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Author(s): Evan Radcliffe

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# “In Dreams Begins Responsibility”: Wordsworth’s Ruined Cottage Story

THE BIOGRAPHY OF THE PEDLAR WHICH WORDSWORTH added to the Ruined Cottage story in late 1797 and early 1798 has been viewed principally as a trial run for the autobiographical verse of *The Prelude*.<sup>1</sup> To Mary Moorman, it “is most important as showing how his mind was being attracted to think about the experiences of his youth.”<sup>2</sup> To Geoffrey Hartman, it shows that “the great Wordsworthian myth of Nature is about to be conceived”; for an “exact description” of that myth, however, “we must go to *The Prelude*.”<sup>3</sup> Nobody, therefore, has noted how the poem, as expanded by spring 1798, arises from a particular rhetorical motive: Wordsworth’s desire to justify his withdrawal from society into the country. Indeed, much of Wordsworth’s poetry of the late 1790s can be profitably interpreted in terms of Wordsworth’s defensiveness about his pastoral retirement;<sup>4</sup> specifically, the Ruined Cottage story anticipates attacks on Wordsworth for being a mere dreamer, and defines the special, restricted sense in which the poet is truly a dreaming man. (It is significant that none of the passages taken

1. I am using “the Ruined Cottage story” to refer both to the story of Margaret and the biography of the pedlar. The pedlar’s section was written to accompany Margaret’s story and they were eventually printed together as Book 1 of *The Excursion* (1814). For some of the intervening vicissitudes, see James Butler’s introduction to “*The Ruined Cottage*” and “*The Pedlar*” (Ithaca: Cornell U. Press, 1979). Line numbers for quotations from Butler’s reading text of MS. B are included in the text; page numbers are included for manuscript quotations (I have expanded all ampersands and used “ed” for past tenses when the MS has only “d”). All the quotations have their equivalents in the final *Excursion* text.

2. Mary Moorman, *William Wordsworth: The Early Years* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), p. 361.

3. Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth’s Poetry 1787–1814* (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1964), p. 135.

4. An extended discussion of Wordsworth’s defensiveness would draw upon E. P. Thompson’s description of his politics in “Disenchantment or Default? A Lay Sermon,” in Conor Cruise O’Brien and William Dean Vanech, eds., *Power and Consciousness* (New

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from drafts of the Ruined Cottage and placed in *The Prelude* concerns the poet as dreamer.)

What probably brought the image of the dreamer to Wordsworth's mind in 1797 was Coleridge's poem "Reflections on entering into active life" (reprinted later as "Reflections on Leaving a Place of Retirement"). The poem had first appeared in October 1796 in the *Monthly Magazine*; in the spring of 1797 James Losh had forwarded to Wordsworth a packet containing, among other things, the issues of the *Monthly Magazine* from March to December 1796.<sup>5</sup> The poem had also been reprinted in Coleridge's *Poems of 1797*. Part of the influence of "Reflections" on the Ruined Cottage story has already been noted. Jonathan Wordsworth points out that Coleridge's poem contains a description of a visionary experience on a hilltop which portrays "the central Wordsworthian mystical experience" before Wordsworth ever did so himself; he adds, "There is every reason to think that Wordsworth had this passage in mind when he came to describe the Pedlar's 'high hour / Of visitation from the living God.'"<sup>6</sup>

Coleridge's poem had another important influence. Directly after the hilltop experience come these lines:

Ah! quiet Dell! dear Cot, and Mount sublime!  
I was constrain'd to quit you. Was it right,  
While my unnumber'd brethren toil'd and bled,  
That I should dream away the entrusted hours  
On rose-leaf beds, pampering the coward heart  
With feelings all too delicate for use?

(ll. 43–48)<sup>7</sup>

Here dreaming is what one does in a "Valley of Seclusion" (l. 9), far from those who work or suffer.<sup>8</sup> It represents an escape into a useless

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York: New York U. Press, 1969), pp. 149–82, and also upon essays like *The Convention of Cintra* (1809), which invokes Petrarch's position as a parallel to Wordsworth's: Petrarch, Wordsworth writes, "withdrew from the too busy world—not out of indifference to its welfare, or to forget its concerns—but retired for wider compass of eye-sight." See W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, eds., *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), vol. 1, p. 342 (hereafter cited in the text as *Prose*).

5. Moorman, p. 309.

6. Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Music of Humanity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), pp. 193–94.

7. E. H. Coleridge, ed, *Poetical Works* (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 1912).

8. Wordsworth's later "Elegiac Stanzas, Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle" (1806) uses dream imagery similarly; the poem criticizes "the heart that lives alone, / Housed in

indulgence in feeling—the visionary experience ends with the exclamation, “It was a luxury,—to be!” (l. 42). Coleridge’s speaker, accordingly, elects to “go, and join head, heart, and hand, / Active and firm, to fight the bloodless fight / Of Science, Freedom, and the Truth in Christ” (ll. 60–62). He does not, however, entirely give up dreams: “Yet oft when after honourable toil / Rests the tir’d mind, and waking loves to dream, / My spirit shall revisit thee, dear Cot!” (ll. 63–65). The image appears again to suggest a contrast with “honourable toil.” This poem, therefore, would have shown Wordsworth just how likely he was to be considered a dreaming man. Hazlitt and Peacock did in fact call him a dreamer,<sup>9</sup> but what is more important is that Wordsworth expected such accusations.

