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## Suicide and Sovereignty in William Wordsworth

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**Andrew Bennett**

## **SUICIDE AND SOVEREIGNTY IN WILLIAM WORDSWORTH**

The problem of suicide is the problem of sovereignty. Twentieth-century suicide theorists such as Jean Baechler, Jean Améry, Anthony Giddens, and Simon Critchley argue that in taking one's own life the individual "proclaims his autonomy and sovereignty" over that life; that the subject who decides to commit suicide acts in "full sovereignty"; that the act often involves a "grasping toward omnipotence"; and that in killing herself the subject assumes a "fantasy of total affirmation" and "absolute freedom" (Baechler 48; Améry 61; Giddens 113; Critchley, *Very Little* 80–81; see also Critchley, *Notes*).<sup>1</sup> In fact, however, in this respect, twentieth-century writers draw on centuries-long traditions of commentary on suicide in philosophy, jurisprudence, ethics, and theology even as they challenge and indeed reverse traditional judgements on the act. Thus, for the majority of eighteenth-century writers on suicide—those who argued against the relatively rare "atheist," "infidel," "materialist," or "free-thinker" who was bold enough to explore and promulgate the thinking of luminaries such as Voltaire and David Hume—suicide contravenes fundamental dictates of religion, nation, and nature. As the historian Jeffrey Merrick puts it, for eighteenth-century writers the suicide "undermines the basis of all laws" because he or she avoids the possibility of punishment (5: ix).<sup>2</sup> In discussions of the theology, law, psychology, and ethics of suicide in pamphlets, sermons, letters, and even book-length studies, appeals are regularly made to an assumed natural law of self-preservation, and, as an anonymous writer in the *Annual Register* for 1764 comments, once the legal prohibition on suicide is contravened, "the foundation of other laws is shaken" (qtd. in Merrick 6: 223). If life and death are the "unalienable prerogative of the universal Sovereign," as the Presbyterian minister Caleb Fleming contends in 1773, then the illegitimate adoption of that prerogative by a human subject is an act of "high-treason"; in this sense, it is an act that offends "not only against the sovereignty of the universal Lord, but against the laws of human society" (qtd. in Merrick 5: 47). William Davy spells out the standard rationale for such an argument in his 1799 "Sermons Against Suicide, or Self-Murder":

We have no Right to destroy ourselves:—For, to do this without Blame, a Man must be at perfect Liberty both by the Laws of God and Man, and independent on them both: There must be no Obligation on him, either from the Law of Nature and right Reason, or from the revealed Law of God, or from his lawful Superiors upon Earth. (qtd. in Merrick 5: 412)

By taking on itself the properly instituted rights of Nature, Reason, the Judicial System, and the Almighty, the act of suicide is conceived of as an affront to all forms of authority.

It is perhaps not surprising, in this context, that William Wordsworth's various poetic engagements with, and interventions in, debates on suicide revolve around the question of sovereignty. Wordsworth's views develop from the early 1790s to the early 1800s, beginning with a sense of suicide as a kind of instinct and a permanent human temptation, before moving to a more nuanced—and more troubled—consideration of the social, economic, and political conditions from which the impulse arises. In each case, the question of sovereignty is an essential but often disputed element in the text's poetic work. Although critics have rarely recognized suicide as a particular focus of concern for Wordsworth, a significant number of his poems refer to the act—even if in tentative, veiled, indirect, or allusive ways in poems that appear to have quite different themes. In this essay, I will examine poems in which Wordsworth addresses the question of the sovereignty of suicide in order both to highlight the extent of his engagement with this fundamental aspect of human behavior and to begin to analyze its implications and consequences. I will suggest that, in his representations of suicide and suicidal individuals, Wordsworth's poems work in varied and complex ways to contest the implicit assumption of the sovereignty of suicide embedded within absolutist religioethical and juridical proscriptions on the act.

### 1. "DESPERATION'S TOYS"

In "The Vale of Esthwaite" (1787–88) and in other manuscript fragments associated with or written at about the same time, Wordsworth specifically engages with the drive or temptation toward suicide and with suicidal thoughts. In doing so, he engages, often in conflicted ways, with contemporary debates in theology, philosophy, and ethics, and in emerging medical, sociological, and anthropological discourses and understandings of the act.<sup>3</sup> Early Wordsworth is particularly attuned to a kind of baseline,

or zero degree, of suicide ideation: the temptation to suicide, and the existential realization of suicide as a universal human possibility, or indeed as a critical element in what it means to be human.

In this respect, Wordsworth expresses, in the first place, something like a countercultural resistance to any simple or straightforward identification of suicide as an act of total personal autonomy—a form of political and religious dissidence constituted by the appropriation of sovereign power from God and King. His poems sidestep religious and legal prohibitions on the act, in other words, by subtly defusing the agency that it seems to imply. Particularly prominent in early Wordsworth is the temptation to jump, or to fall, that individuals encounter on cliff faces or above ravines. In a clumsy, even headlong moment in “The Vale of Esthwaite,” for example, the speaker recalls his attraction to the “dismal gloom” of phantom figures, rattling noises, and ghostly bells in standard gothic locales such as castles and dungeons: but “these were poor and puny joys,” he goes on—“Fond sickly Fancy’s Idle toys,” by comparison with suicidal temptations (Extract XVI: 31, 59, 60). As a boy, he recalls, he “lov’d to haunt the giddy steep / That hung loose trembling o’er the deep” (Extract XVI: 61–62). And he almost admits that he is tempted, madly, to throw himself “Down, headlong down” to a “hideous” death:

My soul will melt away with fear  
Or swell’d to madness bid me leap  
Down, headlong down the hideous steep.

