

Wordsworth's *Margaret; or the Ruined Cottage*

Author(s): Nelson F. Adkins

Source: *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 38, No. 8 (Dec., 1923), pp. 460-466

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2915233>

Accessed: 23-03-2016 11:36 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Modern Language Notes*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

its modern transferred sense, is a fairly late usage, post-dating the chief Gothic romancers, Walpole, Reeve, Lewis, and Radcliffe, who never used the adjective except with mediaeval connotation, and not greatly ante-dating the end of the eighteenth century.

So—apart from its technical use in linguistics and architecture—run the ups and downs of “Gothic,” from a race-term to a sneering-word, from a sneering-word to a cool adjective, from a cool adjective to a cliché in criticism.

ALFRED E. LONGUEIL.

University of California.

WORDSWORTH'S *MARGARET; OR THE RUINED
COTTAGE*

To point out similarities in thought, style, and diction between the work of the French Romanticists of the late Eighteenth Century and the poetry of Wordsworth is by no means a difficult task, for, as one would suppose, it was from these French writers of the Continent that the English poet derived in part, at least, the thought and spirit that animated his work. It was not, however, entirely a pious and unreasoned reverence for these solitary worshippers of Nature which made Wordsworth the man he was. England herself, had, by the time of Wordsworth, begun to experience a definite reaction from the super-conventionality of the times. That highly-wrought state of society which found its most bitter expression in class-hatred, and which resulted in the lordly exaltation of the rich and titled, and a merciless trampling of the poor and degraded—the artificial solidification of human life and institutions, and the corresponding artistic *cliché*, which produced nothing more fit for poetic expression than that polished, but unflexible Popian couplet,—all this had a profound influence on the sensitive soul of Wordsworth. Both England and France, finding themselves involved in an iron net-work of conventionality, sought a similar escape from their toil,—a return to Nature.

Rousseau's uncompromising insistence upon a return to Nature also expressed in substance the English Romantic spirit. Born of a reaction from artificiality, rationality, and high-strung city

life, the Romantic movement insisted first of all upon spontaneity and simplicity of thought and action. Going back to Nature meant, in the first place, a change of attitude from society to the individual. It meant an abandonment of worldly pleasure and dignity for solitude, seclusion, and simplicity of life. It meant a deep love and reverence for the *naive*,—a delight in the helpless, bright-eyed child; a joy in the tiniest woodland flower; a sermon in the rain-washed stone; and good in everything that had not been contaminated by the filth of the city. Lastly, it meant a new religion. The theology and dogma of the Eighteenth Century, attempting to justify a God as complex and brazen as the times that conceived him, was now swept away for a God of the valley, delighting in laughter of little children, and making his home with farmer and herdsman. Nature, in place of dogmatic theology, now became the way of approach to God. It was one of the primary tenets of these early Romanticists that a far-reaching, transcendent knowledge would be imparted to the faithful worshipper of Nature,—that the mind in close communion with the beauties of Nature would grow in a wealth and power entirely denied to the mere discursive kind. Thus in the Romanticist was combined the Pagan worship of Nature and the worship of that unseen anthropomorphic God which, deeply rooted in Hebraic theology, had had so marked an influence on the abstract mind of the Middle Ages.

In reading Wordsworth's *Margaret; or the Ruined Cottage*, which the poet later incorporated in the first book of the *Excursion*, one is often reminded of *Paul et Virginie*. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre was in no way a servile imitator of his forerunners, Rousseau and Buffon. He struck out for himself into the field of Nature, observing and tabulating anew her varied laws, and seeking ever fresh and stimulating experience in the contemplation of her beauties. But in spirit he was a true son of Rousseau.

In both Saint-Pierre's story of Paul and Virginia, and Wordsworth's poem of *Margaret* may be observed those distinctly Romantic tendencies which we noted above. Of similarity in feeling, emotion, and thought, and, indeed, in attitude toward life in general little need be said. The scene of each story is laid amid the beauties and charms of a Nature which everywhere breathes of the spirit of God. It is life and communion with this Nature

that brings to the peaceful and reverent inhabitants contentment, love, and joy. Without, in the cold, hard, rational world,—in the savage cities teeming with vice and sin—reigns discord, hate, and misery. Contentment and happiness come only with retirement from worldly pleasure, and endure only so long as these true children of Nature keep themselves unspotted from the world. As the affairs of the world slowly penetrate their quiet, peaceful abodes, then comes an evil that no virtue or goodness can withstand. In both stories it is solitude that frees the mind for the generous outpourings of the spirit of God. And this communion with Nature and solitude also brings with it an infinite tenderness, as well as an emphasis upon the more primitive and gentler emotions.

