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Narrative and Persuasion in *The Ruined Cottage*

Philip Cohen

In Book I of *The Excursion*, a pedlar known as the Wanderer tells an unnamed narrator “a tale of silent suffering,”¹ a story about the gradual decline of an abandoned woman. From 1797 to 1802, William Wordsworth worked intensively on this narrative tale which at times he and his sister Dorothy called *The Ruined Cottage*.² The first complete manuscript version of the poem, MS B, was written during 1797–8 and includes roughly 250 lines which recount the Pedlar’s early years. In MS D, written during 1799–1800, can be found for the first time much of the great concluding passage of Book I (ll. 917–70), but Wordsworth has extracted the history of the Pedlar, and it appears separately in the manuscript. In subsequent manuscripts, Wordsworth expanded and returned the account to the longer poem, and it eventually was published as Book I of *The Excursion* in the 1814 First Edition. Finally, some overtly Christian elements were added to the poem’s conclusion in 1845 by the seventy-five year-old poet and appeared in the 1850 edition.³

Jonathan Wordsworth has argued in *The Music of Humanity* that MS D, which does not contain the history of the Pedlar, is “the best balanced and most coherent surviving version of *The Ruined Cottage*.”⁴ This history, Jonathan Wordsworth writes, “has almost no bearing on *The Ruined Cottage* proper.”⁵ Both *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature* and *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* found Jonathan Wordsworth’s arguments convincing and now print MS D as *The Ruined Cottage*. In *The Norton Anthology*’s introduction to the poem, M.H. Abrams asserts that the lines of the history are “extraneous to the narrative proper and soften the hard naturalism of the story.”⁶ MS D, as Peter Manning observes, “has become virtually canonical, at least for American readers.”⁷

Not all critics, however, prefer this shorter, abridged version either to MS B or Book I. Geoffrey Hartman writes favorably of MS B that “Instead of centering transparently on Margaret, the tale reflects also the narrator, and tends to become a story about the relation of teller to tale. This reflexive (and modern) emphasis is achieved by the introduc-

tion of the poet as a third person, which allows the accent to fall on the way the Pedlar confronts Margaret's passion."⁸ Reeve Parker's close study of Book I is concerned "with the filter provided for the tale of Margaret's suffering by the wanderer's consciousness and how it serves as the basis for a dramatic interplay between him and the narrator."⁹ Arguing that "A review of the compositional history of Book I . . . can show us how profoundly intertwined are the stories of Margaret and the Pedlar, suggest a motive for Wordsworth's impulse to separate them, and reveal the underlying coherence of the longer text with which he began and to which he returned," Peter Manning employs the techniques of psychoanalysis as well as those of literary analysis to champion the longer text.¹⁰

The opinions of the two opposing critical camps seem to be based on two different notions of narrative. Although Jonathan Wordsworth is interested in the dramatic relationship between the Pedlar and the Narrator, he and Abrams prefer MS D, the text in which the drama of Margaret's tragic decline is made the center of the poem. 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. 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 the Narrator. Given Wordsworth's statement in the Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* 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 I.¹¹

One's preference for either version of the poem, however, cannot be based purely on which type of narrative one likes. While Parker and Manning both concentrate on revealing the richness and unity of Book I, no critic has yet attempted to resolve the controversy by determining whether or not the Pedlar's history can be detached from the longer poem, as in MS D, without doing serious damage to the work. Such an inquiry would be based on the belief that problematic aspects of a text are sometimes the product of carelessly thought-out authorial or critical excisions and revisions. These changes frequently create more problems than they purport to solve. If Book I is demonstrably coherent, then the excision of an entire section of the poem should have some effect upon that coherency. In my examination of MS D, hereafter referred to as *The Ruined Cottage*, I will concentrate on how the persuasive power of the narrative's resolution is weakened severely by the excision of the Pedlar's history.