(Extract XVI: 76–78)

The split between self and soul in the passage itself points toward a derogation of responsibility, an undoing of the sovereign self in the act of or desire for suicide.

The motif of the spontaneous, unwilled submission to the temptation to let go—to jump or fall—returns (along with the joy/toy and the steep/deep rhymes) in *Descriptive Sketches*, a strangely strung out poem that uneasily conflates complacent pastoralism with austere, politically engaged melancholia, mixing an appreciation of the “beauties of nature” with “the acquisition and maintenance of liberty” (Williams 38). In a striking passage that Wordsworth excised when he revised the poem in 1836, there is an ambiguous reference to the type of the Swiss mountain farmer, who is prone to “Hang from the rocks that tremble o’er the steep” and “tempt the icy valley yawning deep” (*Descriptive Sketches* 462–63). But then, in a less ambiguous but more clearly anthropomorphic way, Wordsworth com-

ments on a place “Whence Danger leans, and . . . joys / To mock the mind with ‘desperation’s toys’” (466–67). Explicitly marked as a quotation (even while it reverses the phrase), the vaguely baffling phrase “desperation’s toys” requires the reader, in order to resolve its sense, to recall and then mentally gloss the moment in *Hamlet*, act 1 scene 4, when Horatio refers to the un-willed, semi-instinctive, auto-thanatological action of falling from a cliff. Horatio expresses his fear that the ghost will tempt his melancholic friend to jump from the “dreadful summit” of a cliff: “Think of it,” he urges Hamlet, universalizing the temptation offered by the sheer sight of the instrument of or the opportunity for suicide, “The very place puts toys of desperation / Without more motive into every brain” (74–76). By forcing the rhyme of “joys” with “toys” (“A sportive or frisky movement; a piece of fun, amusement, or entertainment; a fantastic act or practice; an antic, a trick” [“toy” n, I.2]), and by reversing the syntax of the phrase, Wordsworth defamiliarizes and thereby highlights Horatio’s “toys of desperation” and Shakespeare’s suggestion that suicide ideation constitutes a kind of motiveless malignity inhabiting us all—a default possibility for every human, not just for Hamlet. The temptation to suicide, Horatio suggests, can be triggered just because one is in a place where death will result from the simple act of jumping or letting oneself fall, from a simple step, or misstep. Far from repeating conventional and generally accepted eighteenth-century assertions of suicide as an act that expresses either a willful criminality or a simple and non-agential insanity, Wordsworth’s allusion to Horatio’s comment undoes the opposition between the sovereignty of the suicide and its abnegation in madness by implying that simply being *on* a cliff will make anyone, sane or insane, want to throw oneself *off* it.

These are not the only moments in which cliffs produce such an effect in Wordsworth’s early poetry, however, and in this context one might reread a notable moment from Part 1 of *The Prelude* (composed during Wordsworth’s discontented German winter of 1798–99) as a veiled assertion of a similar suicidal temptation. In this case, through a careful reading, we might discern a shift in Wordsworth’s writing toward a sense that the temptation is embraced and even encouraged—toward the sense that there might be a certain exhilaration involved in tempting oneself to fall. In the raven’s nest episode, Wordsworth recounts his adventures as a “rover” in “the high places, on the lonesome peaks” (53–54):

Oh, when I have hung  
Above the raven’s nest, by knots of grass,  
And half-inch fissures in the slippy rock,

But ill sustained, and almost, as it seemed,  
 Suspended by the blast which blew amain,  
 Shouldering the naked crag, oh at that time,  
 While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,  
 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!

(*The Prelude*, 1798-1799, Part 1, 53–54, 57–66)

The boy's "perilous" position as he hangs on the ridge from the cliff seeking the bird's nest is emphasized by references to the unsafe-seeming "knot of grass" and the slender "fissures" on which his life depends, and especially by the idea that it is the strength of the almost-impalpable wind that holds him up. As Christopher Ricks and Stephen Gill have observed, even the syntax is perilously suspended in this complex sentence, with its multiple dependent clauses and its grammatical uncertainty about who or what "shoulders" the crag (Ricks 18–19; Gill 29). In drafting the lines, Wordsworth in fact dithered over the phrasing of his younger self's position on the "perilous ridge," starting with "precious brink cliff" and then rewriting the whole line with the phrase "perilous edge" before crossing through "edge" and adding above the line "ridge cliff" (and settling for "ridge" in the 1805 draft) (*The Prelude*, 108–09; *The Thirteen-Book "Prelude,"* AB-Stage Reading Text 348). Even the line-endings emphasize a kind of syntactical and conceptual or ethical fragility, not least with regard to the word "hung" in line 57 (repeated six lines later), around which the sentence itself hangs: the phrase "hung / Above" hangs between two lines, while its synonym "suspended" a few lines later does something similar but in a way that is even more drawn out by an intervening parenthetical clause—"almost, as it seemed, / Suspended" (60–61).<sup>4</sup> It is the verse as well as the boy, then, that is "ill sustained" in a passage that also highlights the agential uncertainty involved in the use of all language. There is a certain authorial uncertainty, or anxiety, in other words, in this articulation of the thrill of the fall. As Ricks rightly observes of this moment of physical and mental vertigo, the young Wordsworth did not fall (18, 23). But he might have fallen, and that is also what the sentence is about, delighting as it does in the very (retrospective) prospect of such a fall and in the thrill of suicidal temptation—the experience of ambiguous or uncertain sovereignty—that arguably marks all high-risk activities, including rock climbing and cliff clambering.<sup>5</sup>

