

Wordsworth's Ballad "The White Doe of Rylstone"

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The White Doe of Rylstone is admitted by the critics to be one of Wordsworth's best productions and stands high among the finest narrative poems in the language. According to Wordsworth, he visited during the summer of 1807, "for the first time, the beautiful country that surrounds Bolton Priory in Yorkshire" and he set about writing that poem relying "upon a Tradition connected with that place," "at the close of the same year,"¹ and finished it the next year. The poem was not published until 1815. Wordsworth took his material from Percy's *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* and from local traditions connected with the Rising of the Norton Earls (1569). The poem gives the history of the fall of the Norton family who joined the two earls, Percy and Neville in their insurrection to 'restore the rites of ancient piety (Catholicism) by the stern justice of the sword.'² Norton and his seven sons devote their lives to the cause. The eldest of the sons, Francis and his only sister Emily are indeed Protestants, because they have been brought up adherents to the Reformed Church by their now dead mother. Thus Francis's mind is divided between his loyalty to his father's will and his own wishes. And Emily, at her father's command, embroidered for him the Banner with the figure of the sacred Cross and the seven wounds of our Lord to be brought to the battlefield.

Francis boldly attempts to make his father realize the untimeliness of the planned revolt, the ambiguous motives of its supporters, though his father's cause and motive are clear, and, therefore, he warns his father about its unlikely success. However, Francis cannot stop his father, and lastly his father takes his part in the Catholic Rebellion, and is defeated, and after being arrested, is put to death by his enemy.

The present poem, though it passingly narrates the course of the development of the Catholic insurrection, does not aim to give a historical account of the insurrection in detail. The main interest of the poem rather centres round the strange apparition of the White Doe and the melancholy solitary life of Emily after the failure of the unadvised rebellion in which her rash father with his eight sons took part. It is very clear that Wordsworth himself did not intend to make a poem of historical details as distinct from Sir Walter Scott's historical ballads which are full of details in telling a tale of battles. On this point Wordsworth has specially placed the following remarks at the head preceding the commencement of the poem:

The subject being taken from feudal times has led to its being compared to some of W. Scott's poems that belong to the same age and state of society. The comparison is inconsiderable. Sir Walter (Scott) pursued the customary

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1. *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, p. 311 "Advertisement," at the head of the said poem. Edited by E. de Selincourt. (Oxford University Press, 1964.)
 2. *Ibid*, "The White Doe of Rylstone," l. 373.

and very natural course of conducting an action, presenting various turns of fortune, to some outstanding point on which the mind rests as a termination or catastrophe. The course I attempted to pursue is entirely different. Every thing that is attempted by the principal personages in the "White Doe" fails, so far as its object is external and substantial. So far as it is moral and spiritual it succeeds.¹

The beauty of the poem lies in our poet's minute description of the strange behaviour of the White Doe in attending on the heroine Emily after the termination of the fatal war. The poem opens with the scene of a White Doe entering into a churchyard. On a summer Sunday morning late in Elizabeth's reign, Bolton's church bells are ringing, the crowds of villagers noisily pass through the yard on their way to the church. The service begins and an utter summer stillness fills the yard outside:

A moment ends the fervent din,
 And all is hushed, without and within;
 For though the priest, more tranquilly,
 Recites the holy liturgy,
 The only voice which you can hear
 Is the river murmuring near.
 —When soft!—the dusky trees between,
 And down the path through the open green,
 Where is no living thing to be seen;
 And through yon gateway, where is found,
 Beneath the arch with ivy bound,
 Free entrance to the churchyard ground——
 Comes gliding in with lovely gleam,
 Comes gliding in serene and slow,
 Soft and silent as a dream,
 A Solitary Doe!
 White she is as lily of June,
 And beauteous as the silver moon
 When out of sight the clouds are driven
 And she is left alone in heaven;
 Or like a ship some gentle day
 In sunshine sailing far away,
 A glittering ship, that hath the plain
 Of ocean for her own domain.

(Canto I, 11. 43-66.)

The Doe's apparition at the church of Bolton Abbey and her serene movement here and there under "Bolton's old monastic tower" (Canto I, 1.1.) is depicted with a lucidity:

1. *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, p. 411. See Wordsworth's own note. (Edited by John Morley. New York: Thomas T. Crowell & Co. 1888.)