Evidence that Wordsworth recognized the likelihood of being criti-

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a dream, at distance from the Kind” (ll. 53–54). (Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, eds., *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947], vol. iv, p. 260.) Elsewhere, however, Wordsworth used dreams in another sense. In contemporary usage dreams often were employed to refer to hopes, sometimes millenarian, for the improvement or perfectibility of mankind. In *The Prelude*, for example, Wordsworth called Godwinian philosophy a “dream [which] / Was flattering to the young ingenuous mind” (x:814–15). Similarly, Anthony Robinson’s review of Malthus’s *Essay on the Principles of Population* (1798) in the *Analytical Review* wrote of Godwin’s (and Condorcet’s) “pleasing dreams” (quoted in Derek Roper, *Reviewing before the Edinburgh* [Newark: U. of Delaware Press, 1978], p. 217). And in the *Monthly Magazine* for February 1796, “The Enquirer” (William Enfield) cited “the perfectibility of human nature” as “the dream of benevolence” (vol. 1, no. 1, p. 5). But Wordsworth maintained that his own notion of human perfectibility was no baseless dream. In *The Prelude* he wrote that no guilt or vice or misery “could overthrow my trust / In what we may become, induce belief / That I was ignorant, had been falsely taught, / A solitary, who with vain conceits / Had been inspired, and walked about in dreams” (viii:806–10).

Coleridge, incidentally, used the image to refer to the utopian scheme of Pantisocracy in a letter of 1800 to Southey: “The time returns upon me, Southey! when we dreamt one Dream, & that a glorious one—” (E. L. Griggs, ed., *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956], vol. 1, p. 586). In *The Spirit of the Age*, however, Hazlitt was less sympathetic to Southey: “when his chimeras and golden dreams of human perfectibility vanished from him, he turned suddenly round, and maintained that ‘whatever is, is right’” (P. P. Howe, ed., *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt* [London: J. M. Dent, 1932], vol. xi, p. 79).

9. Hazlitt refers to Wordsworth’s “floating dreams” in “On the Character of Rousseau” (Howe, iv, 92). Peacock calls Wordsworth “a morbid dreamer” in *The Four Ages of Poetry* (J. E. Jordan, ed., “A Defence of Poetry” and “The Four Ages of Poetry” [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965], p. 18). In the twentieth century Irving Babbitt said “there is more than a suggestion in the manner of his own retirement into the hills of a man who retreats into an Arcadian dream from actual defeat” (*Rousseau and Romanticism* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1919], p. 279).

cized appears in "Expostulation and Reply," composed probably in May 1798.<sup>10</sup> Its thematic connection with the expansion of the Ruined Cottage seems clear. The famous phrase "wise passiveness," for example, appeared first in the Alfoxden Notebook of early 1798, in which Wordsworth drafted Ruined Cottage material. There he wrote: "there is a holy indolence / Compared to which our best activity / Is oftimes deadly bane [,] / . . . / A most wise passiveness" (Butler, p. 115). More important for our purposes, however, is that "Expostulation and Reply" begins and ends with the image of the dreamer.

"Matthew" provides the accusation against which Wordsworth will defend himself: "Why William, sit you thus alone, / And dream your time away?" (ll. 3–4). William, he suggests, is simply an idler: "You look round on your mother earth, / As if she for no purpose bore you" (ll. 9–10). William's answer is that his inactivity does have a purpose—that his senses are being stimulated, that there are "powers" (l. 21) which act upon us if we remain in "a wise passiveness" (l. 24). William, that is, accepts Matthew's portrait of himself as passive, but gives passivity a new meaning. And the poem ends with William repeating Matthew's accusation; because of what William has already said, however, it now comes with a different connotation: "Then ask not wherefore, here, alone, / Conversing as I may, / I sit upon this old grey stone, / And dream my time away" (ll. 29–32). By repeating the dream image Wordsworth implicitly admits that it describes him; but he changes the implications of dreaming. It turns out to be not an escape into idleness, but rather a fruitful activity.

In late 1797 and early 1798, then, Wordsworth was preoccupied with the idea that he could be viewed as a mere dreamer. As a consequence, in the Ruined Cottage story, as expanded, Wordsworth explores the concept of the poet as dreamer. Using the pedlar as his ideal figure, Wordsworth ultimately defines the special sense in which the poet is, and is not, a dreaming man. The pedlar reveals an ability to "dream" which turns out to be the power that enables him to maintain his "just equipoise": neither subjugated by nature nor entirely unconnected to it, the pedlar is able—as he shows in his narrative—to achieve an equanimity that takes account of human suffering, and to communicate his wisdom to others.

