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ABSTRACT:	This dissertation traces the development of Wordsworth's 'commonplace oracle', figures of the poor and suffering who possess oracular authority not through divine inspiration but through the experience and endurance of suffering itself. The argument proceeds through three stages, examining how the relationship between the suffering figure and the oracular voice shifts from fusion to division to reintegration. Section I establishes the early commonplace oracle in poems such as 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' and 'Animal Tranquillity and Independence,' where mute vagrant figures offer the poet an alternative mode of perception grounded in contemplative constancy. Yet these figures possess no discursive wisdom of their own; the narrator must supply the interpretive authority they embody, a disjunction the poems themselves acknowledge and exploit. Section II traces this problem's amplification in *The Ruined Cottage*, where Wordsworth separates oracle from sufferer for the first time. The Pedlar's philosophic interpretation of Margaret's grief depends upon her depersonalization into a silent sign, exposing the paradox that his consolatory power derives from the very figure he hollows out through abstraction. Section III argues that *The Excursion* resolves this impasse not through a single authoritative voice but through the Pastor's willingness to let sufferers speak for themselves. Rather than interpreting suffering through philosophy or denying its expression altogether, the Pastor's epitaphic mode allows ambiguous utterance to admonish without resolving into doctrine. This 'midway' position appeals not to reason but to feeling in controlled contexts, perfecting the 'imaginative sympathy' Wordsworth had earlier struggled to achieve. By renouncing prophetic authority, Wordsworth disperses it among his readers, a strategic renunciation that becomes his final oracular act.

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Abbreviations and Editions:

The following edition was used for the poetry of Wordsworth throughout. References are given in parentheses in the main text: The Cornell Wordsworth, gen. ed. Stephen Maxfield Parrish, 21 vols. (Cornell UP, 1975-2007)

* * *

Borders: Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Borders of Vision* (Clarendon Press, 1982)

Excursion: William Wordsworth, 1814 Reading Text*, The Excursion,* ed. Sally Bushell, James Butler, and Michael Jaye (Cornell UP, 2007)

EY*: The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years, 1787-1805,* ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Chester Shaver (Clarendon Press, 1967)

IF: *The Fenwick Notes of William Wordsworth,* ed. Jared Curtis, 2nd ed. (e-book; Penrith, 2007)

LK: *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. H. Buxton Forman (1895, Reeves & Turner; rpt. 2005, Adamant Media)

MY: *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt (2 vols., Oxford UP, 1937)

OHW*: The Oxford Handbook of William Wordsworth,* ed. Richard Gravil and Daniel Robinson (Oxford UP, 2015)

Prose: *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth,* ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Symser, 3 vols. (Oxford UP, 1976)

RC*: The Ruined Cottage* and *The Pedlar, The Cornell Wordsworth,* ed. James Butler (Cornell UP, 1979)

I. Introduction

> And if with this
> I mix more lowly matter; with the thing
> Contemplated, describe the Mind and Man
> Contemplating; and who, and what he was,
> The transitory Being that beheld
> This Vision, – when and where, and how he lived; –
> Be not this labour useless.
>
> ('Prospectus', ll. 93-99)

Although Wordsworth has long been associated with the 'egotistical Sublime', he often gives the voice of wisdom to figures distinguished from himself and his own poetic identity.[1] The 'Cells, Oratories, and sepulchral Recesses' of his oeuvre are populated by decrepit beggars and wandering vagrants (including the Old Cumberland Beggar, Old Man Travelling, the Leech-Gatherer, and the Pedlar), who act in accordance with Nature and claim authority not from divine inspiration but from the experience and legacy of suffering. I call these figures 'commonplace oracles'. Wholly engaged in 'incidents and situations from common life,' they express themselves 'in a selection of language really used by men' (*Prose,* I, 123, 118).[2] Yet these figures are often transformed by the 'transparent veil' of the poet's consciousness (*Prelude,* V. 626), receiving 'a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way' (*Prose,* I, 124), so that each fulfils both impulses of Wordsworth's programme: the expression of common life and its imaginative elevation. Upon being encountered, such figures come to perform the office Wordsworth elsewhere claims as his own: to offer corrective wisdom as one of the 'Prophets of Nature'

[1] John Keats, letter to Richard Woodhouse (27 October 1818), *LK*, 210.
[2] These figures are drawn from real life. See Michael Brennan, 'Wordsworth's Characters', *OHW,* 254–267.

(*Prelude,* XIII. 435). Their function, I argue, is to reshape the way the poet perceives and relates to the experience of suffering, converting the bare fact of pain into something he can not only bear to contemplate, but elevate into consoling poetry.

Until Jerome McGann's *The Romantic Ideology*, poets were largely celebrated as oracles of culture, and studies of the Romantic oracle have remained author-centric. A canonical line of post-war criticism took Matthew Arnold's prediction that 'religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry' for granted, assuming the station of Coleridge's clerisy and ranking Wordsworth high amongst 'The Visionary Company'.[3] Arthur K. Moore opened his 1973 article on 'The Instruments of Oracular Expression' with the claim that 'Romanticism fabricated a poet of vast oracular powers', while David G. Riede concluded almost two decades later that Wordsworth's poetry 'is a window to the poet's "oracular mind," not to nature'.[4] These critics react to the poet-as-priest. Yet Wordsworth's most overt prophetic claims for himself, his rights as a 'chosen son' to speak 'things oracular' (*Prelude,* III. 82; XII. 252), are predominantly confined to a poem, *The Prelude*, unpublished during his lifetime. Fixed on that posthumous self-portrait, criticism has overlooked the humble oracles who provide the poet with visionary guidance.

Wordsworth's natural oracles drew contemporary derision for being drawn 'exclusively from the lower ranks of society'.[5] New Historicism, correcting that scorn, has been content to read them chiefly as aestheticized figures contributing, in David Simpson's influential term, to a 'Poetry of Displacement'.[6] Alex Dick, for example, follows Gary Harrison in reading such figures as 'beautiful silent sufferer[s]' unmoored from material

[3] Matthew Arnold, 'The Study of Poetry' in *Essays in Criticism* (Burt, 1865; rpt. Alpha, 2019), 280; Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company* (Cornell UP, 1961).
[4] Arthur K. Moore, 'The Instruments of Oracular Expression', *Diogenes*, Vol. 21, 82 (June 1973), 1; David G. Riede, *Oracles and Hierophants* (Cornell UP, 1991), 164.
[5] Francis Jeffrey, Review of '*The Excursion, Being a Portion of the Recluse, a Poem.* By William Wordsworth.' Edinburgh Review, 24 (November 1814), 5.
[6] David Simpson, *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination: The Poetry of Displacement* (Methuen, 1987).

reality.[7] Simpson's rubric encompasses McGann's use of the term in his analysis of *The Ruined Cottage* and underlies Riede's discussion of Wordsworth's oracular mediations, naming the process by which Wordsworth handles suffering in poems such as 'The Old Cumberland Beggar'.[8] But by approaching all of his sufferers as displaced socio-economic bodies, the historicist approach risks repeating, in a sympathetic key, the flattening Francis Jeffrey performed with hostility, missing the distinction on which this study turns. Beneath their shared poverty lie two distinct offices. Some, like Margaret, are 'silent sufferer[s]' whose grief is interpreted and 'displaced' by an oracular other. But others, like the early Old Man Travelling and the exemplary dead of *The Excursion*, are themselves a source of correction, capable of momentarily displacing the poet's own idealistic vision: their destitution enables them to become a 'silent monitor' to others ('Cumberland Beggar,' l. 115). What these poems obscure is less the actuality of suffering than the poet's fascinated anxiety before it. Wordsworth, as Kenneth Johnston observes, 'is not sure how to feel about the suffering his characters bespeak', and it is this unease – the discomfort of conferring upon mute figures a wisdom they may imply but cannot themselves express – that underlies the development of the commonplace oracle.[9]

The reason criticism has not attended to the commonplace oracle may be because the figure was never meant to look oracular at all. Ever since Milton silenced the Apollonian portals with his pronouncement that 'The Oracles are dumm', English poetry had grown wary of overt oracular representation that carried the whiff of pagan revival.[10] This aversion had come full circle by the second-generation of Romantics, who turned to classical prophecy to construct a mythopoetics free from Judaeo-Christian dogma. Yet for Wordsworth (and, to an

