SOME OBSERATIONS ON WORDSWORTH'S "THE RUINED COTTAGE"

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摘 要

批評家對華茲華斯(William Wordsworth)的《頹舍》(The Ruined Cottage)一詩的版本有不同的看法。許多評論者認爲"D"手稿不像"B"手稿那樣包含了小販 (the Pedlar) 之個人歷史，因此詩人敘述者最後的成長與心理轉變顯得薄弱無力。本文從結構和敘事觀點檢視"D"手稿，乃見這個版本實則包含了四層戲劇結構－－「冗長」的序言、詩人敘述者成爲聽衆、聽衆轉爲敘述者、以及敘述中之敘述。透過這一繁複的結構，我們乃發現，詩人敘述者在小販身上看見的不是嘴上講的(professed)信心，而是活出來的 (lived) 信心。因此、他的心理轉變與成長極其自然且具有說服力。

Abstract

This paper discusses "The Ruined Cottage," as found in Book 1 of *The Excursion* and without the long personal history of the Pedlar, as a convincing piece of narrative poetry. In the poem's four-layer dramatic frame, narrators become readers and readers become narrators. This is especially the case with the Pedlar and the poem's designated Narrator. Their relationship is intricate, their dramatic interplay effective, and their psychological developments perceptible. For what the Narrator sees in the Pedlar is not a faith "professed" or "earned," but *lived*.

'This a common tale,
By moving accidents uncharactered,
A tale of silent suffering, hardly clothed
In bodily form, and to the grosser sense
But ill adapted, scarcely palpable
To him who does not think.

"The Ruined Cottage" 231-36[1]

[1] For this discussion, all references to Wordsworth's works, unless otherwise specified, are from Stephen Gill, ed. *William Wordsworth*.

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I. No Common Tale

What Wordsworth here calls "a common tale" turns out to be rather uncommon. Even the relative "authority" of its versions remains a matter of dispute. The brief, "original" form of "The Ruined Cottage," first written in 1797, underwent several revisions,with the section on the Pedlar inserted or taken out. There are basically two existent versions of the story of Margaret: to the one complete with a detailed history of the Pedlar belong such editions as MS B, written during 1797-98, and Book 1 of *The Excursion*, an expanded and revised version of MS B, published in 1814; to the other, without the long account of the Pedlar's early years, belongs MS D, written during 1799-1800 and preserved at the Wordsworth Library in Grasmere. When, in 1969, Jonathan Wordsworth published MS D as "The Ruined Cottage" in his *The Music of Humanity: A Critical Study of Wordsworth's* Ruined Cottage *Incorporating Texts from a Manuscript of 1799-1800*, he lamented the fact that "On the whole poets are known by the best versions of their works: Wordswerth is almost exclusively known by the worst" (xiii). Since its publication, "The Ruined Cottage," considered by some "Wordsworth's greatest poem" (McFarland 99),[2] has gradually established itself as "the best version" of the Margaret story. Peter Manning observes that "it has become virtually canonical, at least for American readers" (196); it is now included in the *Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, and in Stephen Gill's *William Wordsworth*.

However, many scholars – Philip Cohen, Reeve Parker, Peter Manning, and Geoffrey Hartman, for instance – still prefer the inclusion of the Pedlar's history, which they think lends more credibility to the Pedlar's changed state of mind, and more authority to his advice and instruction to the Narrator. Taking note of Jonathan Wordsworth's interest "in the dramatic relationship between the Pedlar and the Narrator," Cohen suggests that Jonathan Wordsworth's – and, for that matter, Abrams's – preference for MS D is due to the fact that there "the drama of Margaret's tragic decline is made the center of the poem." On the other hand, Cohen continues, "The critics who champion the longer version of the poem do so because they are interested in the psychological drama of the changing responses of the Narrator to the Pedlar's story." In the last analysis, according to Cohen,

> MS D is primarily a bare narrative while the expanded focus of the longer version of the poem emphasizes the dramatic interplay between the Pedlar and

[2] Thomas McFarland also quotes Coleridge and F. R. Leavis in support of his appraisal (98).

the Narrator. (186)

And in the light of "Wordsworth's statement ... that 'the feeling' in his poetry 'gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling,' it would seem that MS D may be less Wordsworthian than Book 1" (Cohen 186).

