CHAPTER TWO

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH
(1770-1850)

It has been noted in the preceding Chapter, that the Romantic poets of England had, more or less, dramatic ambition and interest in the theatre. William Wordsworth was not an exception in this regard. Of the nature of his dramatic ambition we know actually little. Our knowledge of his theatrical interest and play-going is also quite limited. As far as we know, the poet has left little on record which may enable us to form a fair idea about his dramatic ambition and interest. It will not, perhaps, be unjust to say, that of all the Romantic poets, Wordsworth's relation to the living theatre was the weakest. Yet, the poet in his youth made an attempt at dramatic composition. The only play to his credit is The Borderers, a five-act tragedy, written during 1795-96, and published in 1842. Though a lone instance, The Borderers still shows in its own way, Wordsworth's interest in dramatic composition, and his ambition of becoming a playwright.

It is learnt from Wordsworth himself that The Borderers was written at a time when the memory of the horrors of the French Revolution was still fresh in the poet's mind. During his long residence in France in the troubled period, Wordsworth had had the occasions to witness the cruelties
done from a motive originally well-intentioned, and thus experienced a grim truth about human nature. He came to the realization of the truth, that "sin and crime are apt to start from their very opposite qualities," and that there are "no limits to the hardening of the heart, and the perversion of the understanding to which they may carry their slaves." The composition of The Borderers, we are made to believe, was inspired by a desire to illustrate through dramatic actions what the poet had experienced in the revolutionary France.

It is therefore said that Wordsworth's attitude to life in The Borderers was not quite objective. Herbert Read thinks, that the Annette-episode in Wordsworth's life and its effect upon the poet's mind had some bearing upon this work. When the young poet and his French beloved drifted apart, Wordsworth brought with him a burden of remorse from France. The period following his forced separation from Annette in 1793 was a period of deep mental stress and strain for the poet. Read thinks that the poet had to pass through a state of moral confusion.

"What can we say of Guilt and Sorrow, of The Borderers and of Margaret," says Read, "but that they are projections of this confused state of mind - effects


2Ibid.

3Read, Herbert, Wordsworth, (1957) p.86.
unconscious perhaps, to cast off the burden, to resolve the crisis in the objectivity of a work of art.\textsuperscript{4}

F.W. Bateson also finds closer connection between the poet's life and The Borderers. He regards this drama as the "concealed autobiography" of Wordsworth. To him the hero of The Borderers who is betrayed into a great act of cruelty and crime is Wordsworth himself, and the crime of which the poet was conscious, was the abandonment of his French mistress - Annette. The play is the expression of a haunting sense of guilt that baffled the poet's mind; and by writing this play, Wordsworth unburdened his mind and enjoyed a "private catharsis."\textsuperscript{5}

The critics and biographers have dwelt much on the relation of The Borderers with Godwinism. In the bio-critical study of the poet, Emile Legouis writes:

"It is the work of a Godwinian, who, having at first seen only the grandeur of his master's system, is horror-struck when he suddenly perceives its consequences."\textsuperscript{6}

H.W. Garrod maintains, that The Borderers is a tragedy based on Godwin's philosophy.

\textsuperscript{4}Ibid.


"The whole of Godwinism," says Garrod, "is a cry for proof. He who does not wait for proof acts against reason: is the creature of impulse. 7

Garrod traces the root-cause of the tragedy of Marmaduke - the hero - in his being blind to reason, in his failure to insist on proof.8 But The Borderers may be taken to show Wordsworth casting off the Godwinian faith in the power of reasoning. It shows the danger of being led by the guidance of reason alone. J.C. Smith looks at the drama from this angle of vision. He thinks that a feeling mind like Wordsworth's cannot rest satisfied with the "frigid moral arithmetic" of Godwin, and in The Borderers, he finds the poet "sloughing it off."9 By the time when he composed this drama, Wordsworth was no longer a disciple of Godwinian system of philosophy, and in clear terms Smith maintains that "Godwinism was bankrupt for the author of The Borderers."10 The view that The Borderers is rather a conspicuous mark of the poet's recovery from Godwinism and not an exposition of Godwinism, is strongly held by Ernest de Selincourt. To him, The Borderers does not uphold Godwinism, though in plot, it is Godwinian. On the contrary, it exposes its limitations and shortcomings; in other words, it is intended to refute

