

Reading Wordsworth with Hegel and Deleuze

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**Douglas Berman,**

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**Abstract:** In his article "Reading Wordsworth with Hegel and Deleuze" Douglas Berman reexamines Wordsworth poem *The Ruined Cottage* (1798) in terms of the importance of the Pedlar who serves as the witness and singular moral authority in the text. Berman focuses on the inherent tension between impermanence as exemplified by the trope of wandering and the redemptive vision which shapes the ending of the second version of the poem. While recognizing the strength of earlier critics, particularly the new historicists who emphasized Wordsworth's displacement of social and material reality into nature, Berman argues that wandering both in its physical form and as metaphor for impermanence undermines the quest for permanence, thus complicating thematically and linguistically our efforts to wrest any coherent interpretation from the text. Instead of relying on the Hegelian *Aufhebung* as dominant paradigm, a critical interpretation based on a "Deleuzian" structure may be more fruitful in helping us understand the challenges Wordsworth faced when writing the poem — and, in particular, his conceptualization of nature — and better appreciate its power even while acknowledging that to adopt this paradigm works against the grain of Wordsworth's own text.

**Douglas BERMAN**

### **Reading Wordsworth with Hegel and Deleuze**

In reading Wordsworth's *The Ruined Cottage*, we eventually reach a point where we are forced to consider whether the poem, in its totality, "adds up" to anything coherent — "coherence" itself largely determined in this case by whether the poem succeeds to wrest some grander, more humane vision from what is, after all, a fairly unrelenting tale of human disaster. Arguably, this does not come up as a major issue in Wordsworth's earlier poetry, which also documents, with graphic cruelty, the local soldiers, vagrants, and rural poor who were forced to leave their tilled lands for the industrial north during wartime. These narratives end far more abruptly and lack the grander, philosophic reach of *The Ruined Cottage*. Incongruously, the problem, or mystery, of coherence is also the source of the poem's greatest power, what Peter Larkin has called a "vital provocation" to readers (348). This provocation is also, importantly, an invocation coming from the mouth of a passing Pedlar to an unknown narrator who stops for a rest at the very spot the heroine, Margaret's cottage once stood. In the poem, the Pedlar narrates the events that occurred and ultimately resulted in Margaret's death, event which he knew about directly, as he had encountered Margaret several times during his periodic visits to her rural precinct. We are told by the narrator that Margaret formerly resided with her husband Robert who, though "sober and steady" (121) eventually grew sick and, once recovered, could not find steady employment and was eventually compelled to leave home to enlist in the army, where he completely disappeared. In his absence, Margaret's cottage becomes increasingly threadbare, dilapidated, and torn, and, in Wordsworth's words, "is sunk into decay" (477). Finally, after the Pedlar's fourth and final visit, Margaret dies and disappears along with the cottage.

The Pedlar is a more fleshed-out version of an earlier character portrayals of characters who often describe scenes of suffering in Wordsworth's poems, which are presented as serial encounters between a roving narrator and a stray denizen who just happen to appear before him. Critics have also remarked on the similarity between the Pedlar and Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* who must exorcise his sin through the retelling of it. While there is no evidence the Pedlar plays any role in Margaret's death to which he is, after all, only a bystander, he similarly attains a kind of archetypal function by claiming authority to retell events outside of the listener's ken, events which, by virtue of their retelling, receive their significance. Finally, there have been suggestions that the Pedlar is Wordsworth himself, who made a walking tour of England just prior to writing the poem and who drew widely on his knowledge of the rural poor. In sum, then, the Pedlar is an extension of a number of wandering figures that populated so many of Wordsworth's poems and whose titles betray their theme — e.g., "Old Man Travelling," "An Evening Walk," "The Excursion," "The Borderers" — characters who represent, not so much freedom, but a complete deracination from stable home and family life, and who are thereby take on a forced commitment to a "way-wandering life" (*The Ruined Cottage* 46). While the Pedlar's occupation as a itinerant wanderer is explored less in *The Ruined Cottage* than in *The Pedlar*, it is directly contrasted to Margaret's exilic circumscribed existence after Robert's departure. Unlike Margaret, the Pedlar's life is ambulatory and, while seemingly dictated mainly by exigency, as opposed to choice, his actions exist wholly outside of the prison Margaret has made — a tragic imprisonment, in that the cottage symbolizes both the beginning and end of family bliss. However, the meaning behind wandering is inconsistently treated in the text. For instance, Peter Larkin notes that the movements of the Pedlar, while wayward, "partake of an implied seasonal rhythm" (Larkin 348). Against this, we may contrast the image of Robert right after his recovery and before his departure where he is described in more dire terms as inconstant and wayward: "he would leave his home, and to the town/Without an errand would he turn his steps/Or wander here and there among the fields" (176-78). The latter wandering is of a more oblivious kind and far more pathetic than the "way-wandering" Pedlar, who appears to derive some pleasure and purpose from the journey.