It is a similarity in more specific details, however, that makes one feel that possibly Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* was one of the sources of Wordsworth's poem. To be sure, Wordsworth does not mention the Frenchman's story in the preface to his poem. But this fact need not trouble one. Wordsworth, who had probably read the Frenchman's story many years before (some twenty-five or thirty years elapsed between the dates of composition), had, by the time he started his poem of *Margaret*, quite forgotten the details of the story, and would scarcely have recognized it as a possible source of his poem. How much the vitality and fertility of the imagination depends upon the subtle operations of the subconscious mind, it is hard to say. But this much we may say, that the unfolding of the imagination involved in artistic expression is shrouded in deep mystery. The details of Saint-Pierre's story, though lost to outward memory, might well have become a part of the permanent possessions of Wordsworth's inner mind.

The setting of each story is similar. The cottages, now in irreparable ruin as the tales begin, are withdrawn from the world, one, on an island in the Indian Ocean, where scarcely a murmur reaches it, but the ceaseless, muffled roar of the sea; the other, in England, in a less secluded spot, but almost equally removed from contact with city life. Wordsworth's description of the remains of Margaret's cottage,—

four naked walls
That stared upon each other,

compares well with the general impression given by Saint-Pierre of the ruined state of the abodes once loved by the two French

families. The one-time inhabitants had cast their lots amid the simple charms of Nature. But, as if not wholly satisfied with a Nature wild and unadorned, each family had cultivated gardens, which are quite distinct and separate from the uncouth and untended wastes lying round about, although, as Saint-Pierre says of Paul's garden,

Il ne s'était pas écarté de celui [le plan] de la Nature.

One might almost say that these gardens symbolize the prosperity, decline, and final ruin of those simple and reverent worshippers of Nature who had once cultivated them. While yet life is dear, and faith in the future keen for these people, their gardens bloom with delicate, exquisite beauty. But when misfortune and hardship come with the intrusion of the world without, then the flowers begin to wilt, the stalks to droop, and weeds and thorns quickly spring up, which choke all but a bare semblance of the beauty and loveliness that had once quickened the hearts of those unfortunate people.

The similarity between Wordsworth's Pedlar and Saint-Pierre's Old Man, both of whom narrate the stories in question, is too striking to escape the notice of even the superficial reader. This is the Frenchman's description of his "homme déjà sur âge."

"Il était, suivant la coutume des anciens habitants, en petite veste et en long caleçon. Il marchait nu-pieds, et s'appuyait sur un bâton de bois d'ébène. Ses cheveux étaient tout blancs, et sa physionomie noble et simple."

With this description compare the following lines of Wordsworth about his pedlar :

A man of reverend age,
But stout and hale, for travel unimpaired.
There was he seen upon the cottage bench,
Recumbent in the shade, as if asleep;
An iron-pointed staff lay at his side.

Although differing much in phraseology, the descriptions in each case give one like impressions of two venerable old men. We must not assert too boldly, however, that the Old Man of Saint-Pierre's story is the prototype of Wordsworth's Pedlar, for in the preface to his poem Wordsworth gives us a hint of the source of his character. But it is interesting to observe that Wordsworth is here

not describing any single person he had ever known or seen, but rather several persons. Just as the Old Man in Saint-Pierre's story, we may believe, is a portrait of the author himself, who, unfitted by temperament to live in a society which showers its blessings only upon the flattering and obsequious, fled the irksome bonds of propriety and convention to take up his abode with a true and simple-hearted people; so the Pedlar of the opening book of the *Excursion* is, according to Wordsworth's own words, in part a picture of the man he himself would like to have been, had not circumstances of birth and education guided him into other walks of life. In the same preface, Wordsworth speaks also of two other men he had once known who contributed to the picture of this character,—one, an old Scotchman, named Patrick, a kinsman of his and a pedlar; the other, a pedlar whom he had known when a school boy, and who had made a deep impression upon his childish imagination. It is scarcely too much to say, I think, that the sage Old Man of Saint-Pierre's story also contributed his bit to Wordsworth's Pedlar.

It is not only in dress and physical appearance that these two old men resemble each other. Even more is a similarity apparent in the moral and spiritual sides of their natures. To be sure, the manner of characterization is in the case of each different. Wordsworth devotes some ten pages (Aldine Edition) to a detailed description of the Wanderer's spiritual life, showing how from childhood to youth and youth to manhood, Nature had been the chief agent in forming the moral and intellectual possessions of the man. Instead of adopting this direct narrative method in dealing with his character, Saint-Pierre chooses rather to show us from the Old Man's attitude toward life, from his reactions to the sufferings and hardships of others the kind of a person he really is. Both men, paragons of wisdom and virtue quite beyond their learning and station in life, have been ardent lovers and worshipers of Nature. And Nature who "never did betray the heart that loved her," lavish in the abundance of her blessings bestowed upon these simple children of hers, leaves nothing undone that might add to their spiritual, moral, and intellectual welfare. It is with a childish delight that these two men, so long separated from the outer world of action, tell their simple tales of happiness and misfortune.