But, although the Narrator's responses to the Pedlar's story – especially his change of mental state – *may* seem abrupt, and his readiness to accept the Pedlar's advice rather pat, it is still possible to read the whole poem in a different light – the interaction between the narrator(s) and the narratee(s) – a relationship in which the Narrator's responses may be seen as entirely spontaneous and convincing. The poem itself, I would like to argue, tells of the Narrator's conversion; i.e., without compromising his humanity, the Narrator, following the Pedlar, adopts a "natural perspective" in his contemplation of human suffering. The poem is not only thus very "Wordsworthian," but, because the story of Margaret is recounted in a framework of many layers, it features precisely the kind of "dramatic interplay between the Pedlar and the Narrator" that Cohen and many other critics of "The Ruined Cottage" seem to prize highly.

II. Very Wordsworthian

"The Ruined Cottage" is Wordsworthian because, first of all, it is about a place. As Roger N. Murray points out, Wordsworth is often "particular" about a place. "The modes of being he is concerned with," as a result, "are usually men seen, not face to face, but by the mind's eye, men exalted through their association with certain impressive or enduring *forms of nature*" (87, emphasis mine). In this poem, the garden and the cottage are an index to Robert and Margaret's mental as well as physical state; when the owners pine away, declining slowly but surely, the neglected garden lies in waste and the cottage becomes ruined. Other obvious examples include "The Thorn," "Tintern Abbey," and *The Prelude*. Geoffrey Hartman also observes that "It seems to be Wordsworth's fate to return to *spirit of place* as if that alone were the well-spring of poetry" (140, emphasis mine).

Secondly, "The Ruined Cottage" is an example of the poetry of perception, whose meaning resides in the eye of the beholder. According to Wordsworth, "the appropriate business of poetry ... is to treat of things not as they *are* but as they *appear;* not as they exist in themselves, but as they *seem* to exist to the senses, and to the *passions*" *(Selected Poems and Prefaces* 471). Thus, the reader is led "back to the raw data of experience, the evidence about the way the mind operates" (Swingle 979). Hence, even

such little objects as the "wooden bowl" (1. 91), the "hearth-stone" (1. 114), the "elms" (1. 186), the "rose" (1. 316), the "apple-tree" (1. 421), and the "path" (1. 457) – objects associated with Margaret – take on emotional, if not symbolic, meaning. After her story was told, what had a while ago seemed "A cold bare wall whose earthy top is tricked / With weeds and the rank spear-grass" (11. 107-8) turned now into a "tranquil ruin" (1. 218). Through the long prelude the reader is led to the Narrator's early state of mind. Hence, the landscape the reader sees in "The Ruined Cottage" is not what it *is* but what it *appears* to the narrators – and, eventually, to the reader himself. After all, it is the "Mind of Man" that is Wordsworth's "haunt and the main region of [his] song" ("Prospectus" to *The Recluse* 11. 40-41).[3]

Most important of all, "The Ruined Cottage" treats of human suffering and the way to cope with it, a subject that never cesases to fascinate this poet of the human heart. Wordsworth's way of handling suffering is peculiar yet sensible. "In his early twenties," John Purkis reports, "Wordsworth wandered the roads himself in search of case histories," i.e., of wanderers (63). Frequently in his works, we see the poet-narrator in his chance encounters attracted to people exhibiting numinous calm – such as the Old Man in "Old Man Travelling," the Leech-Gatherer, and the Discharged Soldier. Persistently the young man asks them questions, as if, wondering how they could face extremities with an outward show of peace, he would like to fathom the depth of their humanity and find out about their secrets.

Wordsworth does this, Dickstein observes, because his "way of dealing with suffering is to put a frame around it, to bend it away from tragedy toward consolation, to avoid the kind of naked, unmediated approach that could prove merely shocking or depressing" (334). It thus becomes a kind of "secular theodicy" for Wordsworth who "needs to cushion [the] meaning [of human suffering] without recourse to any divine purpose" (Dickstein 334). The "frame," which serves as a shock absorber, refers to the particular structure in which the poet's tale of suffering is "mediated." Such a one, in a much more intricate form, is found in "The Ruined Cottage."