What harmonious pensive changes
Wait upon her as she ranges
Round and through this Pile of state
Overthrown and desolate!
Now a step or two her way
Leads through space of open day,
Where the enamoured sunny light
Brightens her that was so bright;
Now doth a delicate shadow fall,
Falls upon her like a breath,
From some lofty arch or wall,
As she passes underneath:
Now some gloomy nook partakes
Of the glory that she makes,—
High-ribbed vault of stone, or cell,
With perfect cunning framed as well
Of stone, and ivy, and the spread
Of the elder's bushy head;
Some jealous and forbidding cell,
That doth the living stars repel,
And where no flower hath leave to dwell.

(Canto I, 11. 79-99.)

Every Sunday the strange White Doe came and went. Every villager knew from where the Doe came, and when she would cease to come when her destined task would be done. One Sunday the villagers flocked to the church and the White Doe came there too. One of the mothers who were in the congregation noticed the White Doe and said to her boy:

'Look there she is, my Child! draw near;
She fears not, wherefore should we fear?
She means no harm;'—— but still the Boy,
To whom the words were softly said,
Hung back, and smiled, and blushed for joy,
A shame-faced blush of glowing red!
Again the Mother whispered low,
'Now you have seen the famous Doe;
From Rylstone she hath found her way
Over the hills this sabbath day;
Her work, whate'er it be, is done,
And she will depart when we are gone;
Thus doth she keep, from year to year,
Her sabbath morning, foul or fair.'

(Canto I, ll. 178-191.)

Our author knew how to produce the effect of the stillness and slowness with which the Doe came in and sauntered about the church with his exquisite sense of the harmony of rhythmic sounds by means of alliterations which resound between lines:

And through yon gateway, where is found,
 Beneath the arch with ivy bound,
 Free entrance to the churchyard ground——
 Comes *gliding* in with *lovely gleam*,
 Comes *gliding* in serene and slow,
 Soft and silent as a *gleam*,
 A solitary Doe!
 White she is as lily of June,
 And beauteous as the silver moon
 When out of sight the clouds are driven
 And she is left alone in heaven;

(Canto I, ll. 52-62.)

Beside the ridge of a *grassy grave*
 In quietness she lays her down;
 Gentle as a *weary wave*
 Sinks, when the summer breeze hath died.

(Canto I, ll. 141-144.)

The day is placid in its going
 To a lingering motion bound,
 Like the crystal stream now flowing
 With its softest summer sound;
 So the balmy minutes pass,
 While this radiant Creature lies
 Couched upon the dewy grass,
 Pensively with downcast eyes.

(Canto I, ll. 148-155.)

The radiant Doe appears in Bolton Priory every Sunday, and occupies a solitary mound:

It was a solitary mound;
 Which two spears' length of level ground
 Did from all other graves divide:

(Canto I, ll. 170-172.)

The author begins the Canto Second with the scene where the Earl of Norton is standing proudly beside the Banner, which his daughter has wrought. The Earl Norton re-

ceives encouragement and inspiration from the Banner. Consequently he is being encouraged to fight in order to restore the Catholic piety, against all chances of success. Norton's devotion to St. Cuthbert who is enshrined in Norton Abbey and to the Banner embroidered with the figure of the sacred Cross and the Five Wounds of Christ is sincere, and the Banner is certainly fashioned in his inward wish to get help from it in accomplishing his avowed purpose:

For She it was——this Maid, who wrought
Meekly, with foreboding thought,
In vermeil colours and in gold
An unblest work; which, standing by,
Her Father did with joy behold,——
Exulting in its imagery;
A Banner, fashioned to fulfil
Too perfectly his headstrong will:
For on this Banner has her hand
Embroidered (such her Sire's command)
The sacred Cross; and figured there
The five dear wounds our Lord did bear;
Full soon to be uplifted high,
And float in rueful company!

(Canto II, 11. 346-359.)

The uprising of the two Earls, Percy and Neville in the North had two objects to fulfil, one was to validate their claim to the English throne which had now been occupied by Queen Elizabeth I for twelve years, and the other was to start a movement to restore the Catholic faith by their own efforts in the reign of the Protestant sovereign Elizabeth. So much that our author has these lines:

It was the time when England's Queen
Twelve years had reigned, a Sovereign dread;
Nor yet the restless crown had been
Disturbed upon her virgin head;
But now the inly-working North
Was ripe to send its thousands forth,
A potent vassalage, to fight
In Percy's and in Neville's right
Two Earls fast leagued in discontent,
Who gave their wishes open vent;
And boldly urged a general plea,
The rites of ancient piety
To be triumphantly restored,
By the stern justice of the sword!
And that same Banner, on whose breast

The blameless Lady had exprest
Memorials chosen to give life
And sunshine to a dangerous strife;
That Banner, waiting for the Call,
Stood quietly in Rylstone-hall.
(Canto II, 11. 360-379.)