The name Margaret seems to have been a favorite with Wordsworth, and appears to have responded to the poet's imagination as peculiarly befitting a person in humble station of life. In *Paul et Virginie* we see that Paul's mother is named Margaret,—a woman of less culture and refinement than the more religious and melancholy Madame de la Tour. Wordsworth wrote in the preface to his poem that “several passages describing the employment and demeanor of Margaret during her affliction” he gleaned from certain observations which he had made in Dorsetshire and Somersetshire. But he also states that the character as a whole is composite, partaking of the traits and virtues of women who had come under his direct observation, and of whom he had been told. Wordsworth's Margaret, however, resembles more closely Virginia's mother, Madame de la Tour, although Paul's mother, too, possesses many of those tender graces for which we love the English Margaret. Of Madame de la Tour Saint-Pierre says,

“Je trouvai dans madame de la Tour une personne d'une figure intéressante, pleine de noblesse et de mélancolie.”

In essence we find Wordsworth's description of Margaret similar.

She was a woman of a steady mind,
Tender and deep in her excess of love;
Not speaking much, pleased rather with the joy
Of her own thoughts: by some especial care
Her temper had been framed, as if to make
A Being, who by adding love to peace
Might live on earth a life of happiness.

These two pathetic stories of happiness and misfortune conclude in a similar way. Both listeners find in the gloomy recital of love and joy completely wiped out by cruel disaster a human experience that touches the depths of their souls. It is Wordsworth who in his simple, sincere lines expresses more delicately and poignantly than Saint-Pierre the effect of his tale of suffering upon his fellow-companion.

The Old Man ceased: he saw that I was moved.
From that low bench, rising instinctively
I turned aside in weakness, nor had power
To thank him for the tale which he had told.

Saint-Pierre's rather blunt, matter-of-fact way of ending his story lacks much of Wordsworth's simple dignity.

“ En disant ces mots, ce bon vieillard s'éloigna en versant des larmes ; et les miennes avaient coulé plus d'une fois pendant ce funeste récit.”

NELSON F. ADKINS.

New Haven, Conn.

MUSSET ET COPPÉE INSPIRATEURS DE ROSTAND

Dans sa copieuse étude sur Rostand,¹ Jules Haraszti consacre un chapitre très étoffé aux maîtres de l'auteur dramatique. A côté de Corneille, de Victor Hugo, de Banville et de tant d'autres, Alfred de Musset a sa place marquée parmi les modèles de Rostand. Outre l'art des tirades lyriques et musicales, outre l'idéalisme glorifiant la souffrance et l'amour pur, qu'ils ont en commun, il y a surtout l'influence pour ainsi dire “ matérielle ” et directe de la délicieuse comédie *A quoi rêvent les jeunes filles* sur les *Romanesques* et, selon Jules Lemaître, celle de *Carmosine* sur la *Princesse lointaine*.

Une troisième pièce de Rostand et, cette fois, une pièce du Rostand “ arrivé,” en pleine possession de sa doctrine autant que de sa routine, paraît devoir quelques-uns de ses contours les plus importants à un conte de Musset. *L'Histoire d'un merle blanc* (1842) appartient aux contes les plus connus, le plus souvent cités de l'auteur qui s'y met en scène sous les traits du merle célèbre et rare. Rostand, à son tour, prête la moitié de son âme à Chantecler, symbole du poète idéaliste et optimiste, illustre auteur que la foule prône et déteste à la fois. Chacune des pièces de théâtre d'Edmond Rostand fait sensation tout d'abord par le choix du sujet et du “ milieu.” Dans *Chantecler* il renchérit sur toutes en choisissant pour héros des bêtes et en rehaussant l'éclat de la scène par toute une exhibition de plumes bariolées.² C'est que ses héros

¹ *Edmond Rostand*, Paris, Fontemoing, 1913.

² Ce n'est pas le moment de passer en revue les prédécesseurs de Chantecler sur la scène et dans la littérature française. Nous renvoyons nos lecteurs à un article qui va paraître dans la *Revue bleue (Sujets curieux dans la comédie du dix-septième siècle)*, où nous nous efforçons de tirer de l'oubli des pièces de théâtre qui, deux cents ans avant Rostand, avaient demandé aux costumes d'animaux des effets comiques et des coups de théâtre.