10. See Mark Reed, *Wordsworth: The Chronology of the Early Years, 1770–1799* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, 1967), p. 238. For "Expostulation and Reply" I am using W. J. B. Owen, ed., *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads 1798* (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 1967).

## II

The image of the dreamer surfaces in the poem's opening lines, which, since they set up the poem's basic conflict, deserve lengthy quotation:<sup>11</sup>

Tw'as 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 their brown  
 And [                    ] surfaces distinct with shades  
 Of deep embattled clouds that 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 and distant. Other lot was mine.  
 Across a bare wide Common I had toiled  
 With languid feet which by the slippery ground  
 Were baffled still; and when I sought repose  
 On the brown earth my limbs from the 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 which crackled round.

(ll. 1-25)

The narrator finds himself in a scene which oppresses him, and imagines assuming the position of a dreaming man, who has (he thinks) escaped that scene and who "lies stretched at ease and in security."<sup>12</sup> The dreamer, as envisioned by the narrator, is "careless"; he finds the

11. For my reading of this opening I am indebted to Reeve Parker, "'Finer Distance': The Narrative Art of Wordsworth's 'The Wanderer,'" *ELH* 39 (1972), pp. 87-111.

12. The phrase is Wordsworth's; it comes from the *Preface* of 1815, where he is discussing an image from Virgil (*Ecloques* I, 76-77) in terms that recall the opening of this poem. A shepherd is contemplating the "apparently perilous situation" of a goat "from the seclusion of the cavern in which he lies stretched at ease and in security" (*Prose* III:33).

scene “pleasant,” though the countryside the narrator describes is not pastoral. The clouds are “embattled”; the shadows are not soft, but “determined and unmoved.” The narrator, that is, sees dreaming as an easeful, careless escape; as Reeve Parker points out, in this passage he “yearns for an easier paradise, a vision that virtually shuts its eyes to the troubled world.”<sup>13</sup>

When the narrator encounters the pedlar, he links him to this ideal of careless ease: he describes him “stretched at his length” (l. 106), and “his eyes were shut; / The shadows of the breezy elms above / Dappled his face” (ll. 108–10). His position—prone, and in the shade of a tree—is precisely that of the dreaming man of the opening description, and his closed eyes suggest sleep and dreaming. But the pedlar is not the dreamer the narrator has imagined; instead, he is “a human ideal of an achieved harmony with a natural world of suffering.”<sup>14</sup> The conflict between what the two characters represent thus is one between escape and involvement; the poem can be read as the instruction of the narrator by the pedlar, or, what is the same thing, as the narrator’s learning of the precise sense in which the old man is a dreamer. He discovers that the pedlar is no careless or idle dreamer, but one whose dreams are essential to this ideal existence.

Partly because of the possibility that Wordsworth once meant it to be an independent poem, the narrator’s account of the pedlar’s youth has often been considered extraneous to the story of Margaret. But that account, as we shall see, helps explain the way the pedlar tells his story. For it provides an adumbration of the origins of the old man’s dreaming ability; as it turns out, that ability evolved “as a strategy in response to loss.”<sup>15</sup> We learn that the pedlar’s earliest experiences of nature were of great intensity:

deep feelings had impressed  
Great objects on his mind, with portraiture  
And colour so distinct  
They lay like substances . . .

(Butler, p. 151)

So strong were these experiences that they generated in him a desire that all subsequent experiences be as powerful. Though later experiences were inevitably of a “dimmer character” (Butler, p. 153), the pedlar attained

13. Parker, p. 94.

14. Parker, p. 96.

15. Parker, p. 100.

An *active* power to fasten images  
 Upon his brain, and on their pictured lines  
 Intensely brooded, even till they acquired  
 The liveliness of dreams.

(Butler, pp. 153–55)

This is no primal receptiveness in which nature impresses itself upon him (although the later “Immortality” ode thus uses the dream image; in Wordsworth’s youth the earth was apparelled in “the glory and the freshness of a dream” [l. 5]). Rather, it is a process in which the pedlar engages actively. He transfers nature into his mind; his mind then works upon the consequent images, adding life to them. His dreams are therefore a manifestation both of his attachment to the outside world and of his mind’s independent power. We soon receive a glimpse of how this power works (significantly, the scene recalls once more the poem’s opening description of the dreaming man):

In the after day  
 Of boyhood, many an hour in caves forlorn  
 And in the hollow depths of naked crags  
 He sate, and even in their fixed lineaments

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He traced an ebbing and a flowing mind,  
 Expression ever-varying.

(Butler, pp. 153–55)

This experience foreshadows the pedlar’s ability to see things which the narrator cannot.

We have traced, however, only a part of the old man’s history; the crisis of his life still remains. The growing dimness of the pedlar’s experiences of nature is the result of his loss of communion with it. During his adolescence, this communion faded, and nature began to be an oppressive force:

Nature was at his heart, and he perceived  
 Though yet he knew not how, a wasting power  
 In all things that from her [            ] influence  
 Might tend to wean him . . .