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9Smith, J.C., A Study of Wordsworth, 1955,' p.27.
10Ibid.
Godwinian philosophy. Helen Darbishire also comes nearer to Selincourt when she says that Coleridge lavishly admired *The Borderers* as an instance of Wordsworth's recovery from the "disease of Godwinism" from which he himself had already recovered.\(^\text{11}\)

Whatever may be the relation of this tragedy with Godwinism, it seems that *The Borderers* is the outcome of a great secret pain afflicting the mind of the poet. It is not for exposition, nor for refutation of Godwin's philosophy that Wordsworth wrote this tragedy; it was perhaps, written, because a stifled private sense of guilt had been haunting the conscience of the poet from the pangs of which he might have sought to get relief. From this angle *The Borderers* appears to be more intimately related to the life of Wordsworth.

The plot, or the story of *The Borderers* is this: Marmaduke, a young leader of a band of borderers (Outlaws) and a perfectly good man, murders an old blind Baron — Herbert, under the evil power and provocation of a man under him named Oswald. Marmaduke loves Herbert's daughter — Idonea. Oswald is able to convince his leader of the idea that Herbert intends to sell Idonea to infamy; what is more, Idonea is not the daughter of Herbert, in fact. In order to strengthen what he reports, Oswald requires such a person who will corroborate his statement before Marmaduke. He

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bribes a beggar-woman to this purpose and tutors her accordingly, and she, in turn, skilfully performs the task assigned to her. Marmaduke is thoroughly convinced that Herbert is wicked and guilty of allowing Clifford — an enemy of his own to make his vile intercourse with Idonea. The lover and idealist in Marmaduke arise at the same time, and he resolves firmly to throw the blind Baron out of harm's way. Taking advantage of Idonea's absence, Oswald and Marmaduke take Herbert to their custody, and after some short mental conflict Marmaduke murders the old blind man by leaving him to perish in a bleak moor. Later, the plot of Oswald comes to light; Marmaduke tormented by remorse, set out upon a solitary life of wandering penance till death.

The story as this may also symbolise Wordsworth's disillusionment with the French Revolution and his horror at the reign of Terror that it led to. Wordsworth seems to express his remorse for his idealistic involvement in a movement which ultimately turned out to be a blind and mad fury against human life. If this is so, then Oswald might very well represent this inhuman and malicious devilry of the Revolution. Idonea then may stand for Annette, and the blind Baron for the royalist father. But the focal point here is not the Annette episode — the central theme moves through involvement, ignorance, remorse to final repentance. Seen in this light, the story has great dramatic possibility but Wordsworth fails to deal with it dramatically.

The plot of The Borderers is simple. But the poet has constructed it in a way that betrays his lack of dramatic
imagination and skill in story-telling. The artistic lapses, especially in regard to plot-construction are quite obvious. Boleslaw Taborski has also noticed this. "The story is weak in itself," he says, "and badly executed." The cause that drives Marmaduke to the act of murder is weak, because the supposed injustice done to Idonea could easily be stopped by the hero, and Idonea could be rescued from the hand of the blind Herbert, and thereby, from the hand of Clifford. We must not forget, that the adverse situation against which the hero's action is directed is too paltry to need so much of preparation and so grave an action, like the murder. Herbert is not only old, he is also blind. A man in Herbert's condition is not a force at all to Marmaduke, or to any man. The situation hardly justifies Marmaduke's sinister move. Besides, if there is a genuine love between Marmaduke and Idonea, as we are asked to believe, there is no imaginable reason why the girl in this supposed situation will not seek help of her lover to deliver herself. But Idonea does nothing of this kind despite the many other odds she has to face. And this should have roused suspicion in Marmaduke in regard to the veracity of Oswald's report. When the poet has shown mutual love and respect between the hero and his beloved, it is only natural, that the former will procure confirmation of the fact from the latter before he proceeds to take positive step against Herbert.13