Perhaps the best place to begin our examination of *The Ruined Cottage* is with Jonathan Wordsworth's comments on the poem: "*The Ruined Cottage* is not simply the story of Margaret but her story told by someone who is emotionally involved in her suffering to a listener who becomes increasingly so."¹² This dramatic relationship is, for Jonathan Word-

sworth, one of education, with the Pedlar as the teacher instructing both his pupil the Narrator and that other auditor—the reader of *The Ruined Cottage*. During the course of the poem, the Narrator comes to accept the Pedlar's belief "that grief is weakness and opposed to 'natural wisdom,' 'natural comfort,' and 'the calm of Nature'" and finally comes "to a state of mind in which he too can stand back and trace the 'secret spirit of humanity' which survives 'amid the calm oblivious tendencies / Of nature, 'mid her plants, her weeds and flowers / And silent overgrowings.'" ¹³ But Jonathan Wordsworth finds that this stoic refusal to grieve is acceptable to the reader only within the confines of the poem:

Both Poet and Pedlar are shown responding to the story that is being told; and by emphasizing their initially very different attitudes, and bringing them finally to something like agreement, Wordsworth is able to persuade the reader to accept the standards he imposes, and even momentarily to believe in a philosophical resolution which outside the context of the poem is presumably unacceptable.¹⁴

We approve of the Pedlar's philosophy temporarily not because it has any intrinsic merit but because the Narrator accepts it.

Jonathan Wordsworth's observation that the poet's means of persuasion in *The Ruined Cottage* are formal rather than intellectual or a combination of the two comes close to pinpointing the central problem, for me, with this version of the poem: the poem strains for a resolution, but the Narrator's acceptance of the Pedlar's faith does not seem credible. After examining both the beginning of *The Ruined Cottage* and its skillful resolution, I would like to show the excision of the Pedlar's history creates a conclusion which is indeed problematic.

The first twenty-six lines of *The Ruined Cottage* are crucial in that they define the terms of Wordsworth's poetic argument, terms which are found throughout the poem, especially in its conclusion:

'Twas summer and the sun was mounted high.
 Along the south the uplands feebly *glared*
 Through a pale steam, and all the northern downs,
 In clearer air ascending, shewed far off
 Their surfaces with shadows dappled o'er
 Of deep *embattled* clouds. Far as the sight
 Could reach those many shadows lay in spots
Determined and *unmoved*, with steady beams
 Of *clear* and *pleasant* sunshine interposed—
 Pleasant to him who on the soft cool grass

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*,
 With sidelong eye looks out upon the scene,

By those impending branches made *more soft*,
More *soft* and *distant*.

Other lot was mine.

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.

(ll. 1–26, italics added)¹⁵

We are presented with an initial contrast between the embattled Narrator and the dreaming man he envisions. The dreaming man has distanced himself from the world of human cares by becoming through meditation almost one with nature. He lies in repose in the “dewy shade” of a “huge oak,” only “Half-conscious” of the “soothing melody” which a “wren warbles.” The scene he looks out upon with all its ominous undertones—“the uplands feebly glared”; the clouds are “embattled”; and the shadows are “Determined and unmoved”—is modulated into a scene “More soft and distant” by “those impending branches.”

In contrast to the dreaming man’s passivity and ease, the Narrator’s lot is one of activity and struggle. He toils arduously on “slipp’ry ground” which baffles his feet, and his attempts to rest are frustrated by “The insect host” about his face and “the tedious noise / Of seeds of bursting gorse.” More than the dreaming man, the Narrator is a direct participant in the scene and, by a not unreasonable extension on our part, in the human condition.

This involvement in the scene, this lack of distance from the world of human activity is responsible for the Narrator’s being at odds with nature. The Narrator looks at nature from a human perspective while the dreaming man looks at human action from a natural perspective; the latter’s repose is possible only because he has evaded the former’s limited stance. Much is happening in these opening lines then, but it is happening without the Narrator’s awareness. Wordsworth is talking through but around his narrator to his audience.