The Earl Norton and his sons, except Francis, go out gallantly to the battle-field, carrying their proud Banner. The following quotation is Francis's observation:

'Gone are they bravely, though misled;
With a dear Father at their head!
The Sons obey a natural lord;
The Father had given solemn word
To noble Percy; and a force
Still stronger, bends him to his course.
This said, our tears to-day may fall
As at an innocent funeral.
In deep and awful channel runs
This sympathy of Sire and Sons;
Untried our Brothers have been loved
With heart by simple nature moved;
And now their faithfulness is proved:
For faithful we must call them, bearing
That soul of conscientious daring.
——There were they all in circle——there
Stood Richard, Ambrose, Christopher,
John with a sword that will not fail,
And Marmaduke in fearless mail,
And those bright Twins were side by side;
And there, by fresh hopes beautified,
Stood He, whose arm yet lacks the power
Of man, our youngest, fairest flower!
I, by the right of eldest born,
And in a second father's place,
Presumed to grapple with their scorn,
And meet their pity fact to face;
Yea, trusting in God's holy aid,
I to my Father knelt and prayed;
And one, the pensive Marmaduke,
Methought, was yielding inwardly,
And would have laid his purpose by,
But for a glance of his Father's eye,

Which I myself could scarcely brook.

(Canto II, 11. 461-494.)

Of the same class of military tale as Wordsworth's *The White Doe of Rylstone*, giving an account of a battle in verse in the medieval ballad of the 14th century, is *The Battle of Otterbourne*, whose authorship is unknown. This latter ballad is a typical old ballad of that nature, giving a historical account of warlike actions. The Battle of Otterbourne occurred in 1387 in the reign of the English king, Richard II, as the result of the raid by the Scots into the English territory. The English general, Lord Percy was to fight the Scottish leader Earl Douglas. Here are some of the most poignant lines, composed in a characteristic ballad style,¹ each stanza written in a quatrain, the first line in an iambic tetrameter (four feet) and the second line in an iambic trimeter (three feet), the same metrical scheme appearing in the remaining two lines of the stanza. The four lines of each stanza rhyme a b c b, fit to be sung by village folks as well as by the marching soldiers

And he [Lord Douglas] march'd up to Newcastle

And rode it round about;

"O wha's the lord of this castle

O wha's the lady o't?"

But up spake proud lord Percy then,

And O but he spake high!

"I am the lord of this castle,

O wha's the lady gay."

"If thou'rt the lord of this castle,

Sae weel it pleases me!

For, ere I cross the Border fells,

The tane of us shall die."

He took a lang spear in his hand,

Shod with the metal free

And for to meet the Douglas there,

He rode right furiously.

(Stanzas 4-7.)

1. In this connexion I may quote from *A Handbook of English Literature* by Homer A. Watt & William W. Watt (9th ed. 1959. Barnes & Noble, New York.), part of the remarks under the item "Ballad." The authors say, "The popular ballad or folk ballad is a song of the people in which a story is told. The song was often used to accompany a folk dance very much as is still done with children's game-songs. Whether the ballad is originally the work of a single author or the product of common authorship—arising spontaneously out of a group—is a timeworn argument among scholars.The fifteenth century was the golden age of the ballad, and the most fertile field was the border country between England and Scotland." The authors further observe, "Popular ballads are commonly composed in stanzas, often in the four-line ballad stanza with alternate iambic tetrameter and trimeter lines rhyming a b c b."

The battle reached the highest heat when Percy met Douglas in the personal combat:

When Percy wi' the Douglas met,
 I wat he was fu' fain;
 They swak'd their swords, till sair they swat,
 And the blood ran down like rain.

But Percy with his guid braid sword,
 That could so sharply wound,
 Has wounded Douglas on the brow,
 Till he fell to the ground.

(Stanzas 21-22.)