To second the wandering typified by the Pedlar, Wordsworth pays inordinate attention to time's passing, and its relentless effect on Margaret, and the Pedlar's appearance is often on cue to witness it. Time is in fact frequently invoked in the text to link the Pedlar to the passage of the seasons and

day. The poem begins when the sun is "mounted high" (1), continues throughout the day, and then trails off at night. The emphasis on movement, both of the passage of time and the narrative, is contrasted to the arrested moments, those points where the characters find themselves absorbed in the moment — moments that are highlighted separately as if to fix, and thereby intensify, the Pedlar's experience. If there is a sense that the Pedlar obeys the mandates of the seasons, and keeps in tune with them, this extends to his keeping in time with nature herself, which predetermines them. Thus, the narrator, upon first recognizing the Pedlar, on line 38, refers to him as "that pride of Nature and of lowly life." This leads to a question that has no little symbolic significance in Wordsworth: if the Pedlar's wandering is viewed as being in tune with nature, what does this say about the depiction of "nature" in the poem? The point is not trivial and has given rise to a number of arguments particularly with the New Historicist school who have argued that nature represents for Wordsworth a kind of idealization or ideological displacement, the notion that Wordsworth elides the material world by idealizing nature is well mooted in *The Romantic Ideology* (McGann), Alan Liu, and Marjorie Levinson. As a retort to these positions, Jonathan Bate offers an alternative theory that pictures Wordsworth as focused intently, not on idealization of nature, but on nature's transience and its passing, momentary beauty now subject to loss and decay through eco-destruction. Aesthetic representations of nature, for Bate, monumentalize nature and, by doing so, dramatize the poignant and irremediable loss of the physical world and, in turn, the insufficiencies of any monument that would give homage to it. Whereas New Historicism has interpreted the "beautiful and permanent forms of Nature" (Bate 2-4, 6-11) as an obliteration of the political and social domains, Bate therefore sees nature itself as subject to decay and loss (i.e., through global warming, and the like). It is only the sense of loss that provides a sense of nature's value (Bate 2).

It is difficult to trace Bate's scenario through a reading of the Pedlar in the poem, although — as it is hard to put valuations on the meaning behind such terms as "permanence," given the contrary readings of wandering outlined above and, as a programmatic discourse — we reach difficulties when we try to define nature as either an affirmative or destructive entity. We are left with at least two ways of viewing nature in the poem: the first nature as destroyer, continuously undermining any ideals of stability, solidity, or fixture; and the second, as a form of permanence and eternity (the ideological) — as monument, in the same way Wordsworth's poem "Yew Trees," speaks of a "living thing/Produced too slowly ever to decay" (10-11). As the poem progresses, we see Wordsworth struggle, both poetically and conceptually, to wrest something more permanent out of nature that would interrupt the ceaseless changes laying waste to her home and health. One of the Pedlar's roles in retelling the narrative is to give voice to the solidity that life once held and to mourn its passing. It is, in fact, in the retelling of the story that the Pedlar tries to himself attain a sense of permanence in the words themselves, telling the listener not to allow his story to be a source of "momentary pleasure" — which serves as both a denial of the poems' aesthetic function (i.e., as providing a sense of enjoyment) and a claim to a higher, i.e. more permanent, insight. To that end, wandering does often portray negative characteristics of instability and uprootedness, as we see at the start of the poem where an unnamed narrator struggles to mount a hill in summer to reach the cottage where he is beset upon by an "insect host which gathered round" (24) — a scene that resembles what happened to Jesus, beset upon by the Romans, as he labored toward the cross. As the story of Jesus points the way toward salvation, the path toward the cottage points to a possible place of healing that exists either within the natural world or in God, or, in other words, a place of rest. As if to accentuate this goal, the narrator comes across the Pedlar, not in motion, but in temporary repose, which, in turn, anticipates the ending where the narrator concludes his tale and, we are told, we pass into an image of nature that "looked so beautiful.../That what we feel of sorrow and despair/From ruin and from change, and all the grief/The passing shews of being left behind/Appeared an idle dream" (516-23). The Pedlar and narrator then begin their search for "an evening resting place." The end, by implication, ultimately locates the source of human peace within a vision of nature as an ameliorating presence.