[7] Alex J. Dick, 'Poverty, Charity, Poetry: The Unproductive Labours of "The Old Cumberland Beggar"', *Studies in Romanticism* 39, 3 (2000), 371; Gary Harrison, *Wordsworth's Vagrant Muse* (Wayne State UP, 1994), 145.
[8] Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology* (University of Chicago Press, 1983), 84-90; Riede, 127-33.
[9] Kenneth R. Johnston, *Wordsworth and The Recluse* (Yale UP, 1984), 28.
[10] John Milton, 'On The Morning of Christ's Nativity', *Poems* (Raworth, 1645; rpt. Dent 1956), l. 173.

extent, Coleridge's daemonic Mariner), divine authority appears in the unlikely figure of the degraded, poverty-stricken, human form, a disjunction that paradoxically feeds into the oracular. As Hegel observed, the oracle's pronouncement holds its power precisely by remaining

> […] something natural and completely vague, a natural voice or word-sounds without any connection. In this obscurity of form the spiritual content is itself dark and therefore needs *clarification* and *explanation*. […] But although the explanation makes the inquirer aware of it in a spiritualized form, it nevertheless remains obscure and ambiguous.
>
> (*Aesthetics* I, 457).[11]

This is also the essential structure of the Wordsworthian encounter: the oracular figure is presented as both intensely naturalized and, in the mind of the poet, preternaturalized. The significance of the figure's muted, mundane appearance is obscure, and an interpretive act is required to spiritualize it. Yet 'the conferring, the abstracting, and the modifying powers' of imaginative interpretation carry the latent possibility of narratorial unreliability (*Prose,* III, 33). This leaves a residue of ambiguity that draws the reader into the work's completion, so that we come, as Scott Dykstra observes, to 'see' these figures and impute 'needs' to them as though they were persons rather than obscure literary representations.[12] The commonplace oracle's intermediateness and reticence are an early source of its suggestive force, and allow prophetic truth to 'be deflected, like a ray of light, in the medium of poetry,' whose 'intimations and ambiguities' conceal 'its repellent harshness'.[13] Wordsworthian obscurity – the charged ordinariness of 'visionary dreariness' (*Prelude,* XI, 311) – is not evasion but a means of encounter, allowing an otherwise unbearable truth, such as the naked fact of

[11] G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics*, tr. T. M. Knox, 2 vols (Clarendon Press, 1974–75), I, 457. For Hegel as a 'Romantic theoretician' see McGann, 46–47.
[12] Scott Dykstra, 'Wordsworth's "Solitaries" and the Problem of Literary Reference.' *ELH*, vol. 63 no. 4, (Johns Hopkins UP, 1996), 897-98.
[13] Plutarch, *Moralia*, (15 vols), tr. F. Cole Babbit (Harvard UP, 1957), V, 333-35.

suffering, to be approached at all. As Cleanth Brooks recognised, Wordsworth uses paradox in its productive Empsonian sense to show 'the relation between […] two modes of perception'.[14] The liminal commonplace oracle bridges this perceptual gap. He appears as if 'in a dream', but corrects the fanciful poet through his distinctly 'human strength, and strong admonishment' ('Resolution and Independence,' ll. 117, 119).

For Steven Knapp and other critics of the Wordsworthian sublime, these ambiguous figures are 'quasi-allegorical but ostensibly natural' personifications in the lineage of the Hebraic imagination.[15] Yet Romantic criticism of this vein, and its deconstructive inheritors, tends to conclude that such figures are self-reflexive allegories of the mind's very tendency to allegorise, and so amount to a hermeneutic dead end. This impasse between sign and referent is visible even in Geoffrey Hartman's landmark study, whose brief confrontation with these 'stately but static' figures leaves the question open: '[i]s Wordsworth aggrandizing the prophetic character of ordinary perception, or subduing an extraordinary perception' – are these encounters, in a sense, wish-fulfilments?[16] Jonathan Wordsworth, whose umbrella term 'borderers' first admitted these figures' relation to Wordsworthian vision as symbols of the threshold between this world and an imminent other, essentially concedes the latter.[17] He argues that they emerge in Wordsworth's poetry 'only when he has himself lost the power – or lost the faith that he has the power – of which they are symbolic'.[18] They constitute assertions of vision made in its absence.

While my argument shares Jonathan Wordsworth's recognition of liminality, the commonplace oracle as I conceive it performs not a lack of vision but its correction. The

[14] Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1947), 133.
[15] Steven Knapp, *Personification and the Sublime: Milton to Coleridge* (Harvard UP, 1985), 99-100.
[16] Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* (Methuen, 1987), 27; *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814* (Yale UP, 1971), 16.
[17] *Borders,* 214–15.
[18] *Borders*, 307.

figure redirects the poet toward the consoling value of 'ordinary perception' that, as Harold Bloom recognises, becomes 'a mode of salvation for Wordsworth, provided that we are awake fully to what we see.'[19] I depart from the term 'borderers', as well as the more popular 'solitaries', both of which ignore the teleology of these commonplace oracles. 'Borderers' extends to the animal, diluting the specifically human concern the figure seeks to resolve, while 'solitaries' excludes *The Excursion*'s most authoritative oracular voice, the married and communally minded Pastor. The commonplace oracle is a *coincidentia oppositorum* that locates vision in the mundane and self-consciously poses a problem that threatens to undermine its very representation: how a privileged poetic voice may depict the suffering of others without appropriation.

My argument proceeds through three stages, tracing the relation between the suffering figure and the oracular office as they are successively fused, divided, and reintegrated. Section I traces the emergence of Wordsworth's early commonplace oracle, in whom the experience of suffering and the power of admonishment co-exist, and who offers the poet an alternative mode of perception beyond the ordinary vision of the senses. But these figures have nothing particularly 'stately' to say: the narrator must supply the discursive wisdom they cannot, a disjunction the poems themselves acknowledge. The section ends on *Home at Grasmere*'s attempt to resolve this unease by ceasing to make such voices overtly oracular, at the cost of redemptive vision. Section II turns to *The Ruined Cottage*, where Wordsworth, separating oracle from sufferer for the first time, conceptualizes and displaces the suffering of a doomed other more abstractly. It exposes the paradox of the Pedlar's philosophy, which can hold only by depersonalising Margaret into an emblem of 'silent suffering' reabsorbed by Nature (*RC*, *MS.D.,* l. 233), yet draws its consolatory force from the ventriloquized testimony of the very figure it hollows out. Section III, on *The Excursion*, reads the proliferation of

[19] Bloom, 128.

competing oracular voices as staging the relativity of all interpretation. The poem's resolution, I argue, lies not in one system but in the Pastor's willingness to let the sufferers speak for themselves and reveal their own 'dim roads' to redemption.[20] Having separated out the privileged interpreter from the silent sufferer, Wordsworth yokes together the two poles through the epitaph form, creating a new poetic ideal for mediating – but not displacing – suffering.

[20] Paraphrase of 'the road is dim,' *The Excursion*'s repeated conceit for the circuitous path of life (VI. 845).

II. The Early Oracle

The early commonplace oracle derives stoical authority from its endurance of suffering, achieved by embodying an alternative mode of vision. The poet encounters figures who have gone beyond ordinary perception – the 'passing shews of being' accessible through the senses (*RC, MS.D.,* l. 522) – and, having attained complete composure, become 'insensibly subdued to settled quiet' ('Animal Tranquillity', l. 7). Often absorbed in arbitrary acts of 'idle computation' ('Cumberland Beggar', l. 12), these commonplace figures seem blind to events in the actual world, even as their naturalized descriptions place them distinctly within it. The poetic identity is positioned in contradistinction, the envious 'young behold[er]' of a 'peace so perfect' ('Animal Tranquillity', l. 13). But through the 'modifying powers' of the mind he can momentarily access and express this mode of vision, a process which Michael Brennan terms 'imaginative sympathy'.[21] This perceptual shift is more analogous to Keats's chameleon poetics than that 'egotistical Sublime' for which he disparages his precursor.[22] Even if, as Knapp argues, 'the discrepancy between two perceptions is taken to reveal the imagination's power', it is 'curiously autonomous' from the poet's own identity.[23] The mere presence of the commonplace oracle, who effortlessly endures worse suffering, alleviates the poet's overweening fancies by grounding his imagination in the serene sublimity of everyday experience.