Such moments in Wordsworth's early poetry, fleeting and allusive as they often are, suggest a countercultural and even taboo-breaking articulation of the impulse toward, and even the sense of exhilaration in, suicidality. But there is a rather different emphasis—one that points to an underlying sense of despondency or despair—in fragmentary and interpretatively elusive poems such as the strangely joyous and yet (or more accurately *because*) death-driven “These chairs they have no words to utter” and its companion or continuation “I have thoughts that are fed by the sun” (1802). These are poems that seem to indicate a marked and markedly ambivalent desire for hush, stillness, peace, and the ultimate “quiet of death” (Wordsworth, *Poems* 580, l. 29). Such poems have provoked Kenneth Johnston to comment that the “genre of the suicide note” is a “constant leitmotif” in Wordsworth’s “movement toward becoming the master Poet of life and natural affirmation,” and even to argue that suicide constitutes the “ultimate dejection beneath his various odes to immortality” (778).<sup>6</sup> While Johnston does little to develop his insight, it is certainly possible to trace moments of despondency and suicidality in Wordsworth’s poetry from the early poems to his major lifetime publication, *The Excursion*. Indeed, a key moment from that poem seems eerily to echo a comment by Charles Moore in his 1790 *A Full Enquiry into the Subject of Suicide* that the “desponding man is ever ready to extinguish hope itself by self-assassination” (qtd. in Merrick 5: 214): Wordsworth’s own “desponding Man,” the Solitary, states his belief that sleep is “A better state than waking” and that death is a better state than sleep, noting what he calls, in a foreshadowing of the theory of the death drive in Arthur Schopenhauer and then Sigmund Freud, the “universal instinct of repose, / The longing for confirmed tranquility” (*The Excursion* book 3: 211, 285, 403–04; see Schopenhauer 2: 637; see Freud 311). The Solitary’s only hope, he declares, as he ends his monologue in Book 3, is of reaching soon “the unfathomable gulph, where all is still!” (Book 3, line 998). The Solitary’s suicidal “despondency” is not only the topic of Book 3 (titled “Despondency”) and of Book 4 (“Despondency Corrected”) but is central to the poem as a whole, since, as it turns out, his suicidal despondency remains *uncorrected* in Book 4 and is presented, even against Wordsworth’s best efforts, as the default, zero degree, or grounding condition of humanity.<sup>7</sup>



## 2. "FRIGHTFUL WISHES"

In Wordsworth's early poetry, however, suicidality is not limited to a certain temptation or to an expression of the death drive but also provides the focus for a marked political critique. Against the almost unanimous condemnation of suicide within public discourse on the topic, we might even read the claim to a "right to suicide" as a form of liberation politics. This, at least, seems to be the force of Wordsworth's most direct intervention into contemporary debates on suicide, a little-known, unpublished fifteen-line poem written between late 1796 and early 1797 entitled "Argument for Suicide." Something like an off-shoot of *The Borderers*, in which similar arguments are rehearsed, the poem has a cynical, world-weary tone that in some ways reflects the attitude of Rivers, that play's rationalizing villain, but also seems to involve a genuine plea to reason and humanity (see, for example, *The Borderers* IV.2.171–77). In an early argument for euthanasia that is quite out of keeping with standard sentimentico-moralistic approaches to suicide in poetry of the 1790s, the poem's speaker succinctly declares that contemporary morality would deem it preferable to "famish a naked beggar" slowly, painfully, than to let such a person kill himself. "[S]trange it is / And most fantastic are the magic circles / Drawn round the thing called life," the poem concludes in a Humean or Godwinian-rationalist but never fully stable paradox that seems to be at once ironic and entirely sincere: "till we have learned / To prize it less we ne'er shall learn to prize / The thing worth living for," the speaker contends ("Argument for Suicide," 2, 11–13, 14–15).<sup>8</sup> The poem is, in the end, an early statement of the ethical value of individual autonomy, the sovereign right of the person over his or her own body.

It is in certain poems in the *Lyrical Ballads*, however, that Wordsworth engages with the politics of suicide most concertedly. And he does so here in a way that seems to focus above all on the question of agency, articulated in particular as a distinction between male and female discourses of or responses to suicide, and in a way that engages with contemporary debates concerning the relationship between suicide and insanity. As Michelle Faubert and Nicole Reynolds have argued, "the suicidal individual's promise of violence to her own body" threatens political power in the Romantic period since, in undertaking the act, the individual "denie[s] the state's ownership" of that body. In this context, suicide is, Faubert argues, doubly proscribed for women, for whom the act of suicide involves "the unlawful destruction of a *man's* property" (Faubert and Reynolds 645; Faubert 655, emphasis added). Wordsworth's poems respond to a

social, economic, and cultural environment in which female agency and autonomy is fundamentally contested (when it is not simply denied or excluded), such that the very conception of female suicide becomes virtually an oxymoron.<sup>9</sup> Wordsworth's negotiation of the problem of female suicide limits the act to cases in which individual sovereignty or agency is undermined or undone on account of extreme duress or distress. Drawing on recognizable and culturally acceptable codes by which (female) madness is represented, such poems describe the psychological state in which personal autonomy is eradicated. While the male suicides that feature in *Lyrical Ballads* are arguably reasoned and reasonable, female suicides, by contrast, are victims of socioeconomic circumstance so extreme as to produce an unhinged mental state that is ultimately beyond agency. In this sense, we might say that victimization, madness, and therefore absence of agency constitute the condition of readerly sympathy for female suicides in Wordsworth's poems.<sup>10</sup>

