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# Community and Mourning in William Wordsworth's *The Ruined Cottage*, 1797–1798

by Kurt Fosso

IN his 1809 tract, *The Convention of Cintra*, Wordsworth declares there to be “a spiritual community binding together the living and the dead.”<sup>1</sup> His assertion recalls Burke’s claim, in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, about the debt owed the dead, although Wordsworth’s interest in such a bond can be seen in fact to predate Burke’s pronouncement.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Wordsworth’s declaration in *Cintra* serves as a pithy if cryptic assessment of his long-standing conception of English community as a social structure bound together by, constituted by, and articulated between the dead and the living.<sup>3</sup> In fact statements similar to *Cintra*’s appear in *Essays upon Epitaphs* (1810) and in the 1805 *Prelude*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> John O. Hayden, ed., *William Wordsworth: Selected Prose* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 245.

<sup>2</sup> John Turner, in *Wordsworth’s Play and Politics: A Study of Wordsworth’s Poetry 1787–1800* (New York: St. Martins, 1986), argues that *The Ruined Cottage*’s emphasis on “the capacity to mourn” can in fact be traced back to *The Vale of Esthwaite*’s interminable “mighty debt of grief” (89) owed to the mourning of the poet’s father (ll. 418–35). Written in 1787, *The Vale*, and its interest in the relationship between the living and the dead, thus predates not only Burke’s statements in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* ([New York: Penguin, 1984], 119–20), first published in 1790, but also the Revolution itself.

<sup>3</sup> While I often employ the word “community” to define a looser “bond” that can exist among groups or between as few as two people, I retain Ferdinand Tönnies’s notion of “community” as *Gemeinschaft*: a more familial and local than legal and contractual formation. See Kenneth Eisold, *Loneliness and Communion: A Study of Wordsworth’s Thought and Experience*, vol. 13 of *Romantic Reassessment*, ed. Dr. James Hogg (Salzburg, Austria: University of Salzburg Press, 1973), 160–62.

<sup>4</sup> In *The Prelude* Wordsworth declares there to be but “One great society alone on earth: / The noble living and the noble dead” (1805, X.969–70), and in the second of the *Essays upon Epitaphs* praises the churchyard for the “communion” its special topography fosters “between the living and the dead” (Hayden, 340). All quotations from *The Prelude* refer to *The Prelude*: 1799, 1805, 1850, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979).

Yet to see and understand more clearly this linkage in Wordsworth between the dead and community it is best to look back a few years to *The Ruined Cottage* of 1797 and 1798.<sup>5</sup> In this early poem's various manuscripts the bond of community is represented as a product of mourning, an association between the living and the dead that constitutes an organizing process of social cohesion. In *The Ruined Cottage* it is thus not community that leads to a connection to the dead, but the dead, and the relationship of the living to them, that ultimately leads to community.

The narrative of *The Ruined Cottage* is told by a traveler who, at the poem's beginning, is isolated from society and from the company of others and who toils over "a bare wide Common."<sup>6</sup> This opening motif of aimless wandering in a hostile, wearying locale presages the narrator's "spiritual" (moral-social) crisis and progress: the expectation that he is in need of improvement, which he will gain from a guardian who will lead him to see what he presently does not see. This is precisely what happens. The narrator chances upon an elm-shaded ruin shared by an old pedlar whose "way-wandering life" (B.108) has led him to the isolated huts and villages at the outskirts of society.<sup>7</sup> This itinerant tells him the history of the ruined cottage's last inhabitant, Margaret, whose husband had in hard economic times abandoned her and enlisted. She had wasted away awaiting his return, and finally died, "Last human tenant of these ruined walls" (528).

<sup>5</sup> Readers of *The Ruined Cottage*, when they have turned their attention to its representation of death, have tended to focus on death itself rather than on the relationship between it or the dead and community. Cf. David Ferry's *The Limits of Mortality: An Essay on Wordsworth's Major Poems* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1959); Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964, rpt. 1987), 19-69; J. Hillis Miller, *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 59-113; Alan Bewell, *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment: Nature, Man, and Society in the Experimental Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 187-234; and Karen Mills-Court, *Poetry as Epitaph: Representation and Poetic Language* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 165-202.

<sup>6</sup> James Butler, ed., *The Ruined Cottage and The Pedlar*, by William Wordsworth (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), B.19. This and subsequent citations and line numbers from MS.B, MS.D, and MS.A refer to the reading texts of this edition. All quotations of the MS.B addenda, however, follow the Cornell text's photographic reproductions, pp. 256-81, and cite page rather than line numbers.

