CHAPTER 2

Peace Out of Time
The White Doe of Rylstone

Victories in the World of Spirit

> When it is considered what has already been executed in Poetry, strange that a man cannot perceive, particularly when the present tendencies of society good and bad, are observed, that this is the time when a man of genius may honorably take a station upon different ground. If he is to be a Dramatist, let him crowd his scene with gross and visible action; but if a narrative Poet, if the Poet is to be predominant over the Dramatist,—then let him see if there are no victories in the world of spirit, no changes, no commotions, no revolutions there, no fluxes and refluxes of the thoughts which may be made interesting by modest combination with the stiller actions of the bodily frame, or with the gentler movements and milder appearances of society and social intercourse, or the still more mild and gentle solicitations of irrational and inanimate nature.
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> Wordsworth to Coleridge, 19 April 1808 (*MY* I. 222–3)

On 28 June 1815, on the day that news of the Allied victory at Waterloo reached Rydal, Dorothy announced to Catherine Clarkson that *The White Doe of Rylstone* had 'arrived at last' together with an edition of the *Champion* containing a niggardly review of the poem by John Scott (*MY* II. 243).[1] Whether drowned out by triumphalist clamour and the attendant mood of indifference towards works of subtle lyricism and high imagination or by the plain fact of its costliness, outside of the family circle Wordsworth's quarto mostly failed to find an appreciative audience. Considering the poem's long and difficult gestation, and the critical reservations of its initial readers, the unsympathetic reception was perhaps inevitable. In May 1808, Coleridge, responding to Wordsworth's defence of 'victories in the world of spirit' over 'gross and visible action', declared that a lack 'of lively interest, namely, curiosity, and the terror or pity from unusual external Events & Scenes—convent dungeons &c &c' would most likely be an 'obstacle'

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to the poem's 'popularity'.[2] But it is Lamb's wittily concealed approbation that best conveys the sense of perplexity that greeted the poem's entrance into the world: 'No alderman ever longed after a haunch of buck venison more than I for a Spiritual taste of that white Doe you promise.'[3] By conjoining the appetitive and the contemplative, Lamb's comment highlights the poem's failure to satisfy on either count: for readers expecting a stirring description of the failed Rising of the North of 1569 in the manner of Walter Scott, the poem's lack of incident and adventure was a disappointment; for readers drawn in by the opening descriptions of the mysterious, gentle doe, the sudden shift of focus in Canto 2 to the Norton family and their preparations for the uprising was both disappointing and confusing. That, in contrast to *Waverley*, published the year before to dazzling critical and popular acclaim, the action of *The White Doe* focussed on a rebellion that stopped short of an outright clash of arms, and that it managed, at the same time, to evoke painful recollections of the religious and political divisions that threatened even now, in the aftermath of Napoleon's defeat, to unsettle the establishment of national unanimity, added still further to the poem's lack of accord with contemporary taste and opinion.

Yet, in conception, the poem had been designed to demonstrate how outbreaks of civil strife could be tempered by higher wisdom; as Wordsworth informed Scott, who pointed out that the events depicted in the poem were at odds with historical actuality, the action of *The White Doe* was coloured by the imaginations of 'the people' who, unfettered by the standards of the 'studious', had made of the history a tale of pride checked by providence (*MY* I. 237). In a broad sense, the poem highlighted how wars waged in defiance of the established religious and political order could be surveyed from the perspective of the divine. But this was not the kind of message that a people believing themselves to be released from over two decades of wartime anxiety wished to receive. In the summer of 1815, Britain had secured a decisive victory over its chief antagonist; here was a triumph unparalleled in the history of the world, an event that confirmed the supremacy of Church and State over the forces of atheism and republicanism and that instilled among the people, surely, a sense of peace and unity.[4]

A few years later, in the first of his 'Essays on the Lake School of Poetry' for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, John Wilson delineated the respective qualities of Scott, Byron, and Wordsworth, describing them as the 'three great master-spirits of our day'.[5] Though written as a defence of Wordsworth's much-derided poem, Wilson's appraisal of Scott's genius offers a shrewd perspective on just why *The White Doe*, with its combination

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of metaphorical abstraction, mysticism, and historical narrative, appeared to be so out of sync with the times. In Scott's poems, Wilson writes,

> we feel ourselves hurried from this our civilized age, back into the troubled bosom of semi-barbarous life […] His poems are historical narrations, true in all things to the spirit of history […] when it is recollected, that the times in which his scenes are laid and his heroes act were distinguished by many of the most energetic virtues that can grace or dignify the character of a free people, and marked by the operation of great passions and important events, everyone must feel that the poetry of Walter Scott is, in the noblest sense of the world, national; that it breathes upon us the bold and heroic spirit of perturbed but magnificent ages, and connects us, in the midst of philosophy, science, and refinement, with our turbulent but high-minded ancestors, of whom we have no cause to be ashamed, whether looked on in the fields of war or in the halls of peace. He is a true knight in all things,—free, courteous, and brave. War, as he describes it, is a noble game, a kingly pastime. He is the greatest of all War-Poets.[6]

Where Scott succeeded in capturing the attention of the public was in his vivid representations of the heroic passions associated with the noble conflicts of the past. By reviving the spirit of 'old times', Scott's poetry 'prevents History from becoming that which, in times of excessive refinement, it is often too apt to become—a dead letter,—and keeps the animating and heroic spectacles of the past moving brightly across our every-day world, and flashing out from them a kindling power over the actions and characters of our own age'.[7] Wilson, however, is no less attentive to the potential dangers of Scott's poetry, particularly in connection with the arousal of those war-like passions that, in times of peace, ought to be kept within bounds. For readers 'imperiously' demanding 'strong passion and violent excitement' Wordsworth's poem, 'with its gentle lineaments […] sober colouring […] and chastened composition', offers 'new and gentle beauties' as conveyed, most touchingly, in the account of the relationship between Emily and the elusive white doe.[8] As well as emphasising the virtue of cultivating a connection between human and non-human, for Wilson the poem is valued chiefly for its study of 'profound sadness, settled grief, the everlasting calm of melancholy, and the perfect stillness of resignation'. In contrast to Scott's poetry of 'turbulent' extremes, in Wordsworth's poem 'looks, words, movements, are gentle, feminine, subdued'.[9] Thus, in its avowedly 'feminine' character, *The White Doe* gives voice, softly and almost imperceptibly, to expressions and sentiments that have no place in the popular discourse of post-war triumphalism. In its focus on the disastrous consequences of 'kingly' ambitions, the destruction

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of the home, and the elision of natural beauty, the poem speaks of fallings and vanishings that 'Victory Sublime!',[10] as Wordsworth subsequently characterised the Battle of Waterloo, refused to acknowledge.