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But now, before his twentieth year was passed,  
 Accumulated feelings press’d his heart  
 With an encreasing weight; he was oerpowered  
 By Nature . . .

(Butler, pp. 169–73)



Indeed, though he clung to nature, some sort of separation seems necessary. “Wean” is a crucial word; it implies, unexpectedly, that freedom from nature’s influence was something to be desired for growth. But the pedlar was apprehensive of his mind’s freedom; when his mood was turbulent, for example, he “wish’d the winds might rage” and he loved “tempestuous nights” (Butler, p. 171). He was trying to keep his mind connected to nature. In Hartman’s formulation, the child has moved “from a stage in which it walks *with* nature, to one in which it is in search *of* nature. . . .”<sup>16</sup> Remaining under nature’s sway would have meant being overpowered, sinking into “animal tranquillity.” It was critical, then, for the pedlar to assert his freedom, and dreaming (as we will see) exemplifies that freedom. Just as the old man roams freely over the land, not rooted to any one spot, so his mind can assert its freedom from nature, and transform (or see beyond) it: he tells the narrator, “I see around me [                    ] / Things which you cannot see” (ll. 129–30).

One thing he can see is the “spirit of humanity.” But the narrator’s history of the pedlar’s youth does not explain this essential component of his dreaming power or how it asserted itself. The narrator does recognize the pedlar’s crisis; he knows that “accumulated feelings press’d his heart” (Butler, p. 169). “Vainly,” we learn, “he strove to mitigate the fever of his heart” (Butler, p. 173), and he tells of the pedlar’s leaving his teaching position: “The wandrings of his thought were then / A misery to him; . . . [and] he must resign / A task he was unable to perform” (Butler, p. 175). The narrator does not account for the pedlar’s recovery, however; he says only:

From day to day had his affections breathed  
The wholesome air of nature; There he kept  
In solitude, and solitary thought,  
So pleasant were those comprehensive views,  
His mind in a just equipoize of love.

(Butler, p. 179)

Here is where he should be describing the pedlar’s power to dream and to see the human spirit in things. But the narrator does not know how the pedlar recovered. The narrator’s story is incomplete because he has not yet experienced this part of the pedlar’s growth. The story of the Ruined Cottage completes the account of the pedlar’s development, and steers the narrator toward the same achieved wisdom that the old man already possesses.

16. Hartman, p. 135.

## III

Detached from the story of Margaret, the pedlar's biography, as critics have noted, "lacks human interest," or shows the "principle rather than the specific experience of love."<sup>17</sup> But this deficiency stems partly from the narrator, and during his narration the pedlar constantly shows his love for Margaret; that he feels compelled to tell it suggests how important it was in his development. The story hints at how the old man's imagination learned to go out to humanity, how his dreaming power became fruitful by becoming humanized.

It is crucial to recognize that, before his experience with Margaret, the pedlar had not the capacity for equanimity he displays at the poem's end. One of the old man's descriptions of the traveling he did between visits to the cottage suggests that, contrary to what the narrator says, he was neither "serene" nor "happy," and that he was not "quiet in his cheerfulness" (Butler, p. 183). The pedlar says that he was "blithe," but also that he was "drooping" (l. 352)—a word later used to describe Margaret (l. 435) and earlier applied to Robert (l. 233). And his "best companions" include "the music of my own sad steps, / With many short-lived thoughts that passed between / And disappeared" (ll. 353–56). The lines suggest a troubled mind. Not only are his steps sad, but "short-lived" does not fit into the flow implied by "music" and evident in the smooth movement of the lines preceding it. And the abrupt ending, "And disappeared," hints at a lack of resolution.

Moreover, the old man introduces the description of his final visit by saying "I passed this way beaten by autumn wind[s]" (l. 474), thus suggesting a lack of harmony with nature (similar to the narrator's battle with insects at the poem's opening). In MS. A (spring 1797) the line is, "The winds of autumn drove me oer the heath" (Butler, pp. 87, 468). There also it appears as part of the old man's visit to the cottage. Wordsworth clearly had difficulty describing the incident—he made several drafts—but the basic situation remains the same: when the old man comes across the cottage, it either is inhabited by a sheltering horse whose chains clank, or contains on the floor a "broken pain [sic] which glitter'd to the moon / And seemed akin to life" (Butler, p. 87). These scenes possess what Paul D. Sheats calls an "obsessive power"; they suggest an abnormal, possibly unhealthy fascination in the pedlar's visit,

17. Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's "Lyrical Ballads" (1798)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 93; Frances Ferguson, *Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit* (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1977), p. 216.

with humanity being usurped by the chained horse or even the broken glass.<sup>18</sup> Wordsworth later transferred this situation to the fragment entitled “Incipient Madness,” where the obsession and troubling of the speaker are explicit. And although the situation is absent from the poem after MS. A, it does point to a “fever of his heart” in the pedlar, a fever the narrator thinks was spontaneously cured.