Though thus *The Battle of Otterbourne* is evidently one of the best popular ballads, it does not sound in our ears as an elaborately composed poem of a too much literary flavour as our Wordsworth's poem I am considering here. The popular form of poetry known by the name of "ballad" grew up in its history as productions made by some unknown writers who had poetical talents and a sense of music which could accommodate itself to the production of a poetical piece containing a relation of a local incident of social or historical interest to be sung by the local folks with a light tripping tone. *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* (ed. 1965) offers us aid in understanding the nature and history of the ballad. The dictionary gives the following explanation of the ballad: "Since they [ballads] are handed down traditionally, we know them only as anonymous compositions. But their anonymity extends beyond the mere loss of the authors' names, for in successive performances many singers have worked their changes upon any one ballad. The fluidity of musical and textual substance is at the heart of the nature of a ballad. This fluidity operates within traditional restraints, for the changes made by the tradition-bearer are devoid of artful niceties and individualistic turns." And the dictionary goes on, "Since the word 'ballad' has at various times been applied to many kinds of popular verse, students of folk song frequently choose to qualify the term by the adjectives 'popular' or 'traditional'. Ballads are a variety of folk song, but they are sufficiently a group in themselves to be classed separately. The distinction was first argued by William Shenstone in 1761 in letters to Bishop Thomas Percy, where he suggested use of the term ballad to distinguish the narrative of action from songs that were expressions of sentiment."

The author of *The Popular Ballad*, Pror. Francis B. Gummere comes in with his interpretation of the subject as follows: "A careful study of the ballads, however, makes it reasonably sure that they were sung in the first instance about some local hero in the manner of 'Robin and Gandelyn' and 'Johnie Cocks,' but with the structure of a dramatic ballad of situation".¹ And Prof. Gummere continues further: "Ballad airs differ, of course, although a severe simplicity marks them all; but the rhythmical scheme shows no attempt at originality. Ballad metres are almost uniform; the range is very slight."²

1. Francis B. Gummere: *The Popular Ballad*, ch.ii, p. 271. (Dover Publications, Inc. New York. 1959.)

2. *Ibid.*, ch.iv, p. 325.

Wordsworth paints the scene of the efforts put forward by Francis in pleading with his strong-headed father to desist from joining the intended uprising:

'O Father! rise not in this fray——
The hairs are white upon your head;
Dear father, hear me when I say
It is for you too late a day!
Bethink you of your own good name:
A just and gracious Queen have we,
A pure religion, and the claim
Of peace on our humanity.——
'Tis meet that I endure your scorn;
I am your son, your eldest born;
But not for lordship or for land,
My father, do I clasp your knees;
The Banner touch not, stay our hand,
This multitude of men disband,
And live at home in blameless ease;
For these my brethren's sake, for me;
And, most of all, for Emily!'

(Canto II, 11. 381-397.)

All Francis's fervent entreaties to his father not to join the insurrection were wasted, and Francis and his sister Emily are left behind alone in the vacant Hall after his dearest father and brothers are all gone out. All at once Francis is stricken with the deepest grief and is overwhelmed with the sense of being betrayed. It seems to him as if both roof and wall shook and tottered and swam before his sight. Francis's grief at this moment is depicted by Wordsworth in touches neither forceful nor impressive so much.

But Francis, in the vacant hall,
Stood silent under dreary weight,——
A phantasm, in which roof and wall
Shook, tottered, swam before his sight;
Thus overwhelmed, and desolate,
He found his way to a postern-gate;
And, when he waked, his languid eye
Was on the calm and silent sky;
With air about him breathing sweet,
And earth's green grass beneath his feet;
Nor did he fail ere long to hear
A sound of military cheer,
Faint——but it reached that sheltered spot;
He heard, and it disturbed him not.
There stood he, learning on a lance

Which he had grasped unknowingly,
 Had blindly grasped in that strong trance,
 That dimness of heart-agony;
 There stood he, cleansed from the despair
 And sorrow of his fruitless prayer.
 The past he calmly hath reviewed:
 But where will be the fortitude
 Of this brave man, when he shall see
 That Form beneath the spreading tree,
 And know that it is Emily?

(Canto II, 11. 420-445.)

Now *The White Doe of Rylstone* consists of seven cantos, being a lengthy poem of 1910 lines. It can be well supposed that Wordsworth had much difficulty in carrying the tale of the poem to the conclusion through those 1910 lines by saving the poem from becoming loose and lax in tone and structure. If he had in this respect failed in making the present poem solid and consistent all through its structure as a result of his unskilful handling of the story the poem would not deserve a high place among his poetical productions. But to his credit Wordsworth has shown a greater development of his poetical skill in managing the tale in Canto III, and continuing to keep the structure of the story on to the end without slackening the tension of the interestingness of his story.