The Pedlar is first introduced to us under circumstances which immediately fix him in our mind as the human embodiment of the dreaming man in the Narrator’s vision. The Narrator sees the Pedlar “Alone and stretched upon the cottage bench” (l.34) and “His eyes were shut, / The shadows of the breezy elms above / Dappled his face” (ll. 46–8). Both the dreaming man and the Pedlar are half-conscious solitaries lying in repose beneath the shadows of trees. The Pedlar’s description of the immediate scene is similar to the scene surrounding the dreaming man:

“ ’Tis now the hour of deepest noon.
 At this *still* season of *repose* and *peace*,
 This when all things which are not at rest
 Are *cheerful*, while this multitude of flies
 Fills all the air with *happy melody*.” (ll. 187–91, italics added)

From the Narrator’s point of view, the flies are a troublesome “insect host,” but from the Pedlar’s stance, they are a melodious choir. This difference in response is indicative of the difference between the strategies which the Narrator and the Pedlar have adopted to deal with the world, both natural and human, outside.

The Narrator of *The Ruined Cottage* still looks at experience from the human perspective while the Pedlar, like the dreaming man, maintains a meditative union with nature which enables him to view experience from a higher perspective. The Pedlar himself points out these contrasts between the calm and natural and the restless and human perspectives, and between permanent nature and perishable mankind. “ ‘Why should we thus with an untoward mind . . . thus disturb / The calm of Nature with our restless thoughts?’ ” (ll. 193–8), he asks when he breaks off his tale at the end of the First Part. Except in a brief passage at the end of the poem—which I will deal with shortly—*The Ruined Cottage* does not show us how the Pedlar attained his natural perspective on life; we are expected to accept his achievement as a given.

Although *The Ruined Cottage* begins with the Narrator and the Pedlar looking at experience from diametrically opposed perspectives, the poem ends with the Narrator sharing the Pedlar’s view-point. The dramatic nature of the poem with its emphasis on instruction—the Pedlar insisting “ ‘that there is often found / In mournful thoughts . . . a power to virtue friendly’ ” (ll. 227–9)—works to impart a “natural wisdom” to the Narrator and the reader through the medium of the Pedlar’s tale and his own response to Margaret’s sufferings. It is the acceptance of this wisdom, the natural perspective, which at the end of the poem enables the Narrator to join the Pedlar in his freedom from the paralysis of grief over the human suffering which the tale of Margaret stands for. They are both able to turn away from the ruined cottage and continue upon their journey.

Wordsworth handles this conclusion very well indeed. In the last forty-five lines of the poem, the Narrator moves from the intense “impotence of grief” (l. 500), to a milder insight into “That secret spirit of humanity” (l. 503) which still survives amidst the overgrown garden, and finally to a shared ability to turn away from the cottage. This emotional journey is made not only with the aid of the Pedlar’s gentle admonition, “ ‘My friend, enough to sorrow have you given’ ” (l. 508), but also with the assistance of the Pedlar’s own example:

“I will remember that those very plumes,
 Those weeds, and the high spear grass on that wall,

By mist and silent raindrops silvered o'er,
 As once I passed, did to my mind convey
 So still an image of tranquility,
 So calm 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. I turned away,
 And walked along my road in happiness." (ll. 513–25, italics added)

By watching weeds and spear grass, symbols of Margaret's decay, reintegrated into nature, the Pedlar sees that human suffering is temporary. The meditative mind can distance itself from the pain caused by that suffering through pursuing an identification with the permanent reality of nature. The passage also expresses the same contrast between the calm tranquility of nature and the uneasy restlessness of human experience which characterizes the beginning of the poem.

It is along just these lines—the attainment of a natural perspective in order to face tragedy—that Cleanth Brooks explores the Wanderer's ability to deal with human suffering in Book I: "Is Wordsworth saying here that, seen in the full perspective of nature, seen as a portion of nature's beautiful and unwearied immortality, Margaret with her sorrows is simply one detail of an all-encompassing and harmonious pattern?"¹⁶ Brooks "shrinks from concluding that such an interpretation is Wordsworth's own," but he believes "it may be useful to state it as a limiting term of Wordsworth's position."¹⁷ I shall show later in the paper that Brook's comments more accurately describe the Pedlar of *The Ruined Cottage* than they do the Wanderer of Book I.