Between the old man’s past mental unease and his present equanimity the poem provides only one event—the story of the Ruined Cottage. It is virtually the only scene in which we see the pedlar in society with human beings, and it is the poem’s only affecting incident; as Frances Ferguson shows, Wordsworth “deleted numerous occasions for pathos” (such as the old man’s friendship with the little girl) from the poem’s drafts.<sup>19</sup> So it is natural to ascribe special significance to the story. Margaret’s trials led the pedlar, in the words of the introduction of “Michael,” “to feel / For passions that were not [his] own.”

It is useful to think of Margaret’s story as a “spot of time” for the pedlar; this analogy is what James H. Averill suggests when he says that, by “bringing significance and emotional associations to objects, [it] has a ‘fructifying virtue.’”<sup>20</sup> These spots of time, Wordsworth says in *The Prelude*, have a power, when we are depressed by “the round / Of ordinary intercourse,” to nourish and invisibly repair us (xi: 262–64).<sup>21</sup> Such a power is evident in the final vision of the spear-grass. As we learn at the end of the poem, Margaret’s experiences deeply affected the old man, and, once operated upon by his mind, changed him. During his vision of the tranquil spear-grass, “What we feel of sorrow and despair” (Butler, p. 277), which constituted the “uneasy thoughts which filled my mind” (Butler, p. 277), vanished, and he “turned away / And walked along my road in happiness” (Butler, p. 279). This power, moreover, is a repeated power. At one point in his narrative, the old man interrupts himself, and says that

A momentary trance comes over me;  
And to my self I seem to muse on one  
By sorrow laid asleep, or borne away

18. Paul D. Sheats, *The Making of Wordsworth’s Poetry 1785–1798* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, 1973), p. 152.

19. Ferguson, p. 215.

20. James H. Averill, “Suffering and Calm in Wordsworth’s Early Poetry,” *PMLA* 91 (1976), p. 229.

21. I am quoting from the 1805 version, as printed in Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill, eds., *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979). All citations are from this version.

A human being destined to awake  
 To human life or something very near  
 To human life when he shall come again  
 For whom she suffered.

(Butler, p. 241)

As Averill notes, "The phrase 'he shall come again,' while it refers to Robert, has resonances of resurrection and apocalypse. From musing on Margaret's suffering, the Pedlar gains an intimation of immortality. . . ." <sup>22</sup> This "musing" is the pedlar's dreaming; it is a trance—probably the trance in which the narrator finds the old man at the poem's beginning.

#### IV

Dreams, therefore, embody imaginative power, as they do on occasion in *The Prelude*: the "dreamers" who compose imaginative fictions, for example, "are in league" with "great might" (v:547, 551), and those "who had fed their childhood upon dreams" can make "all powers of swiftness, subtlety, and strength / Their ministers" (x:709, 711–12). One's mind asserts itself above external nature and one's animal body (compare, in "Tintern Abbey," "we are laid asleep / In body"); it manifests what the old man calls "the strong creative power / Of human passion" (Butler, p. 195), and transforms mere sensory data. The mind can then see a vision of resurrection, feel a bond between a man and a neglected well, or trace a "secret spirit of humanity" (Butler, p. 275). In this special sense, to dream means not to indulge oneself, or to escape a world of suffering, but to exercise a distinctive power: it involves re-creation in one's mind of a situation or an experience, transforming it, and—possibly—recounting it so that it can have a "fructifying virtue" for others. It means neither being slavishly tied to nature and the world, nor being irresponsibly free of it, but participating in an "ennobling interchange" (*The Prelude* xii:376). <sup>23</sup>

The possibility of a "fructifying virtue" is what the old man has in mind when he seeks to include himself among those who, in the words of Keats's *Fall of Hyperion*, "labour for mortal good":

"It were a wantonness, and would demand  
 Severe reproof, if we were men whose hearts

22. Averill, p. 228.

23. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth portrays Coleridge as a dreamer unable as a child to connect himself to nature, "in endless dreams / Of sickness, disjoining, joining things, / Without the light of knowledge" (viii:608–10).

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; were't not so,  
 I am a dreamer among men—indeed  
 An idle dreamer.”

(ll. 280–90)

The pedlar knows that he appears to be a kind of dreamer; the issue is whether his “dreams” have “a power to virtue friendly.” If they do not, then he can be classed with the idle dreamers, whose dreams bear no vital relation to reality and have no “fructifying virtue”—classed, in other words, with the dreamer the narrator imagines in the poem’s opening lines. The logic resembles that of a passage later moved to Book III of *The Prelude*: because the youthful pedlar’s appearance is strange, he provokes disapproval: “Some called it madness—such it might have been, / But that he had an eye . . .” (ll. 93–94). (One thinks here of Hazlitt on Wordsworth reading aloud: “it is clear that he is either mad or inspired.”)<sup>24</sup> Mournful thoughts can yield the power the old man seeks, but only if he can exert his own strength; by themselves they are “barren.” One of Wordsworth’s attempts at a conclusion repeats “barren,” and expresses a similar idea: the pedlar maintains that clouds, the ocean, the sky—“this majestic imagery”—must not lie “a barren picture on the mind” (Butler, p. 269). The intellect and senses must work together, so that “forms and feelings . . . shall each acquire / A living spirit and a character . . .” (Butler, p. 271). The pedlar’s dreaming power is the power to confer this spirit and character, to make fruitful—“fructify”—an otherwise barren picture or story.