Taking this onboard, one way to anticipate the figural and interpretative difficulties framed above is reading the poem as trying to affirm the permanence and constancy of nature, as idealized in rural family life and, as consolation, in Margaret's rebirth in nature after her death, over against the

waywardness of Robert and, possibly, the Pedlar himself. We could also try to reconcile the competing views of wandering (both positive and negative) by suggesting that although the Pedlar lacks a true home, a enduring truth resides in the story he tells, and his continuous circuit across the space of the poem belies the inconstancy of his occupation. This would help synthesize the ending of the 1798 version (the first version, in 1797, had no such consolatory conclusion) to the other sections, but it does not resolve the implicit tension in the poem between the unrelieved suffering of the earlier sections and what Larkin refers to as the "moralizing addendum," which has proved to many critics "unacceptable, a moral sleight of hand or a false universalizing of the historical predicament out of which the poem is built" (Larkin 348). The resolution Wordsworth found even caused consternation among readers in his own day, in particular Thomas De Quincey who suggested life might have turned out better for Margaret if the Pedlar had offered monetary assistance rather than so much philosophical varnish (306). Like De Quincey, the new historicist school has viewed the Pedlar's lesson as an artful dodge aimed at disguising the political and economic hierarchy in which Wordsworth himself is complicit. Wordsworth, as Liu writes, peddles poems that displace an unfortunate material reality into an ideological and aesthetic fantasy (342). Other critics have been more tolerant of the evasiveness of the coda and more attentive to Wordsworth's apparent poetic and theoretical concerns and the specific difficulties he faced in reconciling suffering with tranquility. Theresa Kelley calls the poem "a story about losses for which the beautiful can offer no adequate compensation" (43). Cleanth Brooks wondered at the ultimate value of a consolatory narrative is, no matter how rhetorically sophisticated, that derives so much aesthetic intensity and enjoyment. Ultimately, Brooks suggests that the poem incorporates a religious vision of the world detached from any brand of orthodoxy current at the time, and one on which, even today, we cannot put a name.

Let us back up a bit to consider the work's inception: Wordsworth's initial impulse in drafting the poem was to rework similar subject matters and themes depicted in his earlier shorter poems, which conclude without any effort by the narrator to find a solution to the characters' plight. Soon after completing the initial version, Wordsworth began searching for a way to justify Margaret's suffering and began lengthening the poem to try to include a grander, more humanistic and philosophic vision. In 1798, Wordsworth completely revised the poem and, whereas the earlier version had no real ending, it now contained a final stanza reading "My friend, enough to sorrow have you given ... She sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here" (512). After these lines, the narrator seems comforted and journeys afterward with his companion to a nearby resting place. Yet, while the trajectory from "nature" to Christ looks fairly obvious in hindsight, it was by no means predestined. Since the rediscovery of the original version of the work earlier this century, the poem, known, now, as *The Ruined Cottage*, the role played by Coleridge on its shape and direction has become increasingly clear. Coleridge was living nearby Wordsworth in 1797 when the poem was first conceived, and Coleridge, of course, collaborated with Wordsworth on the poems that would collectively make up the *Lyrical Ballads*; Coleridge who would encourage Wordsworth to create a "philosophical poem." It is not surprising that Wordsworth would evince at this time a desire to create something more ambitious from a tale of common suffering; to, in effect, wrest from the loss of hope, intensity of suffering and devolution of life, the philosophic and imaginative tools needed to make sense of the monstrous and irremediable suffering of Margaret. Coleridge expressed in a letter to Richard Sharp in 1804 the hope that Wordsworth would be known thereafter as the "first and greatest philosopher poet — the only man who has effected a complete a complete and constant synthesis of Thought and Feeling" (Coleridge qtd. in Hamilton 172).