In the concluding verse paragraph of the poem, we are presented with a scene which is more than vaguely reminiscent of both the Narrator's original vision and of his meeting with the Pedlar. A "mellow radiance" (l. 530) falls on the two men on the bench "beneath the trees" (l. 527). As "the sweet hour" (l. 530) comes on, a bird (a linnet now instead of a wren) warbles, and "a thrush sang loud, and other melodies / At distance" (ll. 532–3) are heard. The crucial difference is that here the Narrator is included in the scene. Earlier he was at odds with nature, but now he shares the Pedlar's ability to view human suffering from the natural perspective. It is their ability to evade a self-limited stance which enables them to escape paralysis and continue upon their journey. In order to go on in a world filled with human tragedy, they must first include themselves in the positive natural cycle. *The Ruined Cottage* is circular in that the end returns to the world of the Narrator's vision, but it is also linear in that the Narrator has grown through the Pedlar's instruction.

Are Wordsworth's considerable poetic and dramatic abilities as they

shape the beginning and the end of *The Ruined Cottage* able to make us believe in the Narrator's acceptance of the Pedlar's philosophy even within the confines of the poem? Perhaps the analysis offered above predisposes us to answer this question in the affirmative. Two key moments in the narrative, however, when the Pedlar turns from the pain of grief, place a strain on this acceptance. Twice the Pedlar simply asserts that there is a "natural wisdom" which enables us to deal with a world in which even a Margaret can suffer terribly.

At the close of the poem's First Part, the Pedlar breaks off his tale by asking:

"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 in disquiet, thus disturb
The calm of Nature with our restless thoughts?" (ll. 193-98)

This admonition to turn from grief occurs after he has told the Narrator about the disastrous blight, war, and sickness which afflicted Margaret and her husband during "those calamitous years" (l. 147) a decade ago. The purpose of the juxtaposition may be to balance a strategy for dealing with grief aroused by suffering against a vivid depiction of pathetic suffering. This strategy is based, as we have seen, on the notion that the world of human existence can be evaded, but the Pedlar's faith in such "natural wisdom" seems to be supported only by facile assertion. Never does the Pedlar discuss whether "The calm of Nature" reflects a benevolent god or an indifferent but permanent universe.

Because this stance seems unearned, untested by any real grappling with experience at this point in this version of the poem, it does not effectively counter-balance the feelings of distress which the Pedlar's tale has aroused. It is only the Pedlar's "easy cheerfulness" and "look so mild" (l. 201) which causes his tale to pass temporarily from the Narrator's mind "like a forgotten sound" (l. 204). Before long, however, there is a "heartfelt chilliness" (l. 213) in the veins of the Narrator and, I think, in those of many readers as well.

With one difference, the same pattern of events recurs at the end of the poem. After the Pedlar finishes his long tale, he pauses and watches the Narrator give way to his intense sorrow over Margaret's gradual decline and eventual death. The Pedlar then gently admonishes his friend: "My friend, enough to sorrow have you given, / The purposes of Wisdom ask no more: / Be wise and cheerful, and no longer read / The forms of things with an unworthy eye" (ll. 508-11). The difference is that here the admonition is briefly shown to be the product of the Pedlar's own experience in the passage, quoted above, with the Pedlar reaching back into his memory (ll. 513-25). As the Pedlar relates how seeing the weeds and spear grass "By mist and silent raindrops

silvered o'er' " (l. 515) allowed him to continue walking " 'along my road in happiness' " (l. 525), he provides the Narrator with a strategy to deal with " 'What we feel of sorrow and despair / From ruin and from change, and all the grief / The passing shews of being leave behind' " (ll. 520–2). The strategy, as we have seen, is one of withdrawal; contemplation enables the Pedlar to view the human state from the perspective of unchanging nature. The Pedlar expresses the same contrast here between the calm tranquility of that permanent nature and the restless transience of human existence that characterized his earlier assertion of faith.