'The Old Cumberland Beggar' ostensibly addresses the apostrophised 'Statesmen', promoting the social value of beggars and the instinctive charity they elicit. But this humanistic concern for outward reform coexists with a more subtle perceptual shift. The single-minded endurance of the Beggar derives from his 'fix'd and serious look,' whose

[21] Brennan, 256.
[22] Keats, *LK,* 210.
[23] Knapp, 108, 109.

downcast gaze remains entirely consistent – whether falling on a providential scrap of food or on 'one little span of earth' – in its unconsciousness 'of common and habitual sight' (ll. 11, 50, 48). For Wordsworth, such fixity does not imply the deathly stasis of an Urizen, but the constancy of vision undeterred by flux, 'the 'anchor' of the poet's 'purest thoughts' ('Tintern Abbey', l. 110). The strange implication that a 'little span of earth' is an *un*common sight signals an emergent instinct in Wordsworth which not only deems the overlooked and ordinary a valuable object of narrative poetry, but emphasizes the responsibility of perception in redefining what is valuable – a pattern the poem repeats for '[t]he class of Beggars to which the old man here described belongs'.[24] Like vagrants met upon the road, whose souls express the 'universal heart' of humanity, yet 'appear to have no depth at all / To vulgar eyes' (*Prelude,* XIII, 219, 167-8), the Cumberland Beggar simultaneously exemplifies how and what to observe. Inspired by his constancy, the lines of the poem themselves become his prospect:

> […] On the ground
>
> His eyes are turn'd, and, as he moves along,
>
> *They* move along the ground; and evermore,
>
> (ll. 45-47)

As 'His eyes' detach from his person '*[t]hey'* momentarily become our own, scanning the steady iambic tread that reveals only the unflinching progress of 'fix'd' vision. But the movement of verse, though repetitive, is not aimless. By never leaving 'the ground' our vision is perpetually stabilized, grounded not in the elusively appealing sights 'of hill and dale' (l. 49), but the unchanging basis and final destination of transitory things. Vision here

[24] See Wordsworth's defence of *The White Doe of Rylstone* in *MY,* I, 198.

becomes contemplative and selfless, uniting all perspectives 'in the eye of Nature' (l. 188), until the true prospect is revealed in the trochee, stretching 'evermore'. The paradox of eternity realized in 'one little span of earth' is rendered possible through the contemplative mode of vision. The 'common and habitual sight' of particular objects becomes detached from rational association, as

> […] seeing still,
>
> And never knowing that he sees, some straw,
>
> Some scatter'd leaf,
>
> (ll. 53-55)

passes through the Beggar's gaze, 'still' implying the unwavering fixity of continuous contemplation. Never conceptualizing the causal relations of objects he observes, the Beggar looks through the 'scatter'd' and disaggregated forms of transitory life to 'the same line' of the open road (l. 57). The road was always for Wordsworth 'like a guide to eternity' (*Prelude,* XII. 151), which the poem's naturalized vision, turned towards it, now realizes. The final couplet –

> As in the eye of Nature he has liv'd
>
> So in the eye of Nature let him die.
>
> (ll. 188-89)

– returns to the enduring presence of Nature, within which the antithetical symmetry of life and death is united in a single, unchanging vision. Human time cannot effect the oracular figure who 'so old, seems not older now' (l. 23), for death is not a negation of life

but its seamless continuity; his presence (like that of the Leech-Gatherer who 'not stood, not sat, but "*was*"') remains always 'now […] in the eye of Nature'.[25]

The poem's perceptual mode does not register the Beggar as a sufferer at all; his existence is, like that of the birds he feeds, part of the harmonious '[s]truggle' of Nature (l. 167), and he is unconscious of self-centred suffering. At every level his presence invites community – perceptually, organically, and charitably – so that it is society which will suffer, should the way of life he symbolizes be destroyed. Yet this conclusive vision is not the Beggar's to express but the poet's to confer. By making his oracular figure stand for a whole 'class' and mode of being, the poem locates its most authoritative perspective not in the Beggar's downcast gaze, nor 'in the eye of Nature', but in the 'privileged gaze of the external spectator' who moralizes upon his brief experience of 'imaginative sympathy'.[26]

The gap between the realism and the sublimity of Wordsworth's commonplace figures is the very thing which imbues them with an oracular aura. In muting them, Wordsworth seems to displace 'the actualities of human suffering', so that 'the imagination itself rather than the objects upon which it is employed becomes [...] the subject of the work', which risks flattening his figures into conciliatory types.[27] Yet it is precisely through representing the endurance of suffering that Wordsworth seeks to construct, in Riede's words, 'a wandering character – not the poet's own – who would speak with authority, from settled convictions, a character who would give human strength by apt admonishment.'[28] By self-consciously performing the imaginative modifications that 'half-create' how we 'perceive' (*Tintern Abbey,* ll. 107-8), he embeds a hint, or anxiety, of his own misinterpretation, the sense which Charles Lamb identifies as the mind 'knowingly pass[ing] a fiction upon

[25] William Wordsworth, letter to Sara Hutchenson (15 June 1802), *EY,* 306.
[26] Harrison, 143.
[27] Riede, 148; Willard Sperry, *Wordsworth's Anti-Climax* (Cambridge, Mass., 1935), 23-28. See also Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford UP, 1989), 322.
[28] Riede, 117.

herself'.[29] Wordsworth keeps alive the tragic potential of suffering even while embodying its transcendence in the figures who admonish him.

The Cumberland Beggar's transcendence of mutability is enabled by his muteness, which allows the creative imagination to shape his presentation. But when Wordsworth grants utterance to his commonplace oracle in 'Animal Tranquillity', it is the poet's own idealising authority that is thrown into question. This parallel figure, an 'overflowing from the old Cumberland Beggar', complicates the image of an ostensibly naturalized body by allowing for agentic speech, and the poem explores the problems thereby entailed.[30] The Old Man enters more wholly integrated into the 'Animal Tranquillity' of Nature than his counterpart: the natural world is unconscious of the man. But where the Cumberland Beggar retains his enigmatic significance through what others make of his helpless appearance,[31] the Old Man appears united by

> […] one expression; every limb,
>
> His look, and bending figure, all bespeak
>
> A man who does not move with pain, but moves
>
> With thought – He is insensibly subdued
>
> To settled quiet: he is one by whom
>
> All effort seems forgotten,
>
> (ll. 4-9)

[29] Charles Lamb, letter to Wordsworth (January 30, 1801), *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb: 1796-1801* (Cornell UP, 2018), 265.
[30] IF note to 'Animal Tranquillity,' 150.
[31] Other than the speaker, the noisy Post-boy who '[t]urns … and passes gently by, without a curse' (ll. 41-2), and the sauntering horseman's 'look, / Sidelong and half-reverted' (ll. 31-2), are both modified by the beggar's unassertiveness.

His unity of purpose is not subjectively experienced (as it is for the Cumberland Beggar, whose vision hinges upon the poet's sympathetic inference) but outwardly readable upon 'every limb'. Like the fractal unity of Nature, his 'one expression' repeats at every scale, its simplicity coexisting with enigmatic self-sufficiency: the meaning 'bespeak[s]' simply what he is – 'A man'. This 'settled quiet' is fixed so strongly that it extends to the natural world, where birds – themselves 'insensibly subdued' – 'regard him not' (l. 2). The unifying principle is that he 'moves / With thought', transcending the 'pain' of worldly suffering. Immune to the sibilant subtleties of sensation, he yet resides *in*-sense, mirroring how, while deeply naturalized, he preternaturally escapes the confines of transient flux. Paradoxically, this vitalizing 'thought' is itself a *memento mori*. As the poet inquires '[t]he object of his journey' (l. 16), shifting towards the figure's worldly relevance to the 'I' of speaker and reader, he is admonished: 'I am going many miles to take / A last leave of my son […] dying in an hospital' (ll. 17-18, 20). Flattened by prosaic monosyllables that emphasize a painfully dragged-out 'hospital', the reminder uncovers the source of the poet's former idealizations as his own desire to transcend pain and the fear of death. One cannot, the Old Man suggests, so easily deny suffering. The voice of the commonplace figure cuts through what Moore terms 'poetry which exploits perplexity', questioning its tendency to elevate the idealized object through imaginative mystification.[32]

It is characteristic of the commonplace oracle that such deflation deepens rather than dissolves its authority; human suffering is the basis of its oracular force. Its grounded honesty may cost the poet his authority, but (as with the triangulation of poet, Pedlar, and Margaret in *The Ruined Cottage*) the observing poet is identified with the reader.[33] We share his preternatural reification of the Old Man, developing from the unconscious position of the

[32] Moore, 29.
[33] J. Wordsworth, (1969), 92-99.

birds to an awareness, even acceptance, of 'peace so perfect' (l. 13). That Wordsworth's 'stately but static figures barely differentiate themselves from their landscape' – are, as Hartman notes, so 'hard to *see*' – enables their 'ontological ambiguity': we suspend the distance between reader and text and attribute humanity to them, supplying, like the poet, our own imaginative 'colouring'.[34] Yet his mortal admonishment forces a re-reading with a new perspective: the animating thought becomes death, and with it the figure continues to move. The kernel of the commonplace oracle is the mysterious endurance of mankind. The authenticity of the Old Man's humble speech does not undercut the poem that precedes it: though his words seem at odds with the 'one expression' his limbs 'bespeak', their steady simplicity and measured apostrophe emphasise his heroic endurance. His words juxtapose his composure with the experiential baggage that necessitates it.