"The Female Vagrant" is exemplary. Originally drafted probably in 1793–94 as part of "Salisbury Plain," in the version published in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* only the final four lines of the 234-line poem (cut from 270 lines in 1798) are not spoken by the destitute, despairing woman as she recounts her tale of woe—a tale of perpetual poverty, destitution, death, sickness, and vagrancy. "The Female Vagrant" focuses on the almost unrelentingly disastrous events that have led to the woman's current helpless and hopeless condition: the hounding of her father from his property, his land, and his fishing rights by a wealthy landowner; his death four years later; agricultural poverty resulting from the altered economics of a nation in a state of war; the conscription of the woman's husband into the British army to fight in the American War of Independence; the death by disease of her three children and the death of her husband in battle; her subsequent return across the Atlantic and her state of homeless vagrancy back in Britain. If the poem protests powerfully against economic and social conditions in late-eighteenth century England, it also displays "an interest in the workings of human feeling," so that the sorry domestic and family history that the woman rehearses brings into focus debates over social welfare and the poor laws, private property, new working practices and industrialization, rural poverty, enclosures, conscription, colonialism, militarism, and "the vices of the penal law and the calamities of war as they affect individuals" (Jacobus 147; Wordsworth, *Letters* 159).<sup>11</sup> On both accounts, the woman's rehearsal of events that "would thy brain unsettle, even to hear" offers ample justification for her thoughts of sui-

cide (“The Female Vagrant” 94). Onboard ship as she crosses the Atlantic with her husband and children, the woman recalls those that “perish’d in the whirlwind’s sweep”: “We gazed with terror on their gloomy sleep,” she comments, unaware at the time that “soon such anguish must ensue,” that she herself will “rue” foregoing “the mercy of the waves” (85–99). But such anguish comes soon enough: back in England, destitute and alone after the deaths of her husband and three children, she finds herself walking near the sea in such “deep despair” that she is “stirr’d” by “frightful wishes” (156). The vaguely euphemistic reference to a suicidal impulse is immediately justified, however, by emotional, psychological, and physical breakdown:

—In deep despair by frightful wishes stirr’d,  
Near the sea-side I reached a ruined Fort:  
There, pains which nature could no more support,  
With blindness link’d, did on my vitals fall,  
And I had many interruptions short  
Of hideous sense; I sank, nor step could crawl,  
And thence was carried to a neighbouring Hospital.  
(156–62)

What the poem insists on at this point is the temporary psychological and physical collapse that results in (or is the result of—the line of causation is not entirely clear) serious thoughts of suicide. Suicide ideation, in other words, is properly and understandably *motivated*, is produced by intolerable circumstances and produces, or is produced by, a form of temporary insanity. In this way, a woman’s fleeting thought of suicide is made defensible and can be understood, represented, and to some extent sympathized with. At least in its insistence on death as preferable to a life of suffering, a stanza included in the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* reads like a modified version of “Argument for Suicide.” In both, life at any cost is deemed to be not worth the cost:

Oh! dreadful price of being to resign  
All that is dear *in* being! better far  
In Want’s most lonely cave till death to pine,  
Unseen, unheard, unwatched by any star;  
Or in the streets and walks where proud men are,  
Better our dying bodies to obtrude,

Than dog-like, wading at the heels of war,  
Protract a curst existence, with the brood  
That lap (their very nourishment!) their brother's blood.  
(118–26)

Life for the British army's camp-followers is worse than death, the woman declares, as she caustically points to the paradox of having to abandon "All that is dear *in being*" in order to cling to being. The passage is emotionally raw, and in directly promulgating a form of euthanasia it is, like "Argument for Suicide," virtually unpublishable: Wordsworth deleted the lines when he revised the poem in 1800.<sup>12</sup>

Whether fleeting and indirect or more explicit, the references to suicidality and suicide ideation in "The Female Vagrant" are unmistakable. And the references are carefully framed within a narrative that insists on the female vagrant's victimhood—on the fact that events have conspired to generate a deep despair that drives her to the point of madness and therefore to suicide, or at least to the thought of or wish for it. As such, suicidal thoughts and impulses are framed within contemporary debates over "temporary insanity" and are governed, in some sense, by the almost exclusive preponderance, by the late eighteenth-century, of the legal judgment of *non compos mentis* in such cases (the judgement that one is not in control of one's mind allows for the taking of one's own life in a way that is therefore not an act of suicide).<sup>13</sup> The poem needs these allusions to suicide, one might say, in order to limn the depths to which the woman has sunk in her psychological depression and financial distress: suicide in this sense is the limit against which Wordsworth's readers are to judge the woman's moral/emotional destitution, her social exclusion, and her economic precarity. But the poem also needs to justify these references to suicide within a feminized rhetoric of victimhood to which its very title gestures. Whether embedded within a larger argument around "guilt and sorrow," and around militarization and modernity in the various iterations of the Salisbury Plain poem, or whether largely extracted from those contexts and presented as a stand-alone tale, the poem is directed toward a sympathetic representation of female suicide that leans heavily on the justification from insanity—an implicit assertion of the radical absence of personal sovereignty—in order to explore victimhood within a critique of contemporary social and economic conditions.