This revelation of a moment of experience which led the Pedlar to his philosophy, however, is brief: the Pedlar seems once again merely to assert his philosophy, to will his stance into success. This willed stance, willed because it is backed up by only the briefest of insights into the experience which formed it, appears pitifully inadequate as an alternative to the emotions the Pedlar's tale has aroused in both the Narrator and the reader. In terms of sheer numbers alone—and surely this must have some effect on our experience of reading the poem—this passage is no match for the preceding 293 lines of the Second Part which depict Margaret's pathetic decline.

Jonathan Wordsworth observes correctly that we accept the Pedlar's stance "according to whether his voice seems authoritative or merely sententious" and is relieved to find that the Pedlar's "wisdom seldom in fact obtrudes."¹⁸ I would argue that this wisdom seems sententious because we must, like the Narrator, accept it by fiat when it does obtrude. If we do not share his acceptance, the Narrator's adoption of the Pedlar's philosophy is disconcerting. We may even be disappointed not only in this Narrator but also in Wordsworth who has provided this problematic resolution.

These points are important enough to bear repeating. While we feel Wordsworth struggling through the dramatic nature of the poem to impart a philosophical stance to both the Narrator and the reader, the Pedlar's "tale of silent suffering" may affect us too much to make that jump to the natural perspective. The long, pathetic story of Margaret's suffering arouses emotions which refuse to be palliated by the few passages in which the Pedlar talks about "natural wisdom": because his faith is asserted but not dramatically grounded, it is not fully credible.

In Book I of *The Excursion*, however, the Narrator's response is not so troubling because he is persuaded by more than the Pedlar's statements about "natural wisdom." The Narrator is fully aware of how the Pedlar came to see human actions from the natural perspective, and he does not hesitate to share that knowledge with the reader. An examination of the Wanderer's history as it appears in Book I will demonstrate that these 382 lines, missing in *The Ruined Cottage*, are the crucial factor in convincing us that the Wanderer's faith is earned and not merely professed.

The Wanderer, we learn early in Book I, owes his ability to move beyond the human plane of existence to his upbringing “Among the hills of Athol” (l. 108). The “foundations of his mind” (l. 132) were laid by an early communion with “the presence and the power / Of greatness” (ll. 135–6) which he perceived in the stars, the hills, and the woods around him. The Wanderer assimilated these objects of nature into his consciousness where “they lay / Upon his mind like substances” (ll. 137–8). As he grew and became less and less satisfied with dimmer perceptions than those that used to lie “upon his mind,” he developed his imagination, “an active power to fasten images / Upon his brain” (ll. 145–6). It was this boyhood growth of imagination which allowed the Wanderer to deepen his normal human perception. Imagination enabled him to sit “ ‘mid the hollow depths of naked crags” (l. 155) and “Even in their fixed and steady lineaments” (l. 160) to trace “an ebbing and a flowing mind” (l. 161).

As a “growing youth” (l. 197), the Wanderer’s ability to withdraw from the human perspective blossomed into a joyous union with nature, especially when he watched “from the naked top / Of some bold head-land” (l. 198–9) the sun-rise:

He looked—

Ocean and earth, the solid frame of earth
 And ocean’s liquid mass, in *gladness* lay
 Beneath him:—Far and wide the clouds were touched,
 And in their silent faces could he read
Unutterable love. Sound needed none,
 Nor any voice of joy; his spirit drank
 The spectacle: sensation, soul, and form,
 All melted into him; they swallowed up
 His animal being; in them did he live,

And by them did he live; they were his life.
 In such access of mind, in such high hour
 Of visitation from the living God,
 Thought was not; in enjoyment it expired.
 No thanks he breathed, he proffered no request;
 Rapt into *still communion* that *transcends*
 The imperfect offices of prayer and praise,
 His mind was a thanksgiving to the power
 That made him; it was blessedness and *love*!