This chapter builds on Wilson's insight into the gendering of peace in Wordsworth's poem to add a further dimension to the uncertain and often-contested character of the poet's representations of historical violence. In an important essay on *The White Doe*, Peter Manning argues that Wordsworth sought to capitalise on the public taste for epic romance, as evidenced by the popularity of Southey's, Byron's, and Scott's productions in this vein.[11] But while noting Wordsworth's wish to secure a place alongside Byron, Scott, and Southey, we must be alert as well to the ways in which this poem gives voice to those 'gentle, feminine, subdued' emotions that the genre of epic romance, in its bid for cultural dominance, sought to overpower. Much of what I have to say about the depiction of feminine feeling in this poem is connected to Wordsworth's attempt to draw a distinction between Scott's 'customary and very natural course of conducting an action, presenting various turns of fortune, to some outstanding point on which the mind might rest as a termination or catastrophe' and the shift in emphasis in *The White Doe* towards action as a prompt for 'moral and spiritual' reflection,[12] subsequently characterised by Christopher Wordsworth, Jr., as 'the subduing of the will, and all inferior passions, to the perfect purifying and spiritualizing of the intellectual nature'. Just as the doe, 'by connection with Emily, is raised as it were from its mere animal nature into something mysterious and saint-like', so the poem works to purge imagination of its masculinist, materialist, and martial characteristics.[13]

Just a few months prior to the poem's publication Wordsworth had explored, in 'Laodamia', the relations between female virtue and military masculinity. Based on a myth retold and refashioned by, amongst many others, Euripides, Propertius, Catullus, Virgil, and Ovid, the poem recounts the loss of Laodamia's husband, Protesilaus, in the fight against Troy, his brief restoration as a spirit, and his widow's attempts to bring him back to life. Pitting Laodamia's desire for fleshly reunion ('Come, blooming Hero, place thee by my side!/Give, on this well-known couch, one nuptial kiss/To me, this day, a second time thy bride!', ll. 62–4) against the spectre's insistence that earthly passions must be annulled in the service of a higher object, the verse echoes sentiments that Wordsworth had first explored in 'Character of the Happy Warrior'. War, the new poem makes clear, frees the warrior from those 'ignoble games and revelry' (l. 112) that distract from 'lofty thought' (l. 137) and which are identified

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explicitly with the feminine.[14] Read by Jeffrey Cox as a barbed response to Leigh Hunt's endorsement of love over war in *The Descent of Liberty* (1814), Wordsworth's message to those women whose livelihoods and homes had been blasted by the war against France appears unequivocal: dead soldiers may be mourned but the desire for their return must yield to 'self-government' (l. 140). By way of punishment for her excessive mourning, Laodamia must therefore die. However, as Judith Page notes, Wordsworth, though formally inclined towards the ascetic heroism of Protesilaus, is drawn emotionally to the plight of the grieving widow.[15] Thus, while acting 'in reason's spite', Laodamia is 'yet without crime' (l. 123) and, in a 'trance of passion', is 'Delivered from the galling yoke of time/And these frail elements to gather flowers/Of blissful quiet mid unfading bowers' (ll. 159–63). Disturbed by the poem's unstable moral tone, Wordsworth went on to revise these lines, leaving Laodamia condemned 'as for a wilful crime,/By the just Gods, whom no weak pity moved' to 'wander in a grosser clime,/Apart from happy Ghosts'.[16]

I will return to consider the revisions to this poem in the next chapter, but here would note that the fate of the widow raises the question of how grieving femininity should live on in a devastated world. In opposition to Laodamia's unseemly devotion to the flesh – a love of sensual life that links her to those other female victims of war, Margaret and the Female Vagrant – Emily is presented in *The White Doe* as virginal and pure, a bodiless cipher for the impossibility of peace on earth. Her act of mourning – for the loss of her family, but specifically for her brother – although interminable and self-destructive, provides a corrective to Laodamia's overweening grief but has wider implications for how life should continue in the aftermath of war. Wandering as a ghost amid the ruins of Rylstone, Emily, indifferent to the world and with her sights sets on heavenly deliverance, is emblematic of the melancholy of peace: a wounded soul longing for release from a life of unending antagonism. For Page, Emily's fate as a woman excluded from the male-dominated public sphere, and her subsequent religious ascension, is coeval with the implication 'that if violence can neither be understood nor justified, at least it can be transcended in a spiritual realm'.[17] But while Emily's descent into oblivion suggests that neither peace nor womanhood has a place in this world, I would suggest that the great virtue of *The White Doe* resides in its willingness to raise questions about the relations between war, identity, and power.

A clue to how the poem might be read as response to the end of war can be found in the 1815 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface'. Composed at the same time as Wordsworth was making final revisions to *The White*

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Doe, the essay seems, at first, to retrench on the poem's gentler, pacific leanings. As the mention of 'Adversaries', 'hostility', 'attacks', and 'enemies' in the opening sentences of the essay makes clear – a blazon of antagonism inspired, no doubt, by recent criticism of *The Excursion* – forms of militancy cannot be expunged from the relationship between reader and poet (*Prose* III. 62); yet insofar as the reader is called upon to join with the poet in the 'exertion of a co-operating *power*', the triumph of art need not be conceived as a form of hostile takeover (82). Thus, as the poet, like 'Hannibal among the Alps', shapes and clears the road before him, so the reader is 'invigorated and inspirited by his Leader' (80). Soon after this declaration, however, Wordsworth moves to cleanse his argument of any lingering traces of militancy. As the 'Essay' goes on to assert, in a pregnant attack on the literary pretensions of Lucien Bonaparte, whose Ossianic (code also for Scott-like) poem *Charlemagne; or, the Church Delivered* (1815) Wordsworth had recently appraised, the epic ambitions of would-be conquerors must be distinguished from the efforts of the 'truly original Poet' to introduce 'a new element into the intellectual universe' (82). In *The White Doe*, the union of poet and reader, 'which owes its being to the struggles it makes' while rejecting the drive towards domination (*Prose* III. 67), finds its analogue in the participatory relationship between Emily and the deer. Founded in beauty and love, this relationship stands as a peaceable alternative to Richard Norton's aggressive devotion to the 'unhallowed Banner' (II. l. 505),[18] and his subsequent 'sublime despair',[19] suggesting that wise passivity, when informed by 'corresponding energy' (*Prose* III. 82), may yet find a place in a conflicted world.[20]

Active and passive, militant and meditative, masculine and feminine, sublime and beautiful, human and non-human, secular and sacred, war and peace, the living and the dead: *The White Doe of Rylstone* is built on conceptual distinctions that cross-fade into each other, generating unexpected correspondences and collisions. In the following reading I trace the ways in which the poem sets out to engage with its internal contradictions, its gestures towards concord unsettled by persistent reminders of the strife it would transcend. Memories of conflict, as I argue throughout this book, shadow the poetry Wordsworth composed in the immediate aftermaths of Waterloo and Peterloo, but this is no less true of poems composed in the 1790s and in the 1810s that did not appear in print until after the wars against France. Entering the world in the year of Waterloo, *The White Doe* dramatises tensions inherent to the conceptualisation of peace, a claim that applies also to *Peter Bell* and *The Waggoner*, poems that did not appear in print until 1819. In connection with these related narrative poems a point

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that should be noted is the virtual existence of a volume comprising 'Peter Bell, The White Doe, and Benjamin the Waggoner' that Wordsworth had 'resolved upon' in April 1814 (*MY* II. 140). It would be interesting to speculate on how the projected volume, conceived in the month of Napoleon's first abdication and announced on the very day that Louis XVIII returned to France, might have been received, not least had it appeared before the publication of *Waverley* in July. I consider the relations between *The White Doe*, *Peter Bell* and *The Waggoner* in more detail in Chapter 4, but for now *The White Doe of Rylstone* stands alone: composed in a time of war, revised during an interlude of peace, readied for publication in a period of unexpected and rapidly escalating tensions, and finally published within a few days of the war's decisive conclusion, *The White Doe* is a poem out of time, exhibiting in its dislocated compositional and publication history the societal fractures it seeks to transcend. To pave the way for the exploration of the poem's contribution to post-war culture, I wish first to look at how the verse nests an experience of personal grief within a story of historical defeat.

