born force of perversity within
the mind of this ersatz beggar. Just as in The Black Cat, Frankenstein, the Rime, and The
Borderers above, we can already sense the impulse within the “beggar” to destroy that
which he loves. Sure enough, without any warning, justification, or pretense (just like the
Mariner), the “beggar” indulges in “imp”:

    Then up I rose,
    And dragged to earth both branch and bough, with crash
    And merciless ravage; and the shady nook
    Of hazels, and the green and mossy bower,
    Deformed and sullied, patiently gave up
    Their quite being[.] (41-6)

The motley “beggar” takes away the very thing he delighted—the thing to which his heart
had clung—: he destroyed the scene’s natural and pristine beauty. This “crime” then
leads, just like the others, to a metaphysical sense of dread instilled by guilt:

    Even then, when from the bower I turned away,
    Exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings
    I felt a sense of pain when I beheld
    The silent trees and the intruding sky. (48-51)

The line “exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings” recalls the mood of the narrator of
The Imp of the Perverse after the commission of his silent crime of poisoning his victim’s
candle. The narrator here had inherited the residence and other items bequeathed to him
from the innocent man’s will, and “all went well for [him]” for years after. However, just as, in a strategic placement of pathetic fallacy, Wordsworth’s sky *intrudes*, the Imp’s narrator feels the presence of his whole environment upon him, and he experiences “suffocation” as a result. For the “beggar” of “Nutting,” there is “a Spirit in the woods” (54), and again the reader is left with this unresolved psychological confusion.

Finally, in Book I of *The Prelude*, two distinct instances of *perversity* happen back to back, starting with line 305\(^\text{15}\)—the first being the destruction of some birds, the second being the theft of a boat. In both instances, the speaker engages in what would incidentally be perceived by him as criminal acts against nature, indicated by the (what would seem to be uncalled-for) metaphysical terror subsequently erupting from his surrounding natural environment, where the trees, the sky, the mountains, and everything else seem to be in some anthropomorphized pursuit of him. In both instances, just as Marmaduke and the others cited above, the child speaker is led by some inward force; in these circumstances this force is the mind’s projection of the natural world: “Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up / Fostered alike by beauty and by fear” (305-6), and “One evening (surely I was led by her [Nature] / I went alone into a Shepherd’s Boat” (372-73). The line “Fostered alike by beauty and by fear” elicits Thompsons’s extremes of “beatitude and horror” cited above in which the Gothic character finds himself suspended between. In the first scene, the speaker is “transplanted” (by memory—i.e. the mind) to “that beloved Vale, and “In thought and wish / That time, [his] shoulder all with

\(^{15}\) This reference and all subsequent lines are cited from the 1805 version of the *The Prelude*. 

62
the springes hung, / [he] was a fell destroyer” (316-18). He then elaborates on the circumstances of this destruction:

[I]t befell
In these night-wanderings, that a strong desire

*O’erpowered my better reason*, and the bird
Which was the captive of another’s toils
Became my prey[.] (325-28, italics mine)

The strong desire which overpowered the speaker’s “better reason” clearly points toward the imp of the perverse as previously described, where the motiveless desire seems to stem from some dark unconscious and malevolent abyss. Curiously, Coleridge describes in his notebooks his observation on his trip to Malta in May of 1804 of a group of sailors shooting at a hawk: “Poor Hawk! O strange Lust of Murder in Man!—It is not cruelty / it is mere non-feeling form non-thinking.”

Coleridge’s description here perfectly captures the essence of Wordsworth’s scene above, since there appears to be no apparent motive, just as explicated by Poe. Sure enough, the speaker, because of this violent act against the bird, suffers the terror experienced by the Gothic character: “I heard among the solitary hills / Low breathings coming after me” (329-30) and “With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind / Blow through my ears! the sky seemed not a sky / Of earth, and with what motion moved the clouds!” (348-50). Nature’s perceived fury similarly haunts the speaker in the next scene after stealing the shepherd’s skiff: “And, growing still in stature, the huge Cliff / Rose up between me and the stars, and still, /

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With measured motion, like a living thing / Strode after me” (409-12). The capitalization here of “Cliff” instills the geological formation with an air of consciousness, as if the natural world were an agent of arbitration, and the speaker a prisoner trying to escape to no avail his sentence.