III. The Structural Frame

A particular feature of "The Ruined Cottage" is its almost metapoetic structural frame. The poem, Stephen Gill tells us, which "began as a narrative account of the

[3] These lines are quoted from John O. Hayden, ed., *William Wordsworth: The Poems*, Volume Two.

sufferings and death of Margaret," became in 1798 "framed by the introduction of the Pedlar, a philosophical wanderer whose origins and powers soon engrossed W, so much so that DW could write, 5 March 1798, that 'The Pedlar's character now makes a very, perhaps the *most* considerable part of the poem'" (686n). Structurally, the poem's narrative consists of three sub-narratives told respectively by Margaret, the Pedlar, and the Narrator; each of these characters serves at once as narrator and reader. As a result, there are in "The Ruined Cottage" three emphases: first, Margaret's torturing hope and her tragic decline; second, the Pedlar's internalization of nature and of Margaret's suffering; third, the education of the Narrator by the Pedlar and his story. Hence, what we have is a narration-within-a-narration-within-a-narration about a ruined cottage.

Cohen observes that much that happens in the opening lines happens "without the Narrator's awareness. Wordsworth is talking [not] through but around his narrator to his audience" (188). The different layers in the structural frame give dramatic *immediacy*[4] as well as *distance* to Margaret's story and serves to guide the reader's response. The meanings of the poem then emerge: it is a tale about human suffering and about the education of the narrators/readers. Wordsworth asks the Pedlar, as reader of Margaret's story, to *feel* Margaret's suffering, and to *think* about its impact on him. In turn, the Narrator, as reader, is advised to *think* about (through *feeling*) Margaret's and the Pedlar's stories and learn his lesson. Finally, the general readers are expected to be moved by Margaret's and the Pedlar's and the Narrator's stories and learn their lessons. This being its framework, the poem features four narrators – Wordsworth, the Narrator, the Pedlar, and Margaret – and they interact with each other. In addition to the "official" Narrator, the Pedlar also emerges as an important narrator in the poem. And in as far as he succeeded in converting the Narrator, who most of the time did little more than "reporting" his narration, the Pedlar perhaps deserves to be considered the more important of the two.

Particularly worth noting is the curious similarity or affinity between the Pedlar and the Narrator. The Pedlar, who knew the story well, could not but sympathize with Margaret:

> ... often on this cottage do I muse
> As on a picture, till my wiser mind
> Sinks, yielding to the foolishness of grief.
>
> (11. 117-19)

[4] McFarland observes that Wordsworth's "characteristic narrational device, as in 'The Ruined Cottage' or 'Michael,' makes the tales of Margaret and of Michael when presented actually seem as though the narrator has drawn the curtain on a kind of stage from which is enacted the story of human woe" (72).

And when he finished *narrating* the first part of the story to the Narrator, he caught himself weeping in spite of himself: at a time "when all things which are not at rest / Are chearful ...," he asked, "Why should a tear be in an old man's eye?" (11. 189-190, 192). Similarly, the Pedlar's story about Margaret, even in its unfinished form, chilled the Narrator to the spine:

> There was a heartfelt chillness in my veins.
> I rose, and turning from that breezy shade
> Went out into the open air and stood
> To drink the comfort of the warmer sun.
>
> (11. 213-16)

And when the story was done, the Narrator who had been listening was visibly moved. He said:

> I stood, and leaning o'er the garden-gate
> Reviewed that Woman's suff'rings, and it seemed
> To comfort me while with a brother's love
> I blessed her in the impotence of grief.
>
> (11. 497-500)

A grief is "foolish" precisely because it is "impotent," as the Pedlar's narration pointed out. It is necessary to adopt nature's perspective in viewing human affairs. What the Pedlar once had been, the Narrator was now. Through Wordsworth's manipulation, both were readers of the Margaret story, and both turned narrators.

If Wordsworth talks "around" the Narrator, he talks "through" the Pedlar. Hence, Wordsworth defensively lets the Pedlar justify his idea of "a common tale" (1. 231), a tale which is not marked by sensational plots like those of his contemporaries. It is, rather, a "simple tale" (1. 203), like the story told by the Pedlar, "homely" yet "with such familiar power" (1. 209) that it can move one and change one's perception. Again, through the Pedlar, he advises his reader to take his "tale of silent suffering" (1. 233) seriously: "It were a wantonness and would demand / Severe reproof, if we were men whose hearts / Could hold vain dalliance with the misery / Even of the dead" (11. 221-24). A didactic poet is talking when the Pedlar says, "... there is often found / In mournful thoughts, and always might be found, / A power to virtue friendly" (11. 227-29).