Fictions of Distress

Considering what Wilson has to say about the poem's investment in chastisement and sobriety in the wake of the losses occasioned by war, it seems fitting that the poem should be bookended by representations of grief. As is well known, *The White Doe* bears the imprint of personal loss – of William's brother, John, in 1805 and of William and Mary's children, Catherine and Thomas, in 1812. Over the course of the poem's composition, from inception in December 1807 to publication in 1815, *The White Doe* became a register of familial tragedy as well as a demonstration of the consolatory work of imaginative literature. The description of John's character that Wordsworth gave to Beaumont in the wake of his death casts an intriguing light on how the association between grief, consolation, and the idea of the feminine took a hold on the poem: 'my departed Brother […] walked all his life pure among the impure […] his modesty was equal to that of the purest Women. In prudence, in meekness, in self-denial, in fortitude, in just desires, and elegant and refined enjoyments, with an entire simplicity of manners, life and habits, he was all that could be wished-for in man' (*EY* 556). The 'sainted' Emily (VI. l. 1692), who also walks among the impure, suggests the possibility of a continuation of personality after death, her triumph over adversity providing a lesson in fortitude to those who struggle with grief.

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The idea that personal grief work could be linked to a nation's recovery in the aftermath of war, and that peace should be linked to feminine purity, takes shape in *The White Doe* in the depiction of the contrast between Emily's patient endurance of loss and her father's headstrong and immodest pursuit of power. If, as Geoffrey Hartman has contended, the poem exists to chasten and subdue the 'wanton' excesses of the pagan or Catholic imagination that is the cause of idolatry, fanaticism, and war, it seeks nevertheless to retain a faith in the existence of natural sympathies as 'vital not only to poetry but also to human development'.[21] Hence the importance of the volume's dedicatory poem, which explores the ability of literature to provide consolation while avoiding 'an over-extension of imaginative hopes' beyond the measure that nature can fulfil.[22] Composed as *The White Doe* was going to press, 'In trellis'd shed with clustering roses gay' gives expression to the effects of 'lamentable change' (l. 21),[23] observing how the 'stream of fiction' (l. 25) fails to provide the grieving couple with consolation until a reading of *The Faerie Queene*, with its story of 'female patience winning firm repose' (l. 50), yields a 'timely promise of unlooked-for fruit' (l. 30). From Spenser's late Elizabethan Protestant romance, Wordsworth retrieves a sense of those sympathies that 'Aloft ascending, and descending deep,/Even to the inferior Kinds' (ll. 44–5), connect the material with the spiritual world without losing a sense of their distinction.

Echoing the emphasis on co-creativity that had been imparted to Coleridge and that was expressed emphatically in the 1815 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface', Kristin Dugas has argued that 'In trellis'd shed', together with the sonnet 'Weak is the will of Man' and the epigraph from Bacon, 'prepares "readers for the action" of *The White Doe*' by showing how 'every symbolic action, whether in the world or as a response to a fictional representation, requires an extended exercise of suspended disbelief'.[24] A product of Wordsworth's fraught attempts to derive consolation from artifice, Dugas goes on to claim that 'In trellis'd shed' is aware of how 'fictions of distress, however soothing, remain fictions'.[25] Yet such awareness need not invalidate the ability of such fictions to provide readers with solace; if readers can respond empathetically to Spenser's stylised representations of recovery from grief then, by implication, they should also be able to respond to the contrivances of *The White Doe*.[26]

A pre-text for *The White Doe*'s delicate balancing of sympathy and self-consciousness that must be considered in this context is 'Hart-leap Well'. Rooted, like *The White Doe*, in traditional British and German balladry, the opening of the poem sets the thrill of a 'remarkable Chace' alongside pre-emptive indicators of frustrated endeavour and melancholy attainment.

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Matching 'Joy' (l. 9) with 'doleful silence' (l. 13) and the cheery huntsman's halloo with a 'weary mountain strain' (l. 20), the chase terminates at the site of the hart's ignoble end: a 'trembling' spring (l. 44) united in sympathy with the 'foaming' (l. 40) expirations of the dying beast.[27] Due to the verse's qualifying notes, the huntsman's satisfaction at this 'glorious act' (l. 37) appears uncertain, hollow, a moment of solitary delight undercut by the pathos of the suffering creature, whose blood, like a sacrificial 'lamb' (l. 39), offers consecration, not to the founding of a holy site but to the raising of a 'Pleasure-house' (l. 57), a space of 'merriment' (l. 92) and illicit, carnal delight. Divided into two parts, 'Hart-leap Well', in anticipation of Wordsworth's desire to deflate the pomp of epic romance, sets the would-be tale teller's wish for 'moving accident' (l. 97) against 'a simple song to thinking hearts' (l. 100). In advance of *The White Doe*, the poem discovers grief in the midst of victory as, revisiting the site of the huntsman's triumph many decades later, the narrator is struck by the ruins of the pleasure house: a 'doleful place […] It seem'd as if the spring-time came not here,/And Nature here were willing to decay' (ll. 114–16). As relayed by a shepherd, the narrator's 'former rhyme' (l. 123) is now rendered overtly depressing and strange, its heroic potential waylaid by rumour and suspicion. While the fall of 'the great Lodge' (l. 130) tells its own sorry tale, the shunning of the fountain by dogs, horses, sheep, and cattle suggests the possibility 'that here a murder has been done' (l. 137) and that 'blood cries out for blood' (l. 138). The potential for satire on gothic credulity, akin to the teasing out of fact and fantasy in 'The Thorn', does not quite take off; rather, by the close of the poem shepherd and narrator appear united in their response to the desolation of the site and to the hubristic folly on which it was founded. Couched as a dead zone, in stark contrast to the analeptic qualities associated with the hart's nascent spring, the ruined arbour, with its 'lifeless Stumps' (l. 125) and sullied waters, provides a vision of environmental collapse, a state of non-being consequent on the war against nature that looks forward to the universal state of 'despoil and desolation' (l. 1586) that is evoked at the close of *The White Doe*. Unwilling to confirm this gloomy prospect, the narrator of 'Hart-leap Well' observes that even as nature commits the site to 'slow decay' (l. 173), a higher 'Being' (l. 165) mourns this loss in 'sympathy divine' (l. 164). Confident that, under the guidance of this Being, 'Nature, in due course of time, once more/Shall here put on her beauty and her bloom' (ll. 171–2), the narrator proposes to the shepherd that they may 'divide' 'One lesson' (l. 177) from these opposing tales: 'Never to blend our pleasure or our pride/With sorrow of the meanest thing that feels' (ll. 179–80). Thus, artfully insisting

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on 'difference' (l. 162) as a condition of sympathetic accord, the poem accounts for its own unity in division while at the same time affirming the necessity of a divine exception to the 'bloom' (l. 172) and 'waste' (l. 170) of human and non-human life.