The relationship with Coleridge no doubt informs much of the struggle in *The Ruined Cottage*. Alan Bewell has argued, provocatively, that "Wordsworth's best poems had their genesis in his antagonism towards the philosophical model" and often deviated from them (5). If so, it is not surprising that as Wordsworth proceeded, his aesthetic vision became increasingly tormented and unresolved — and this creates conceptual confusion in *The Ruined Cottage*. The cognitive confusion behind the early renderings of *The Ruined Cottage* support the thesis that Wordsworth did harbor a philosophic ambition that ultimately lay beyond his reach, his own dissatisfaction echoing the later New Historicist critique that he had tried to find refuge within eternal, unyielding forms. Yet, admitting Wordsworth was not a philosopher does not banish philosophy from Wordsworth's poetry. In fact, the New

Historicist's argument that the "full presence of Nature ... cancels out the vexing, restless thoughts otherwise excited by the story of Margaret" (Levinson 228), along with the charge that Wordsworth abridged, or elided, material reality by erasing it, is wed to a Hegelian/Marxist universe that relies entirely on Hegelian strategies of reconciliation (*Aufhebung*) and thereby reduces our access to other modes of access. I do not doubt that Hegelian readings are impermissible. The Pedlar's own words seek closure by embracing nature as a benign force, unflinching, and, yes, even eternal — a view that was shared by Wordsworth himself. It would be foolish to entirely gainsay this vision of transcendence. It does exist and it is fairly apparent that as Wordsworth aged, it became paramount. It is ultimately what made Wordsworth so appreciated by the Victorians, who domesticated the pantheism of the earlier verse. Wordsworth's coda does, admittedly, function as a kind of wish fulfillment by trying to impose a philosophical eternity about the Hericlitean flux of the poem, made more acute and poignant through the stark rendering of that transience in the visual imagery.

As Geoffrey Hartman notes in his "Elation in Hegel and Wordsworth," problems with dialectical closure, the postponing of a final resolution" (186). Once we recognize this, the troubled passages of the poem achieve greater saliency and meaning. It is here that we might insert another critical narrative, not as its replacement, but as a different type of thought. If so, this would be surely be Nietzsche, who himself spoke of the tragic but without compensatory closure. If David Collings is correct that Wordsworth's poetry can be fruitfully considered in relation to the entire theoretical tradition comprising such thinkers as Nietzsche, Artaud, Bataille, Foucault, and Derrida, then surely this would entail a moving beyond Hegel and strategies of absolutism, even if it means working against the grain of Wordsworth's text. Collings has written an entire book on the theme of wandering in Wordsworth and has given consideration to the role of the Pedlar in *The Ruined Cottage*. For Collings, the wandering male solitary seeks out the abandoned mother, represented by Margaret, thereby sharing in her fixation on one spot, the cottage, to which he incessantly returns. Although the poem appears to celebrate permanence, it also links permanence to deviant themes of madness and dissolution (Collings 69-99). In contrast, as Collings points out, in Wordsworth's Note to "The Thorn," Wordsworth offers the alternative possibility that "radical homelessness may be the source of greater beauty than can be found in moral consolation" (98). We are thus left, at least for Collings, to oscillate between two modes of experience: the first (the Pedlar) the obsession with repetitious and return; the second (in "The Thorn"), an escape from social institutions.