Just as Wordsworth advocates his natural perspective through the Pedlar, so he

fashions a model reader's response through the reaction of the Narrator. The cathartic effect of the story purged the Narrator of his petty irritations, making him serene and calm. The Pedlar set a good example of one able to see human suffering from both the human and the natural perspectives. The Narrator, seeing a lived faith, came to realize the bond between man and nature.

IV. The Long Prelude

Here it may be profitable as well as appropriate to comment on the significance of the poem's long prelude, which has often been criticized. Jonathan Wordsworth, for instance, who recognizes the "unusual importance" of setting in "The Ruined Cottage," nevertheless finds fault with descriptions that go on "too long" (122), and "produce a feeling of long-windedness, and delay the impact of the story" (124). But, since the poem is in part about the education of the Narrator and how he learns to see through the "passing shews of being" (1. 522), the long preamble to the story is not necessarily a fault but should instead be considered for its possible contribution to the lesson of the story. Specifically, it shows us two perspectives of looking at human suffering.[5]

The poem begins with the Narrator, ruffled by the summer heat and wearied by the long journey, coming into view of "shadows dappled o'er / Of deep embattled clouds" (11. 5-6). Far away, he saw "shadows lay in spots / Determined and unmoved" (11. 7-8).[6] Pressed by the suffocating and harsh reality of where he was, the Narrator envisioned a dreaming man, who

> on the soft cool moss
> Extends his careless limbs beside the root
> Of some huge oak whose aged branches make
> A twilight of their own, a dewy shade
> Where the wren warbles while the dreaming man,
> Half-conscious of that soothing melody,

[5] Other critics – such as Reeve Parker in "'Finer Distance': The Narrative Art of Wordsworth's 'The Wanderer' (1972), "Philip Cohen in "Narrative and Persuasion in *The Ruined Cottage* (1978), and Evan Radcliffe in "'In Dreams Begins Responsibility': Wordsworth's Ruined Cottage Story" (1984) – have also mentioned the importance of the opening lines in Book 1 of *The Excursion*, especially for the dramatic interplay between the narrator and the wanderer (the Pedlar in "The Ruined Cottage"). In fact, Book 1 and this poem share the same long prologue, but not the Pedlar's long history.

[6] I owe my appreciation of the opening lines to Cohen's "Narrative and Persuasion" and Parker's "Finer Distance," although Parker's text is that of Book 1 of *The Excursion*.

With side-long eye looks out upon the scene,
By those impending branches made more soft,
More soft and distant.

(11. 10-18)

The shift to the present tense makes clear that the pleasant state of the dreaming man was nothing more than an illusion. "other lot was mine," he bitterly lamented:

Across a *bare* wide Common I had *toiled*
With *languid* feet which by the *slipp'ry* ground
Were *baffled* still and when I stretched myself
On the brown earth my limbs from very heat
Could find *no rest*, nor my *weak* arm disperse
The insect host which gathered round my face
And joined their murmurs to the *tedious noise*
Of seeds of bursting gorse that crackled round.

(11. 19-26, emphases mine)

Thus, early on in the poem, through the obvious contrast, "[the readers] are made to feel strongly his suffering and to sympathize with his yearning for that other pleasanter vision" (Parker 96).

It seems his yearning was soon satiated, for he rose again and found an aged man, who "stretched upon the cottage bench" (1. 34), "in the cool shade" (1. 43). The man turned out to be no other than the "venerable Armytage" (1. 38), a friend of his who was a Pedlar by profession and a "pride of nature" (1. 37). The Pedlar pointed to him the half-covered well. Having quenched his thirst, the Narrator returned to the "shady bench" and "stood unbonneted / To catch the motion of the cooler air" (11. 64-66), ready to enjoy the long-expected ease. But the Pedlar would not leave him alone; instead, he remarked:

I see around me here
Things which you cannot see: We die, my Friend,
Nor we alone, but that which each man loved
And prized in his peculiar nook of earth
Dies with him or is changed, and very soon
Even of the good is no memorial left.