Wordsworth the poet, in the above scenes of Book I, alludes to a kind of reconciliation of “discordant elements” (353-54), and he would like for this reconciliation to stick. But of course it does not: “Though haply aiming at the selfsame end, / Does it delight [Nature] sometimes to employ / Severer interventions, ministry / more palpable, and so she dealt with me” (368-71). Just as Lansdown attributes a pathology to the poet’s remembrance of the “spots of time” in the sense that they are continual (but always in vain) attempts to ease his psychological grief (detailed in Chapter 2), Wordsworth himself—in writing these multiple versions of the Prelude—enacts the Freudian death drive by way of a repetition compulsion to re-present the unrepresentable. In this way, even through the stories of all of Wordsworth’s characters described above, the Romantic poet fails to gain a transcendence that critics normally attribute to him. In this way, Wordsworth seems to be speaking of himself in his own pessimistic declaration (from the ironically titled “Resolution and Independence”): “We poets in our youth begin in gladness; / But thereof comes in the end despondency and madness” (48-9); resolution is a myth.
Conclusion

Wordsworth has been popularly remembered as the poet of Nature—of daffodils, rainbows, and clouds. It is lesser known that he also wrote about the more threatening manifestation of Nature, where these clouds swell, darken, and open up into terrible storms that chase the speaker back into the Mind, for the mind of the poet projects his own Nature. Seen as such, the natural world conforms to the psyche of the viewer. In Wordsworth’s case, he does find joy in daffodils and rainbows, but he punctuates this joy nearly without exception with the more terrible forms of nature. He wrote about the light and the dark, most often in close enough proximity to one another (sometimes in the very same line) with one always giving away, or slipping into, the other.

Wordsworth’s treatment of the daisy, for instance, may serve as a case in point. In the Spring of 1802, along with “Written in March,” Wordsworth wrote at least two poems “To the Daisy,” published six years later. In these “daisy” poems, the poet praises the vibrancy of the flower and the spirit of cheerfulness and virility it inspires. Spring has come, and with it the optimism and idealism of youth, carefree and loving. The poem beginning “With little here” ends thusly:

Sweet Flower! For by that name at last,
When all my reveries are past,
I call thee, and to that cleave fast,

    Sweet silent Creature!
That breath’st with me in sun and air,
Do thou, as thou art wont, repair
My heart with gladness, and a share
Of thy meek nature! (41-8)

In this stanza, the speaker’s heart is filled with gladness from his observation of the “sweet flower.” However, Wordsworth’s poetic voice regarding the daisy grows more despondent and hopeless when this flower is connected with the death of his brother, Jonathan, in an 1805 poem bearing the same name as the ones composed three years prior. In this poem, the “Sweet Flower!” is associated with the tragic death of his brother out at sea. The poem begins by describing the auspicious beginnings of his brother’s finding work on a ship having just set sail: “Ah! Hopeful, hopeful was the day / When to that Ship he went his way” (8-10). However, by the end of the poem, the daisy is connected with the image of death—in this case “senseless” because it is unable to be represented or rationalized: “And Thou sweet Flower! Shalt sleep and wake / Upon his senseless grave” (55-6). By the end of another poem written along this poem (“I Only Looked for Pain and Grief”)—also dedicated to the daisy—there is no hope:

And to the few who come this way,

Traveller or Shepherd, let it say,

Long as these mighty rocks endure,

Oh do not Thou too fondly brood,

Although deserving of all good,

On any earthly hope, however pure! (95-100)

The daisy, having once been a signifier for joy and youth and bliss, has now become an indicator of hopelessness, senselessness, and death. Wordsworth’s lighter moments, as
this pairing shows, must be read alongside their darker counterparts if we are to truly understand the poet’s psyche, which cannot sustain the salubrious nature the poet would like it to. The light of the mind turns to dark, and in its transformation we can see the flash of a truly perturbed spirit.