<sup>7</sup> The pedlar, advanced in years and with an "iron-pointed staff" (B.39) by his side, is an appropriate Virgil to lead the poet into the narrated past of the ruin. In fact the narrator first describes him in rather corpse-like terms: "Stretched on a bench" that is "studded o'er with fungus flowers" (38). For a discussion of the pedlar's peddling as a transgressive activity, see Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 341-47.

The 1797 "B" manuscript, the first complete surviving text of *The Ruined Cottage*, concludes with these final words by the pedlar, leaving us to wonder as to their effect on the poem's narrator. Yet in the later attempted and rejected conclusions to MS.B the narrator reveals himself to have been much affected by Margaret's tragic history and, moreover, to have thereby become "a better and a wiser man" (p. 257). Likewise, in the consoling conclusion to the "D" manuscript (1798) the pedlar makes it clear that his responsive listener has properly served the "purposes of wisdom" (D.511), a change signaled at the poem's end by the two men's joint departure to a "rustic inn" (538).<sup>8</sup> Hence, as Jonathan Wordsworth has observed, while these wanderers symbolically enter the scene "separately, with their separate attitudes,"<sup>9</sup> they leave it together, as comrades bonded by the pedlar's story, and with a sojourn before them.

Of primary importance to the living side of community in *The Ruined Cottage* is the relationship of these two travelers. Readers of the poem might object, however, that the narrator and the pedlar are already friends at the poem's outset. After all, upon seeing the old man the narrator observes that he is "no stranger to the spot" (B.51) because of his familiarity with the itinerant and the latter's "talk of former days" (52), and he is subsequently called by him "my friend" (130, 526). Moreover in MS.D the narrator even describes the two of them as having been "fellow-travelers" (41). How then can the mourning of the dead be said to consolidate community if the very form of association of such a community—namely, friendship—would seem to preexist it?

The answer is that in fact these wanderers' relationship *is* altered by the old pedlar's narrative of the dead, as MS.D's symbolic conclusion suggests, and as we find similarly suggested in Wordsworth's various attempts at better concluding MS.B (see the addenda, pp. 257–81). Furthermore it is clear from the earliest manuscripts of *The Ruined Cottage* that their author first conceived of the wanderers as strangers. In the lost June 1797 text, for example, to judge from Coleridge's quotation

<sup>8</sup> There is considerable scholarly contention about the preferability of MS.B or D. Jonathan Wordsworth, in *The Music of Humanity: A Critical Study of Wordsworth's Ruined Cottage* (New York: Harper, 1969), argues for the preferability of MS.D (23), whereas both Peter Manning, in *Reading Romantics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 11, and John Turner, in the aforementioned *Wordsworth's Play and Politics* (90), argue the contrary. For my purposes, I have tended to rely on the earlier of the two complete manuscripts, MS.B, but to supplement it with passages from MS.D whenever doing so was helpful to my argument.

<sup>9</sup> *The Music of Humanity*, 151.

of the poem's last lines in a letter to John Estlin, the pedlar calls the narrator "Stranger."<sup>10</sup> Similarly in the poem's first surviving manuscript the pedlar hails him as "Sir" (MS.A.170) and needs to provide him with an account of his livelihood as a "wanderer among the cottages" (191). Even in MS.B the narrator is occasionally addressed as "Sir" (311), a formal salutation that, while perhaps attributable to class differences, is more suggestive of the two men's acquaintance than friendship.

In addition to these wanderers' intertextual progress from the strangers of June 1797 to the "fellow travelers" of 1798 in MS.D, there is also an intratextual progression.<sup>11</sup> In the latter manuscript it is signaled by the men's joint departure described at the poem's close, and in MS.B, in addition to their exchange in the aforementioned addenda, their progress is signaled by a subtle graphical difference between the pedlar's two hailings of the narrator as "friend." In the first such interjection, "We die, my Friend" (B.130), the word "Friend" is capitalized in order to signify its formal character, in a rhetorical appeal that literally capitalizes upon humankind's common mortality. Yet in the second interjection, "here, my friend, . . . she died" (526–27), "friend" is now written in the more familiar, lower-case form, thereby underlining its status as a sign of familiarity.<sup>12</sup>

Given this development of the narrator's and pedlar's relationship, then, how did the strangers of June 1797, or the quasi-strangers at the opening of MS.B, come to be the friends of the latter manuscript and of MS.D? The answer is that their social conversion is effected by elegiac conversation of the dead. The pedlar's history of Margaret initiates a complex mourning-work which serves to bind together him and the

<sup>10</sup> Cited Butler, 95.