As readers we experience the revisionary force of the Old Man's utterance – are forced to recognise how perception guides interpretation. Therein lies the oracular force of Wordsworth's commonplace encounters: what appears to mean one thing proves far more ambiguous, and our usual guide – the authoritative poetic voice – cedes its authority to the very figure who undermines it. This recalls the oracular structure Hegel describes, where the explanation itself 'remains obscure and ambiguous.'[35] Wordsworth, by creating such a figure to mediate suffering, provides it with alluring ambiguity but unearths an intractable problem. To give the figure articulate wisdom is, as Henry Crabb Robinson observed of the Leech-Gatherer, to grant it 'powers of mind which his original did not possess', in effect 'silence[ing]' the actual man in the act of elevating him.[36] Yet to leave that wisdom unspoken is to forfeit the consolation the figure exists to provide.

[34] Hartman, (1987), 27; Dykstra, 898-903.
[35] Hegel, 457.
[36] Henry Crabb Robinson, *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence,* ed. Thomas Sadler, 3rd ed. (Macmillan, 1872), I, 278; Richard Gravil, *Wordsworth's Bardic Vocation*, *1787–1842* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 146–7.

Incorporating the poem into *Lyrical Ballads* two years later, Wordsworth converted the Old Man's direct speech into reported speech, displacing the oracle's autonomy and reorienting authority to the poet's creative imagination. In *Poems* of 1815 he omitted the final six lines altogether, flattening the Old Man into an idealized symbol of transcended suffering by avoiding the complications its direct experience creates. The original's strength lay in its honesty: the reader, like the speaker, is left unmoored by the Old Man's voice, returning to his fixity with deeper appreciation and doubt as to its realization. The early commonplace oracle offers the possibility of transcendence even as he grounds its difficulty. Yet while the poem's nuance is eroded in revision, the recurrence of such figures in *The Prelude* and 'Resolution and Independence' implies that Wordsworth, even at his most rhetorically powerful, cannot extricate himself from the system of ambiguous admonishing encounters he invents.

His most obvious failure to separate an Edenic vision of everyday life from the reticent oracles which support it occurs in *Home at Grasmere*. Here the poet works, in Jonathan Wordsworth's analysis, 'very much on his own, supported neither by imagination […] nor by the One Life'.[37] His treatment of '[a]n awful voice […] from the mountains' (ll. 407, 409) – a shepherd's cry, appealing candidate for the commonplace oracle – tempts him with sublime revelation:

> That voice, the same, the very same, that breath
>
> Which was an utterance awful as the wind,
>
> Or any sound the mountains ever heard
>
> (ll. 420-2)

Yet he soberly concludes that, rather than seeking providential guidance,

[37] *Borders,* 356.

[…] I look for man,

The common creature of the brotherhood,

But little differing from man elsewhere

(ll. 433-35)

The oracular implications are present, a naturalized and ambiguous 'utterance' corresponding to the classical standard, yet the relationship of shepherd to sublime Nature remains mere simile.[38] Even in its universality there is a mundane democracy: the 'voice' was like 'any [*other*] sound', speech 'little differing from man elsewhere'. Stripped of imaginative 'colouring', the 'real language of men' speaks, unsurprisingly, of 'common life' (*Prose,* I, 151, 123). That is the ideal to which Wordsworth has turned, yet the poem's honesty is 'hardly prophetic or redemptive', falling short of his ambitious Prospectus.[39]

The cost of this hesitancy becomes plain when the shepherd is set beside his counterpart in Book VIII of *The Prelude*. There, moving on from simile, Wordsworth elevates the shepherd into an oracular guide for 'Man suffering among [the] awful Powers and Forms' of Nature:

your snows and streams

Ungovernable, and your terrifying winds,

That howl'd so dismally […]

There 'tis the Shepherd's task the winter long

To wait upon the storms: of their approach

[38] Hegel, 457.
[39] *Borders,* 127.

Sagacious, from the heights he drives his Flock

Down into sheltering coves,

(VIII, 213, 355-360)

The terrifying Burkean sublimity is no longer imaginatively interwoven with the shepherd's speech; his figure is now 'purified, / Remov'd, and at a distance that was fit', a picturesque signifier silently emanating meaning (*Prelude,* VIII. 439-41). As an ideal type, the shepherd has become an interpreter of Nature. 'Sagacious' and isolate he reads her signs, serving an overlapping imaginative and Christological function. His reported experience, having suffered Nature's 'awful Power and Forms', empowers him to shelter his helpless flock – the poet counts himself among them – and the problem of vocal autonomy is elided by symbolic flattening. The shepherd need not speak, as he possesses 'a symbolic, not an actual, wisdom'.[40] This instance marks two related developments to Wordsworth's commonplace oracle.

The first, as Jonathan Wordsworth argues, is a movement from the individual towards the typological, evident in the revisions to 'Animal Tranquillity' and in increasingly 'self-enclosed' characters such as the blind Beggar.[41] The second – largely overlooked – is an increasing concern with the oracular interpretation of natural signs, rather than their embodiment in characters of wisdom. This precipitates a distinct kind of commonplace oracle, set apart to interpret a suffering it observes rather than endures. This figure displaces the anxiety Wordsworth's early oracle could not resolve, providing a guide who corrects the readings of the naïve poet (and his readership) by incorporating suffering within a justifiable philosophic scheme.

[40] *Borders*, 10.
[41] For a discussion on the blind Beggar and Cumberland Beggar's 'preternaturally self-enclosed' resistance to interpretation, see Dykstra, 896-900. The term is a paraphrase of Knapp, p. 99.

III. *The Ruined Cottage*

The construction of an authoritative oracular voice unidentified with either the poet or the sufferer begins in 1797 with *The Ruined Cottage.* Expanding upon the bare tale of suffering in *Incipient Madness*, the poem's early drafts are a stark study of Margaret's ruin, ending without consolation: 'here she died, / Last human tenant of these ruined walls' (*MS.A.,* ll. 741-2). Confronted with suffering of this order, Wordsworth returned, as Stephen Gill reminds us, not 'to answer the unanswerable question', but rather to work out how to understand, respond to, and write about it.[42] The intradiegetic narrator of the Pedlar enters to buffer that uncertainty, mediating Wordsworth's fascination with pathological states, in Paul Fry's phrase, 'by giving them over to another, possibly unreliable voice'.[43] He accordingly becomes the focal point of every subsequent revision, acquiring a genealogy of his own mind and a reconciling conclusion.[44] The intention, Johnston argues, is 'to invest the Pedlar with philosophic – that is, metaphysical – authority that would make him a plausible interpreter of Margaret's sufferings. Without such interpretative authority, her suffering raised too negatively questions of the worth of human life'.[45]

Yet this authority comes at a price, for it 'entails a great deal of prior insulation from [suffering's] effects': positioned *ab extra*, the Pedlar reinterprets Margaret's grief only in her absence, his ventriloquism asserting above all 'the recalcitrant inaccessibility' of the other.[46] By making the Pedlar, as Dorothy notes, 'the *most*, considerable part of the Poem', Wordsworth can read Margaret's particular grief as a sign extending beyond her own experience to a larger pantheistic pattern, even as his own identity – the extradiegetic poet –

[42] Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth's Revisitings* (Oxford UP, 2011), 67-68
[43] Paul H. Fry, 'The Pedlar, the Poet, and *The Ruined Cottage*', *OHW,* 366.
[44] James Butler, *RC,* 15.
[45] Johnston, 20.
[46] Johnston, 25; Edward E. Bostetter, *The Romantic Ventriloquists: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Byron*, rev. ed. (University of Washington Press, 1975), 68.

suffers in sympathy.[47] In the Pedlar, Wordsworth fashions an ideal oracular interpreter equal to the impenetrability of suffering, which 'is permanent, obscure, and dark, / And shares the nature of infinity' (*The Borderers,* III, 409-10). Such unanswerability is itself an oracular quality. The obscurity of suffering, like the ambiguous natural signs of Margaret's ruined garden that express it, demand the Pedlar's interpretation to be rendered conceivable.