G. R. Thompson’s discussion of the synthesis of positive and negative experience of the Byronic hero discussed moves towards this kind of anti-synthesis in synthesis. Thompson ends his thought thusly: “[. . .] Byron’s poetic vision is finally the expression of the suspended moral vertigo of one caught between two worlds who yet has somehow to bring them together” (9). The subject has yet to bring them together, and he never will, because they must always exist in opposition to each other. James Heffernan notes this same dynamic in Wordsworth: “For Wordsworth, nature was neither reducible nor divisible; it could only be embraced in its complexity, seen at once as multiple and unified” (612); he quotes lines from the last book (XIII) of the Prelude to make his point: “[. . .] too exclusively esteem’d that love / And sought that beauty, which as Milton sings, / Hath terror in it” (224-26). The ir-reconciliation of beauty with terror here indicates both sides of the Gothic sublime, as well as Burke’s false sublime (in the sense of blinding light); the beautiful is ultimately rendered terrifying. Just as Heffernan invoked Milton above, John Turner invokes Shakespeare in his expression of the same phenomenon in Wordsworth: “In Macbeth’s world it was the king who enshrined the good, in Wordsworth’s it is Nature and his fraternal relationship with his fellow man. Yet in each case trust engenders treachery, taboo excites temptation; the beauty of the landscape, the freedom of its creatures, and the trustfulness of the people who labour
there, become the innocent causes of cruelty, possessiveness and greed” (25). Again, with beauty comes the not-beautiful: cruelty, greed, treachery, and the like.

Wordsworth’s poetry is fraught with this dichotomous nature of things, from the descent into sadness and back again of the poet in “Resolution and Independence,” to Vaudracour in Book IX of the Prelude, to the boy (Wordsworth’s childhood self) in the first book of the Prelude (where “darkness” and “blank desertion” accompanies “images of trees” and “colours of green fields,” and where the “huge Cliff [. . .] Strode after [him],” recalling the movement of the flood waters that were the demise of the idealistic Arab of Book V.), to even one of Wordsworth’s most benign and optimistic poems, “I wandered lonely as a Cloud,” when the speaker speaks of lying on his couch “In vacant or in pensive mood” where the mind conjures up the image of the Daffodils, that “flash upon the inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude” (16). Again, solitude is invoked here as a kind of escape from the vexatious thoughts of the “hurrying world”—a kind of death drive—and this solitude, normally a rather negative state, is “blissful,” yet another irreconciliation of “discordant elements.”

In this sense, Wordsworth is much like Blake (despite Blake’s accusation that Wordsworth was “No Poet but a Heathen Philosopher at Enmity against true Poetry or Inspiration” (qtd. in Wlecke 106) in his play with contraries. To Blake, “Opposition is True Friendship,” as he states in his Marriage of Heaven and Hell (20). This opposition must be eternal: organic life, for Blake, implies infinity, just as it does for Wordsworth’s mind of Man. Wordsworth’s poetics is the marriage of the deepest of joy with the deepest of sadness, the darkest of night to the brightest of day, the most passionate life to
the most tranquil death—and these contraries exist throughout his corpus, not just with the early work. Mishra claims that the experience of the Fragment of a Gothic Tale (parts of which later ended up in The Borderers) was “sobering” for Wordsworth, but that the poet would later transform this “Gothic dread” into a “positive Romantic sublime”—the sublime for which Wordsworth is usually known. However, Mishra qualifies his statement with this: “[I]t is clear that elements of the Gothic would always stalk Romantic transcendence, the dark side pursuing what it sees as an abrogation of the original design of the sublime” (94-5). Mishra then describes such a haunting as a “palimpsest”, a “dream fragment, which, after all, is the ontology of the literary Gothic anyway” (95). Wordsworth, then, just as Shelley, Byron, Coleridge, and the others before him, attempts to stray from the Gothic in vain—his sublime is certainly a Gothic sublime, and however much he would have liked to transcend it, it would always haunt him. To quote from Book VI of the 1850 Prelude:

The unfettered clouds and region of the Heavens,  
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light—  
Were all like workings of one mind, the features  
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;  
Characters of the great Apocalypse,  
The types and symbols of Eternity,  
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end. (634-640)
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SCHOLASTIC VITA

Robert James Lang

BORN: March 6, 1987, Tampa, Florida

UNDERGRADUATE STUDY: University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida
B.A., English, with Honors, 2009

GRADUATE STUDY: Wake Forest University
Winston-Salem, North Carolina
M.A., English, 2012

PROFESSIONAL PRESENTATIONS

“Anarchy and World Unity in Claude McKay’s Home to Harlem”

Questioning Identity: Representations of Class and Working Class Identity.

English Graduate Organization, Western Illinois University, Macomb, Illinois.
2009.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Teaching Internship with Dr. Gale Sigal, Wake Forest University, Spring 2012

Assisted in ENG 165 core course, Explorations in British Literature.

Prepared and taught two 75 minute classes including lesson plan and leading discussions.

Graded student’s essays.

PROFESSIONAL SOCIETIES

Phi Kappa Phi (2008–present)