<sup>11</sup> In his edition of *The Ruined Cottage, The Brothers, Michael* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), Jonathan Wordsworth attributes this intertextual transformation in the narrator's and pedlar's relationship to Wordsworth's pragmatic decision to make the two men friends in order to increase our confidence in the pedlar "as a spokesman" for his own nature philosophy (29)—to a decision, in other words, to superadd something extrinsic to the text. One might also speculate that the men's inter- or extra-textual progress might be attributed to a *propter hoc, ergo ante hoc* conversion: to a hermetic logic and process by which the post facto association produced by conversation of the dead is represented as pre-existing it. See Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 33.

<sup>12</sup> MS.D throws an interjective wrench into the works of this development by adding a third "My Friend" in its own conclusion (D.508). It must be remembered, however, that Wordsworth had by this time clearly altered the travelers' relationship. I would also point to a manuscript revision of the last lines of MS.B, in which the narrator's and pedlar's status as strangers is revised, with the word "Stranger!" crossed out, and under it inserted the words "my friend" (p. 258).

poem's narrator as a memorializing community. Wordsworth's goal in this elegiac text is indeed, as it would be in his writing of epitaphs, to represent the "conversion of the . . . 'stranger' into a 'friend,'" <sup>13</sup> and to locate the agency of such conversion in mourning's unique bonding of the living and the dead.

#### I. READING AND MOURNING

In explaining to the narrator the secret character of the ruined cottage's enigmatic "spot," the pedlar describes himself as able to see here "Things which you cannot see": a place where

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.

(B.129-35)

Yet such history discursively recapitulates not just objects lost to time but the grief that underlies or accompanies their loss and missing memorial. The pedlar proceeds to draw the narrator's gaze to the adjacent spring, whose waters "if they could feel / Might mourn" Margaret's death (135-36). But

They are not as they were; the 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.

(135-40)

The spring waters signify not nature's malignant character or otherness so much as the breaking of "the bond / Of brotherhood," a social breach that alienates this nature *from* ministering to "human comfort." It is because wells and woods cannot mourn that human beings must. Yet the tale of the ruin and its occupant is unfolded not simply because human beings abhor a memorial vacuum but because they are preceded by a blocked and unfinished mourning, eliciting the text's repetition of elegiac history in the absence of proper "memorial."

In terms of the underlying nature of this mourning, to which the

<sup>13</sup> Joshua Scodel, *The English Epitaph: Commemoration and Conflict from Jonson to Wordsworth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 396.

pedlar's history responds, we learn that Margaret's dis-ease was chiefly owed to the uncertainty of her husband Robert's fate. For, after his surreptitious departure,

she had learned  
 No tidings of her husband: if he lived  
 She knew not that he lived; if he were dead  
 She knew not he was dead.

(436-38)

As a result of Robert's indeterminate status as one awaited *or* mourned, Margaret "lingered in unquiet widowhood, / A wife, *and* widow" anxiously "shaping things . . . in the distance" (483-84, 492; emphasis added) in anticipation of his return. One can see from the pedlar's description of Margaret's sufferings that her tragedy lies less in Robert's enlistment and tacit abandoning of her, or even in the economic conditions that precipitated his departure, than in her own uncertainty about his fate, and her resulting dichotomous status. She is able to reject neither alternative about him, and so is condemned to being not a wife *or* a widow—the resolution of an ambivalence—but the wife *and* widow of one thus unable to be mourned. Her mourning of Robert is blocked, resulting in her melancholy and its symptomatic listlessness, self-neglect, and reveries of reunion—and, subsequently, in her decline and death.<sup>14</sup>

Margaret's troubled mourning is revealed in this way to be the *raison d'être* of the poem as a whole, for the latter is occasioned and produced by the conversation of the two travelers at a "ruin" owed to her ruinous inability to mourn and work through a mourning process. The force of her tragedy of non-mourning elicits the pedlar's narrative, and provides the text's implicit basis for tale-telling, dialogue, and the travelers' association as mourners of one whose mourning was and remains aporetic, unresolved, and oddly interminable. As one finds in Wordsworth's early narrative *The Vale of Esthwaite*, the seed of the desire for memorialization takes its start in *The Ruined Cottage*

<sup>14</sup> Turner likewise finds Margaret's condition to be owed to failed mourning and its subsequent melancholia, but attributes the latter to her "repression of [her] violent feeling[s]" (90) at having been abandoned. I see no reason not to locate her problem more in the ambiguous character of her loss. On this point I am indebted to Freud's distinction between melancholia and mourning, in "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, et al., 24 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1953-74), 14: 243-58; and to Peter Sacks's discussion of mourning and melancholia, in *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 1-23.

from a disruption of mourning that becomes, in its tragedy and need for supplementation, the predicating ground of subsequent mourning and conversation. Community in *The Ruined Cottage* is in this way centered on the underlying inefficacy and interminability of mourning. A gathering of readers responds not just to a death but to a reserve or lack associated with it: a loss that is responsible, in its incompleteness, for a subsequent force in and desire for a missing mourning and its representation.