Suicidal insanity is also the topic of "The Mad Mother," a poem in which the question of gender is again signaled in its title. "The Mad Mother" can be seen as a companion-poem to "The Female Vagrant" in

also focusing on a despair-driven vagrant woman who has returned to England from America. Both are instances of what Kenneth Johnston has called “Wordsworth’s main plot throughout the 1790s”: “the story of an abandoned woman” (511). While the focus of “The Female Vagrant” is as much on the societal, economic, and political as on the psychological and pathological causes of suicide (or on one producing the other), in “The Mad Mother” Wordsworth is more explicit about female insanity, and his emphasis is almost exclusively on the psychodynamics of suicidal despair. In this poem, the speaker is evidently delusional, suffering from hallucinations and from shaky or faulty ratiocination, and her suicidal thoughts are precisely seen in that context. She assures her baby that he need not “dread the waves below, / When o’er the sea-rock’s edge we go,” since

The high crag cannot work me harm,  
Nor leaping torrents when they howl;  
The Babe I carry on my arm,  
He saves for me my precious soul;  
Then happy lie, for blest am I;  
Without me my sweet Babe would die.

(43–50)

The confusions in the woman’s thinking are unmistakable and are focused on a delusional conception of a suicidal leap that will incur no “harm.” The fantasy or temptation to suicide expressed in these lines is precisely not to be taken seriously because it is so evidently self-contradictory, because it so evidently works against logic and even sense. The stanza makes three conflicting claims: that the woman’s baby does not need to *fear* falling even as his mother “leaps” with him over the cliff (here, the word “leaping” is pointedly transferred from the mother’s imagined impulse to the “torrents”); that her baby will save *her* from harm when she leaps; and that she will save *him* from death (“without me my sweet Babe would die”), even as she imagines leaping with him in her arms to their shared destruction. Wordsworth works hard, in other words, to present female suicidality as acceptable, in a sense, because irrational and unreasonable, because clearly and unequivocally “mad”; and it is perhaps for this reason that he felt able to retain the suicidal stanza intact when he reprinted it in the more conservative second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800. The representation of suicide in “The Mad Mother” is thus explicitly exculpatory: if the mother is mad, as the poem insists she is, then she cannot be held legally or indeed morally responsible for her own prospective death. It is a legitimate or

excusable suicide fantasy because, in so clearly departing from reason and logic, there is a sense in which it is not a properly conscious, fully agential, or intentional *suicidal* impulse at all.<sup>14</sup>

As if to reinforce this sense of the undecidable suicidality of morbid melancholia (of a suicide that is also not a suicide), Wordsworth included in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* a third poem about female vagrancy and suicidal insanity that once again concerns the unintended consequences of the American War of Independence. In “Ruth,” “substantially a revision of ‘The Female Vagrant,’” according to James Averill, the morbidly insane “Vagrant” who has escaped from a mad house “prison” has stopped playing the “oaten Pipe” that she made as a child and instead plays on a “flute made of a hemlock stalk” as she begs at a carefully selected location at the side of a road (Averill 204; Wordsworth, “Ruth” 214, 201, 247–50). Wordsworth’s sly but precise specification of the homemade musical instrument is suicidologically pointed, since hemlock, a common roadside plant, has been a byword for suicide at least since the time of Socrates, since ingesting just six leaves or small amounts of the root or seeds is enough to kill a person. But the ever-present possibility of suicide is also marked in this poem by two notable references to “hallowed” / “unhallowed” ground that unmistakably allude to the convention of burying the suicide outside the “hallowed” or sanctified ground of a churchyard. The first reference appears in a lengthy addition to the poem in 1802 that was modified in the 1805 printing and subsequently dropped. Ruth’s lover is a British soldier who has fought in America and who deceives her into believing that he will take her back across the Atlantic as his wife. But his “genius and his moral frame” turns out to be “impair’d”: he is a “slave of low desires,” “without self-controul,” and with a “degraded soul” (175–79). He reveals to Ruth his suicidal thoughts during his time in America:

Sometimes most earnestly he said:  
“O Ruth! I have been worse than dead:  
False thoughts, thoughts bold and vain  
Encompass’d me on every side  
When I, in thoughtlessness and pride,  
Had cross’d the Atlantic Main.

Whatever in those Climes I found  
Irregular in sight or sound  
Did to my mind impart  
A kindred impulse, seem’d allied

To my own powers, and justified  
The workings of my heart.