Since the pedlar’s story is to be an instruction in dreaming, it is fitting that the story resemble a dream. “I see around me / Things which you cannot see” (ll. 129–30), the old man says, emphasizing the difference between his powers of perception and the narrator’s. His actually seeing, instead of simply remembering, suggests that the old scene is reappearing in his mind, as if dreamt or in a “second-sight procession” (*The Prelude* VII:602). In the Addendum, in fact, the narrator describes the pedlar’s story-telling thus:

He had discoursed  
 Like one who in the slow and silent works

24. Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age*, in Howe, vol. xi, p. 91.

The manifold conclusions of his thought  
 Had brooded till Imagination's power  
 Condensed them to a passion whence she drew  
 Herself, new energies, resistless force. . . .

(Butler, p. 275)

His words closely resemble his description of the old man's youthful ability to "fasten images / Upon his brain, and on their pictured lines / Intensely [brood], even till they acquired / The liveliness of dreams." The two processes are related and possibly identical.

The pedlar's tale is a kind of dream. But it is not an idle dream in the sense of being unconnected to reality, for it is firmly rooted in the present scene. As many critics have noted, the old man uses the condition of Margaret's cottage and garden as an index to her decline. But the prominence of the natural scene in the story has a more direct cause. The crucial point is that he and the narrator can see nature around themselves; the pedlar is building the story on the foundation of the scene in which the story is told. Everything in the story except the human characters is actually present before the two men.

The old man's narrative is thus a merging of past and present. His use of "this" and "that"—e.g., "this poor cottage" (l. 214), "this old Bench" (l. 490), "that forsaken well" (l. 155)—serves to link past and present, and consequently to bring a story of past events into the present. Words like "forsaken" strengthen that sense by characterizing things through their present, not their past, qualities. The pedlar evokes the scene before him so vividly as to suggest the relevance of T. E. Hulme's criterion of making us "continuously see a physical thing."<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the pedlar's dream is the result of a mind working "in alliance with the works / Which it beholds" (*The Prelude* II:274–75). It is not pure unattached dreaming, but dreaming of a special sort.

This sort of dream is in implicit contrast with the workings of Margaret's mind during her decline. Although the pedlar does not moralize, neither does he refrain completely from judging her. One of his descriptions of Margaret contains a submerged criticism:

In every act  
 Pertaining to her house affairs appeared  
 The careless stillness which a thinking mind  
 Gives to an idle matter . . .

(ll. 419–22)

25. T. E. Hulme, *Speculations* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1936), p. 134. The appositeness of this passage is pointed out by Sheats, p. 148.

Unlike the pedlar (the word “idle” recalls the old man’s assertion that he is no “idle dreamer”), Margaret in her daydreaming withdraws from participation in her surroundings. She thus reminds us of the image of the carefree dreamer from the narrator’s opening description (although her withdrawal is not toward ease). Margaret’s inability to look directly at the pedlar (ll. 307, 416–18) is an emblem of her divorce from reality. She has severed the link between man and nature, and the old man must reassert it:

Beside yon spring I stood,  
And eyed its waters till we seemed to feel  
One sadness, they and I; For them a bond  
Of brotherhood is broken time has been  
When every day the touch of human hand  
Disturbed their stillness and they minister’d  
To human comfort.

(Butler, pp. 195, 199)

For the pedlar, the bond still exists; he seems to feel the same sadness as the waters. Moreover, we learn that he perceives Margaret’s manner “familiarily” (Butler, p. 241), and the narrator describes him as rehearsing the tale with “familiar” power (l. 267); the repetition of words that stem from “family” reinforces our sense of brotherhood.

But Margaret’s family has broken up, and the bond of brotherhood between Margaret and nature has dissolved, so nature becomes an obviously destructive force.<sup>26</sup> Nature, we recall, had threatened to overpower the pedlar during his youth; he escaped that threat by asserting his creative, dreaming power. Margaret severs herself from nature completely, however, and her imagination works destructively:

in that broken arbour she would sit  
The idle length of half a sabbath day,  
There—where you see the toadstool’s lazy head—  
And when a dog passed by she still would quit  
The shade and look abroad. On this old Bench  
For hours she sate, and evermore her eye  
Was busy in the distance, shaping things  
Which made her heart beat quick.

(ll. 486–93)

26. Jonathan Wordsworth notes that “Nature in the poem is at no stage hostile, but from a human point of view it is inexorable . . .” (p. 108). He adds that “Harmony is shown to exist only as long as man is capable of balancing activity” (pp. 108–9).

If the bond is broken, both nature and the imagination can become harmful.