Where does this leave us? At minimum, the various ways tropes, such as wandering, function in the texts at play, should help diminish the attraction of programmatic readings. If we take Collings's suggestion seriously that we should consider Wordsworth's contributions in relation to continental thinkers, Nietzsche would appear the most akin in spirit to Wordsworth not simply because of Nietzsche's development of the "eternal recurrence of the same" of which the Pedlar's own diurnal reiterations bears an uncanny likeness, but in his own fondness for the wanderer figure, particularly in both *Human, All Too Human*, where he titled an entire section, "The Wanderer and His Shadow" and to *Zarathustra's* "The Wanderer." Nietzsche, himself, spent much of his later adult life wandering alone throughout Europe, thus personalizing what became, for him, a major philosophical theme. The wanderer, for Nietzsche, like the Pedlar, attains a moral authority and knowledge precisely for having escaped the strictures and binding conventions of society. Looking at wandering and errancy in Nietzsche also opens up new approaches to interpretation. Along these lines, Gilles Deleuze has done more to introduce this subject into contemporary thought. Ron Broglio suggests that Deleuze's reconceptualizing of subjective exteriority can be profitably compared to the manner in which Wordsworth depicts characters interacting with their landscapes. Certainly, if we were to examine Deleuze and wandering, we would need to look closely at his concept of "nomadism" in various works. From the standpoint of *The Ruined Cottage*, it seems fairly apparent that Deleuze's 1962 work, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* is most relevant for sketching out the contours of the more commonly recognized Wordsworth seeking transcendence and closure. In his section titled "The Tragic" in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Deleuze laid out a non-dialectical, non-Hegelian Nietzsche who affirms tragedy without trying to sublimate it. The essence of the tragic is Dionysius, who "affirms all that appears ... The tragic is not to be found in this anguish or disgust, nor in a nostalgia for lost unity. The tragic is to only to be found in multiplicity, in the diversity of affirmation as such" (Deleuze 17). As for

Nietzsche, the "tragic" may also be the site where all of the characters in *The Ruined Cottage*, including the reader, relate, a site of irreducibility to higher ideals or compensatory strategies. As Nietzsche later repudiated *The Birth of Tragedy* for being "offensively Hegelian" (Deleuze 11), Deleuze speaks of Nietzsche's retreat from a vision of tragedy needs to justify life and thereby redeem it "from suffering and contradiction," from the "Christian dialectic; justification, redemption, and reconciliation" (11).

Although Wordsworth did not articulate this same set of ideas in the same manner, his internal struggle to resolve the poems' complexities did seem to take him in the same direction. Both Wordsworth and Nietzsche begin from the moment of suffering, a suffering that is moral and psychological, just as much as it is physical. The difference, of course, is that while Wordsworth ultimately embraced Christian orthodoxy, and essentially re-translated the poem into Christian terms, Nietzsche became increasingly opposed to Christianity, seeing it as a form of "bad conscience" that would attempt to justify suffering in life, which, in the end, results in the negation of life (Deleuze 15). Instead, Nietzsche's Dionysius, according to Deleuze, affirms suffering (16). Was Wordsworth able to achieve this kind of affirmation? Most likely, not, as evidenced by the search for closure and resolution. Hartman is right to suggest that the falling-off of Wordsworth's poetry in his later years was partly due to the failure to "condense his thought into a clear structure or dialectic" (Hartman 14). It may be true that Wordsworth had most affinity with dialectical modes of construction, as we see in the contrast between the Pedlar, as wandered, and the fixed, stationery Margaret. Yet Hartman also understands the claim Nietzsche has had on all Romantic thought, in particular in its critique of progress and apocalyptic sensibilities (xxvii-xxviii). What Wordsworth, Blake, and Shelley were responding to was an age striving to divest itself of an antiquated religion while thirsting after its spirit. Even the orthodox Wordsworth of the later works should not be taken entirely at face value. Hartman, who has written extensively on Wordsworth, points out the resemblance between Christ's own absence to the missing Robert, calls Christianity "not a congealed myth but [one that] keeps growing out of a secular understanding" (30). Efforts to map the poem onto a familiar set of symbolic determinations often miss the point and the oscillations between different states of being, competing objectives. A reading of the poem benefits more by focusing on these irreducible aspects of the poem, as exemplified by the movement of wandering and consciousness/suffering that permeates the tale. True binaries obviously exist in the poem but they do not resolve themselves into a totality. If we claim God and nature as permanent fixtures, it is only in opposition to the clear visual appearance of change and decay which creates the bulk of the suffering we endure during our lives. "I well remember that those very plumes, / Those weeds, and the high spear grass on that wall... / 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" (512-17). It is no wonder, then, that Wordsworth refers, in the line before, to the "forms of things," thereby lending a Platonic gloss to the poem. Of course, this could be only a momentary resolution, and the poem does not provide the necessary permanence but only temporary quiet, in the same way the Pedlar's early dreaming provides only temporary respite from his "way-wandering life." The night, like sleep, may only console by hiding from vision those who suffer in our midst, just as the disappearance of the cottage and Margaret makes it harder for us to envision her suffering, thereby necessitating the continual retelling of the poem as does the Mariner in Coleridge's poem. One way of reading Wordsworth's closing is that all consolation arrives too late. The diurnal cycle of night and day in which the Pedlar continuously plies his trade is ultimately meaningless, only part of the general flux.