13 Taborski, op. cit. p.4.
Wordsworth has not also given us sufficient reason as to why Idonea leaves her physically decrepit father to the care of the host (Act I.), and parts for three days, all on a sudden. This abrupt parting of Idonea is not only inconsistent, it is also highly improbable. For the poet has shown earlier that Idonea is quite dutiful and sympathetic to her helpless father. Had she been otherwise, her unfeeling action could have been justified. The inevitable impression, therefore, is that Idonea leaves her father for three days, because the dramatist wants one such action to alienate Herbert from his daughter at least for some time in order to hand him over to his murderer in Idonea's absence; and the impression, no doubt, greatly damages the sense of dramatic probability.

There is revenge motif in The Borderers, but the cause of revenge is weak and unfounded. For Marmaduke's action against Herbert is something that does not seem inevitable. The central action of this tragedy is the murder of Herbert, prompted by the spirit of revenge, and that of justice. The cause is both private and public. To rescue Idonea, the murder of Herbert appears to be unnecessary, and out of all proportion to the actual situation presented by the poet. The action which is the climax of the drama (Act III) is, therefore, forced - not the natural result of a cause sufficiently serious and thoroughly established. Herbert's death seems to be a means to an end. For Wordsworth requires one such action for the tragedy of the hero. The
plot of *The Borderers* displays, on the whole, Wordsworth's weak power of plot-construction and dramatic conduct. The structural defects open even to the superficial view, create a crack in the totality of impression of the drama. The denouement is, so to say, bathetic. The scenes drag, and are conceived, rather clumsily. The tragic tempo which should have been maintained up to the end, has ludicrously fallen; it finally ends in an unmatching conclusion of a plot originally promising. The result is that *The Borderers* fails to stir those feelings and emotions in our mind which a genuine tragedy always does. There is a touch of artificiality all about its actions, situation and characters.

In *The Borderers*, Wordsworth has tried, to some extent, it seems, to follow the rules of unities. The unities of time and action are somehow maintained; the unity of place is partially lost. Compared with the dramas of Shakespeare, *The Borderers* is more a classical tragedy in so far as the unities are concerned. It is, perhaps, more correct to regard it as a neo-classical tragedy than a romantic one. The romantic excesses which we note in some of the dramas of the Romantic poets are held in check in it. Wordsworth is as moderate in his drama as he is in his poetry. Of the Romantics (excepting Lord Byron), it is only he who shows classical restraint and moderation over the romantic tendencies without being classical himself.

In creating dramatic characters, Wordsworth has not shown much skill either. Of the characters of *The Borderers*,...
Marmaduke and Oswald - the hero and the villain respectively, show some vitality, but these two are only partially alive. Allardyce Nicoll says, that the characters of The Borderers are lifeless. Nicoll is, on the whole, correct. Marmaduke remains almost a static figure all through. He is an idealistic young man of courage and the leader of a band of outlaws whose aim is ultimately noble. He is equally an idealist even when he murders Herbert. For to vindicate justice is the only thing that primarily remains as the motive-force preparing his mind for the deed. Finally, when he renounces the world for a life-long wandering penance he is also nothing short of an idealist.

Oswald, I have loved
To be the friend and father of the oppressed,
A comforter of sorrow;

(Act II.)