Losing cherished offspring and a beloved brother to the reign of contingency, Wordsworth and Mary may well have been tempted to regard their world as a place dead to the restoration of life and beauty. But if the re-reading of Una's patience offered the grieving couple a way to yield to fiction's consolatory power without abandoning critical awareness, it prompted the thought too of a transcendental principle remote from and unaffected by artifice. The theological thinking that forms the basis of this concord is, however, tantalisingly vague. As noted in Chapter 1, in 1815 Wordsworth felt moved to deny that he was 'a worshipper of Nature', confirming his belief in an immortal and infinite 'spirit', distinct from 'objects of sense' (*MY* II. 189). In what amounts to a formal declaration of this faith in the transcendent God, in the 'Preface to *Poems*' (1815) Wordsworth cites as examples of 'the enthusiastic and meditative Imagination' the 'prophetic and lyrical parts of the holy Scriptures, and the works of Milton […] and Spenser', selecting 'these writers in preference to those of ancient Greece and Rome because the anthropomorphitism of the Pagan religion subjected the minds of the greatest poets in those countries too much to the bondage of definite form; from which the Hebrews were preserved by their abhorrence of idolatry' (*Prose* III. 34–5). Pronouncing Milton 'a Hebrew in soul' for his related abhorrence of idolatry, Wordsworth goes on to praise Spenser for maintaining

> his freedom by aid of his allegorical spirit, at one time inciting him to create persons out of abstractions; and at another, by a superior effort of genius, to give the universality and permanence of abstractions to his human beings, by means of attributes and emblems that belong to the highest moral truths and the purest sensations,—of which his character of Una is a glorious example. (*Prose* III. 35)

Acknowledging the gap between 'persons' and 'abstractions', Spenser's Christian allegory draws attention to its own fictiveness while avoiding the perils of nominalism.

Thus, artifice and faith are sustained in exquisite tension. But if *The White Doe* marks an advance in the humanisation of religion, substituting the interpretative freedom of 'Protestant' allegory for the dogmatic certitude of 'Pagan' and 'Catholic' idolatry, the poem is no less alert to what might be lost as a result of secularisation. In a world in which prayer is

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presented as 'a bootless bene' – Lady Aäliza's son will never return; Francis Norton fails to avert his family's catastrophe – the onus falls on 'that sacred power, Imagination',[28] to forge bonds of sympathy between the living and the dead. In its efforts to establish itself as a virtual God, the sacred Imagination makes use of similes to convey a sense of what the world might be like were the dead to be restored to the living. As the poem's several nautical similes reveal, the absentee the poem seeks most ardently to recover is the recently drowned John Wordsworth. Most affectingly, the doe lies down beside the grave of a warrior 'Gently as a weary wave/ Sinks, when the summer hath died,/Against an anchored vessel's side' (I. ll. 143–5), while Emily, in her grief, is 'like a Ship at random blown/To distant places and unknown' (VI. ll. 1633–4). The simile, in its foregrounding of the difference between one thing and another – Emily is only *like* 'a Ship at random blown' – humanely reminds the reader that unity with the dead can only be forged through analogy.[29]

But can the Imagination provide lasting and real consolation unless it takes seriously the notion of a sacred power, beyond the human, that is more than merely analogical? In answer to this question, and with a recollection of how 'apparent' tautologies serve 'not only as symbols of the passion, but as things, active and efficient, which are themselves part of the passion',[30] it is worth noting that, for Wordsworth, as for Coleridge, the failure of language to capture the holy Word was an indication not of divine lack but of divine presence, a transcendental plenitude manifested precisely in the *in*ability of signs to deliver spiritual fulfilment. In the 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface' Wordsworth reflects further on this paradox, providing a rationale for the 'divine origin' of poetry:

> The concerns of religion refer to indefinite objects, and are too weighty for the mind to support them without relieving itself by resting a great part of the burthen upon words and symbols. The commerce between Man and his Maker cannot be carried on but by a process where much is represented in little, and the infinite Being accommodates himself to a finite capacity. In all this may be perceived the affinities between religion and poetry;—between religion—making up the deficiencies of reason by faith, and poetry—passionate for the instruction of reason; between religion—whose element is infinitude, and whose ultimate trust is the supreme of things, submitting itself to circumscription and reconciled to substitutions; and poetry—ethereal and transcendent, yet incapable to sustain her existence without sensuous incarnation. (*Prose* III. 65)

The White Doe makes much of the breach between the 'ethereal and transcendent' and the 'finite capacity' of 'words and symbols', but the

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concluding reference to 'sensuous incarnation' should give us pause. Writing under the influence of Hartman's account of the poem, critics have perhaps been too quick to read the depiction of the contest between 'pure religion' and Catholicism as an allegory of the triumph of secular self-consciousness over religious credulity.[31] In a January 1816 letter to Francis Wrangham, Wordsworth describes *The White Doe* as starting from a 'high point of imagination […] to a still higher; nothing less than the Apotheosis of the Animal' (*MY* II. 276); but while elevation to the spiritual undoubtedly takes place in the poem, it might be more accurate to conceive of the doe as the incarnation of the divine. At once natural and spiritual, the doe becomes the embodiment of the affinities between religion and poetry, which strive alike to bridge the divide between the finite and the infinite.

Wordsworth's fierce objections to Catholic Relief are well known; less well known is his preference for the Gospel of St John, which, with its focus on the Incarnation, has been taken by some critics as an indication of the poet's lingering attachment to Catholicism.[32] Much could be made, and has been made, of the poem's secret sympathy with the faith it would abjure, and rather than rehearse these arguments I would prefer to relate Wordsworth's interest in incarnation to the concern expressed in the second 'Essay upon Epitaphs' with the instability of language: 'if words be not the incarnation of the thought, but only a clothing for it, then surely they will prove an ill gift' (*Prose* II. 84–5). As incarnation, words signal the distinction between nature and spirit while yet allowing for their interanimation. A poem founded on such a principle would sustain fictive self-consciousness even as it maintains faith in God; accepting the necessity of artifice in the work of consolation, a poem of this kind would be sincere in its efforts to provide a communicative link between the living and the dead. Still further, a poem in which the infinite submits 'to circumscription and is reconciled to substitutions' (*Prose* III. 65), abjuring the drive towards tautological correspondence that marked, in 'Home at Grasmere', the sad futility of claiming a home for peace, might, after all, provide the groundwork for a peace in which humans and non-humans sojourn in undifferentiated accord. As Wordsworth would go on to claim, in a letter to Walter Savage Landor: while seeking, like religion, to incarnate infinite truths in finite words, poetry is at its most compelling 'in those passages where things are lost in each other, and limits vanish'. In other words, it is in the ruins of symbolic expression, in those moments where peace is unhoused and the infinite shines through, that the 'aspiration' towards a better life is most fully exercised.[33]