The Pedlar's opening lines distinguish him as both a privileged perceiver and an authority on mortality: 'I see around me here, / Things which you cannot see: we die, my Friend' (*MS.D.,* ll. 67-8). Like Tiresias, he was granted 'an ear which deeply felt / The voice of Nature in the obscure wind' (*MS.B.,* ll. 77-8), and like Lynceus, 'had an eye which evermore / Looked deep into the shades of difference / As they lie hid in all exterior forms' (*MS.B.,* ll. 94-96). To find the 'voice of Nature' in the 'wind' may seem tautologous, until one sees that it is not heard but 'felt' – as with the 'gentle breeze' of the *Prelude* (I, 1), to read it literally is to observe only 'exterior forms', whose 'deep' meanings remain 'obscure'.[48] For Wordsworth, an avowed Prophet of Nature, the same holds true for the natural utterances his poetry sought to recreate and, in part, replace.[49] As Frederick Garber observes, Wordsworth's focus is not on the object itself but the 'the feeling therein developed [which] gives importance to the action and situation' (*Prose,* I, 128).[50] The Pedlar's oracular authority likewise derives from his clarity of introspection. Acutely aware of his inner nature ('often on this cottage do I muse / As on a picture, till my wiser mind / Sinks, yielding to the foolishness of grief' [*MS.D.,* 117-19]) he is able to witness mental phenomena in perspective. By seeing through such obscure 'shades of difference' with detachment, he perceives the harmony underlying the internal and external worlds.

[47] Dorothy Wordsworth, letter to Mary Hutchenson (5 March 1798), *EY,* 176.
[48] M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (Norton, 1971), 75.
[49] Riede, 150-156.
[50] Frederick Garber, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Encounter* (University of Illinois Press, 1971)

His perceptiveness and oracular force are first showcased through metanarrative. By picturing himself creating a static 'picture' of the past (within poet's framing memory) the Pedlar self-reflexively flags the recursive dangers of his method – why '[i]t were a wantonness' (*MS.D.,* l. 221). The 'static' isolation of an ideal memory constitutes a hopeless attempt to negate the change Nature has worked upon reality – a mistake the poet makes midway, sinking unwittingly towards grief and away from the redeeming perspective of the 'eye of Nature'. The Pedlar thus forewarns us of the route to Margaret's stasis of suffering, the compulsion to turn from present to past, neglecting the growth that change brings. Yet he also allows himself that sympathy, if in a detached manner, preconditionally allying himself with the poet. This initial admission of suffering, which cunningly ushers in a moral judgement, 'foolishness', prepares us to countenance its reconfiguration into an acceptable part of Nature's pattern.[51]

The Pedlar is exemplary from the first, and his oracular interpretation of obscure natural signs is exhibited by his sensitivity to the garden rather than the cottage as the site where Wordsworthian happiness, the reciprocity between man and nature, decays. Upon his second visit, the house 'in its outward look appeared / As chearful as before; in any shew / Of neatness little changed' (*MS.D.,* ll. 305-7), associating false appearances with 'passing shews of being', and implying – as with his first speech – that one must look beyond the seemingly revealing surface of 'four naked walls' to the essential truth (*MS.D.,* l. 31). Wordsworth's languid enjambment is checked by heavy caesura as the Pedlar confronts 'her garden. – It was chang'd' (*MS.D.,* l. 313). The abrupt break delivers the verdict before his catalogue of overgrowth and neglect can spell it out, so that the line does not describe his interpretive sensitivity so much as demonstrate it. The pattern is repeated upon his third visit, as he

[51] Jonathan Wordsworth, *Music of Humanity* (Nelson, 1967), 92.

[…] saw

More plainly still that poverty and grief

Were now come nearer to her: the earth was hard,

With weeds defaced

(*MS.D.,* ll. 412-15)

By prefacing the sign with the Pedlar's interpretation in definitive, simplistic language, Wordsworth bypasses the problem that '[n]either poverty nor grief can logically be deduced from hard earth and weeds,' because in the rhetorical pattern of the poem – its recurrent return to the relationship between humanity and Nature – 'one accepts the evidence without question.'[52] The Pedlar becomes the hierophant of that relationship, justifying, as Milton does for God, the ways of Nature to man. Objective as his philosophy appears, he retains an interpretive agency in the formulaic delivery of his auguries, which pronounce meaning before the signs that occasion it, making their significance seem self-apparent. His focus on organic signs obfuscates, in McGann's terms, the 'nexus of historical relations' underpinning the poem's conception, and the Historicist charge of displacement is strongly felt.[53] The 'weeds' which overrun the ruined cottage obscure its material reality, speaking not to a specific historical moment but the general dissolution of all moments, the erasure of history itself: 'that which each man loved / And prized in his peculiar nook of earth / Dies with him' (*MS.D.,* ll. 69-71). Similarly, the success of the Pedlar's vision rests upon how convincingly he can transform a painful, personal sympathy with Margaret, remembered as an animate individual, to a wider impersonal love for the whole of Nature to which she now belongs as an inanimate part.

[52] J. Wordsworth, (1967), 115.
[53] McGann, 54, 82-85.

That transformation is worked, above all, upon Margaret herself. For his philosophy to hold, the Pedlar must construct Margaret not as a fleshed-out individual but a 'beautiful silent sufferer', whose reticence and ghostly liminality require his interpretation for the poem's satisfactory completion.[54] The early drafts feature no description of her at all – the Pedlar's meditations on the garden rather paint her by proxy – and, as Jonathan Wordsworth has shown, much of her pathos accumulates as a result of Robert's more detailed deracination, which subtly transfers the reader's sympathy onto her.[55] Margaret is, moreover, introduced as absent, the refrain 'She is dead' tolling twice at the line's own termination (*MS.D.,* ll. 103, 108), arresting the verse before its parallel images of encroaching decay. The first is of the body, '[t]he worm […] on her cheek' invasively reducing her flesh to its rightful property (*MS.D.,* l. 104), the second of the dwelling, given over to the 'doleful creatures' of a desolate Babylon and overrun '[w]ith weeds and the rank spear-grass' (*MS.D.,* l. 108).[56] Margaret and her home have become as much the property of Nature as the Cumberland Beggar and Old Man Travelling have in the eye of the poet. She remains, recycled, in non-human form. As with her garden, the oracle begins with a conclusion before expounding upon its sign, and what appears a personal elegy depersonalizes its subject into inanimate object through repetition; each pronouncement hands the line off to the non-human that assimilates it.

As with the 1800 revision of 'Animal Tranquillity' which displaces the suffering oracle's immediate agency, Margaret can only speak through ghostly ventriloquisms. The poem's realism, bolstered by seemingly insignificant details, makes us forget that Margaret's experience is mediated by two fictitious narrators – that Wordsworth (as exhibited so

[54] Dick, 371.
[55] A description is not added until *MS.E.* (1800-2), and then merely stresses her love and potential for joy, the two things which make her story tragic. See J. Wordsworth, (1967), 130-3.
[56] *Isaiah,* XIII. 20-2.

brilliantly in *The Thorn*) can contrive complex games of Chinese whispers. What Margaret vocalises as direct speech is itself reported, and occupies, alongside her character, the same liminal position as the Leech-Gatherer, 'not all alive nor dead' but something in-between ('Resolution and Independence', l. 71). Both are reticent figures made significant by an imagination not their own. But where the presence of the Leech-Gatherer offers a corrective the poet who beholds him directly, the significance of Margaret's absence reaches the poet only through the Pedlar who interprets and expresses her. She cannot be the oracle of this encounter but its occasion, a sign that the Pedlar construes. Her spectrality is heightened by being half-recollected to life by memory, and thus her awareness – that 'I am changed,' – seems self-reflexive:

> I have slept
>
> Weeping, and weeping I have waked; my tears
>
> Have flow'd as if my body were not such
>
> As others are, and I could never die.
>
> (*MS.D.,* ll. 352, 354-57)