The Narrator, whose complacency at the moment must have been obvious, was admonished to notice the discrepancy between reality and appearance. The Pedlar, like the envisioned "dreaming man," lay in the cool shade; unlike the latter, however, he was not delighted because of physical comfort, but was in mourning.

As the Pedlar proceeded with his story, the Narrator felt a deep compassion for the dead, aware of his tranquil sympathy growing with thought. The Pedlar, being "pride of nature," as the Narrator called him, always saw man in his relation with nature. To him, man is not alone but part of nature; nor does man die alone, whose "peculiar nook of earth" will die with him or will be changed because of him. To the Pedlar, nature takes on human feelings, like the poet in his elegies, who calls upon the hills, streams, and rocks to lament with him. In the Pedlar's elegy for Margaret, nature is animated and personified. Wordsworth, known to have "endeavoured utterly to reject [personifications] as a mechanical device of style, or as a family language which Writers in metre seem to lay claim to by prescription" (*Selected Poems and Prefaces* 449-50), nevertheless uses them as "a figure of speech occasionally prompted by passion" (449), "to keep the Reader in the company of flesh and blood, persuaded that by so doing [he will] interest [the Reader]" (450).

Just as the Pedlar can feel a poet's heart when he writes elegies, so a reader, such as the Narrator, can also feel the Pedlar's attachment to Margaret and his affinity with nature:

> Beside yon spring I stood
> And eyed its waters till we seemed to feel
> One sadness, they and I. For them a bond
> Of brotherhood is broken: time has been
> When every day the touch of human hand
> Disturbed their stillness, and they ministered
> To human comfort.
>
> (11. 82-88)

The Pedlar was a mediator between man and nature, being equipped with both the natural perspective and the human perspective.[7] He knew well the importance of the bond between man and nature, and was saddened when that bond was broken.

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[7] Cohen points out that the dreaming man and his embodiment – the Pedlar – have natural perspective while the Narrator has human perspective. Owing to this difference, the Pedlar and the Narrator live in different mental states. That is, the Pedlar and the dreaming man enjoy peace, while the Narrator is restless. The argument is inspiring, but the present paper attempts a different reading of the Pedlar's and the dreaming man's perspective.

More important, obviously a person with experience, the Pedlar knew how to minister to the Narrator's needs, both physical and spiritual. He first helped the Narrator to quench his thirst. Then he was going to teach him another aspect of suffering and how to deal with it. In the Pedlar, the Narrator saw his own shallowness and narrowness. Having complained about his sorry lot, he saw the Pedlar, who must have been through just as weary a journey in the sun as his and who seemed to be enjoying the cool shade, was in fact mourning for the departed Margaret, who was not even a relation of his. The Narrator must have realized, to his own embarrassment, how superficial he had been to envy or envision others' good fortune while lamenting his bad luck. The long prelude, then, serves to prepare the Narrator psychologically to lend a willing ear to this reposed and philosophical Pedlar.

V. The Natural Perspective

As has been pointed out earlier, the Narrator mistakenly identified the Pedlar with the envisioned dreaming man. In Cohen's words, "the Pedlar, like the dreaming man, maintains a meditative union with nature which enables him to view experience from a higher perspective" (189). While both of them seemed at one with nature, the Narrator, lamenting his physical discomfort under the sweltering sun, was "at odds with nature" (Cohen 188). But there is an important difference between the dreaming man and the Pedlar. Unlike the "half-conscious" dreaming man, the Pedlar was conscious of the nature surrounding him. Unlike the dreaming man, who was only physically in nature, the Pedlar was in tune with nature, emotionally and intellectually. Furthermore, without compromising or forgoing his humanity, the Pedlar, a man of nature, always saw man in relation with nature. In other words, his perspective was both natural and human.

The Pedlar's narration revealed a man who, from his human perspective, suffered compassionately with Margaret. He insisted, however, that it was wrong to muse on the ruined cottage "till [his] wiser mind / Sinks, yielding to the foolishness of grief" (11. 118-19). As a man of nature, he believed in the importance of keeping in step with nature. In his story, actually, he tended to emphasize the relation between man and nature. For instance, earlier in the story he remarked on Robert's decline:

> He blended where he might the various tasks
> Of summer, autumn, winter, and of spring.
> But this endured not; his good-humour soon
> Became a weight in which no pleasure was,

And poverty brought on a petted mood
And a sore temper[.]