The Nortons on the battlefield could not win the victory they wished for. In Canto III Wordsworth skilfully presents the brave display of warlike preparations of the opposing armies by making the readers imagine the noises by the soldiers' brisk movement. The brave forces that were in support of the Catholic cause in which the Nortons had joined appeared on the battlefield as they came down from Scotland to fight against the Protestant armies now arrayed on the battlefield:

Now was the North in arms:—they shine
 In warlike trim from Tweed to Tyne,
 At Percy's voice: and Neville sees
 His Followers gathering in from Tees,
 From Were, and all the little rills
 Concealed among the folkèd hills—
 Seven hundred Knights, Retainers all
 Of Neville, at their Master's call
 Had sate together in Raby Hall!
 Such strength that Earldom held of yore;
 Nor wanted at this time rich store
 Of well-appointed chivalry.
 —Not loth the sleepy lance to wield,
 And greet the old paternal shield,
 They heard the summons;—and, furthermore,

Horsemen and Foot of each degree,
Unbound by pledge of fealty,
Appeared, with free and open hate
Of novelties in Church and State;
Knight, burgher, yeoman, and esquire,
And Romish priest, in priest's attire.
And thus, in arms, a zealous Band
Proceeding under joint command,
To Durham first their course they bear;
(Canto III, ll. 688-711.)

A desperate fighting began, and the Nortons, sire and Sons fought bravely with their faithful men under the Banner of the Cross, and seemed to obtain the victory, when at last Norton's band were overwhelmed by their numerous foes:

The foe from numbers courage drew,
And overpowered that gallant few.
(Canto IV, ll. 1153-1154.)

The Norton men were too few in number against the crowding foes who were in great number. The Banner of the Cross was pulled down by the victorious foes, and the Norton men all fled, and the cause of the Nortons was lost:

'A rescue for the Standard!' cried
The Father from within the Walls;
But, see, the sacred Standard falls!
Confusion through the Camp spread wide:
Some fled; and some their fears detained:
But ere the Moon had sunk to rest
In her pale chambers of the west,
Of that rash levy nought remained.
(Canto IV, ll. 1155-1162.)

Yes, as Francis had endeavoured in vain to prevent his father and brothers from going to join in the battle, the Norton band was a "rash levy," as Wordsworth well puts it.

The disappointed Francis had to pass the rest of his rueful days in prison and his sad desolate sister Emily remained alone in a corner of the ruined castle. Wordsworth patiently as well as diligently maintained the flow of his poetic fervour to the last line in telling the tale of the mysterious White Doe who accompanied the forlorn Emily. Our poet does not forget to add a romantic touch of sadness to his picture of the forlornness of Emily in her last days, a touch not to be found in old popular ballads, whose authorship is unknown. Here Wordsworth gives such a realistic picture of the forlorn Emily in his romantic melancholy vein:

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 these 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,
 With vocal music, 'GOD US AYDE;'
 And all the hills were glad to bear
 Their part in this effectual prayer.

(CANTO VII, 11. 1761-1776.)

Emily's last hour came and she was buried, but the White Doe, even after "her dear Mistress" (Canto VII, 1. 1880.) had died, never failed to appear at the convent and wander about the ruins there,

Haunting the spots with lonely cheer
 Which her dear Mistress once held dear:
 Loves most what Emily loved most——
 The enclosure of this churchyard ground;
 Here wanders like a gliding ghost,
 And every sabbath here is found;
 Comes with the people when the bells
 Are heard among the moorland dells,
 Finds entrance through yon arch, where way
 Lies open on the sabbath day;
 Here walks amid the mournful waste
 Of prostrate altars, shrines defaced.
 And floors uncumbered with rich show
 Of fret-work imagery laid low;
 Paces softly, or makes halt,
 By fractured cell, or tomb, or vault;
 By plate of monumental brass
 Dim-gleaming among weeds and grass,
 And sculptured Forms of Warriors brave:
 But chiefly by that single grave,
 That one sequestered hillock green,
 The pensive visitant is seen.

There doth the gentle Creature lie
With those adversities unmoved;
Calm spectacle, by earth and sky
In there benignity approved!
And aye, methinks, this hoary Pile,
Subdued by outrage and decay,
Looks down upon her with a smile,
A gracious smile, that seems to say——
'Thou, thou art not a Child of Time,
But Daughter of the Eternal Prime!'

(Canto VII, 11. 1879-1910.)

A fitting dirge over the sad fate of the unfortunate Emily, which closes the present poem. Such an elaborate conclusion written with literary efforts does not appear in the concluding lines of any old ballad.