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In Sacred Ruins

On what basis, then, is the peace of *The White Doe* founded? Set some fifty years after the failed rebellion, the opening verses describe a gathering of worshippers in 'a rural Chapel', protected 'like a little nest' in 'the shattered […] heart' (I. ll. 25–8) of Bolton Abbey. If the chapel proclaims the restorative hegemony of Protestantism, it stands no less as an image of harmony after duress, a haven to which, significantly, the congregation 'repair' (I. l. 29).[34] As the description unfolds, the covert celebration of the decline of Catholic 'magnificence' (l. 117) in the name of Protestant simplicity is overtaken by the poem's fascination with the fecundity of natural forms: the dormitory of this 'pile of State,/Overthrown and desolate!' (ll. 83–4), is home to wild roses, sapling ash, and elder; the alter, 'whence the cross was rent' is now 'rich with mossy ornament' (ll. 121–2); and, strangest of all, 'gliding in serene and slow,/Soft and silent as a dream' (ll. 58–9), is the solitary doe – 'White she is as lily of June,/And beauteous as the silver moon' (ll. 61–2). The allusion here to Dryden's 'milk white *Hind*, immortal and unchang'd',[35] brings back into play the possibility of a resurgence of Catholic belief, or perhaps even, in an extension of Dryden's vision, the prospect of an alliance between the Crown and the Anglican and the Catholic churches against the forces of religious and political dissent. But Wordsworth's poem, despite its apparent Protestant leanings, leaves open to question the status of the doe's pagan or Christian origins:

> Whether she be of forest bowers,
> From the bowers of earth below;
> Or a Spirit, for one day given,
> A gift of grace from purest heaven. (I. ll. 77–80)

The parishioners share this uncertainty, differing in opinion as to whether the creature is the material embodiment of Lady Aäliza's grief for her drowned son (ll. 226–44), a rebel Lancastrian spirit resurrecting traumatic memories of the beheading of the Yorkist Earl of Pembroke in the War of the Roses (ll. 245–66), or a benign shapeshifting 'Fairy' (l. 270), tutoring the Baron Henry Clifford, perceived variously as an abrasive Lancastrian warmonger and as a studious 'Shepherd Lord' (l. 271), in the ways of 'humble quietness' (l. 297).[36] The friction introduced into the poem by these 'superstitious fancies' (ll. 218) attests to the persistence of a 'tragic history' (l. 202) of dispute and conjecture, 'Which does the gentle Creature wrong' (l. 219). Doubt as to the creature's origins and intent is shown in the poem to be a remnant of the grief and anxiety brought about by the sectarian conflict and its uncertain settlement. The aftershocks of war that

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work ceaselessly to derange the peace find their counterpart in the poem's struggle to preserve a 'vision so composed and sweet' (l. 314) within a genre fated to expose the gap between individual consciousness and objectified meaning. That, for a moment, 'the people', overcoming their 'doubting' and 'questioning' (ll. 315–16), are afforded an 'undisturbed repose of heart' (l. 320) highlights the poem's paradoxical logic: only a creature divorced from objectivity can undertake the work of healing after war, but divorce from objectivity is precisely the cause and consequence of war. Thus, as the doe moves delicately through the churchyard, filling 'many a damp obscure recess/With lustre of a saintly show' (ll. 102–3), casting 'glory' (l. 93) on the ruins, the ability of lyric to discover a home for 'solitude, and utter peace' (l. 330) is short lived; because conflict is destined to recur in this world, such dreamlike visions must 'vanish' (l. 323).

As Richard Norton prepares his family for the ill-fated uprising, his son Francis counsels restraint. Like the white doe, Francis is symptomatic of the divide between the individual and collective consciousness, his pleas for moderation falling on unsympathetic ears. As the Nortons venture towards a battle that would fulfil the expectations of epic romance, the son is left at home to brood alone, seemingly caught, like a 'phantasm' (II. l. 423), between the realms of the living and of the dead. Locked in a 'trance' (l. 438), Francis becomes representative of the aporia that bedevils the poem throughout as, echoing Wordsworth's own conflicted feelings at the time of the poem's composition – torn on the one hand between adherence to economic, creative, and political independence and on the other bound by loyalty to the demands of his reactionary patrons – he drifts into inertia, unable either to join in with the fray or to sue for a credible peace. That the son can support the father only by widening the breach between thought and action – unable to support the father's 'aims', he will nevertheless join him, 'Unarmed and naked', so that on 'Kind occasions' he may 'See, hear, obstruct, or mitigate' (ll. 511–18; *passim*) – underscores the sense in which conscience, because of its refusal to take up arms, is placed at a remove from the world in which it would intervene. The attempt to recast opposition to war as an act requiring courage akin to that of the warrior remains, as a result, ineffective. Just as the sacralising labour of simile cannot compete with religious conviction, so the claim that Francis and Emily in their 'Forebearance and self-sacrifice' have 'like combatants […] fared' (ll. 583–4) fails to bridge the divide between analogy and actuality. Understanding as much, the conscientious objector sees in the conflict the source of a deeper and more lasting catastrophe, informing his sister of a 'Time' to 'come that rings the knell/

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Of all we loved, and loved so well' (ll. 522–3). Knowing that peace cannot be realised in this time, Francis counsels Emily to 'Hope nothing' (l. 535):

> For we must fall, both we and ours,—
> This mansion and these pleasant bowers;
> Walks, pools, and arbours, homestead, hall,
> Our fate is theirs, will reach them all;
> The young Horse must forsake his manger,
> And learn to glory in a Stranger;
> The Hawk forget his perch,—the Hound
> Be parted from his ancient ground:
> The blast will sweep us all away,
> One desolation, one decay! (II. 550–9)

In this manner Francis prophesises a time when the conflict of individuation recedes, supplanted by a phase of mutual decline: the 'fall' of 'all' into 'desolation' and 'decay'. As persons, objects, and animals descend into oblivion, so too do claims of ownership and obeisance; walks and arbours, homestead and hall, horse, hawk, and hound – in the absence of the social contract, all must succumb to the return of primal violence. But whereas domesticated creatures may learn, in time, to 'glory' in new masters, thereby restoring under the guise of peace the juridical wars that are the origin and end of history, a principle of beauty, distinct from human control, returns to 'her peaceful woods' and 'murmuring floods' (ll. 564–5) and there remains, 'in heart and soul the same […] before she hither came,—/Ere she had learned to love us all' (ll. 564–8). Exempted from human history, the white doe symbolises for Francis a state of peace that is forever divorced from actuality. In related mood, Francis conjectures that Emily 'by force of sorrows high' will be 'Uplifted to the purest sky/Of undisturbed humanity!' (ll. 591–2), further accentuating the sense in which, out of very despair, peace can be conceived only as an unattainable ideal.