Her sorrow, like that of *The Borderers*, is made infinite through repetitive endurance, flattening the regenerative force of Nature's diurnal time and interpenetrating all states of being. Reanimated as an emblem of such suffering, her instinct is proven right: the 'body', no longer her own, exists only of words and images (like 'four naked walls', exposed for us to see), and thus 'c[an] never die' as long as her story is retold. This marks, for Alan Liu, a case of textual profiteering, as the Pedlar leverages Margaret's absence by resurrecting her into a generalized symbol of suffering which supports his own philosophic authority.[57] Having

[57] Liu, 346.

detached his heroine from the particularities of ordinary experience, the Pedlar thus allows himself to muse on

> […] one
>
> By sorrow laid asleep or borne away,
>
> 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.
>
> (*MS.D.,* ll. 820-5)

Her haunting liminality, like the experience of suffering (of which he partakes: '[w]hy should a tear be in an old man's eye?' [*MS.D.,* l. 192]), is not denied so much as reconfigured. The repetition asserts her continuing existence against the poem's early refrain that trumpeted her death, and the ambiguous qualification (of 'something' enduring) accepts a change in form but not in essence. The Pedlar does not deny that Margaret suffered and 'slept / Weeping,' but entertains the possibility that she was 'borne away,' a phrase which Jonathan Wordsworth reads as a self-deceptive faerie-land solution, ignoring the metempsychotic pun that, in the poem's pantheistic context, implies rebirth.[58] Continuity within change is a power Wordsworth associates with Nature (whose 'Function never dies', ['After-Thought', l. 6]), signalling that through Margaret's death and decay she is *re*-'*born*e' into harmony with the principle of being. Combined with the eremite's gaze into futurity, the poem transfuses our personal sympathy for the sufferer into an almost scriptural sense of certainty that, out of context, we may be inclined to doubt (knowing, after all, that her husband can never return).

[58] J. Wordsworth, (1967), 148.

The ‘conferring, the abstracting, and the modifying powers’ of the Pedlar’s oracular interpretation present Margaret ‘[l]ike one whom I had met with in a dream; / Or like a man from some far region sent, / To give me human strength, and strong admonishment’ (‘Resolution and Independence’*,* ll. 110-12), in order to recall the poet, the reader, and even the Pedlar himself, from having ‘turned aside in weakness’ from Nature’s equipoise (*MS.D*., l. 954).

Through the development of *The Ruined Cottage*, Wordsworth separates out the two figures on which ‘the FIRST GENUINE PHILOSOPHIC POEM’ will come to depend: the commonplace oracular voice, whose authority rests on an avowed clarity of perception licensing it to interpret the obscure, and the suffering subject whose displaced experience supplies the very sign that voice exists to construe.[59] The relationship between them is not one of disinterested witness but of mutual constitution. The Pedlar’s resolution relies on ‘converting the events of Margaret’s life into abstractions’ yet draws its consolatory power and persuasive force from the quasi-experiential testimony of the figure it has hollowed out.[60] For Riede, this abstracting separation of authority from experience underlies a development in Wordsworth’s poetry that confers oracular power upon a mediating figure in order to construct ‘the authoritative poetic character, “Wordsworth,”’ hero of *The Prelude*’s ‘personal myth of the oracular self.’[61] Yet *The Ruined Cottage* did not lead directly to *The Prelude* but became *The Excursion*, whose chorus of authoritative voices unsettles the pantheistic certainty of the exemplary Pedlar – indeed, of any interpretive lens – and relocates authority in the everyday experience of ordinary lives. The actualities of human suffering, which first prompted Wordsworth’s beggar studies and became gradually displaced by his own revisions,

[59] S. T. Coleridge, *Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose,* ed. Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano (Norton, 2003), 544.
[60] David Perkins, *Wordsworth and The Poetry of Sincerity* (Harvard UP, 1964), 116.
[61] Riede, 117-18.

are re-placed at the centre of the poem, where philosophy is shown to rely on the mute sufferers whose stories necessitate its pronouncement.

IV. *The Excursion*

As we have seen, the locus of authority in Wordsworth's encounter poetry shifts from the enigmatic presence of the commonplace figure to its oracular interpretation via the storyteller. *The Excursion*, in its ambitions to make public the personal vision of *The Prelude* and *Home at Grasmere*, develops a network of distinct interpretive voices – the Wanderer (formerly the Pedlar), the Solitary, and the Pastor – whose readings of suffering diverge along a single axis: the distance each keeps from the sign he reads.[62] Wordsworth dramatizes the central problem of inter-subjective communication: 'how acquire', wonders the Wanderer, 'The inward principle, that gives effect / To outward argument' (V. 571-3) – how, amid multiple convincing interpretations, how does one arrive at or communicate truth? The poem asks this question as much of itself as of its oracular figures, and its answer lies not in the interpreters themselves but the commonplace stories which they discuss. Where the Wanderer interposes his philosophy between Margaret and the reader and the Solitary deconstructs all authority, the Pastor effaces himself, allowing the embedded narratives of the sufferers – tales that shape 'not an ideal but a storied landscape' – to admonish us directly.[63] Through him, the impulse to philosophize *about* suffering is corrected, returning to the willingness to be present *with* suffering initially found in 'Animal Tranquillity'.

Critics have tended to read these embedded narratives in the interpretive vein of the Wanderer (when sympathetic to the Romantic ideology) or the Solitary (when taking a deconstructive approach).[64] But the poem comes to favour the Pastor, whose unprescriptive narration disperses the overzealous 'colouring' of imaginative interpretation that risks displacing the humanity of its silent sufferers. Where the Pedlar construed the obscure sign,

[62] Sally Bushell, *Re-Reading the Excursion* (Ashgate, 2002), 231.
[63] Hartman, (1971), 207.
[64] Abrams, 138-40; Alison Hickey, *Impure Conceits* (Stanford UP, 1997), 143.

the Pastor leaves it 'dim' (VI. 845), allowing the unmediated utterance of suffering to admonish without resolving into doctrine. The epitaph, which by 1810 has become Wordsworth's 'epitome of poetic language', is the logical terminus of the early commonplace oracle.[65] It offers otherworldly admonition through 'shadowy interposition', uniting 'the worlds of the living and the dead' (*Prose,* II, 60) – contraries co-existing in the figures of the Leech-Gatherer, Old Man Travelling, and the Cumberland Beggar. While the 'mute inglorious Milton[s]' of *The Excursion* seem to exist to be interpreted, their cumulative impression on the mind of the poet culminates in the feeling that they simply *are*, like the forms of Nature with whom they form a community.[66] Without this grounding in ordinary lived experience, Wordsworth suggests, philosophy is unmoored: '[g]ive us, for our abstractions, solid facts' the Wanderer asks the Pastor, '[f]or our disputes, plain pictures' (V. 637-8). The poem offers not one authoritative interpretation but, through the Pastor, an interlocking community of the living and the dead, standing finally as an epitaph to a vanishing way of relating to our surroundings, our sufferings, and one another.

Each of the poem's interpretive voices become hierophants of their own philosophical systems by offering divergent approaches to the poem's primary natural signifier: the earth, and our relation to it. The Wanderer proves an apt interpreter of natural signs, and his resolution to Margaret's tale – that 'She sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here' (I. 941) – epitomizes his approach. The metaphor of sleep carries the possibility of waking, marking death as a transitory but necessary phase in the cycle of life, and signals through its circadian associations a return to natural rhythms (separation from which entails the kind of suffering exhibited by Robert, who uneasily 'blended … the various tasks / Of summer, autumn, winter, and of spring' [I. 576-7]). The earth takes on the 'calm' aspect we would expect to be

[65] Frances Ferguson, *Language as Counter-Spirit* (Yale UP, 1977), 33.
[66] The phrase is Thomas Gray's, from his *Elegy* (1751; rpt. Augustan Reprint Society, 1951), l. 59; the figures *are* like the Leech-Gatherer simply '*was*'.

attributed to Margaret, implying a productive, communal relationship whereby the spoils of 'peace' are disseminated like nutrients into the soil. His statement is frontloaded at every hermeneutic level to express his pantheistic 'natural wisdom' that 'peace' is found via integration into Nature (I. 601).

The Solitary, echoing the Wanderer's opening speech, professes his own powers of perception for a wholly antithetical purpose: 'You never saw, your eyes did never look / On the bright Form of Her whom once I loved' (III. 480-81).[67] Where the Wanderer's seeks to give his listeners the 'power to see / Even as he sees' (IX. 465-6), the Solitary's repeated negations emphasise the impossibility of 'the imperfect sounds of this discourse' communicating that which we 'never saw' (III. 604). His descriptions are appropriately abstract, evoking only his wife's development through various social roles from 'Bride' through 'Partner' to 'Mother' (III. 504, 551, 582), and the minimal story of her descent into 'a gulph obscure of silent grief' recalls that of Margaret, eliciting a comparison between the interpretations of the two embedded narrators (III. 675).