That Wordsworth eventually resorted to the "cross" as nature's substitute suggests that nature itself may not provide sufficient guarantee of salvation, but it also complicates our understanding of nature's role in the poem, or, to be more material, how he treats the durable, and not so, durable, forms of life. The advocacy behind "green" Romanticism is precisely in its energetic quest to re-materialize the experience of nature (with a small "n") without completely dismantling any broader humanistic vision. Without this continual interrogation, we may end up positing Wordsworthian nature as idealizing and monolithic and neglect the "fear and trembling Hope; Silence and foresight," which drives this experience. What drives the poem is an obsession with transience and decay that in turn mobilizes a monumentalizing impulse, which itself challenges the processes by which nature is

symbolically encoded. It is virtually impossible, in Wordsworth, to know exactly where the symbolic is encoded: is it "within" the physical or grafted on top of it? The manner in which Wordsworth mixes abstraction and concrete image further complicates this effort. Paul Hamilton suggests the weakness of the figural when he writes how "the ruined cottage and its overgrown garden cease to symbolize Margaret's decline and gradually and literally assimilate her" (37). The concept appears to cede to the material world after all.

I contrast the Pedlar's wandering to the rooted Margaret who remains in the cottage until her death. I also argue that the poem is set up to contrast the Pedlar's "errancy" (Collings's term) from Margaret's steadfastness, her own desire for permanence, which the Pedlar will in some ways sanction in his views of approving nature. However, in an earlier section of the poem the Pedlar is much less sanguine about the role nature may play in human existence: "The old man said, 'I see around me here / Things which you cannot see. We die, my friend, / Nor we alone, but that which each man loved / And prized in his peculiar nook of earth / Die with him, or is changed, and very soon / Even of the good is no memorial left'" (67-72). It is an ironic line, for to invoke the story of Margaret and, for Wordsworth, to enshrine it in words, is to memorialize it, thereby creating a monument in language. In fact, isn't a memorial possible only after the person or thing it gives to, is absent? Of course, it is possible that the aim of the Pedlar is not to build monuments but to efface them. For, at the end of his tale, his instruction to the narrator is to no longer "disturb the calm of Nature with our restless thoughts" (197-98) and they move toward a resting place for the evening, which implicitly suggests his responsibility to tell the story of Margaret has been fulfilled, and a kind of catharsis realized. The New Historicists, of course, have argued that this consolation effects a displacement of the material social reality in which Margaret lived. If so, then their retreat toward the "resting place," with its promise of material comforts, does appear to elide the "reality" of Margaret's suffering. Rather than try to rescue the poem from its redemptive impulse, we should recognize, as well, that the Pedlar's stay in the inn will be temporary. Tomorrow, or the next, he will resume his wandering. Where I agree with Levinson is in her claim that Wordsworth's poetry is one of displacement, which he attempts to resolve through various figural and metaphorical evasions. This is not explicitly political. Where I would stress is in the continual unwillingness to spell out, at least in the earlier work, the conditions which would satisfy this need. Displacing Margaret's suffering does not necessarily idealize nature, but instead, or in addition to, registers the impact of those displacements in the narrative uncertainty and implicit denial of its own compensatory strategies.