(ll. 200–18, italics added)

This transcendent communion is conveyed by the syntax of the middle lines which alternate between making the Wanderer the subject and the “sensation, soul, and form” of the spectacle the object, and then the other way around. As he became one with nature, the Wanderer was able to read in the clouds “Unutterable love,” the first principle which infuses the natural world in much of Wordsworth’s poetry. Whether or

not the universe is indifferent or benevolent is not left open to question in Book I as it is in *The Ruined Cottage*.

Through recalling those moments of communion, recalling “those ecstasies to mind” (l. 237), the Wanderer acquired “Wisdom which works thro’ patience” (l. 239) and learned “To look on Nature with a humble heart / Self-questioned where it did not understand” (l. 241–2). The lessons of patient acceptance and humility which the Wanderer learned here compose the “natural wisdom” which he attempts to teach to the Narrator during their encounter. “Brought up in nature, by nature,” Hartman writes, the Wanderer eventually stands “before us as the embodiment of natural wisdom.”¹⁹

One last stage in the development of the Wanderer’s natural perspective remains to be accounted for. He has received “Deeply the lesson deep of love” (l. 194), the love which animates nature. Now the Wanderer’s sympathies which have been naturalized must also be humanized, turned towards other men. As a Pedlar, he wandered through fields and woods

and there
Spontaneously had his affections thriven
Amid the bounties of the year, the peace
And liberty of nature; there he kept
In solitude and solitary thought
His mind in a just equipoise of love.
Serene it was, unclouded by the cares
Of ordinary life; unvexed, unwarped
By partial bondage. In his steady course,
No piteous revolutions had he felt,
No wild varieties of joy and grief.
Unoccupied by sorrow of its own,
His heart lay open, and by nature tuned
And constant disposition of his thoughts
To sympathy with man, he was alive
To all that was enjoyed where’er he went,
And all that was endured

(ll. 350–66)

As a result of his “solitude and solitary thought” and “steady courage” amidst nature, the Wanderer achieved a balance, “a just equipoise of love” which kept him from “wild varieties of joy and grief.” The balance, “serene,” “unclouded by the cares / Of ordinary life,” permitted him to open his heart to all the joys and griefs of other men:

for, in himself
Happy and quiet in his Cheerfulness,
He had no painful pressure from without
That made him turn aside from wretchedness
With coward fears.

(ll. 366–70)

The serenity of his natural perspective, the unique stance from which he

views human suffering, allowed the Wanderer “to suffer / With those whom he saw suffer” (ll. 370–1).

In his history of the Pedlar, the Narrator related how his mentor achieved the “natural wisdom” which lets him live in a tragic world without being paralysed by grief. The Narrator allows us to catch up with him, as it were, by telling us at the start of the poem what we need to know about the Wanderer. Our perception of the Wanderer’s faith as earned and not merely professed strengthens the credibility of the conclusion of the poem. This resolution is made even more credible by the Narrator’s familiarity with the Wanderer and his point of view before they meet near Margaret’s cottage. During his school-years, the Narrator was singled out by the Wanderer “To be his chosen comrade” (l. 61). They spent much time together talking and rambling in the woods. Before hearing the story of Margaret, the Narrator has already “learned / To weigh with his care his [the Wanderer’s] words, and to rejoice / In the plain presence of his dignity!” (ll. 74–6). This part of the Wanderer’s history helps to accentuate the dramatic nature of Book I with its emphasis on the teacher-student relationship between the Wanderer and the Narrator and makes the latter’s attainment of the natural perspective at the end of the poem acceptable to the reader.

The 382 lines of the history also provide a balance to the Wanderer’s lengthy story of Margaret. The Wanderer’s optimistic belief in a benevolent universe balances effectively against the pessimistic grief aroused by Margaret’s ordeal in Book I because both faith and grief stem from the same source: they are the different lessons of human experience. By placing the narrative of the Wanderer’s early years before the tale of Margaret, Wordsworth is able to put us in the proper frame of mind to deal with the most unjust suffering possible, that of an innocent, helpless victim. The poem’s conclusion is able to elicit a response from us now which coincides with that of the Narrator’s.