As the poem proceeds, a preoccupation with the gulf between earthly despoliation and transcendental preservation becomes ever more apparent. Just as Rylstone Hall is destined to decay, surviving only as a romantic ruin, so Catholicism has fallen into abeyance, persisting only on the margins of society as a self-defeated and ultimately outmoded religious practice. For this reason, the rebels' anti-climactic yielding of 'the unfought field' (III. l. 817) makes perfect sense. Though the bloodless defeat of the Rising of the North frustrates the conventions of epic romance, the absence of battlefield passions works to ensure that latent strains of religious and political extremism are prevented from disturbing the post-war consensus. Unrealisable outside of the virtual future conveyed by a sequence of past

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modal verbs ('The darksome Altars would have blazed […] Once more the Rood had been upraised'; […] 'This Banner' on 'the consecrated breast' of Bolton Priory 'Should […] have found rest […] I would myself have hung it high', V. ll. 1276–95), the promise of Catholic 'renovation from the dead' (l. 1279) is drained of any affective force. That the son, out of filial devotion, should commit to honouring the father's wish to place the 'unhallowed banner' on St Mary's shrine, only to fail in this 'high endeavour' (l. 1230), can be read as a further sign of the poem's determination to maintain the distinction between superstitious fancies and sacred imagination. In a world given over to the misrecognition of words and symbols, the son's desire to fulfil the father's wish is interpreted by the enemy as a sign of craven self-interest: 'Behold the Ensign in his hand!/ He did not arm, he walked aloof!/For why?—to save his Father's Land' (VI. ll. 1481–3). Slain as the result of a failure of communication, Francis's death marks, therefore, the end of the father's benighted hopes for 'New life' (IV. l. 1287). And with the loss of the banner comes the end, too, of the defective zeal that would deny the foundational divide in mortal signs, effacing the gap between reference and referent to make palpable the invisible and immaterial Divine.

True to its aim to make of 'Dire overthrow' (VI. l. 1865) a source of spiritual rejuvenation, the poem's conclusion returns once more to its source in familial grief. Emily's encounter with the grave of her beloved brother is described as the 'consummation, the whole ruth/And sorrow of this final truth' (V. l. 1567–8), the end rhymes serving as a poignant reminder of how the supreme height of knowledge contains a mournful core. The sense of uncertainty aroused by the loss of John Wordsworth is sustained in the passage that follows, as the narrator inquires of the poem's tutelary 'Spirit' where Emily has 'fled': 'is a rifted tomb/Within the wilderness her seat?/Some island where the wild waves beat,/Is that the Sufferer's last retreat?' (VI. ll. 1573–9; *passim*). The grieving sister is then discovered, sitting 'alone' and in 'quietness' (ll. 1602–3), her 'fortitude' – the word recalls Wordsworth's evocation of John's qualities in his letter to Beaumont – put 'to proof' (l. 1639) amid the ruins of Rylstone's 'fair domain' (l. 1587). Reminiscent of the blasted landscapes inhabited by the female vagrant and Margaret, the levelling of Rylstone contrasts with the earlier account of 'proud' Norton Tower: an 'Edifice of warlike frame' (IV. l. 1170) that 'fronts all quarters, and looks round […] Upon a prospect without bound' (ll. 1172–5). Within this toxically altered domain – 'the ravage hath spread wide/Through park and field, a perishing/That mocks the gladness of the Spring' (VI. ll. 1595–7) – Emily

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maintains a solitary vigil, 'as if the waste/Were under her dominion placed' (ll. 1599–1600). But while Margaret and the female vagrant sink into nullity, Emily maintains composure in grief; likened to 'a Virgin Queen' (l. 1608), negligent of 'outward images of fate,/And carrying inward a serene/And perfect sway' (ll. 1610–12), the sole survivor of the uprising retains her core sense of self, unmoved by outer circumstance.

The allusion to the Protestant Queen Elizabeth recalls the poem's commitment to its historical context; it also evokes the sense in which, *pace* Hartman, the verse seeks to align the triumph of sacred Imagination with the ascendency of Protestantism; but the description of Emily, as it unfolds, is reminiscent too of the Catholic veneration of Our Lady of Sorrows. In lines redolent of the iconography of Mater Dolorosa, Emily is described as having been 'brought/To the subjection of a holy,/Though stern and rigorous, melancholy!' (ll. 1615–16); and while she retains 'the tender gleams/Of gentleness and meek delight', she nonetheless is 'held above' the 'infirmities of mortal love;/Undaunted, lofty, calm, and stable,/And awfully impenetrable' (ll. 1640–6). The point here is not that Wordsworth displays a subterranean sympathy with the old religion but rather that aspects of the defeated faith are shown to migrate into the new regime; as indicated by the lines 'Her soul doth in itself stand fast,/Sustained by memory of the past/And strength of Reason' (ll. 1642–4), as well as by the unostentatiousness of Emily's 'woollen cincture' (l. 1626), echoes of the rationalist, self-reliant, and self-denying precepts of Protestantism are forcefully present in this account, but the portrait of maternal sorrowing that with 'grace/Of awfulness' is displayed in Emily's face (ll. 1616–17) testifies to the persistence of a sacramental, as opposed to instrumental, understanding of the relationship between nature and the divine.

Composed in May–June 1808, just a few weeks after the earliest complete version of *The White Doe*, 'The Tuft of Primroses', as previously observed, returns to the consideration of England's Catholic ruins, depicting through prosodic violence the fall of 'stately Towers', 'crush'd, and buried under weeds and earth' (ll. 479–82). But while the appeal to 'nature's pure religion' supports the transmission of Christian, as opposed to doctrinal, truth in 'line/Uninterrupted' (ll. 499–500; the enjambment is strikingly ironic), the poem, like *The White Doe*, continues to register the grievous shock of the Reformation and to that extent may be read as a sympathetic response to Catholicism. Despite the fact that Wordsworth's political objections to Catholicism were to become increasingly vehement, reaching a crescendo around the time of the 1829 Catholic Relief Bill, in his poetic practice he maintains sympathy for a religion that, 'made

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glorious in decay' ('The Tuft of Primroses', l. 493), survives as the harried consciousness of the post-Reformation settlement: a mode of supernatural excess at home amidst the ruins.[37]

Apotheosis of the Animal

As the incarnation of this alienated sublime, Emily, 'from stroke/Of ravage saved' (ll. 1650–1), persists as an image of beauty, foreshadowing 'The Tuft of Primroses', 'like a stately Flower […] separated from its kind' (ll. 1653–5).[38] And it is at this point that the poem enacts its most daring turn, providing a figure for the relationship between earth and heaven that, even as it accepts ontological difference, can accommodate the possibility of intercommunion. From a certain perspective, the reappearance of the doe, in defiance of Francis's prophesy, could be described as a miracle; not only has the preternatural creature survived time and change, but its return from the 'peaceful woods' implies that eternal harmony may, after all, be restored to the world. The passage describing the reunion of Emily and the creature, which Wordsworth revised significantly for the 1815 publication, deserves to be quoted in full:

> Thus checked, a little while it stayed;
> A little thoughtful pause it made;
> And then advanced with stealth-like pace,
> Drew softly near her—and more near,
> Stopped once again;—but, as no trace
> Was found of any thing to fear,
> Even to her feet the Creature came,
> And laid its head upon her knee,
> And looked upon the Lady's face,
> A look of pure benignity,
> And found unclouded memory,
> It is, thought Emily, the same,
> The very Doe of other years!
> The pleading look the Lady viewed,
> And, by her gushing thoughts subdued,
> She melted into tears—
> A flood of tears, that flowed apace
> Upon the happy Creature's face. (VI. ll. 1666–84)

In the draft version, the doe, 'Through fear & through confusion strange', maintains a distance from Emily and is so disheartened as to resign Emily to the care of an 'old Man' as her only comforter.[39] In the published version, the encounter is transformed into a scene of mutual recognition and

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reciprocal delight, suggesting that Wordsworth sought, in the aftermath of war, to convey an impression of how human and non-human, nature and spirit, could be brought together in peaceful co-existence. While 'She melted into tears—/A flood of tears' implies a dissolving of the psychological limits that prevent human beings from overcoming loss, it raises too the prospect of a peaceable alternative to the destructive floods that yield the legend on which *The White Doe* is founded and that, to this point, have flowed through the poem's narrative course.[40] Thus, when at the poem's conclusion Emily is 'Uplifted to the purest sky/Of undisturbed mortality' (l. 1872), the violent waters of Rylstone are transformed into an 'innocent spring' (l. 1876), offering a slender promise of earthly renewal.

The lines that follow the meeting between Emily and the doe add further to the therapeutic dimensions of the encounter as, recalled by the doe's reappearance to memories of past pain and pleasure, Emily is delivered from grief-stricken stasis to joyful recovery:

> Oh, moment ever blest! O Pair!
> Beloved of heaven, heaven's choicest care!
> This was for you a precious greeting,—
> For both a bounteous, fruitful meeting.
> Joined are they, and the sylvan Doe
> Can she depart? can she forego
> The Lady, once her playful Peer,
> And now her sainted Mistress dear?
> And will not Emily receive
> This lovely Chronicler of things
> Long past, delights and sorrowings?
> Long Sufferer! will not she believe
> The promise in that speaking face,
> And take this gift of Heaven with grace? (VI. ll. 1685–98)

In her dual role as a messenger of the eternal and as a 'Chronicler of things/Long past', the doe moves between realms, a 'gift of Heaven' affording cathartic release for the 'Lone Sufferer', hitherto locked in timeless grief. Alluding to the 'blest pair' of *Paradise Lost* (IV. l. 774), the scene augurs well for the restoration of lost innocence. Intimations of Emily's 'sainted' status have been threaded throughout *The White Doe*, but the description of her meeting with the doe as 'the first of a re-union/Which was to teem with high communion' (ll. 1699–1700) makes the poem's liturgical orientation explicit. Linked to the incarnation of word and thought, the reunion of Emily and the creature evokes the intermingling of flesh and spirit that takes place in the Eucharist. However, in a work that eschews

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doctrinal clarity, the matter of whether the dialectic of unity and difference that takes place in this 'high communion' should be understood in terms of transubstantiation or consubstantiation is left uncertain.

What is clear is that the doe's reappearance helps Emily to come to terms with all that she has suffered. Key to this process of restoration is the creature's ability to foster a sense of continuity between the recollection of historical trauma and the promise of restoration. If, as Mater Dolorosa, Emily is 'held above/The infirmities of mortal love', the resulting state of equanimity has left her 'separated' and 'Single on the gladsome earth' (ll. 1654–6), unable to participate in those forms of life that would help to restore a connection with the divine. The doe's return brings not only joy but also pain as, following a journey to those familiar spots that document the fall of the Nortons, from the dell where the doe was first encountered to the churchyard where the last of the brothers is buried, Emily is recalled to her connection with the 'trouble-haunted ground' (l. 1720). But it is through this revisitation of the past that Emily is able to re-enter the world 'Of time, and place, and thought, and deed', perceiving in 'her silent Follower's eyes' a record of 'Endless history' (ll. 1734–5). No longer detached from the source of her misfortune, the maid undertakes a 'second, yet nobler birth' (l. 1864) and though set apart from 'human cares' (l. 1878) can sympathise with and participate in the lives of her fellow post-war survivors.[41]

Significantly, however, the poem remains open to the question of how precisely a state of peace is to be realised in a world in which language and history have become synonymous with violence. One possible avenue for peaceable revolution is suggested by the pre-articulate and thus, in Rousseauian mode, pre-societal relationship between Emily and the white doe. Though 'mute', the doe nevertheless has a 'speaking face' (l. 1697), which by means of looks and glances allows Emily to come to terms with the past. The relationship between Emily and the white doe could, of course, be dismissed as a correlationist fantasy, but it is also worth asking what might be gained from the poem by indulging in this fantasy. Following Bruno Latour's defence of anthropomorphism, I would suggest that the beast's ability to communicate and sympathise with her human companion has wider implications for the poem's representation of post-war truth and reconciliation, which aims to heal the breach not only between humans but also between humans and non-humans.[42] Considering the repeated mentions of the doe's expressive face, as well as her ability to comprehend and respond to Emily's facial expressions ('Skilled to approach or to retire,—/From looks conceiving her

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desire'; ll. 1739–40), it would be reasonable to conclude that, in a Levinasian sense, an ethical relationship has been established. Leaving aside the problematic and potentially scandalous significance of this conclusion (Levinas, for one, would object to the inclusion of the animal in the face-to-face encounter), the doe, as a quasi-speaking subject, opens a space within the poem in which the embodiment of the nudity and defencelessness of all life, including the life conventionally defined as faceless, can articulate a plea not to be killed.[43] Tentatively, then, *The White Doe* advances an image of nature delivered from the silence that separates human and non-human life. As the poem moves to its seraphic conclusion, Emily is 'happy' to receive in 'the mild glance/Beamed from that gracious countenance;—/ Communication, like the ray/Of a new morning' (ll. 1845–50). Seemingly immune to the misrecognition and miscomprehension that bedevils the substitutive play of signs, the rapport between human and non-human appears not only to transcend the primary violence of signification but also to provide an example of how memories of past violence may be recollected without the risk of their traumatic repetition. Though nature is 'wasted' (l. 1773) and 'mournful' (l. 1908), the time of the endless sorrowing of the earth appears to have come to an end. As Emily wanders through the ruins, she comes to regard the recent history of personal and collective loss with a 'Mild, delicious melancholy:/Not sunless gloom or unenlightened,/But by tender fancies brightened' (ll. 1772–9). With eyes set on the 'purest sky/Of undisturbed mortality' (ll. 1870–1), we might say that not only Emily but also nature, as represented by the doe, can cease its lament for the division that language brought to the world.[44]

What Good Is a Bootless Bene?