Where the Wanderer's memory can convey to his present mind 'an image of tranquillity' (I. 946), rereading the weeds which formerly stood for Margaret's suffering as harmonious aspects of 'the living God' (*Pedlar,* l. 203), the Solitary's response 'cannot be reviewed in thought; / Much less, retraced in words' (III. 680-1). Obscure natural signs are deemed as meaningless as their human counterparts: Margaret's articulate garden is exchanged for 'this mute earth' (V. 250), and death is registered as what Alison Hickey terms the 'ultimate unfulfilled figure' of the promise of life, whose 'whole course, / To this conclusion, deviates from the line […] proposed to all / At her aspiring outset' (V. 258-61).[68] By ironically appropriating the stream metaphor of the 'pure course of human life' that runs

[67] Bushell, 192.
[68] Hickey, 80.

throughout the poem (VI. 1172), the Solitary reveals the relativity of subjective interpretation, and points to decisively un-romantic sepulchral remains as 'dread proof' of his despondent vision (V. 255). Yet his hesitancy toward the lexical grave as 'a volume, shut' belies a fear that the tomb is, in fact, filled with meaning (V. 252), 'shut' marking suppression rather than vacancy. The Solitary's cynical conditionality (hinging on 'if' and its correspondent modal verbs) withholds interpretation not because there is nothing to read, but because the 'yielding [of] its contents to eye and ear' is unbearable for one who has not only 'suffered' but continually 'suffer[s] now' (V. 253; III, 485-6).

Unsurprisingly, the Solitary's recollections cannot allow themselves to fully recognise his wife's humanity, because to re-live her life would mean accepting her death. She enters the poem as a flat and unsatisfactory epitaph, an oracle of nothing more than the Solitary's own repression, because, unlike the 'laissez-faire' Wanderer, he cannot detach himself to the ideal 'midway point' which Wordsworth finds essential to the form (*Prose,* II, 53).[69] What seems a generalized lament in lacklustre verse becomes, upon closer inspection, that deliberate withholding of emotion found so powerfully in *Michael*, which expresses the most through what it refuses to say.[70]

The subversive potential of the Solitary's displaced wife reflects the residual power that silent sufferers hold over narratives which, self-reflexively or otherwise, attempt to restrict them to 'proof[s]'. Even the Wanderer's 'penetrative eye' is shown to misread (VI. 257), taking the funeral procession in Book II as signalling the death of the self-defeating Solitary, whose very identity encourages misprision. As Sally Bushell has argued, however, the Pastor's unprescriptive narration provides a model for epitaphic communication and

[69] Leslie Brisman, *Romantic Origins* (Cornell UP, 1978), 376-77; Johnston, 7.
[70] J. Wordsworth, (1967), 80.

community by becoming a mouthpiece for the deviating lives of ordinary people.[71] This marks a return from the rational, interpretive oracle – who prognosticates over others' suffering – to the valuation of the mundane life for its own sake. It also reinstates the commonplace oracle to his classical function with a Protestant twist: a mouthpiece not for abstract gods, but the inscrutable divinity of mankind. Compare the Solitary's 'mute earth' with the Pastor's reading of the same natural signs of suffering:

> Ah! what a warning for a thoughtless man,
>
> Could field or grove, could any spot of earth,
>
> Show to his eye an image of the pangs
>
> Which it hath witnessed; render back an echo
>
> Of the sad steps by which it hath been trod!
>
> (VI. 806-10)

Where the Solitary's metaphor of the grave-plot as a 'volume, shut,' implies the failure of a literary mode of interpretation, the Pastor is intent on recalling the 'image […] witnessed', a literally 'image'-inative figure as opposed to a definitive truth. Hickey claims that the Pastor accepts that 'the witnessing and the voice are his own', just as he recognises the 'pangs' and 'sad steps' which, for the Solitary, constitute an inadequate answer to the question of life.[72] He observes the same obscure signs of suffering, decay, and death, and articulates most fully the relativism that 'Angels may […] perceive, / With undistempered and uncolouded spirit, / The object as it is; but, for ourselves, / That speculative height *we*

[71] Bushell, 191, 202-3.
[72] Hickey, 83.

may not reach' (V. 486-9). The use of privatives exemplifies his apophatic claim; divine truth can only be expressed by terms which it is not.

Yet he nonetheless feels compelled to 'speak / Of what [he] know[s], and what we feel within' (VI. 860-61). To do so is to fulfil the oracular office in its root sense – "to speak", from the Latin *ōrāre* – giving voice to the collective rather than pronouncing over it.[73] While subjective perception proves 'speculative' and divisive, the Pastor suggests that shared feeling (that invaluable 'inward principle' which the Wanderer struggles to communicate) has the conciliatory force of self-evident, pre-linguistic truth. Such truths can only be imagined, the Pastor suggests, by an 'acceptance of limitations' and an openness of mind to the value of the commonplace.[74] The suggestiveness of his language ('thoughtless' refers both to the Wanderer's contemplative 'meditation' [I. 983] and the 'thoughtless guilt' of the Solitary [III. 560], playfully unifying and correcting both) does not seek to restrict our interpretations of 'this blind world [to] the guiding vein of hope' as does the Wanderer (VI. 258). The latter's ideal 'vein' appears as an enclosed linear cognate to the 'Stream of human Life' (III. 256), and evokes the doomed Miner's goal, a Pastor's tale which 'can formally support two opposing interpretations,' that the Wanderer attempts to collapse.[75] The Pastor, emptying himself of interpretive authority, frees his voice to 'echo' the lives that have been integrated into the obscure earth, 'heaping up' a series of commonplace oracles not to support a philosophical system but to transcend it.[76]

Hickey's reading that such echoes 'are [the Pastor's] own' (since he immediately proceeds to relate Ellen's story in his own voice) overlooks how his reflections are prompted by an articulate natural sign, 'that little mound' which '[s]peaks for itself' (VI. 789, 791).

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[73] "oracle (*n.*), Etymology," *OED Online,* June 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4297301617.>
[74] Bushell, 192.
[75] Susan Meisenhelder, *Wordsworth's Informed Reader: Structures of Experience in His Poetry* (Vanderbilt UP, 1988), 215; Bushell, 200.
[76] Hartman, (1971), 319.

Perhaps it '[s]peaks' only to the human imagination – the tomb of an infant as an archetypal symbol of suffering – but the earth and its contents are nonetheless rendered autonomous and vocal, their meaning irreducible to such an easy paraphrase. Ellen herself attempts an interpretation of the 'time-beguiling ditty' of the thrush (VI. 867), and just as the Solitary's readings reflect his preconceptions, her analysis that

> he sings
>
> As if he wished, the firmament of Heaven
>
> Should listen, and give back to him the voice
>
> Of his triumphant constancy and love;
>
> The proclamation that he makes, how far
>
> His darkness doth transcend our fickle light!
>
> (VI. 882-887).

speaks to her own despondent condition. Yet the economy of voices has a universal dimension, bearing on the centrality of the oraclar in Wordsworth's poetry, and its implications for his intradiegetic Prophets. The birdsong is initially interpreted as a naturalistic prayer to the great witness in Heaven, whose desired response would affirm his 'constancy and love'.[77] '[T]he voice' of God's assurance is no disembodied proclamation from the clouds, but a naturalized expression 'give[n] back to him' that doubted, triumphantly empowered to speak divine truth from within. The augury Ellen performs is a paradoxical act of doubt and of faith, the hope that her own utterance can be the proof that the 'fickle light' of

[77] *Job,* XVI. 19.

her mind requires to accept her reality. Ellen, thus recalled by the Pastor, stands again on the border of life and death, hesitating between a vision of

> human life
>
> [A]s either faire and tempting, a soft scene
>
> Grateful to sight, refreshing to the soul,
>
> Or a forbidding tract of cheerless view;
>
> Even as the same is looked at, or approached.
>
> (V. 526-30).