It is a break between the present and past, and in the past itself, that is represented in *The Ruined Cottage* by the spring waters. Their disturbance by "the touch of human hand" once symbolized a communitarian bond but now, in their stillness, the waters signify its loss; so too the "deserted" well's "useless fragment of a wooden bowl" (B.141, 145) signifies the loss of community. The latter line sounds so commonplace that, as Jonathan Wordsworth has pointed out, readers might not recognize "the pitcher broken at the fountain in Ecclesiastes, but there can be no doubt that Wordsworth had in mind this archetypal image of life stopped at its source."<sup>15</sup> In Ecclesiastes this figure of the broken pitcher is one of a metaphorical series describing old age, comprised of the "loosed" "silver cord" of the lamp, the broken "golden bowl," and the "wheel broken at the cistern," along with the white almond tree and the lagging grasshopper (12:6).<sup>16</sup> This series of geriatric figures describes waning physical and sexual vitality, symbolized by the loosening of the phallic wick of sexual potency and by a break in the bowl of life's waters, as well as by the gray hair and bent gait of old age.

Moreover, a further reading of Ecclesiastes reveals such human decline to be associated directly with the response to death. The text's lament of whitened trees and loosed cords extends to man's final journey "to his long home," and to mourners who thereupon "go about the streets" to mourn his passing (12:6). The sign of a lost bond of community, "still" waters, is thus also the sign of a wished for animation and reactivation of mourning.<sup>17</sup> The ruined cottage's waters in this way reg-

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Ruined Cottage*, 7.

<sup>16</sup> All citations from The Bible are from the King James authorized version. I have also consulted the text and notes of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, RSV, ed. Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>17</sup> Wordsworth had enlisted this "bowl" metaphor some years before, in *Descriptive Sketches* (1792), where he declared his love for Switzerland would last "'till Life has broke her golden bowl" (l. 741). In *An Evening Walk* (1792) his allusion to Ecclesiastes is even more direct: "For hope's deserted well why wistful look? / Chok'd is the pathway, and the pitcher broke" (ll. 255-56).



ister a double symbolic coinage of loss and desire, of a break between man and man ("the touch of human hand") and a desire for a mourning, since "broken," that would restore a degree of social connectedness and continuity. As a sign, then, the bowl is no longer "useless," for it connects the "deserted well" to a "regained home" (12:5)—for Wordsworth a sign of presence and cohesion—and to those who mourn mortal loss, like those pastoral elegists to whom the pedlar later refers, who "call upon the hills and streams to mourn [the departed]" (D.73–74). The re-activation of a "broken" mourning becomes in this light the hallmark and promise of a community organized to mourn death, mourning, stillness, and so on.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, for all this ruinous spot's elision of human culture and cultivation, its surviving signs speak volumes to what has been lost. They offer to the reader possessed of the elegist's "creative power" and "passion" (D.78–79; from Lat. *patior*, "to feel" and "to suffer") an opportunity to read *and* mourn: to come to see such reading *as* mourning, and to see mourning itself as the registering of a lack or loss of mourning.<sup>19</sup>

Such a hermeneutic project is emblemized in the old pedlar's description of Margaret: how, along a nearby path,

There, to and fro she paced through many a day  
Of the warm summer, from a belt of flax  
That girt her waist spinning the long-drawn thread  
With backward steps.

(B.495–98)

More than her weaver husband, Margaret is depicted not just as a flax-waisted spinner but as a figure of the memorializing poet "spinning the long-drawn thread" which since the Greeks has symbolized poetic process. She is also figured as a type of historian who *retraces* "[w]ith backward steps" the "thread" of difference and loss that leads back into a temporal "distance" shaped by her: "her eye . . . busy in the distance, shaping things / Which made her heart beat quick" (491–93). In this sense she is a figure of the elegist, whose vocation is the textualizing

<sup>18</sup> One might usefully and favorably compare this connection between lamentation and community with the actual retrieval of a dead body by "a company," in *The Prelude* (1805, V.460–73).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 52; *Mémoires: for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 29; Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971, rev. 1983), 207.

of what has been lost. Her melancholy “shaping [of] things” arises in direct response to her inability to leave what is distant (a life or a death, a body or a corpse) *in* the distance. In fact no amount of “backward steps” will lead her to Robert or to a proper mourning of him. They will only measure, like poetic meter, her distance from that loss, the loss of which loss can be overcome only by an unacceptable mourning-work of accepted loss and substitution.<sup>20</sup>