This is the ideal of his life to the altar of which he is ready to sacrifice all other feelings and considerations. Unlike the hero of a tragedy, Marmaduke maintains a mind undisturbed by any conflict capable of splitting his personality. We notice some mental weakness, some nervous tension in him only a little before he commits his tragic action. But despite all these Marmaduke remains essentially

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an undivided personality like the hero of a typical melodrama. He is very much a rigid type - not a living character. Even after the realization of his tragic mistake, he has not changed much in mind. But it is anagnorisis that constitutes the real tragic beauty of a tragic hero. Here, it is made quite abortive. Wordsworth seems to have conceived this character with Othello as his model, but even though he is placed in an Othello-situation, Marmaduke fails to show the tragic potentiality of his character. Marmaduke is remorseful. The emotional storm that splits the personality of the tragic hero into pieces and brings about his tragic sufferings to the extreme is absent here. His situation demands something more of him than his being only remorseful. Marmaduke, the declared "friend and father of the oppressed," and "a comforter of sorrow" has learnt, that he has not only destroyed the innocent, and fallen from his ideal, but has also destroyed his love by becoming himself the cause of Herbert's death. We are asked to believe, that the hero faces a double tragedy on the two different planes - ideal and personal. But where is in him the storm of passion equal to the situation? There is a sort of placidity all about him, and in the character of the hero, Wordsworth has failed to create a convincing personality - a character of flesh and blood. The defects in characterization of the hero are dramatically so serious, that Marmaduke cannot touch our heart; we are asked to see his tragedy, but we cannot feel for him. The element of sexual jealousy is also there in him, but the poet has not been
successful in utilizing the same for his dramatic purpose; stress is laid on the ideal side of the hero. Had it been properly and dramatically brought out, Marmaduke would have been a tragic hero somewhat like Othello.

Against this character is set the character of Oswald. Oswald is the only character that shows the elan and vitality, and displays Wordsworth's greatest success in creating character. Oswald is the villain of the play. The poet seems to have Iago in mind when he outlined this character. A villain of the Iago-type, Oswald knows how to turn his victim to his purpose. But the motive behind his actions is made clear to us only in the fourth act. Wallace's analysis of the nature of Oswald appears to be more correct and convincing:

Wal. .........................

Power is life to him
And breath and being; where he cannot govern,' He will destroy.

(Act III.)

The reason for Oswald's plot to deceive his master into a great crime and the resultant tragedy, which Wordsworth has given us through the mouth of Oswald himself (Act IV), appears to be something added as an after-thought. Even, if it is actually not, still it constitutes a serious dramatic defect, the result of which is not very happy. Until the fourth act we cannot clearly know as to why Oswald plots to
deceive Marmaduke and make him murder an innocent man.'

Bernard Groom is quite right when he remarks:

"Up to that point (Act IV) the action has no visible principle of cohesion."\textsuperscript{15}

The "principle of cohesion" is lacking, because we are not given to understand the ultimate motivation of Oswald, which is given by the poet too late.

Wordsworth might have forgotten to hint at the motive of Oswald through any of his earlier soliloquies, and later discovering Oswald's action motiveless and the dramatic defect due to lack of coherence, put it only in the fourth act. The poet has also tried to justify in his prefatory essay on \textit{The Borderers} the action of Oswald later. The later realization of the dramatic incoherence, it may be supposed, led Wordsworth to the writing of a long preface to tell us what he failed to show through the actions and speeches of the drama. The preface referred to was meant to be compensatory in character and spirit. In trying to justify his villain's action Wordsworth says, that "in a criminal conduct every fresh step that we make appears a justification of the one which preceded it,"\textsuperscript{16} and the reason, why he felt it necessary to write the preface in a Shavian fashion is, perhaps, that the poet might have been struck by the obvious

\textsuperscript{15}Groom, Bernard, \textit{The Unity of Wordsworth's Poetry}, 1966. p. 23.