Nor less to feed unhallow'd thoughts  
The beauteous forms of nature wrought,  
Fair trees and lovely flowers;  
The breezes their own languor lent;  
The stars had feelings which they sent  
Into those magic bowers. (67–84)

It is not only the degraded society of the new world but even nature itself that triggers the man's "irregular" impulses and his unhallowed thoughts. Our suspicion that the word "unhallow'd" alludes to the "unhallowed" ground in which suicides are buried (our sense that "unhallowed thoughts" is a euphemism for suicide ideation) is confirmed by the curious ending to the poem. If the reader has overlooked the hemlock stalk and the man's "unhallow'd thought," the poem's ending might seem to involve a kind of *non sequitur* in the narrator's insistence on the fact that Ruth will be buried in hallowed ground with the usual Christian ceremony:

Farewell! and when thy days are told  
Ill-fated Ruth! in hallow'd mold  
Thy corpse shall buried be;  
For thee a funeral bell shall ring,  
And all the congregation sing  
A Christian psalm for thee. (259–64)

Ruth is, after all, not dead yet, and the only reason to emphasize the conventionality of her prospective burial—the only reason to end the poem with this stanza and even to imply this as the point of the poem—is to fend off the suggestion that the reader might deem her a potential suicide: she *will* be buried in consecrated ground; a funeral bell *will* be rung; the congregation *will* sing a "Christian psalm." And yet, even by its own logic, the assertion of sacred burial fails to counter the possibility that Ruth will die by her own hand. Indeed, the ending seems to emphasize that possibility just in its insistence that Christian burial remains an option—as if the poem needs to remind the reader that the appeal to insanity still allows for Christian burial for a certain class of suicides.<sup>15</sup> The poem may be understood to end, therefore, in an indirect reference to the legal ruling of *non compos mentis* as an alternative to the illegitimate sovereignty of *felo de se*.

### 3. MEN WHO DIE FOR LOVE

All of these women are examples, in part, of what Helen Small has referred to as an “extraordinary vogue” in the period for narratives of “bereaved or deserted women fallen into insanity” (11–12).<sup>16</sup> While none of the female figures in *Lyrical Ballads* actually kill themselves, several contemplate suicide, and it is notable, as I say, that each instance of female suicidality involves forms of madness, states of mind that work against individual autonomy or personal sovereignty. By contrast, while there are references to at least three completed male suicides in *Lyrical Ballads*, the suicidal thoughts of men are presented as *not* being provoked by moments of insanity, or as being significant articulations of a certain autonomy—*despite* the fact that all three poems can be read as variations on the convention of love-suicide. “’Tis said, that some have died for love” is exemplary. This curious and generally overlooked poem is based on a kind of Wertherian *Liebstod*—on the forsaken lover’s love of or desire for death.<sup>17</sup> While such deaths accord with what Eric Parisot calls the “prevailing social script of sentimental suicide,” or with contemporary codes of what Faubert terms “sentiment, mental illness, and tragedy” that diagnose the subject as lacking “reason and therefore intention,” we might deduce that Wordsworth is in fact following an alternative rationale whereby, in performing such acts, men do indeed play out a kind of logic in seeking a reasoned and not-unreasonable outcome to their loss (Parisot 665; Faubert 652). “’Tis said that some have died for Love” begins by pointedly considering those who lie in the “cold North’s unhallow’d ground” (unequivocally if euphemistically implying that they have killed themselves), before devoting forty lines to the complaint of a man whose lover or wife has died and for whom the very sound of the birds, the position of a tree, the movement of a stream, or the sight of a plant growing “disturbs” him and makes him feel that he is unable any longer to “bear” such experiences (3, 44). The speaker’s response to the tale is to assure us that he would rather not experience love at all than risk such misery. What goes unsaid but is clearly implied is that the mourning lover is suicidal and even that he will indeed kill himself—and that this would in fact be both a legitimate and in some sense an understandable end for a certain kind of forsaken lover, a reasoning that seems indeed to be ratified by the general tone and perspective of the poem’s speaker.

Wordsworth’s pseudo-Scottish ballad “Ellen Irwin” is also about the suicidal impulses of the lover. Added to *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800, the poem depicts the titular woman stepping forward to protect her lover’s body with



her own when the man she has spurned throws a “deadly jav’lin” at his rival (28). In so doing, she puts herself in the way of the spear and dies. While it is arguable that this impulsive gesture of defending a lover can be taken as suicidal, the primary action of the poem, which follows this death, seems more clearly to be so. The narrative proceeds to follow the fate of Ellen’s lover, who kills his assailant before sailing away to Spain as a mercenary, “vainly” seeking in battle “The death that he was wooing” (43–44). Failing to die in battle, he returns to Ellen’s grave, lies down, and dies: “His body he extended, / And there his sorrow ended” (47–48). Although the rhyme is bathetic, if not comic, and although the manner of his death and the reason for it are not explained, we might see this as a displaced suicide: having lost his love, the man seeks death and can only end his sorrow by giving up his life. The self-sacrifice is presented as consciously chosen, self-willed, and not unreasonable, and the poem carefully guards against any implication of insanity.