Karen Swann observes that the pedlar, in his repeated laments, “recognizes and elegizes Margaret as a lost fellow poet, changed into something strange, dead before her time.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed it is clear that Margaret’s strange grief and death are the foundation for the pedlar’s own poetic practice. Her errant movements and fantasies emblemize the manner in which he spins out her tale as a narrative line extending into the past—a tale of a spinner-weaver occasioned by his spotting of a spider’s web stretched across the well. Margaret serves as the *genius loci*, long-suffering saint, and muse of this ruin and its elegiac narrative. Her troubled (non)mourning inaugurates poesis as mourning-play,<sup>22</sup> and is the focus for the rehearsals of mourning that compose the poem and for the changing relationship between its two interlocutors. For it is the poignancy of her suffering as a mourner and textualist, its insistent insufficiency, that forges the primary, triadic link of identification between those mourners who retrace her thread of irremediable grief. Hence the pedlar is “not seldom” drawn by the thread of her tragedy to envision her as “destined to awake / To human life” (D.368, 372–73), while the narrator, in response to the old man’s own “busy” eye’s textualizing of distant “things,” reviews them as a still-surviving “secret spirit of humanity” (D.503). Margaret is here the flickering focal image of a lost yet “busy” grief recalled in a tale of the production of tales, a metapoetic marker of poetics as a textual supplement to an unfulfillable loss.

It can indeed be said that in *The Ruined Cottage* history is elegy: a per-

<sup>20</sup> See Jacques Lacan, “Direction of Treatment and Principles of Its Power,” *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 263; Sigmund Freud, *Letters*, trans. Tania Stern and James Stern, ed. Ernst Freud (New York: Basic Books, 1960), 386; “Mourning and Melancholia,” 243–58; Sacks, 6–10, 22–24; Joel Fineman, “The Structure of Allegorical Desire,” *Allegory and Representation*, ed. Stephen J. Greenblatt (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 26–60, esp. 42–47.

<sup>21</sup> Karen Swann, “Suffering and Sensation in *The Ruined Cottage*,” *PMLA* 106 (1993): 83–95, cited 94.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Harold Bloom, *Poetry and Repression* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 1–27; and Sacks, 1–37.

formative attempt to reconstruct through reading and its mourning of difference and distance a "broken" "brotherhood" that elegiac "human passion" desires and effects to mend. The details of this ruinous topography—its overgrown garden "plot," "deserted well," "bare walls," and "useless fragment" (B.116, 145, 141)—help compose an elegiac script or "plot" that allows one to read *and* mourn, to decipher and in some way recapitulate a "broken" mourning locked within this landscape of decay, as the hallmark of lost personal and social connection.<sup>23</sup> Hence, in the final MS.B addendum, the pedlar proclaims to the narrator that such reading serves to transform that which appears "dead & spiritless" (p. 267) into a "living spirit" and "power that knows no bounds" (p. 271). Yet such a deathless spirit is in fact the measure or product of a loss and suffering that lives only in its insufficiency as a potential force, a poignant piece of unfinished human activity both absent and present, lost and found in the recapitulation of loss *in* mourning as a measure of distance, difference, inadequacy, and loss.

## II. "TO VIRTUE FRIENDLY"

At the midpoint of his narrative, the pedlar pauses to ask "Why," amid the "repose and peace" of nature, Margaret's history should still cause there to be "a tear . . . in an old Man's eye?" (B.250). Nature's peace and beauty ought to be enough. But could this topography really be expected to counteract the sorrow of a history that reveals it to be a locale of loss, and its locodescription as elegy?<sup>24</sup> In fact the pedlar's attempt to interpose his own restorative "natural wisdom" (254) fails to reconcile the poem's narrator. For a moment, in light of the old man's "easy cheerfulness," he does turn away from Margaret's "simple tale" and its "restless" effects (256) to the natural scene that surrounds him. But only for a moment. He soon returns to his contemplation "of that poor woman as of one / Whom I had known and loved" (265–66), in large part because her elegist-historian

<sup>23</sup> See John Kerrigan, "Knowing the Dead . . .": *The Pete Laver Lecture 1986*, *The Wordsworth Circle* 18 (1987): 87–98. Kerrigan argues that even "bare stones . . . are *semai*, signs" (88). He also reminds us that the word for stone in ancient Greek is *herma*, the root of *Hermes*, god of "doorways, paths, exchange, writing, seacliffs, shores and the underworld," and psychopomp of the threshold of life and death (88).