\textsuperscript{16}Wordsworth, \textit{Prefatory Essay} on \textit{The Borderers}.
Oswald, however, proceeds step by step to reach his goal. He is a cool, calculating villain, shrewd but philosophical in speech. He studies Marmaduke closely, and discovers, especially, his two weak points—his love for Idonea, and his extra-ordinary zeal for an ideal love and justice. He, therefore, fabricates a story which may almost instantaneously touch these two weak points of his leader. He tells Marmaduke that Herbert does not want his daughter to maintain connection with him and hold him in her high esteem. Because,

He dreads the presence of a virtuous man
Like you; he knows your eye would search his heart,
Your justice stamp upon his evil deeds
The punishment they merit.

(Act I.)

Oswald knows every string of his leader's mind, and strikes where the effect will be maximum. Like Iago, he also tries to incite Marmaduke's sexual jealousy by his report, that Marmaduke's enemy Clifford in collusion with Herbert, intends to take revenge upon him by polluting his enemy's love—Idonea. Clifford does it, because,

He hates you, and he knows
Where he can stab you deepest.

(Act I.)

Oswald does not stop here. He bribes a beggar-woman to corroborate his statement; his motive is to strengthen his
leader's spirit of revenge to an effective end. Oswald becomes successful; Marmaduke is thoroughly convinced at last.

Oswald, the firm foundation of my life
Is going from under me; these strange discoveries
Looked at from every point of fear or hope;
Duty, or love - involve, I feel, my ruin.

(Act II.)

When Oswald finds Marmaduke shaky in spirit and purpose (Act II), he again seeks to activise his leader to his purpose by striking at his weakest point:

Your weakness, to the Band
Shall be proclaimed: brave Men, they all shall hear it.
You a protector of humanity!
Avenger you of outraged innocence!

(Act II.)

In short, Oswald instigates his leader, where instigation is necessary; where castigation is indispensable, he also castigates him. His clandestine motive drives him to assume the role of both Iago and Lady Macbeth, and leads Marmaduke to the only action - the murder of Herbert. This being accomplished, Oswald achieves his final victory, and enjoys a private satisfaction:

Osw. ............

The goal is reached. My Master shall become
A shadow of myself - made by myself.

(Act V)
Oswald incarnates the Evil that is determined to ruin the Good. He is a close kith and kin of Satan whose only satisfaction in his fall is to cause fall to others. Though himself a villain, Oswald is, as G. Wilson Knight considers, "pivotal to both plot and thought-scheme" of The Borderers, and outshines all other characters in vigour and vitality. With Oswald, Wordsworth achieves success in characterization.

Wordsworth's female characters in The Borderers are weaker in comparison with his male characters. Idonea is the only character that deserves some mention. Idonea loves Marmaduke, and has a high regard for her lover's noble and heroic qualities.

His face bespeaks
A deep and simple meekness: and that soul,
Which with the motion of a virtuous act
Flashes a look of terror upon guilt,
Is, after conflict, quiet as the ocean,
By a miraculous finger stilled at once.

(Act I.)

The poet has shown a short intimate scene between Idonea and Marmaduke in Act III; but even then, in her as also in her lover, the heat of passion and vitality which is the sine qua non of youth is almost lacking. Idonea is an anaemic

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character. She has little relation to the plot, except for the reason, that Oswald's report about the injustice done to her is instrumental to the ultimate act of murder. But even this too does not seem to be absolutely essential. Even without her, Oswald could have won his young Chief by reporting about injustice of similar magnitude done to any other innocent person. For Marmaduke's general attitude is to stand by the side of the oppressed and punish the oppressor. Here in The Borderers, Marmaduke's personal relation with Idonea counts very little. The character of Idonea could not be unfolded; neither as a daughter, nor as a mistress she is impressive. Wordsworth seems to have conceived this character as the heroine of The Borderers, but has failed to relate her organically to the plot in an interesting way.

Other minor characters of The Borderers are no better than outlines, and deserve no mention in this study.