That Emily's rehabilitation takes place silently in a region set apart from human society should, however, give us pause. As Wilson observes, in *The White Doe* 'looks, words, movements, are gentle, feminine, subdued'; peace, that is, appears to be associated in Wordsworth's poem with a mode of private, apolitical interiority expressly identified as feminine. Should this pre-discursive, pre-societal, and pre-political compound of peace and the feminine be decried or affirmed? Designated by Levinas as 'the other par excellence' femininity, like peace, is in a perpetual state of jeopardy, granted a foundational role in the making of the just society but only on condition that it remains inarticulate, a mode of welcoming that serves as the excluded origin of the world.[45] A distaste for Levinas's theorising of feminine alterity informs Judith Page's criticism of the characterisation

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of Emily: 'As a woman defined by male culture in terms of weakness, Emily has no voice in the world of power, the public arena of religious and political conflict that causes her loss and isolation. She gains spiritual power only when she accepts the complete loss of everything that would have been hers as a dependent of patriarchy'.[46] However, contrary to this criticism, one could argue that it is precisely on account of her withdrawal from the public arena that Emily is able to suspend the destructive urgings of the masculine world. Indeed, to push this reading further, the equation of feminine alterity – which for Levinas is not relational but absolute – with notions of domestic retreat should prompt us to consider how the drive to self-correspondence and completion is born out of a failure to come to terms with the equivocation that the feminine, as absolute other, introduces into the home.[47] Associated with a series of temporary shelters – an 'island where the wild waves beat' or 'some aspiring rock' (ll. 1578–85), 'a primrose bank' (l. 1601), 'a self-surviving leafless Oak' (l. 1649), 'A Hut, by tufted Trees defended' (l. 1711), a 'thick bower' (l. 1755), 'a rocky cavern' (l. 1758) – Emily highlights the sense in which feminine alterity, associated with the heart of the home while, at the same time, remaining fundamentally unhoused, undoes the zeal for permanence that, perversely, fuels the pursuit of war.

Often overlooked in readings of *The White Doe* that dwell on the associations between peace, withdrawal, and feminine quiescence is the way in which the poem comes, ultimately, to challenge the theological presuppositions on which the dream of lasting peace is founded. Although, as we have seen, Wordsworth sought in the poem to evoke a sense of transcendental plenitude in the disparity between the infinite and its sensual incarnation, in its conclusion the poem steers towards a more sceptical position, or at least one that is able to accommodate an idea of the divine as an effect of artifice:

> When the Bells of Rylstone played
> Their Sabbath music—"God us ayde!"
> That was the sound they seemed to speak;
> Inscriptive legend, which I ween
> May on those holy Bells be seen,
> That legend and her Grandsire's name;
> And oftentimes the Lady meek
> Had in her Childhood read the same,
> Words which she slighted at that day;
> But now, when such sad change was wrought,
> And of that lonely name she thought,
> The Bells of Rylstone seemed to say,
> While she sate listening in the shade,

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> With vocal music, "God us ayde!"
> And all the Hills were glad to bear
> Their part in this effectual prayer. (VI. ll. 1780–95)

Affirming the sense in which 'through the sound the soul of the material thing expresses itself' directly to the ear, the passage entertains, albeit briefly, a dream of unmediated contact with the divine.[48] But by drawing attention to the 'Inscriptive legend' on the bells, the lines speak no less of how sonic presence is a mechanical illusion, an effect accentuated by the reproduction of Old English script within the main body of the printed poem. Evoking the power of 'vocal music' while drawing attention to the visual medium in which this power subsists, *The White Doe* blurs the distinction between spirit and artifice while providing a graphic connection to the volume's most despairing pronouncement: 'What is good for a bootless bene?' Pitched between faith and doubt, the poem couches prayer as agonisingly alienated from the promise of restoration; uttered in hope of a face-to-face encounter with God, the 'bootless bene' confirms only that God is always already co-implicated with finitude and, as such, can never transcend the opposition between presence and absence, life and non-life.

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Peace, God, nature, and the feminine: must the association of these others par excellence with the destruction of the earth be regarded as a diminution of *The White Doe*'s promise of deliverance from the melancholy of a post-war world? Or should the poem's openness to contestation be taken as a marker of its success? Those early readers who struggled to reconcile the poem's epic energies with its drive towards lyrical inertia, and who discovered in its account of a world given over to feminine self-abnegation and protracted grief an unsatisfying model of how life should be imagined in the aftermath of conflict, were no doubt attuned not only to the poem's renegotiation of the heroic but also to its radical undoing of identity. That, in the ravaged land described in the poem, peace remains fugitive, a transient ideal that finds, at best, only a temporary home, speaks of course to the larger sense in which *The White Doe* failed to find a place in the aftermath of Waterloo. Unable to dwell in the busy, self-congratulatory culture that emerged suddenly in the summer of 1815, the poem retreats into silence. The poem's final words may be read as a performance of this retreat, securing victory, of a sort, from its lack of impact in the world. Thus, in the 'twilight of this day' (l. 1891), the doe is encountered one last time, 'Haunting' the spots 'Which her dear Mistress once held dear'

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(ll. 1898–9). Delighting in homophonic play, the lines postulate a participatory relationship between human and non-human that extends to the relationship between natural 'degree' and 'heaven's grace' (l. 1895). As a 'gliding Ghost' (l. 1902), the white doe mediates between the worlds of the living and the dead, drawing attention amid the ruins of the old religion to something larger and more powerful than the regressive, and painful, longing for home. Amidst 'the mournful waste/Of prostrate altars, shrines defaced' and 'fret-work imagery laid low', the creature 'Paces softly, or makes halt,/By fractured cell, or tomb, or vault', offering mute testimony beside the 'sculpted Forms of Warriors brave' (ll. 1908–16) to a life released from the pursuit of self-completion, the outcome of which is hatred, war, and devastation.

In *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida describes peace as the 'time of learning to live' with 'ghosts', of learning, that is, to accept and accommodate the comingling of absence and presence, lack and plenitude, finitude and infinitude that is the precondition for the emergence of any form of meaning.[49] In such a world, by 'adversities unmoved', 'Calm Spectacle' (ll. 1920–1) resides gently with the ghosts of ruined certitudes in a relationship that comes as close as possible to non-violence. The thematic scope of *The White Doe*, which embraces the subduing of religious and political factionalism, the transition from war to peace, and the recovery from grief, ought, in theory, to have made of the poem a tale for the times. However, as Jeffrey, Wilson, and other commentators hinted, the poem's advocacy of sobriety and restraint placed it at odds with the prevailing mood of triumphalism, and the poem's struggle to come to terms with its own internal contradictions, most notably in its attempt to pitch a weakened, de-cathected Imagination against the dangerous excesses of religious and political dissent, meant that it came uncomfortably close to expressing the underlying melancholy of the post-war settlement. In seeking to secure a sense of transcendental purity, blissfully havened from material objectivity, the *White Doe* merely reconfirmed the divisions between the infinite and the finite, the invisible and the visible, the spiritual and the material, that peace was supposed to heal. Yet in its efforts to show how the 'supreme of things' must submit to 'circumscription' and 'substitutions', the poem provides a way for readers to imagine peace not as the 'bootless bene' of history but as a mode of aesthetic play, unconstrained by the need for certainty and capable of fulfilment in the present.

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