The pedlar, then, exhibits an ideal relationship to nature, exemplified by the special way in which he dreams. And it is this ideal relationship that enables him to treat the story of Margaret as he does. Because his sight is always directed toward nature, because he sees Margaret's story emblemized in nature, a peaceful nature—which is what he sees during the spear-grass vision—means a peaceful Margaret. Yet the process is a bit more complicated, and involves the old man's dreaming power. For it is crucial that the tale he tells is a dream, a re-creation. It is a dream in the sense that it can vanish and seem unreal (though it can later recur). But, more importantly, since the dream-tale merges past and present, Margaret's trials (which bring a tear to the pedlar's eye) and the spear-grass vision (which implies tranquillity) can exist together. As Coleridge, speaking of tragedy, said in a letter of 1799, "in all violent states of *Passion* the mind *acts & plays a part*, itself the actor & the spectator at once!"<sup>27</sup> Involvement and detachment are simultaneous; like the dream, which can be linked to nature and yet be free of it, the pedlar's attitude can encompass grief even as it achieves equanimity. Thus it is that the old man can review Margaret's tale without somehow violating her. The bare story reviewed would be an "idle dream" (Butler, p. 279), but placed in the present scene, in a particular context, it can have "a power to virtue friendly." Abstractions—"what we feel of sorrow and despair / From ruin and from change and all the grief / The passing shews of being leave behind" (Butler, pp. 277–79)—are transformed by the dreaming mind, made concrete and employed as teachers.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the pedlar's conclusion reverses expectations. For what we take as reality (the "passing shews of being") are presented as a dream, and the old man's "dream" is asserted to be true reality.

## V

But if the pedlar's dreaming ability implies a kind of power, it also involves a certain impotence. A man dreaming is not a man acting. The contrast between dreaming and action occurs obliquely early in Margaret's story. During the famine, the pedlar says, the rich "sunk down as in [a] dream among the poor" (l. 194); in a dream, of course, one often feels that one cannot act to help oneself. The pedlar himself is passive; his dreaming power is a delayed power ("wisdom . . . works

27. Griggs, vol. 1, p. 493.

28. The abstracting process is pointed out by David Perkins, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Sincerity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, 1964), p. 116.



through patience" [Butler, p. 163]) and even as he exerts it he does not physically act. Aside from telling his story the old man does nothing in the poem. To dream of an experience, or to tell its story, may be a kind of action, but it is action performed only after the original experience is complete. Therefore, the pedlar is powerless when Margaret faces him: "I wist not what to do, / Or how to speak to her" (ll. 309–10); "I could make no answer" (l. 318); "I had little power / To give her comfort" (ll. 334–35). Indeed, as a general rule Wordsworth's poetry rarely shows him or his persona actually helping anyone. The pedlar's weakness, it seems, lies in his inability to act or even to speak if his mind has not had time to transform his experience. Even his "active power to fasten images / Upon his brain" has to be followed, as we have seen, by intense brooding "on their pictured lines . . . till they acquir[e] / The liveliness of dreams" (Butler, p. 153). And the first action he relates is, "Beside yon spring I stood, / And eyed its waters till we seemed to feel / One sadness, they and I" (Butler, pp. 195, 199). The "till" in both passages implies a necessary passage of time before the pedlar's dreaming power can assert itself.

Paradoxically, the pedlar's weakness is the source of his strength. It had been his youthful susceptibility to strong feelings that had caused "the fever of his heart," and he had developed his dreaming power in order to achieve an equipoise. The old man's ability to be affected deeply—so deeply as to be caught in "the impotence of grief" (Butler, p. 273)—gives his mind something to work upon. What he labels "weakness" is "the weakness of humanity" (l. 252), something that is essential to man. The dreaming itself is almost inhuman (both cruel and natural), for it enables him to conclude the story of Margaret's tragedy with "an image of tranquillity" and to assert that "peace is here" (Butler, p. 277). Yet the "here" limits that statement, and Margaret's story did, and still does, move him. He reaches equanimity through reflection only after he has been affected. (And in the case of Margaret, that she has been dead nearly ten years makes his equanimity easier for us to accept.)

Indeed, the old man's occasional "lapses," as Jonathan Wordsworth calls them,<sup>29</sup> into emotional exclamations are out of tune with his assertion that "peace is here," and reinforce our sense that Margaret's tragedy can still touch him. His susceptibility to strong emotion is manifest in an early interjection: "Oh Sir! the good die first, / And they whose hearts are dry as summer dust / Burn to the socket" (ll. 150–52). It is not just the exclamatory tone of these lines, nor their mixed metaphor, nor their sentimentality that implies weakness. It is also that the aphor-

29. Jonathan Wordsworth, p. 121.

istic phrase is one neither the reader nor even the pedlar really believes; it is an absurd statement, prompted solely by the example of Margaret's life.<sup>30</sup> Even the very beginning of his story-telling is causing him strong emotion. Can the old man really believe his own heart is "dry as summer dust"? Could Wordsworth have believed it when he published this poem in middle age?