The Borderers falls, to some extent, in line with the Gothic melodramatic tradition. Here we find the half-ruined castle, dungeon, wild scenery of the desolate moor, outlaws, and the like. Even the idea of hero's wandering penance, as D.P. Varma points out, is traced to the Gothic origin.

"An outstanding Gothic motif - the Wandering Jew," says Varma, "first enters Romantic poetry in
Wordsworth's *Borderers*. ............ Wordsworth modelled his blank verse tragedy, *The Borderers* (1795-96), partly on *The Robbers* of Schiller, and more on current Gothic fiction.\(^{18}\)

The stage directions offered by the poet in Act II and also in Act IV are quite suggestive of the trappings of Gothicism.

The Area of a half-ruined castle - on one side the entrance to a dungeon - Oswald and Marmaduke pacing backwards and forwards. (Act II)

or, as in Act IV,

\[\text{A desolate prospect - a ridge of rocks - a Chapel on the summit of one - Moon behind the rocks - night stormy - irregular sound of a bell - Herbert enters exhausted.}\]

G. Wilson Knight thinks that the name of Clifford who does not appear before us in person through the actions of the play is a link with the Gothic tradition.\(^{19}\)

Osw. ................. Before we enter

\[\text{This barren Moor, hangs from a beetling rock}
\text{The shattered Castle in which Clifford oft Has held infernal orgies - with the gloom,}
\text{And very superstition of the place,'}
\text{Seasoning his wickedness.}\]

\[\text{(Act II.)}\]

\(^{18}\text{Varma, op. cit. p.192.}\]

\(^{19}\text{Knight, *The Golden Labyrinth*, 1962. p.213.}\]
Wilson Knight is quite right in his statement, because, with this speech of Oswald, Wordsworth creates a kind of Gothic atmosphere to which this extract of the speech serves as an introduction. These Gothic reminiscences form a part of the melodramatic character the play has ultimately assumed. The structural and the conceptual short-comings of The Borderers are, broadly speaking, the general short-comings which are noticed, more or less, in a typical melodrama, though the short-comings due to artistic lapses vary with the variation of the individual dramatic talent of the author. Apart from the exploitation of the Gothic material, Wordsworth has employed the outlaws, the leader of whom is Marmaduke, the hero; "the crime committed with the best intentioned motives," says Allardyce Nicoll, "is clearly a legacy of the German drama." Moreover, the hero of The Borderers is a character that best suits a melodrama; he is unfit for a tragedy.

Besides the German melodramatic tradition, there might have probably been a stronger cause leading Wordsworth to write a poetic drama of this kind. The cause was, perhaps, quite personal to him. His lack of adequate power over and conception of the tragic drama, and his inexperience were mainly responsible for the melodramatic character of The Borderers. The Romantics were not only the admirers of the Romantic Germany, they were also the lovers of the Elizabethan dramatists, especially, Shakespeare. This love for

20Nicoll, British Drama, p.212.
the Elizabethans led these poets, more or less, to the imitation of the dramatic virtues (including the verbal beauties) of these old dramatists; Wordsworth was certainly not an exception. But he, like other Romantics, had no dramatic genius comparable with theirs. As a result, in trying to write a tragedy, Wordsworth has written nothing better than a melodrama. It may appear that the melodramatic character of The Borderers is rather fortuitous than intentional. For every author, we think prefers psychologically to write one that is the best of the kind, but the inherent limitations of power determine the character of the product, and he ultimately gives what he is capable of giving.

It is rather surprising, that Wordsworth whose poetry is a kind of apotheosis of the common man and the ordinary experience of life, was to choose to write his poetic drama on a theme that is Gothic in spirit. Charles Smith also thinks, that the poet imitated the wrong models - Schiller, Godwin's Caleb Williams, and other Gothic novels of the time. But the question is - why is it so? It is difficult to point out with certainty what could be the actual driving force behind this Gothic imitation. It is found, that Wordsworth had strong dislike for the Gothic melodramatic tradition of the German drama which had infected the public taste of the time.