“The Brothers,” finally, may also be read as a narrative in which suicide is generated, excused, and explained by a certain kind of fatal love—in this case, fraternal love for a brother who has left his community, disappeared, and apparently died. The poem might be considered a disguised suicide narrative both in the sense that, while it clearly points to the possibility of suicide and a community’s disavowal of the act, it has rarely been recognized as such, and in the sense that the poem itself is about the way in which communities habitually defend themselves against the knowledge of a suicide. The brother in question, Leonard, returns after years away at sea to discover that James has died by falling from a precipice. He is assured by the priest that James fell asleep near the cliff and accidentally walked off it while still asleep: that was as “we all conjectur’d,” the priest assures the brother, “And so no doubt he perish’d” (392, 398). But in paradoxically highlighting the question of doubt in the phrase “no doubt,” the priest in fact raises questions, after all, about the manner of James’s death. There were no witnesses to his death, and the sleepwalking theory is pure conjecture—a reassuring narrative, perhaps, for the priest, who has the task of judging whether the dead man can be buried in “hallowed” ground, as well as for the community. And it is particularly important, of course, for Leonard himself, even though the priest is never told that the two are related. Leonard seeks to be reassured that his brother’s “mind was easy” and that he “could not” have come “to an unhallow’d end,” precisely because he is uneasy, and doubtful, about this unexplained end (384, 389).<sup>18</sup> More than anything else, I would suggest, “The Brothers” has to do with community and family and with the narratives that such groups tell

themselves in order to be spared the devastating consequences—ethical, religious, psychological, reputational, social, legal, financial—that follow from the suicide of one of their members. But in asserting that the death was unequivocally accidental, the poem thereby implicitly raises the possibility (by denying it) that this was a sovereign act of suicide, an agential and conscious action by a person who makes a rational decision to end his life in part as a consequence of losing a loved brother.

#### 4. THE SUICIDE DILEMMA

In his engagements with eighteenth-century debates on suicide, then, Wordsworth contests contemporary proscriptions on that act of suicide and severe restrictions on the way that it is represented in texts. Wordsworth's poetry may be said to figure suicide in three principle ways. The act is presented as a projection of masculine selfhood—an assertion of autonomy or sovereignty—that responds to a general temptation to kill oneself; in some cases it constitutes the ultimate act of rebellion against intolerable circumstance (specifically the death or absence of the beloved), in an act that can be read as a reasoned expression of existential freedom; but it is also figured as the action of a female “other” whose death or imagined death, rather than an assertion of supreme agency or sovereignty, is conceived almost as its opposite—as the tragic consequence of intolerable social, economic, and political conditions, the supreme expression of a certain victimhood. It is the third case, I think, that is the most intriguing, in the sense that it pointedly brings out the fundamental suicidological dilemma. We might surmise that the complex and troubled negotiations around the discourse of female suicide in Wordsworth's early poetry come down to this: on the one hand, the poems need suicidal individuals, and individuals who contemplate killing themselves, in order to emphasize the urgency of Wordsworth's moral, economic, and political critique. On the other hand, the poems seek to justify thoughts about and even the act of suicide, and to do so they emphasize the extent of an individual's suffering. The two questions are intimately intertwined, of course, and self-reinforcing: the suffering of the destitute accounts for suicidality, while suicide or suicidal thoughts are markers for and indeed graphically evince the nature of that suffering. For both men and women, the representation of suicide is complicated by the critical question of agency: the act of suicide needs to be motivated, rational, and intended by a reasonable and reasoning individual. But the scenario has a greater urgency in the case of women, who already have a contested claim to

agency and autonomy. For a woman's suicide to be excusable, the act must be undertaken by an individual who is understood to have been moved to kill herself (or to contemplate the act) by circumstances that produce such intolerable suffering that she is driven to an otherwise inconceivable and unjustifiable action. Wordsworth's cliff-side poems and "Argument for Suicide" clearly present suicide as thinkable and even as permissible under certain circumstances; and while all three suicidal men in *Lyrical Ballads* are presented as morbidly melancholic, their melancholia does not define them and does not circumscribe the interests of these poems. Suicide in these cases is, in a sense, *reasonable*. For the suicidal women in *Lyrical Ballads*, however, the position is more paradoxical: suicide cannot be countenanced but must be; it cannot be justified and yet it is; it must be conscious, voluntary, agential, and yet cannot be. If Margaret Higonnet is right to argue that representations of female suicide in literature of the period both "draw from and generate narratives of political resistance," Wordsworth's narratives of female suicidality work hard to defuse one kind of political resistance—that which is implicitly asserted in the "sovereign" act of suicide—in order to deploy the action's force for another kind—the challenge to social inequality and political oppression (688). In their different ways, and in ways that we might understand to be organized around the ultimately unstable discursive fissure of masculinity and femininity suggested by the parasuicidal figure of Ellen Irwin, Wordsworth's suicide poems explore some of the questions that inhabit contemporary suicide discourses and debates—debates that were, at the turn of the nineteenth century, beginning to emerge and were beginning decisively to dislodge centuries of unwavering religious and moral proscription.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Foucault, Marsh, and others have argued that the question of suicide brings together interlinking questions of power, authority and autonomy, and personal agency and individual sovereignty (Foucault 139; Marsh 90–99; see also Bennett 11–12).

<sup>2</sup> As Beccaria argues in 1764, strictly speaking the suicide cannot be punished, since any such punishment could only be inflicted on 'the innocent,' those not directly responsible for the act, "or upon an insensible dead body" (434).

<sup>3</sup> See Lee's comment in his introduction to Solomon Piggott's *Suicide and its Antidotes* ("notable as the last book-length treatment of suicide written by an English religious author during the nineteenth century") that "by the time Piggott wrote ... the discussion of suicide was increasingly animated and shaped by newly emerging medical, psychiatric and sociological forms of knowledge" (63).