We are further persuaded to see the wisdom of the Wanderer’s natural perspective by another ploy in Book I which loses its impact with the excision of the Wanderer’s history. There is a fundamental contrast in all the versions of the poem between Margaret’s reaction to grief and the Wanderer’s. Margaret was paralysed both by her excessive grief and by her refusal to accept the fact that Robert will not return. She remained rooted to the scene of her loss:

Yet still

She loved this wretched spot, nor would for worlds
Have parted hence; and still that length of roads,
And this rude bench, one torturing hope endeared,
Fast rooted at her heart” (ll. 910–15)

Unable to work her way past Robert’s abandonment of her, Margaret lingered nine years “in unquiet widowhood” (l. 873) and then died. The Wanderer, on the other hand, has his faith which does not save him

“from solitude or evil, but enables him to face these without exhaustion.”²⁰ Unlike Margaret who cannot accept her loss, the Wanderer’s natural stance allows him to look squarely at human suffering like Margaret’s and still continue on his way in life. “Constantly in motion, free of compulsive involvements, profoundly sane,” Paul D. Sheats observes of the Pedlar, “his consciousness is guaranteed against the fixation that destroys Margaret.”²¹

Margaret is overpowered by her grief, but the Wanderer masters his. This contrast has no small effect on our final response to the poem. The forcefulness of this effect is conditional upon the inclusion of the Wanderer’s history. Without the passages concerning his early years, the Wanderer’s faith in a benevolent nature appears glib when compared to Margaret’s very real suffering. This contrast between Margaret and the Wanderer with its favorable emphasis on the latter’s ability to deal with grief loses its persuasive power in *The Ruined Cottage*; the contrast there may even have the opposite effect of alienating the reader from both the Wanderer and Wordsworth.

I want now to return to Brooks’s comments on the Wanderer’s natural perspective. The Pedlar achieves this perspective in *The Ruined Cottage* in order to avoid being paralysed by grief, but the Wanderer evades the human stance only as a prerequisite for extending sympathy to those who suffer. Identification with nature is, for the Wanderer and doubtless for Wordsworth as well, a form of self-protection. Only after taking this initial precaution, as we have seen in the history, is the Wanderer able to show sympathy to those less fortunate than he. The Wanderer’s attainment of the natural perspective is balanced against “the fraternal sympathy” (l. 419) he extends to the “sick man’s tale” (l. 418) in the history. During his account of the Wanderer’s early years, the Narrator tells us that “never did there live on earth / A man of kindlier nature” (ll. 414–15).

The excision of the Wanderer’s history alters the uneasy tension between aloofness and sympathy, between detachment and concern which lies beneath the Wanderer’s “natural wisdom” and generates much of the energy of Book I. This tension is the product of the Wordsworthian paradox which informs much of his poetry: his sympathy for the sufferings of mankind depends on his ability to remove himself from those sufferings. Without the history and its emphasis on the “Unutterable love” which animates the world and the Wanderer’s own “kindlier nature,” the Wanderer appears far more callous in *The Ruined Cottage* than he does in Book I.

Wordsworth’s tale uses the history, then, to refine our perception of this balance between the Wanderer’s evasion of and his involvement with human cares. The Wanderer is not portrayed as too wise for human emotions. He shows sympathy to the old and the sick when they are in need of such sympathy. He comforts Margaret when she is alive, but he is not immobilized by excessive grief—as Margaret is by her loss—when

she dies. After breaking off his tale, the Wanderer resumes it only because he hopes to show the Narrator how to cope with grief.

In Book I of *The Excursion*, the Wanderer's history and tale present a choice to both the Narrator and the reader, a choice between the two strategies—the Wanderer's or Margaret's—of dealing with the tragic nature of human existence. In response to both history and tale, we are able, I think, to join the Narrator in adopting the Wanderer's stance. The choice the Narrator makes in *The Ruined Cottage* is the same, but the weight behind it is less. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Wordsworth returned the history to the later manuscript versions and allowed it to remain in Book I.