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"The invaluable works of our elder writers, ........
are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse. - When I think upon this degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation, I am almost ashamed to have spoken of the feeble endeavour made in these volumes to counteract it;#22

Though written after the composition of The Borderers, this extract of the "Preface" shows quite unequivocally Wordsworth's general hostile attitude towards the German drama. Yet, he wrote his tragedy on the models he disliked. This is, perhaps, for the reason that the influence of the Gothic dramatic tradition was too strong and prevalent to be easily set aside; and it might have entered into the unconscious process of artistic creation. Or, it may also be the fact, that before he came to write about man in nature, Wordsworth wanted to show man against an unnatural background. But whatever is the actual reason, the fact remains, that The Borderers provides a general contrast to his cherished ideal and philosophy of life, as manifest in his poetry and the "Preface" referred to earlier. The Borderers has Gothic machinery, but no Gothic horror, as we find in a typically Gothic drama, or novel. In an age when the Gothic spirit submerged the field of drama and novel in general, it was,

perhaps, difficult for Wordsworth and others to distinguish properly between the Gothic and the non-Gothic elements. By avoiding the Gothic horror, which is a broad and vivid characteristic of Gothicism, Wordsworth might have thought to have shunned the influence of the "sickly and stupid German tragedies."

Though Wordsworth tells us that The Borderers was composed "without any view to its exhibition upon the stage," yet he does not seem to have written it only as a dramatic poem. The stage directions indicate, that his inner desire was something contrary to his expressed statement. Moreover, records show that the poet tried to get it performed, but ultimately failed. "As a young-man Wordsworth tried," writes G. Wilson Knight, "unsuccessfully to get it produced," and this is very likely. But the question is - why was the play rejected by the theatre-manager? This is, perhaps, a very vital question. The Borderers, like most of the dramatic works of the Romantics was rejected, because, it was found, either not calculated for the stage, or not meeting the requirements of the contemporary London theatre, or both. After the rejection of The Borderers in 1798, Wordsworth wrote to his friend - J. Tobin, the following, and it throws some light on the reason for which his drama could not make its way onto the stage:

"If ever I attempt another drama," writes Wordsworth,
"it shall be written either purposely for the closet, or purposely for the stage. There is no

Wordsworth, it shows, was conscious that *The Borderers* was neither a purely literary drama, nor was it a purely stage drama; he had followed the middle way, and his play was rejected mainly for its not meeting the requirements of the theatre of his time.

It is not a fact, that *The Borderers* defies stage production. The play can be staged with some minor alterations and re-arrangement of the scenes. But, whether the production will be a gainful venture, or not is a different question. *The Borderers*, from the technical point of view, is not like Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* defying stage presentation; it is also not one that will be theatrically successful on the board of a commercial theatre. The reason is the middle way it treads. Let us see how.

Firstly, *The Borderers* has a plot based on a philosophic foundation. Abstract metaphysical thoughts are given a dramatic form by the poet in such a way that the story-element of the drama is made sub-ordinate to its powerful thought-element. The average audience want entertainment; they enjoy the story and appreciate the theme presented in an entertaining manner. They feel easy when they find before their eyes those actions and episodes of human life to which their own experience and emotions easily correspond. It is, therefore, not surprising, that for such

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an audience The Borderers was found unsuitable for stage presentation. Its serious high philosophical tone and improbable actions, its lack of relief, and compromise with the contemporary taste of the theatre-world — all were responsible for its failure as a play for the contemporary commercial stage. Both the plot and the dialogue intensify the play's philosophical character so much so that it was, perhaps, considered far from interesting by the theatre management. G. Wilson Knight is quite right when he comments on The Borderers:

"What drama so often makes us feel, here we are forced dangerously to think,"

and especially, for this reason Wordsworth's play is unfit for a commercial theatre. Hazlitt also tries to find the reason for which it was rejected and says,

"Perhaps for want of light and shade, and the unshakable spirit of the drama, this performance was never brought forward." 