Other "sentimental" exclamations follow: "This happy Land was stricken to the heart" (l. 189); "Needs must it have been / A sore heart-wasting" (ll. 484-85). Another exclamation explicitly links strong feeling to an inability to speak: "Oh Sir! / I cannot *tell* how she pronounced my name . . ." (ll. 311-12). And the feelings the story arouses cause the pedlar to interrupt himself several times. His recounting Margaret's admission that she had "done much wrong" (l. 406) leads him to speak of the story's effect on himself—of how a momentary trance comes over him. He prefaces and concludes this personal aside with "It would have grieved / Your very soul to see her" (ll. 414-15; Butler, p. 241), by which he means in part that the story grieved him then and grieves him still.

The old man is aware of his weakness. But he also knows that it is necessary to his power:

Why should a tear be in an old Man's eye?  
 Why should we thus with an untoward mind  
 And in the weakness of humanity  
 From natural wisdom turn our hearts away,  
 To natural comfort shut our eyes and ears,  
 And feeding on disquiet thus disturb  
 [            ] of Nature with our restless thoughts?  
(ll. 250-56)

The answer will be that there can be found "a power to virtue friendly," and the question is less a self-rebuke than it is a test of the narrator.

## VI

When Margaret had inhabited the grove, she had welcomed and helped travelers; the pedlar is now attempting something similar with the nar-

30. When writing about the unexpected death of Sir Alexander Ball in *The Friend* (25 January 1810), Coleridge alluded to the pedlar's sentiment and how one can—temporarily—agree with it: "At the thought of such events the language of a tender superstition is the voice of Nature itself, and those facts alone presenting themselves to our memory which had left an impression on our hearts, we assent to, and adopt the Poet's pathetic complaint." He then quotes the pedlar's lines. See Barbara Rooke, ed., *The Friend* (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1969), vol. II, p. 292.

rator, but he knows the narrator must be ready to learn. As Wordsworth, writing about poets and readers in the 1815 *Essay, Supplementary to the Preface*, put it: “without the exertion of a co-operating power in the mind of the Reader, there can be no adequate sympathy with either of these emotions [the pathetic or the sublime]: without this auxiliary impulse, elevated or profound passion cannot exist” (*Prose* III:81). Through his questions, the pedlar is challenging the narrator to view his story as a weakness, an unjustified disturbance of calm. As his own experience indicates, the old man feels that one should not submit completely to nature, but he does not want the story to be a “vain dalliance” for the narrator.

The narrator passes his test. Though at first the pedlar’s mild look “stole away / All recollection” (ll. 260–61), the narrator returns to Margaret’s story. In a draft contained in the Alfoxden Notebook he returns to it because he is “depressed” (Butler, p. 111); the MS. B version—“In my own despite / I thought of that poor woman” (ll. 264–65)—has an equivalent meaning. Despite the attractions of the pedlar’s invocation of calm, the tale has affected the narrator strongly enough so that he feels a love for Margaret and senses a “heartfelt chillness” (l. 271) in his veins. His crucial deed in the poem follows: “I begged of the old man that *for my sake* / He would resume his story” (ll. 279–80, underlining mine). He realizes that the story is being told for his own sake, that it has a point.

Does the narrator ultimately learn anything? His final reaction implies an affirmative answer, inasmuch as it is a dreaming akin to the pedlar’s:

From that low bench rising instinctively  
 I turned away in weakness, for my heart  
 Was heavy with the tale which he had told[.]  
 I stood and leaning oer the garden gate  
 Retraced that woman’s story and it seemed  
 To comfort me while with a brother’s love  
 I bless’d her in the impotence of grief.  
 At length upon the hut I fix’d my eyes  
 Fondly and traced with milder interest  
 That secret spirit of humanity  
 Which ’mid the calm oblivious tendencies  
 Of nature, ’mid her plants, her weeds and flowers  
 And silent overgrowings still survived.

(Butler, pp. 273–77)

The narrator’s weakness resembles the pedlar’s powerlessness before Margaret; his “retracing” suggests his bringing the picture to his mind’s

eye; his "brother's love" recalls the "bond of brotherhood"; and his tracing "that secret spirit of humanity" testifies to his new-found ability to see things he previously could not. He, too, has learned "to feel / For passions that were not [his] own."

What exactly the narrator learns remains unsaid; the passage of time is necessary before the tale can provide a "fructifying virtue." But what Neil Hertz calls a "chain of mediations" has been established.<sup>31</sup> The poem is not just the story of Margaret; it is also the story of how nature and Margaret's tragedy formed the pedlar, and of how the pedlar and Margaret's tale educated the narrator. Finally, if Wordsworth succeeds, it is a story that can teach its readers also—about power and weakness, grief and equanimity, and dreamers and poets.

University of Michigan

31. Neil Hertz, "Wordsworth and the Tears of Adam," *Studies in Romanticism* VII (1967), rpt. in M. H. Abrams, ed., *Wordsworth: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 121.