(11. 170-175)

To the Pedlar, man would be on the losing side if "the link between work and season is lost" (Watson 81). When he saw the old elms were still there but not Robert and Margaret, he could not help being moved to tears. As the pride of nature, however, he knew it was "out of season" to mourn:

"At this *still* season of *repose* and *peace,*
This hour when all things which are not *at rest*
Are *cheerful*, while this multitude of flies
Fills all the air with *happy melody*,
Why should a *tear* be in an old man's eye?"

(11. 188-92, emphases mine)

Unlike the Narrator, who found "in nature a correlative and sympathetic image of the world within" (Averill 57), the Pedlar, though mourning for human suffering and loss, was detached and fair-mined enough to realize and acknowledge that nature was still serene and insects cheerful.

The contrast between the natural and the human becomes most obvious when, as the first part of the story draws near its end, the Pedlar remarked, almost rhetorically:

"Why should we thus with an *untoward* mind
And in the *weakness of humanity*
From *natural wisdom* turn our hearts away,
To *natural comfort* shut our eyes and ears,
And feeding on *disquiet,* thus disturb
The *calm of Nature* with *our restless thoughts*?"

(11. 193-98, emphases mine)

It seems that, by opposing "the calm of Nature" to man's "restless thought," the Pedlar was not only trying to convince the Narrator but himself as well. Notice the pronouns used throughout this passage are "we" and "our" to include the speaker himself. After all, the Pedlar is also human, and it is only human to be disturbed and saddened by such a sad and disturbing story as Margaret's. At the same time, however, he suggested that

man should not turn his heart away from natural wisdom nor shut his eyes and ears to natural comfort. Man should not be blind to the natural perspective.

It was this emphasis on the natural perspective, the Narrator observed, that enabled the Pedlar to regain his calm, and even cheerfulness:

> He spake with somewhat of a solemn tone:
> But when he ended there was in his face
> Such easy chearfulness, a look so mild
> That for a little time it stole away
> All recollection, and that simple tale
> Passed from my mind like a forgotten sound.
>
> (11. 199-204)

Although the story was told solemnly, the result of the telling seemed anything but solemn – a cheerful face and a mild look as far as the story-teller was concerned. And initially this seeming nonchalance rubbed it on the listener, the Narrator. Not only do critics find such a response incredible and thus unacceptable, but the Narrator himself must have been surprised by the effect of the story: "a heartfelt chillness" forced him to go out of the "breezy shade" to "drink the comfort of the warmer sun" – a striking contrast to the man, depicted in the long prelude, who yearned for and envisioned a shelter from the sweltering sun. The ruin turned "tranquil," and the Narrator found himself demanding to know more about Margaret and her suffering.

At this juncture, nature seemed much pleasanter to this traveller, but the natural perspective was yet to dawn upon him. According to Averill, "the calm of Nature is the metaphor by which the poet describes the cathartic effects of Margaret's tragedy" (60). It is the "human misery" that "provides the psychic energy necessary to purge life of its petty irritations and to make accessible the cathartic calm" (Averill 61). Indeed, "internal factors are responsible for his disharmony with the environment," and "his weakness is more a mental than physical state" (Averill 57). For the Pedlar, too, the cathartic effect of Margaret's tragedy has a share in brightening up his solemn face.

When the Pedlar resumed his narration, he detailed Margaret's changes according to his four visits to the cottage. Seeing from his natural perspective, he often externalized Margaret's suffering by stating how she took care of her garden: her hope waned in proportion as her garden was neglected. For instance, when Margaret and the Pedlar first parted, "It was then the early spring; / [he] left her busy with her garden tools" (11. 282-83). On his second visit, as he "strolled into her garden," he noticed " [i]t was changed" (11. 313-14). Margaret herself also admitted she was "changed" (1. 352).

On his third visit, he found her "sad and drooping" (1. 396): "She seemed the same / In person [or] appearance, but her house / Bespoke a sleepy hand of negligence" (399-401). On his fourth visit, sitting on the old bench on which Margaret used to sit in her lifetime, the Pedlar told the Narrator how her "torturing hope" (1. 489) shaped "things / Which made her heart beat quick" (11. 456-57). Pointing to the path which she walked many times enquiring passersby about Robert, the Pedlar noted how "The green-sward now has broken its grey line" (1. 458). Thus, time and again, the Narrator was made aware of the link between man and nature: when man is out of step with nature, the link is broken, and nature takes over.