<sup>24</sup> See Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads (1798)* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), 175.

had rehearsed

Her homely tale with such familiar power,  
 . . . that the things of which he spake  
 Seemed present, and, attention now relaxed,  
 There was a heartfelt chillness in my veins.  
 (267–71)

Finding himself staring at the “tranquil ruin” not with the pedlar’s natural tranquility but with “a mild force of curious pensiveness,” the narrator seeks him out, asking “that for my sake / He would resume his story” (277–79). Here the hope of *The Ruined Cottage*’s MS.B epigraph, that the poem’s “homely” “Muse” might “touch the heart,” achieves fruition.<sup>25</sup> The narrator identifies with this “homely” tale’s protagonist not as he would a stranger but as one whom he “had known and loved,” to the point even, in the conclusion to MS.D, of reviewing her sufferings, in the absence of “brotherhood,” with a new-found “brother’s love” (499). Paul Sheats sees the narrator as in this way developing an identity resembling *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*’s own listening Wedding Guest, becoming “a humble initiate and a ‘better and a wiser man’” now able to display “compassion for Margaret.”<sup>26</sup> One must agree with Sheats’s assessment, for *The Ruined Cottage*’s poet-narrator becomes, more obviously even than the Wedding Guest, one further teller compelled by his “passion” to rehearse the same basic tale (evidenced by the poem we read), and, in MS.B’s addenda, “a better and a wiser man” precisely because of hearing it.

Such stress on the narrator’s own moral progress provides an intriguing context for the following lines from MS.D, in which the pedlar, nearing the end of his history of Margaret, explains to his listener that

It would have grieved  
 Your very heart to see her. Sir, I feel  
 The story linger in my heart. I fear  
 ’Tis long and tedious, but my spirit clings  
 To that poor woman: so familiarly  
 Do I perceive her manner, and her look  
 And presence, and so deeply do I feel

<sup>25</sup> The epigraph, attributed to Burns but rather bungled by Wordsworth, was excised by the time of MS.D. It reads: “Give me a spark of nature’s fire, / Tis the best learning I desire. / My Muse though homely in attire / May touch the heart.”

<sup>26</sup> Paul Sheats, *The Making of Wordsworth’s Poetry, 1785–1798* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 179.

Her goodness, that not seldom in my walks  
 A momentary trance comes over me;  
 And to myself I seem to muse on one  
 By sorrow laid asleep or borne away,  
 A human being destined to awake  
 To human life, when he shall come again  
 For whom she suffered. Sir, it would have griev'd  
 Your very soul to see her. . . .

(361-76)

This enigmatic scene has been variously interpreted: as a "moment of apocalyptic insight" into "the quickening power of love,"<sup>27</sup> as a less worked-through "imaginative fantasy" of Margaret's "return to life,"<sup>28</sup> as a fairy-tale "fantasy of reunion with the lost mother,"<sup>29</sup> and, in the words of James Averill, as a "version of Christian immortality," insofar as

The phrase, "he shall come again," while it refers to Margaret's husband, has resonances of resurrection and apocalypse. Similarly, "for whom she suffered" recalls Christ's sacrifice for mankind. From musing on Margaret's suffering, then, the Pedlar would appear to claim a vision of immortality much like that contained in the Christian promise.<sup>30</sup>

Wordsworth's wording indeed draws on Christian associations of resurrection and sacrifice, and represents a secularization of the supernatural powers associated with Christian apocalypse and Judaic messianism.

So much has the poem's focus been on the narrator's improvement, however, that, in the pedlar's revelation that his "spirit clings" to Margaret's spiritual "presence" such that she seems "destined to awake . . . when *he* shall come again," the latter "he" can be read not as, or not just as, Robert, or even Christ (or as a son or lover), but as the narrator himself. It is, after all, for his "sake," as the narrator himself declares, that dead Margaret's sufferings have been "rehearsed" and are being rehearsed still, and it is his grief-stricken "heart" and "soul" that bracket the pedlar's revelation. Indeed, Margaret's status as a saint-like martyr in the pedlar's "common tale" of her "suffering" (B.290-93) underlines her connectability to and exchangeability between mourners who

<sup>27</sup> Hartman, 223.

<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Music of Humanity*, 93.

<sup>29</sup> Manning, 24. Cf. Turner, 103; and Swann, 92.

<sup>30</sup> James Averill, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Human Suffering* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 133.

invoke her as a eucharistic “secret spirit” (D.503) whose sufferings, unable to be worked through—and so never and always to be worked through—continue. In their transmissible, seemingly eternal character, her past sufferings become the basis for a connection to her and to those who share in their “rehears[all].”