She symbolizes the ubiquitous struggle to find faith amidst suffering, even while the verisimilitude of her earlier 'tender passage', quoted from 'the blank margin of a Valentine, / Bedropped with tears' (VI. 888, 892-3), gives the impression of authentic, individuated characterization. Her lament has become as 'time-beguiling' as the singing thrush or Keats's nightingale, and by withdrawing '[into] lonely reading' (VI. 896), Hickey notes, her very act becomes a moment of suspended reference. As with the narration of the Cumberland Beggar's gaze, Ellen's turn to text obliterates 'the distinction between character, narrator, and reader', as all share in the momentary disengagement from the actual while searching the lines for an answer that, the tale suggests, cannot be explicitly given.[78] Her self-reflexive voice gives poignant utterance to the 'silent suffering' shared by the muted figures of the poem (I. 638), yet her particular experience appears genuine: rather than displacing it through interpretation, each interlocutor 'listened with his inmost heart' (VI. 1054). This appeal to inner feeling accords with Wordsworth's sense of naturalistic truth 'not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion' (*Prose,* I, 139), and is so

[78] Hickey, 83.

moving that even 'the Solitary's cheek / Confessed the power', not of mortality, but 'of nature' (VI. 1062-3). All interpretations are allowed but none pursued (a mistrust of figuration, the possible pantheism in the final appeal to 'nature'), because, speaking through the oracular mouthpiece of the Pastor, the voices of the suffering dead encompass and negate them all.

Some of the poem's sufferers cannot achieve Ellen's escape from strict typology, particularly more overtly typical figures such as the Miner and the deaf Dalesman. Their suggestive potential is readily assimilated into the Wanderer's argument, much as historical oracular institutions were appropriated for ideological ends.[79] Here Moore's charge of oracular 'pretensions' finds its mark, but only against the Wanderer who speaks with Wordsworth's early prophetic ardour.[80] The Pastor's narration continually reacts against his extension of the oracular into 'abstractions', and turns from visionary appeals to 'solid facts' and 'plain pictures' of the everyday (V. 637-8). He notes that while 'we muse, and mourn / The waste of death', a living alternative to the Wanderer's abstractions '[c]ame at that moment, ringing noisily' like the admonishment of a church bell (VII. 546-7, 545).

Nature takes refuge in the figure, 'fresh air lodged / Within his cheek' (VII. 553), and a Protestant inner light glows from within, lending human vivacity to a scene otherwise '[g]rey' and cold (VII. 551). His face, bearing 'too much / Of Nature's impress' to be 'worldly-minded' (VII. 559-60, 558), is 'endowed / With foresight' (VII. 576-7): in him Wordsworth's 'great consummation' of human mind and Nature is achieved (Prospectus, l. 58), so that a 'Peasant of the lowest class' takes on the bearing of a 'careless Lord' (VII. 550, 575). Like the early commonplace oracles, he has nothing in particular to say; his appearance prompts the Pastor to prophesy that time and suffering 'cannot fix / The obligation of an

[79] Thomas De Quincey, 'The Pagan Oracles', *Collected Writings*, Vol. VII (Adam and Charles Black, 1890).
[80] Moore, 1; See, for instance, the Wanderer's typification of the Dalesman (VII. 527).

anxious mind' upon him (VII. 570-1). The chronotopic folding of time into space implies the eternity of his composure; necessities cannot 'fix' a mind that, like the Cumberland Beggar, is already 'fix'd' in constancy.

The peasant's vitality underwrites 'the vast engine' of industry (VII. 609), which consumes the very Nature it destroys – including human nature, since 'ancient custom or distinguished name' means nothing to one whose 'sentence to the axe would doom them all!' (VII. 623-4). The felling of a tree shadows the falling of a gavel, and carpentry's Christological associations evaporate in Pharisaic 'doom'. This perversion of a legal 'sentence' into the inevitability of the 'axe' aligns England's industrial growth with the French Revolution whose violence had so frustrated Wordsworth's prophetic hopes.[81] 'His sentence' applies equally well to the 'Destroyer' himself (VII. 631), as Wordsworth completes the symbolic cycle through the peasant's dendrification:

> – But, green in age and lusty as he is
>
> And promising to stand from year to year,
>
> Less, as might seem, in rivalship with men
>
> Than with the forest's more enduring growth,
>
> […]
>
> This keen Destroyer, in his turn, must fall.
>
> (VII. 625-8, 631)

The qualification that it 'might seem' he could rival 'the forest's more enduring growth' marks the impermanence of tyranny beside Nature, which, once destroyed, will

[81] His early prophetic failures likely prompted the outsourcing of prophecy to his commonplace oracles.

regrow, 'enduring' like 'woods decaying, never to be decay'd' (*Prelude,* VI. 557). Having opened with the peasant's endurance, the Pastor seems to contradict himself in prophesying his fall; but in that contradiction he contributes to the balanced ambiguity of oracular vision Wordsworth could reach only retrospectively about the Revolution.

The Pastor here becomes the 'Priest' (VII. 633), officer of symbolic spiritual truth, yet the oracular is grounded not in his qualified 'half-smile', which admits its own perceptual limits, but in the simple, wordless 'smile' of the peasant (VII. 589, 555). '[E]ndowed / With foresight', his actions mark him a pragmatic prophet, having sided, as our hindsight confirms, with an industry that may indeed outlast Nature. Yet as the historicists would argue, his destructive vocation may simply be the condition of his existence. Simpson, briefly glossing the section, puts it plainly: '[e]conomic incentives, and often the demands of mere survival, force the inhabitants of less powerful social groups (then as now) to work against their own traditional and arguably 'best' interests.'[82] What can be read as prophetic 'foresight', on this account, is equally a displacement of dangerous necessity. Wordsworth implies the industrial corruption of idyllic rural life, but beyond the Pastor's apocalyptic interpretation, does not outright condemn it; the 'Destroyer' remains dignified, and, as the Wanderer's own exegesis makes clear, hope remains for a healthy relationship to be restored. Wordsworth's oracular pretentions, contrary to Riede's thesis, have become softened and dispersed through various possible readings, and the peasant's enigmatic 'smile' provides an ambiguous sign that, in Delphic style, leaves room for multiple futures to come to pass.[83] Even the Wanderer's soliloquy on industry, a didactic exposition 'completely contrary to the open teaching of the previous books', proves insubstantial before the simple suggestiveness of the tree-feller,

[82] Simpson, 190.
[83] Ian Balfour, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy* (Stanford UP, 2002), 186.

whose embodiment of the issue instantiates and encompasses all that Armytage can say.[84] The Priest's Wife puts it well:

> While he is speaking I have power to see
>
> Even as he sees; but when his voice hath ceased,
>
> […] I sometimes feel, as now,
>
> That combinations so serene and bright,
>
> Cannot be lasting in a world like ours,
>
> (IX. 465-69)

The Wanderer's vision fades because, as theory, it lacks the tree-feller's grounding in the real 'world like ours'. Instead, what remains in the poet's mind is the effect of the Priest's stories that 'seize and occupy the sense', settling not into abstract doctrine but

> A consciousness […]
>
> Deposited upon the silent shore
>
> Of memory, images and precious thoughts;
>
> That shall not die, and cannot be destroyed
>
> (VII. 23, 27-30)

Like the Leech-Gatherer's enduring memory as mankind's 'help and stay secure' ('Resolution and Independence' l. 146), *The Excursion* seeks to impress upon readers 'a consciousness' that finds divinity and constancy in everyday life. The poem recovers the oracle's essential function – to mediate between the human and the transcendent – by shifting

[84] Bushell, 239.

prophetic authority from the Wanderer to the Priest, reorienting us towards the commonplace. Where *The Ruined Cottage* and the Wanderer transpose suffering into abstraction, appealing to an insubstantial 'type and shadow of an awful truth,' (VII. 527), the Priest recognizes that 'no such visionary views belong / To those who occupy and till the ground' (V. 689-90). His authority resides not in rational philosophy or Gothic sensationalism, but in the epitaph's balanced emotional register, through which Wordsworth perfects his 'imaginative sympathy' with suffering. The narratives succeed precisely because they refuse didacticism: they 'create a structure which unites the tales of the dead into one communal whole, and unite the minds of the living in response to this.'[85] By allowing ambiguity rather than asserting vision, Wordsworth – as Averill observes – does not 'avert his eyes from wretchedness'; he compels readers to look more closely.[86] Having become the mouthpiece for the suffering of others, the Priest performs a Christologically oracular office at once kenotic and incarnational, voicing not Pagan gods but the immanent divinity of ordinary humanity. The poem fulfils Wordsworth's conviction that ordinary life is the highest matter of art, and marks the termination of his own prophetic poetry.

[85] Bushell, 208.
[86] James Averill, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Human Suffering* (Cornell UP, 1980), 10.

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