Margaret's dying, Paul Hamilton points out, "has taken the form not of tragic self-expression but of a gradual loss of identity in nature. The ruined cottage and its overgrown garden cease to symbolise Margaret's decline, and gradually and literally assimilate her" (37). Thus Margaret, victimized by her own impotent - and, from nature's perspective, foolish - grief, eventually withered, and her death resulted in the complete taking over of the encroaching nature. That, in fact, marks the beginning of the Pedlar's story:

> She is dead,
> The worm is on her cheek, and this poor hut,
> Stripped of its outward garb of household flowers,
> Of rose and sweet-briar, offers to the wind
> A cold bare wall whose earthy top is tricked
> With weeds and the rank spear-grass. She is dead,
> And nettles rot and adders sun themselves
> Where we have sate together while she nursed
> Her infant at her breast.
>
> (11. 103-11)

It was a picture desolate enough to make the Pedlar, from his human perspective, yield to "the foolishness of grief." Similarly, the Narrator, having heard the story and seen nature triumph, oblivious of Margaret, sank in the "impotence of grief." The Pedlar once again admonished his listener/reader by emphasizing the importance of putting suffering in its proper perspective:

> "My friend, enough to sorrow have you given,
> The purposes of wisdom ask no more;
> Be wise and chearful, and no longer read

The forms of things with an unworthy eye."

(508-11)

To the Pedlar, nature was not "oblivious" but with feelings, and Margaret was now at one with nature, sharing its calm and peace: "She sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here" (1. 512). Real and enduring, nature will not be changed according to man's "uneasy thoughts." Rather, the Narrator was advised to detect what nature revealed through "those very plumes, / Those weeds, and the high spear-grass on that wall, / By mist and silent rain-drops silvered o'er," for they conveyed

So still an image of tranquility,
So callm and still, and looked so beautiful
Amid the uneasy thoughts which filled my mind,
That what we feel of sorrow and despair
From ruin and from change, and all the grief
The passing shews of being leave behind,
Appeared an idle dream that could not live
Where meditation was.

(11. 513-24)

The Narrator was made to see and feel nature's definite superiority; if seen from the proper, natural perspective, human grief for "the passing shews of being" was but "an idle dream."

VI. The Education Completed

Eventually, the natural perspective dawned upon the Narrator. This time, there was no need to envision any dreaming man, for he had accepted the teaching of the Pedlar. It is worth noting that once the Narrator had adopted the natural perspective inclucated by the Pedlar, the two persons became one, as the predominant emphasis on togetherness in the ending of the poem strongly and clearly indicates:

He ceased. By this the sun declining shot
A slant and mellow radiance which began
To fall upon *us* where beneath the trees
We sate on that low bench, and now *we* felt,

> Admonished thus, the sweet hour coming on.
>
> (11. 525-30, emphases mine)

Curiously, they were even "admonished" together. The Pedlar's story had a cathartic effect on the narrator himself as well as on the Narrator/listener. The human perspective will always remain strong; after all, man is only human. And it is because of this that there is need for repeated instructions in the natural perspective. This applies to the experienced Pedlar as much as it does to the first-time listener. When "The old man rose and hoisted up his load,"

> *Together* casting then a farewell look
> Upon those silent walls, *we* felt the shade
> And ere the stars were visible attained
> A rustic inn, *our* resting-place.
>
> (11. 534-38, emphases mine)

Wordsworth, who speaks through the Pedlar, sets up the Narrator as an ideal reader, who is brought back to "the raw data of experience" where he sees how the Pedlar's mind– and his own – operate. As with the Narrator, so perhaps with the general reader, perpetuators of the story of human suffering.

In the poem's four-layer dramatic frame, narrators are readers and readers are narrators. This is especially the case with the Pedlar and the Narrator. Their relationship is intricate, their dramatic interplay effective, and their psychological developments perceptible. Even without the Pedlar's long personal history, "The Ruined Cottage" is a convincing piece. For what the Narrator sees in the Pedlar is not a faith "professed" nor "earned" (Cohen 192), but *lived*.

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