The problem today is what to make of Wordsworthian nature, which has long been severed from the *socius* and can no longer, it seems, function as an allegory of social disaffection and inequality? The initial point of departure I took was to contrast the Pedlar's wanderings with Margaret's unwillingness to leave the cottage which, the poem suggests, contributes to her death. If she had left her home to search elsewhere, it is possible she may have lived. More importantly, her decision to stay is coupled with a complete abandonment of responsibility towards her life or the world around her. We have also examined how nature is portrayed in two different ways: first, as destroyer of life, of Margaret's garden and, by extension, of her life, but also as a posited eternal nature, a nature of rebirth, as envisioned at the end of the poem by the Pedlar. I also contrast the "way-wandering" of the Pedlar, which appears stable and even diurnal, from the random, capricious wandering of Robert, who loses his balance and constancy. The Pedlar's four visits to the cottage are timed to neatly encapsulate stages in Margaret's decline and therefore appear timed to nature herself. We thus have two distinct views of wandering: the first is wayward, inconstant, as represented by Robert; and the second, deliberate and in tune with the seasons. The Pedlar's story is in fact timed to one single day-cycle and seeks natural break points at noon and at evening. Finally, we have seen the attempt to affirm Margaret's fate through an appeal to nature that seems strangely disingenuous or unfulfilling. The wandering itself becomes a type of permanence, as it is endlessly repeated: the trick may not be to wrest conceptual coherence from the poem, or to reduce it to some totalizing perspective. Rather, we may better succeed in appreciating the poem if we see it as a pure exercise in symbolic recognition — or, more precisely, symbolic misrecognition, in which the individual actors are unsure how to interpret their shared reality or truly imagine another's suffering. The narrator's struggle at the beginning to cross the "bare wide common" (19) while struggling against the "insect host" (23)

represent our own struggles to retrieve some fixed meaning from the text that would give it sense, and thereby create a permanent identity. What gives rise to this need is something absent from the text but no less deeply felt: suffering, the intensity of experience the text can only reference but not recreate. The pathos of that suffering is not reduced, or alleviated, by the fact it takes place prior to the events of the poem. Ultimately, the poem is deeply ontological, positing an essential condition of pain against which all future efforts at understanding, resolution, or peace seem conflicted and confused.

If we, as readers, are left to float, as our own wandering Pedlars, on the sea of signifiers without finding any permanent semantic mooring, Wordsworth does suggest that, language may provide a social bond, even if it does not lend itself towards a coherent philosophy or even allow us to make full sense of the phenomena of nature. At the ending of the 1798 version of the poem, after concluding his tale, the unnamed narrator returns to where the cottage once stood and, we are told, "fondly ... trace[s] with milder interest/That secret spirit of humanity/which still survived" (502-05). We are never informed what is meant by "secret spirit of humanity," and Wordsworth risks appearing trite here; however, the key word is "survived." What survives, after all our attempts to interpret it are exhausted, is the story itself, and the feeling of humanity the story, and by extension, the poem, which is something different from the Pedlar's immediate commentary about Margaret's having been reabsorbed into the natural world. The contrasting language, instead of any specific concepts they represent, renders the poem meaningful. Kurt Fosso has suggested that the loss of Margaret creates for the Pedlar, a solitary wanderer (105), a means of overcoming his loneliness by bonding with the narrator (97). If so, the social relationship, extended, arguably, to the reader through the poem, helps ameliorate the harshness of solitary wandering and creates a new social community, even though born/borne from another's corpse.

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