It is not the purpose of this paper to argue that either the 1814 edition or the 1850 edition of Book I is the definitive version of Wordsworth's dramatic narrative.²² What is clear is that the absence of the account of the Pedlar's early years renders *The Ruined Cottage* problematic in a way that neither edition of Book I is. Jonathan Wordsworth's observation that "the philosophical resolution" of *The Ruined Cottage* is unacceptable "outside the context of the poem" is correct, but it is the excision of the Pedlar's history which renders the conclusion unpersuasive. In *The Ruined Cottage*, the Pedlar simply withdraws from the human stance, but in Book I, this protective ploy enables the Wanderer to extend sympathy to those who have not achieved the natural perspective. Like Wordsworth's Poet in the Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*—albeit on a lesser scale—the Wanderer becomes "the rock of defence for human nature" who "binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society."²³ The dramatized growth of the Pedlar in Book I provides the experiential base from which that passion and that knowledge draw their strength and their authority.

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NOTES

1. William Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, 1850, in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, V, eds. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), Book I, l. 638, p. 29. All references to Book I will be to this edition of *The Excursion*.
2. Darbishire and de Selincourt print and discuss these references in the notes to Vol. V of *PW*, p. 365 and ff.
3. Darbishire and de Selincourt discuss the history of the composition of Book I in the notes to Vol. V of *PW*, pp. 361–72, pp. 376–8, and p. 404. They print MS B on pp. 379–404 and the Pedlar's history as Addendum IV to MS D on pp. 405–8. Other discussions of the

- history of the composition can be found in John Alban Finch's *The Ruined Cottage Restored: Three Stages of Composition*," pp. 29–49, in *Bicentenary Wordsworth Studies*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970); James A. Butler's "The Chronology of Wordsworth's *The Ruined Cottage After 1800*," *SP*, 64 (January 1977), 89–112; and Mark L. Reed's *Wordsworth: The Chronology of the Early Years, 1770–1799* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) and *Wordsworth: The Chronology of the Middle Years, 1800–1815* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).
4. Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Music of Humanity* (New York: Harper-Row, 1969), p. 31.
 5. Jonathan Wordsworth, p. xiii.
 6. M.H. Abrams, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. II, 3rd ed., gen. ed. M.H. Abrams (New York: W.W. Norton, 1974), p. 145.
 7. Peter J. Manning, "Wordsworth, Margaret, and The Pedlar," *SiR*, 15 (Spring, 1976), 196.
 8. Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787–1814* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 139.
 9. Reeve Parker, "'Finer Distance': The Narrative Art of Wordsworth's 'The Wanderer,'" *ELH*, 39 (1972), 90.
 10. Manning, p. 197.
 11. William Wordsworth, "Preface to the Second Edition . . . of *Lyrical Ballads*," II, *PW*, p. 388–9.
 12. Jonathan Wordsworth, p. 93.
 13. Jonathan Wordsworth, p. 97.
 14. Jonathan Wordsworth, p. 92.
 15. All reference to MS D will be to the version printed in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. II, 3rd ed., gen ed. M.H. Abrams (New York: W.W. Norton, 1974), pp. 145–57.
 16. Cleanth Brooks, "Wordsworth and Human Suffering," in *From Sensibility to Romanticism*, eds. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 385.
 17. Brooks, p. 386.
 18. Jonathan Wordsworth, p. 93.
 19. Hartman, p. 305.

20. Hartman, p. 306.
21. Paul D. Sheats, *The Making of Wordsworth's Poetry, 1785–1798* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 150.
22. My own preference is for the 1814 edition which lacks the overtly Christian elements which Wordsworth added to the poem in 1845. Although I have used the 1850 edition as my text, I have refrained from using any of the added Christian material in my discussion of Book I.
23. William Wordsworth, "Preface," *PW*, II, p. 396.