*The Ruined Cottage* is, after all, not just the tale of Margaret’s suffering and death but a tale told by a poet (the pedlar) “emotionally involved in her sufferings to a listener who becomes increasingly so.”<sup>31</sup> It is a transformation owed to the narrative’s resurrective power for making “things” seem “present” that have long been absent—which is really to say, to the transmissive character of that which *cannot* be worked through and concluded (as reflected in *The Ruined Cottage*’s numerous and problematic endings). Yet Margaret is “loved” only as another person (“as of one / Whom I had known and loved”). The sympathetic narrator does not entirely confuse mimesis with reality, however “familiar” or “present” it may seem. We find him instead connected to an absence, one able to induce in him “chillness” and “restless thoughts.” It is an elegist’s “passion” discernible in his and the pedlar’s lamentings of that which resists or exceeds representation and memorial. Witness the pedlar’s lament that he “cannot tell” the way Margaret at one point pronounced his name (B.312; original emphasis), and the fact that Margaret’s past “sufferings” are made “present” to the narrator only in a “tale of silent suffering, hardly clothed / In bodily form” (290–93).<sup>32</sup>

One might well ask, in fact, how it is that a *silent* tale of “things” that resist or exceed a clothing of words can be “rehearsed” in such a way that it induces chills and “curious pensiveness” in the listener. How can “silent suffering[s]” be “rehearsed” and conveyed? One can answer that, while the pedlar’s fantasy concerns Margaret’s ghostly immediacy, the bulk of his digression really treats her power as one “borne away” by a “sorrow” that, while the death of her, is not the end. Indeed her melancholic suffering continues as a muse-like, inspiring potential (note the pedlar’s trance-like reveries). Margaret’s ghostly return to “human life” is thus associated less with a christological resurrection of presence per se than with the silent, messianic force inherent *in* such sufferings as they are subsequently “rehearsed.” Her inarticulate suf-

<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Ruined Cottage*, 93.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Wordsworth’s linguistic metaphor, in the third of the *Essays upon Epitaphs*, of words as an “ill gift” if they are only a signifying “clothing” for thoughts rather than their bodily incarnation (Hayden, 84).

ferings arise from a grief that cannot speak its loss save as melancholy fantasies and distracted wanderings. Yet it is just such grief that carries over from past to narrative present as a potential that both initiates and acts upon the two mourners' mourning of nonmourning. Margaret's "broken" mourning sparks the narrator's own anguished "impotence of grief" (D.500), as a paradoxically potent impotency whose interminable character lies precisely in its troublesome status as a "mourning" in quotation marks and at a "distance" from its object.

The pedlar's fantasy recapitulates a distance that the text, like Margaret with her thread, seeks to close but cannot. It is because the medium of such recapitulation, elegiac history, is itself one of absent "shades of difference" enlisted to build up representation, that the pedlar's discourse can acknowledge itself *as* a medium characterized by loss. It is in response to the unreachable and nonrecoverable character of loss, as a mourning of difference, that the ghost of this mismeasure can be raised up as a "secret spirit." The power of his discourse rests in its connection to and recapitulation of an absence, difference, distance, and silence that appear to be transmissible from the past to the present: from Margaret's "silent suffering" and fantasies to the pedlar's own "restless thoughts" and trance-like visions, and even to the narrator's "pensiveness" and "grief" at reviewing her suffering "spirit" as it survives in the "silent overgrowings" of an unmourning nature (D.503-6).

The narrator and pedlar have indeed been connected by his elegiac narrative: the pedlar's "countenance of love" for his subject and the "familiar power" with which he relates its details correspond to the narrator's own sense of loving this dead woman. Theirs is a community of two mourners triadically formed by the messianic power and ghostly effects of a discourse staged against the shadowy presence of things absent and the absence in things present (things "not as they were"). The sense of commonality between the narrator and the pedlar is owed ultimately not so much to the formal subject positions of their elegiac dialogue as to the shadowy, almost contagious crossing over of mourning from the dead past to the living diageitic present, as a force of insufficiency and unfulfillable loss.

It is in response to the narrator's responsiveness that the pedlar tells him that

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, contented thence to draw  
 A momentary pleasure never marked  
 By reason, barren of all future good.  
 But we have known that there is often found  
 In mournful thoughts, and always might be found,  
 A power to virtue friendly. . . .

(B.280–88)

The pedlar's praise of an emotional reaction to his elegiac history of Margaret is instructive. "Dalliance" is "vain"—idle, wasteful, trifling—and it is against vulgar enticements that the pedlar holds up an appropriate response, which will find in "mournful thoughts" a "power to virtue friendly." The adjective "friendly" in turn reveals something important about the character of this "virtue" in "mournful thoughts" of the dead. The tale is to be recited for the poet's "sake," which is to say for the moral "good" such mournful rehearsals and revisitations promote (a similar perspective is to be found in "Michael"). Such "good" is "virtuous" to the extent that it is "friendly": a discursive power to "touch the heart," and in such a way that strangers are transformed by their "mournful thoughts" into friends.