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<sup>4</sup> Ricks was the first to comment, in a 1971 essay, on Wordsworth's use of "hung" here, in a discussion of the poet's way with line endings; Gill argues that "the repeated word 'hung' sustains the sentence," and that "the syntax of the primary, direct statement has to be registered ... at the same time as the suspensions and modifications which simultaneously enrich and yet delay fulfilment of the sense" (29).

<sup>5</sup> For a recent consideration of this passage in the (non-suicidal) context of Romanticism and the contemporary subculture of rock climbing, see Bainbridge 251–52; on the potential suicidality of risk-taking activities ("vertigo" games) including mountain- and rock-climbing, see Baechler 195–96.

<sup>6</sup> Compare Pirie's suggestion that in "Three Years She Grew," Lucy can be conceived as "a kind of suicide" (148).

<sup>7</sup> See Pirie's claim that in *The Ruined Cottage*, despair drives Margaret "virtually to commit suicide," and Averill's contention that the story of Margaret in Book 1 of *The Excursion* is "an exemplum of the human condition" in the context of a poem in which the Wanderer and the Pastor "unsuccessfully attempt to correct the pessimism and despondency of the Solitary" (Pirie 138; Averill 280). See also Hay for a similar reading of the Solitary's irresolvable and unresolved despondency.

<sup>8</sup> See Hume's assertion that it is "plainly false" that someone who "tired of life and hunted by pain and misery" decides to take his own life should then "incur the indignation of his Creator" and "disturb the order of the universe" (3). Godwin's thoughts on suicide in *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, by contrast, are in fact conventional, offering a trenchant non-theological argument against the act in all its forms (177–78). For a selection of contemporary poems on or featuring suicide, see Lee, vol. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Compare Parisot's point that suicide as a "claim for utter subjectivity" has the potential to transform the "virtuous heroine" into the "fallen women" so that such a woman is "no longer an appropriate object of sympathetic identification or available to benevolent concern" (665).

<sup>10</sup> The constitutive rationality (and humanity) of suicide is emphasized, for example, by Richard Hey when, in *A Dissertation on Suicide* (1785), he argues that suicide implies "some or all of those faculties which distinguish a rational and accountable Being from inferior Creatures," noting that neither animals nor "Idiots" commit suicide (qtd. in Merrick 5: 148). In his *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–69), William Blackstone remarks that the individual must be "of years of discretion, and in his senses, else it is no crime" (qtd. in Merrick 6: 17). Like other commentators, however, Blackstone balks at the tendency of juries apparently to suppose that "the very act of suicide is an evidence of insanity" (qtd. in Merrick 6: 17); see also, for example, Anon, "Concerning the Law and the Coroner's Practice in Cases of Suicide" (1776) (qtd. in Merrick 6: 38–39, 41–42). Compare William Rowley's unequivocal assertion (from 1788) that "when a man meditates how he shall destroy [his own] life ... he is no longer *compos mentis*" and that the act of suicide "must necessarily be always considered an act of *insanity*" (qtd. in Merrick 6: 96; see also 6: 97).

<sup>11</sup> Quotation taken from a letter in which Wordsworth tries to sell an early version of "Salisbury Plain" to a publisher in 1795 (*Letters* 159). As Gary Harrison comments, no other poem in *Lyrical Ballads* "more directly engages the social crises of the 1790s" than "The Female Vagrant" (93). The fullest consideration of "The Female Vagrant" to date is by C. P. Wilkinson, who argues against political and historical readings that the poem is "not primarily a sociological document" (51).

<sup>12</sup> See Harrison's comment that Wordsworth's revisions to the poem "reveal the degree to which he later muted his radical critique as he became more reserved in his political opinions" (93).

<sup>13</sup> See MacDonald's assertion that the "meaning" of suicide is "transformed utterly" between about 1660 and 1800, such that the preponderance of coroner's judgments shifts decisively in that period from verdicts of *felo de se* to verdicts of *non compos mentis*—the latter rising from 8.4% of verdicts in the 1660s to 97% by the end of the eighteenth century (89–90).

<sup>14</sup> One other poem from *Lyrical Ballads* is also, fleetingly, about maternal suicide: in "The Idiot Boy" as she loses "all hope" of finding her son, Betty's thoughts turn toward suicide when she "hurries fast" past a "green-grown pond.... Lest she should drown herself therein," before deciding to "think no more of deadly sin" (302–06, 318).

<sup>15</sup> The proscription of Christian burial with full rites for suicides was restricted to those who died "in sound mind" (the 1823 act of Parliament that proscribed burial of suicides in the "public highway" and with a stake through the body, and that specified that they should be buried in a regular churchyard or burial ground, nevertheless specifically proscribed the performance of Christian burial rites: see Lee 7: 13–14). Although often ignored in practice by the clergy, the proscription on Christian burial was only formally rescinded by the Church of England as recently as 2017; even now (Nov. 2019), "The Order for the Burial of the Dead" from *The Book of Common Prayer* reproduced on the Church of England website is prefaced (in red typeface) by the command that "Here is to be noted, that the Office ensuing is not to be used for any that die unbaptized, or excommunicate, or have laid violent hands upon themselves."

<sup>16</sup> See also Small 1–6 on female love-melancholy and suicidality. As Small comments, "the element of personal choice and responsibility was rarely granted much influence in women" (15).

<sup>17</sup> On the influence of Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* on Wordsworth, see Chandler 57.

<sup>18</sup> See Turner 643–64 for a similar reading.

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