Apart from the technical defects pointed out earlier, there is a sort of obscurity about some actions and motivations which is bound to limit the play's popular appeal.

Secondly, the defect lies in the verbal part too. In The Borderers the poet has pressed to his service the blank-verse

25Knight, op. cit. p.212.

style, and paid little attention to the need of bringing
his style and idiom closer to the common conversational
speech-pattern of his time. Some of the Romantics, like
Shelley and Byron tried to come closer to the contemporary
speech and idiom (though not always with complete success),
but Wordsworth has consciously avoided to pay any attention
to this aspect of the drama. He paid attention to the
necessity of a different style and language for poetry, but
did not care to think about the language and diction of
dramatic composition.

"It is not, then, in the dramatic parts of
composition," he writes, "that we look for this
distinction of language;" 27

and here he mistakes in assuming no necessity for a kind of
dramatic speech closer to the speech of his age; The Borderers
is a vivid example of this error of judgment.

It was, perhaps, for all these, that The Borderers
was not found stage-worthy. As far as we know, it was never
brought forward on to the stage, and has remained as a
literary drama. There are fine passages of poetry in it;
there are fine thoughts too, but the piece lacks merit of a
successful stage drama. Coleridge, who once highly applauded
The Borderers, remarks later - "Wordsworth's Drama is in its

27Wordsworth, 'Preface' to the Second Edition of
Lyrical Ballads, 1800, in English Critical Essays (XIX Century),'
present state not fit for the stage." But Coleridge discovered a great dramatic possibility in his friend, beside whom he thought himself "a little man" as a dramatist. In a letter to Joseph Cottle, Coleridge writes on June 8, 1797:

"His drama (The Borderers) is absolutely wonderful. ..........
There are in the piece those profound touches of human heart, which I find three or four times in The Robbers of Schiller, - & often in Shakespeare - ......." It is definitely an unqualified eulogy of Coleridge for The Borderers, but if we take into account the age of Wordsworth in which it was composed, and his inexperience and ignorance of the stagetactics, we shall soon find, that The Borderers cannot be dismissed lightly as a drama. It is not a small thing for an inexperienced author to be able to write a drama, like The Borderers. It only goes to point out, that Wordsworth had dramatic gift which was not tempered by his knowledge of the stage and experience of life. For a successful dramatist is often equipped with qualities both inherent and acquired, and Wordsworth had only the former. The poet made no second attempt at dramatic composition, but his letter to J. Tobin as cited earlier, indicates, that he has grown wiser after the rejection of his maiden attempt. The possibility cannot be

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29 Coleridge's Letters, Vol.I.

30 "If ever I attempt another drama," writes Wordsworth, "it shall be written either purposely for the closet, or purposely for the stage. There is no middle way."
ruled out altogether, that had he made subsequent attempts, he could have been able to use profitably the wisdom gained therefrom to success.

F.R. Leavis denies any dramatic gift to Wordsworth, and maintains:

"Wordsworth, it is true, has no dramatic gift and compared with Shakespeare's, the range of interest he exhibits is narrow." 31

The comment of Leavis does not seem to be quite fair. It would be fairer to say, that Wordsworth had dramatic gift, but because of having no practical knowledge of the theatre, he was not capable of giving us a successful stage play in The Borderers. It is not fair to pass a judgment on an author on the basis of his performance in the maiden attempt. Moreover, to judge always an author by the Shakespearean standard, as Leavis has done, is still unfair; Shakespeare is an exceptional case, and anybody unlike Shakespeare in merit cannot summarily be dismissed as a dramatic author. The maiden attempt of a poet should not be a basis of judgment on the actual nature and character, as well as, the possibilities of his genius. The Borderers alone cannot be a sufficient proof enabling us to say the last word about Wordsworth's dramatic power that was in him.