The pedlar's comments here suggest the way in which in Wordsworth a "passion" of mourning registers a force "laid asleep or borne away" but "destined to awake" to the "human life" of the narrated present. These words describe a low messianism in which a past potentiality is recuperated in narration as a lack or an insufficiency, effecting a desired "power to virtue" that was missing in its past.<sup>33</sup> "[H]e" for whom Margaret suffered will *not* come, yet the ambivalent and poignant force of the return and lack of return of mourners and mourning is carried across to that narrating "he" who, in the present of narration, is himself both able and unable to mourn. Hence, in an addendum to MS.B, the narrator, having now heard the pedlar's narrative, awakens, as the pedlar would have had dead Margaret awaken, "from the silence

<sup>33</sup> My use of the term "messianic" is chiefly owed to Walter Benjamin's discussion of low or "weak" messianism, in "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 253–64. Benjamin here describes a "Messianic power to which the past has a claim" (254), a temporality "shot through with chips" of a "now" from an "oppressed" past (261–63). Such messianism posits and requires a difference between the past and present out of which the messianic ghost is recalled as a poignant "remembrance," not a presence (264). Cf. Wordsworth's similar description in *The Prelude* of the "spot of time": an "efficacious spirit" of the past, "lurk[ing]" (1805, XI.268–69) in the present "with distinct preeminence" (1799, I.289). One might also note the still common notion that ghosts endure on earth because in life they were unable to work through some traumatic event, such as a loss.



of . . . grief" (p. 257), restored to a consciousness that makes him "a better and a wiser man" (p. 259). His moral resurrection of sorts is lifted from the ruins of Margaret's life and death, and still more clearly associates him with that "he" promised to come in fulfillment of her troubled "sufferings": to satisfy their stifled desire for mourning, and supplement that which remains incomplete.

It is this desire for mourning that associates and links mourner to mourner and mourners to mourned where no other such commonality exists. The pedlar's and narrator's talk of the dead is in fact virtuous only inasmuch as it aims to consolidate "friendly" grounds of relationship in the "ruined walls" of representation, in which the dead's unending mourning is the focus and basis for revisiting loss. Such mourning, as the desired object of mournful discourse, effects a recuperation of community articulated in and as memorial, within a dialogical economy of mourning that has fallen and must always fall short, always be "rehearsed," supplemented, and revisited. The messianic recuperation of Margaret's "sufferings" of mourning is thus represented in *The Ruined Cottage* as serving to effect the social transformation of the pedlar and narrator from strangers or acquaintances to friends united by their sharing of a "common tale" of mourning on a "Common." That such mournful commonality is both "common" (recurrent, shared) and "homely" (familiar, domestic) is, however, owed chiefly to the uncommonly tenacious, poignant character of the troubled "sufferings" of the ruin's last, lingering "tenant" (from Lat. *tenere*, "to hold," "to endure," "to bind," "to inspire"). Margaret's tenancy persists as the ghostly presence of an absence, mourning's lack, and as the absence of a presence, of a "he" or memorial still to come. It is the a priori, interminable holding-on of the dead that, as the object of the pedlar's and narrator's supplementary acts of mourning, forms the basis for a memorializing, communitarian bond. The dead serve in this way as a legacy for the living, although for reasons other than those proffered in 1790 by the arch-conservative Burke.<sup>34</sup>

Wordsworth's *Ruined Cottage* thus articulates a basis for community

<sup>34</sup> While conservative in its traditionalism, Wordsworth's "levelling" Muse (the term was Hazlitt's) is nonetheless radical in its leveling of humanity through the transmissible character of mortal loss—death being, with birth, one of "two points in which all men feel themselves to be in absolute coincidence" (*Essays upon Epitaphs*, Hayden, 331). On the "serious mistake" of viewing Wordsworth and other Lake poets as "conservative," see Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History, 1740–1830* (New York: St. Martin's, 1987), 241–42.

in the errant instabilities of mortal experience and memorial representation, representing community as an uncommonly unfinished product of acts of mourning whose incompleteness and interminability necessitate the ongoing mourning of mourning. In the problematics of mourning, his text discovers a contagious force for linkages not only between the living and the dead but also between living mourners themselves—those of the present and, as the spiritual chain of elegist-historians and elegiac histories continues, of the future, too. Hence in *The Ruined Cottage* of 1797 and 1798 we find not a desire to be free of the past but a desire to amend it. Like mourning itself, community is here oriented toward the thresholds of life and death, and bound together by the living and the dead.

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